

## Is There Any Sense in Praying?

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

January 9, 1910<sup>1</sup>

I have stated this subject thus baldly because that is precisely the form in which it appears to many men. That is precisely the form in which that very question has been asked me more than once. I want, if possible, to state as clearly as possible what seems to me to be the truth of the matter. Is there any sense in praying, or is it a survival of former days which has no human or ethical significance? In answering this question, I do not want to evade or obscure a single issue.

Now there is a very decided sense in which prayer has no meaning whatever. The time was, as you know, when God was thought of as some great personality, who ruled the earth much as a monarch rules his people. He was apart from the earth and the lives of men. Between man and the great man, God, there was a great chasm. In times of need and distress, a petition was presented to this God, asking of him some favor, or relief or special dispensation. The real significance of this kind of prayer is seen when we recall the use that is made of the word, legally. The word prayer is, in a legal sense, as a petition or a memorial to a legislative body or other authority. It is used in law as a request in a bill of equity for a specific relief sought for by the complainant. This secular use reflects the religious and theological use in times past. Prayer was a petition or a request asked of God as a special favor. It rested upon the basis that God was a person who could listen to the petition of each one, decide upon its merits, and give or reject, just as the king might decide upon the merits of a petition from one or a group of his subjects. Now it is evident that such an idea of prayer is impossible according to the modern ideas of God. To pray for a special personal dispensation or favor, to pray for fair weather, or for rain, to pray for the special blessing of God upon this person or that, or this country or that is indeed senseless, unless perchance, as some

---

<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

hold, all the great principles of modern life, upon which modern civilization rests, are false. If they are false entirely, and that great man, God, to whom people presented their petitions in the past, and from whom they asked favors, is the true God and is endowed with all the powers with which he has been credited, then he lays himself open to the charge of ingloriously deceiving the whole modern world. As for me, I would rather pray to a graven image whom I believed to be true, than to a real God whom I knew to be false, and a deceiver of mankind. So whatever else prayer may be, it cannot be what it has been held by some men in the past to be, at least not for such as have the faith of the modern world.

But here is where most men stop, when they consider prayer as a function of human life, and as a matter of fact this is just the place where we should begin its consideration. Here we are, men and women, thinking, hoping, working beings, having our existence in a great universe, whose truth, whose beauty, and extent produce in us the deepest and most indescribable feelings of childlike wonder. We go out into the winter night, and amid the silence, look into the heavens. We see the little dots of radiating light shining out from the black background of space. We try to imagine the extent and the meaning of it all. We know that if we should start out to explore those vast confines of space, we would be wandering still through all eternity. We know that those bodies that appear to us so small, are infinitely larger than the earth that we live on. We know that they move in such complete harmony, and in such accurate paths, that we, men so small in comparison with them that the relation of our bodies to the smallest and most minute particle of matter that we can conceive of is hardly to be compared to the relation of our bodies to those dots of light, that we men know enough of their movements to be able to predict to the minutest fraction of a second, the time when a star so distant that we cannot see it with our naked eye, will cross the hairline on the face of the telescope with which we grasp it from the black illimitable space. We stand transfixed by the very stupendousness of what we see.

Overcome we cast our eyes to the ground, and behold, it is covered with the tiny particles of snow that have fallen from the atmosphere above. The same force that brought them floating softly, gently to the ground, and holds them there as we stand, and holds us there also, is the force that marked the pathway of

the stars, and fixes the rising and the setting of the sun. It is the force which attracts all bodies to each other, and binds these individual masses of matter into an organic universe. Gravitation is the word that we use to express to each other this great universal force.

But the inquiring spirit is aroused in us now. Our searching eye penetrates the cold lifeless snow, that lies at our feet, and sees hidden there seeds and germs of that force which we call life. We know that the days are fast coming, when the rain, and the sun will melt the snow, warm the earth, and draw from beneath its surface, the life of vegetation. Then our imagination, fed by the treasures of memory, carries us forward to the luxuriant days in June, when all the earth is alive with the evidences of that strange mystery of life.

So much for the outer world. But not less strange and marvelous is the inner world of man, where are thoughts, hopes, aspirations, loves and hates, dreams and visions, longings for truth and adventure, ideals, and purposes. Is it not quite as wonderful as the facts themselves, that man should ever have sought to know the truth about the laws that govern this great outer world, that he should be able to trace the pathways of the stars, that he should know to a moment almost when that great strange visitor from far-off worlds that is journeying to us day by day, will be the nearest to us? Is it not wonderful that he knows, even though his eye has not been able to follow it, just where that wanderer of the heavens has been all these years, and that he will come to us and will go away and will return again? Is it not wonderful that we should have the desire to know about the laws of life, and seek to penetrate the vast seas of the unknown? Is it not wonderful, that we, men and women, infinitely small particles, should control the very powers amid which we live, and make them serve our ends? Is it not wonderful that we should have dreams and visions of life that go far beyond all that we hope to see in reality, and is it not wonderful that we should pin our faith upon those ideals, and let them take command of us and guide our action? Is it not wonderful that a man will take an idea, which seems to defy all the reality about him, and alone stake all on the truth of that unseen ideal? What is the meaning of this inner life, of thought, of poetry, of human love and hope, of music and art, of devotion to truth? What is the meaning of this inner wonder at the outward reality that we see? Is there any relationship between the two? Does the

world within bear witness to the great universe without? Does the world of thought and personality within derive its being and existence from the very forces of the universe that we see without? Is there any connection? Have we any reason to think that our endeavors after truth, that our visions and dreams of a noble humanity, will ever be realized? Have we any reason to think that any of the things that men and women think worthwhile, and of value in human life, have any legitimate place in human life? Or are they simply the wild caprice of an unreliable fancy?

