



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
(1803-1882)

# Prayers

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Not with fond shekels of the tested gold,  
Nor gems whose rates are either rich or poor,  
As fancy values them: but with true prayers,  
That shall be up at heaven, and enter there  
Ere sunrise; prayers from preserved souls,  
From fasting maids, whose minds are dedicate  
To nothing temporal.

Shakspeare.

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Pythagoras said that the time when men are honestest, is when they present themselves before the gods. If we can overhear the prayer, we shall know the man. But prayers are not made to be overheard, or to be printed, so that we seldom have the prayer otherwise than it can be inferred from the man and his fortunes, which are the answer to the prayer, and

always accord with it. Yet there are scattered about in the earth a few records of these devout hours which it would edify us to read, could they be collected in a more catholic spirit than the wretched and repulsive volumes which usurp that name. Let us not have the prayers of one sect, nor of the Christian Church, but of men in all ages and religions, who have prayed well. The prayer of Jesus is, as it deserves, become a form for the human race. Many men have contributed a single expression, a single word to the language of devotion, which is immediately caught and stereotyped in the prayers of their church and nation. Among the remains of Euripides, we have this prayer; "Thou God of all! infuse light into the souls of men, whereby they may be enabled to know what is the root from whence all their evils spring, and by what means they may avoid them." In the Phaedrus of Plato, we find this petition in the mouth of Socrates; "O gracious Pan! and ye other gods who preside over this place! grant that I may be beautiful within; and that those external things, which I have, may be such as may best agree with a right internal disposition of mind; and that I may account him to be rich, who is wise and just." Wacic the Caliph, who died A. D. 845, ended his life, the Arabian historians tell us, with these words; "O thou whose kingdom never passes away, pity one whose dignity is so transient." But what led us to these remembrances was the happy accident which in this undevoutage lately brought us acquainted with two or three diaries which attest, if there be need of attestation, the eternity of the sentiment and its equality to itself through all the variety of expression. The first is the prayer of a deaf and dumb boy.

"When my long-attached friend comes to me, I have pleasure to converse with him, and I rejoice to pass my eyes over his countenance; but soon I am weary of spending my time causelessly and unimproved and I desire to leave him, (but not in rudeness,) because I wish to be engaged in my business. But thou, O my Father, knowest I always delight to commune with thee in my lone and silent heart; I am never full of thee; I am never weary of thee; I am always desiring thee. I hunger with strong hope and affection for thee, and I thirst for thy grace and spirit.

"When I go to visit my friends, I must put on my best garments, and I must think of my manner to please them. I am tired to stay long, because my mind is not free, and they sometimes talk gossip with me. But, Oh my Father, thou visitest me in my work, and I can lift up my desires to thee, and my heart is cheered and at rest with thy presence, and I am always alone with thee, and thou dost not steal my time by foolishness. I always ask in my heart, where can I find thee?"

The next is a voice out of a solitude as strict and sacred as that in which nature had isolated this eloquent mute.

"My Father, when I cannot be cheerful or happy, I can be true and obedient, and I will not forget that joy has been, and may still be. If there is no hour of solitude granted me, still I will commune with thee. If I may not search out and pierce my thought, so much the more may my living praise thee. At whatever price, I must be alone with thee; this must be the demand I make. These duties are not the life, but the means which enable us to show forth the life. So must I take up this cross, and bear it willingly. Why should I feel reprov'd when a busy one enters the room? I am not idle though I sit with folded hands; but instantly I must seek some cover. For that shame I reprove myself. Are they only the valuable members of society who labor to dress and feed it? Shall we never ask the aim of all this hurry and foam, of this aimless activity? Let the purpose for which I live be always before me; let every thought and word go to confirm and illuminate that end; namely, that I must become near and dear to thee; that now I am beyond the reach of all but thee.

"How can we not be reconciled to thy will? I will know the joy of giving to my friend the dearest treasure I have. I know that sorrow comes not at once only. We cannot meet it, and say, now it is overcome, but again, and yet again its flood pours over us, and as full as at first.

"If but this tedious battle could be fought,  
Like Sparta's heroes at one rocky pass,  
'One day be spent in dying,' men had sought  
The spot and been cut down like mower's grass."

The next is in a metrical form. It is the aspiration of a different mind, in quite other regions of power and duty, yet they all accord at last.

"Great God, I ask thee for no meaner pelf  
Than that I may not disappoint myself,  
That in my action I may soar as high,  
As I can now discern with this clear eye.  
And next in value, which thy kindness lends,  
That I may greatly disappoint my friends,  
Howe'er they think or hope that it may be,  
They may not dream how thou 'st distinguished me.  
That my weak hand may equal my firm faith,  
And my life practise more than my tongue saith;  
That my low conduct may not show,  
Nor my relenting lines,  
That I thy purpose did not know,  
Or overrated thy designs."

The last of the four orisons is written in a singularly calm and healthful spirit, and contains this petition.

"My Father! I now come to thee with a desire to thank thee for the continuance of our love, the one for the other. I feel that without thy love in me, I should be alone here in the flesh. I cannot express my gratitude for what thou hast been and continuest to be to me. But thou knowest what my feelings are. When nought on earth seemeth pleasant to me, thou dost make thyself known to me, and teach me that which is needful for me, and dost cheer my travels on. I know that thou hast not created me and placed me here on earth, amidst its toils and troubles, and the follies of those around me, and told me to be like thyself, when I see so little of thee here to profit by; thou hast not done this, and then left me to myself, a poor, weak man, scarcely able to earn my bread. No; thou art my Father, and I will love thee, for thou didst first love me, and lovest me still. We will ever be parent and child. Wilt thou give me strength to persevere in this great work of redemption. Wilt thou show me the true means of accomplishing it. . . . I thank thee for the knowledge that I have attained of thee by thy sons who have been before me, and especially for him who brought me so perfect a type of thy goodness and love to men. . . . I know that thou wilt deal with me as I deserve. I place myself therefore in thy hand, knowing that thou wilt keep me from all harm so long as I consent to live under thy protecting care."

Let these few scattered leaves, which a chance, (as men say, but which to us shall be holy,) brought under our eye nearly at the same moment, stand as an example of innumerable similar expressions which no mortal witness has reported, and be a sign of the times. Might they be suggestion to many a heart of yet higher secret experiences which are ineffable! But we must not tie up the rosary on which we have strung these few white beads, without adding a pearl of great price from that book of prayer, the "Confessions of Saint Augustine."

"And being admonished to reflect upon myself, I entered into the very inward parts of my soul, by thy conduct; and I was able to do it, because now thou wert become my helper. I entered and discerned with the eye of my soul, (such as it was,) even beyond my soul and mind itself the Light unchangeable. Not this vulgar light which all flesh may look upon, nor as it were a greater of the same kind, as though the brightness of this should be manifold greater and with its greatness take up all space. Not such was this light, but other, yea, far other from all these. Neither was it so above my understanding, as oil swims above water, or as the heaven is above the earth. But it is above me, because it made me; and I am under it, because I was made by it. He that knows truth or verity, knows what that Light is, and he that knows it knows eternity, and it is known by charity. O eternal Verity! and true Charity! and dear Eternity! thou art my God, to thee do I sigh day and night. Thee when I first knew, thou liftedst me up that I might see there was what I might see, and that I was not yet such as to see. And thou didst beat back my weak sight upon myself, shooting out beams upon me after a vehement manner, and I even trembled between love and horror, and I found myself to be far off, and even in the very region of dissimilitude from thee."



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