We come here to the parting of ways. On the one hand, we have the answer of those who believe in supernatural religion. Their answer is this, that in the universe as we see it there is nothing of truth or goodness or beauty for human life. Only as some God has intervened and injected into the world by miracle or supernatural agency of some kind, those values that we think worthwhile, can we hope to have any of these dreams realized. All but this injected serum is dross, and of the evil. It is the answer of pessimism and despair.

On the other hand, we have the answer of those who rest on the conviction that these inner things of life, that bear the stamp of human values, are the very witness, and product of the outward world, that we are at this moment, with all our limitations, and all our possibilities, with all our achievements, and all our failures, just the product that these great universal laws and forces have made us, and that we and humanity after us shall become what these real ideals of ours hope for. The ideals are indeed the germs of life implanted in us by the universal life that has been operating through all the ages, and that they are the prophecy of things that shall be, that they evolve, develop, come into being in human life, not through chance and caprice, but through law and order, that they are of the very nature of the universe and the universal life. Just as they have come into being in human life, in the form of an ideal, so will they, responding to the very laws which have produced them, both laws of matter and of mind, become established in reality. The ideals of today are the seeds that we plant for the harvest of reality tomorrow.

In other words, the great fundamental conviction of all human life is the conviction that we live in a universe in which just such ideals as we value, not our whims, but our ideals, will be

realized. Our conviction is not that they are mere sentiment, and unsubstantial dreams, but that they are of the solid texture of possibility, produced in accord with the laws operating in all the universe, and destined to realization. Our conviction is also that these very forces that are at work producing in us ideals, are at work realizing them, and that we are the responsible agents in their realization, and that the forces, the laws in which the ideals are grounded, stand behind and support the agents that bear witness to them. When a John Brown starts on his crusade against slavery, he rests his faith that this universe is a universe in which freedom and justice shall exist, not as phantoms of the mind, but as a reality. That is the great faith and conviction of the John Browns of the ages. It was the conviction of Amos, of Jesus, of thousands in whom the germ of the ideal has developed. It is the conviction of thousands today. And all these muster to their aid the great laws of human life. We have ideals today because it is natural that human beings who live in such a universe as we live in should have ideals. Those longings after truth, justice, and freedom will become realities, because it is natural that they should become realities in such a universe as we live in. That is our conviction. That is the conviction that men have lived by all through the ages. The word that they have used to express their idea that the universe is a universe for achieving ideals is the word, God. Whether it be the savage praying to the great spirit, or the simple man bowing before his graven image, or the worshipper of Yahweh, or the worshiper of Christ as God, or the man who speaks of laws immutable and unchanging, it is all the same when you get back to the ultimate faith. It is the evidence that in man is the faith that the universe in which he lives is a universe in which his ideal values have a place, and that he may count on the universe to support him in his work for their realization. Out of all the immensity of life and law, he takes the raw material and makes in his own image his helping God, as a symbol of his ultimate faith that the ideal, such as he has, is an organic part of the natural order. The conscious faith of man is similar to the unconscious faith of the seed. The seed, nestled in the frozen earth, apparently dead, has the faith that the earth with its moisture and its fertility, aided by the warmth of the sun and the light, will work together to make the seed grow into the plant and bear its fruit. The earth has produced just that kind of a seed, because that kind of a seed is the kind that the great universal forces nourish and foster. So in the man, the ideal appears in his inner life, because the

universe fosters, nourishes and produces the ideal, and man himself is one of the nourishing creating forces at work.

It is very easy to see what prayer is in its essence, if you look at the world from this point of view. It is the impelling life force within responding to the great universal forces without, it is the seed facing the warmth of the sun, it is the ideal that has formulated itself in man, seeking contact with the great outside to which it feels itself related. The moment of prayer is that moment when the conviction that the Universe is a universe whose forces sanction the ideals that we cherish, takes possession of our personality, and we realize that the whole vast sweep of the universal life is contributing to the realization of those ideals, and that the universal life forces are calling us finite particles to our universal consecration. The moment of prayer is the moment we feel ourselves a part of the great world process, when the best of the finite calls to the best of the universal. It is not the bended [knee], or the uttered word, but the inquiring spirit, looking for truth, and the values of life that make life worthwhile.

Perhaps a particular illustration which comes to my attention this morning will show what I mean. At a meeting held in a home in New York the other day for the purpose of assisting the Shirt-Waist strikers,<sup>2</sup> a collection was taken. When they came to examine the collection, they found that one woman had given her wedding ring to assist the strikers, and when pressed for an explanation, she replied that she had given it because it was the most valuable thing that she had to give. Now that woman had the faith that she lives in a world where justice for women has a rightful and legitimate place, and that her ideal of justice for those women can be realized, and that she is an agent in realizing it. At some moment in her life when she saw that ideal of hers as a possibility, and recognized herself as a contributing agent in its realization, and gave the most precious thing that she had for it, she went through the experience of true prayer. Every person, that ever cherished an

---

<sup>2</sup> The shirtwaist strike of 1909 was the largest strike by female American workers to its date, involving 20,000-30,000 workers. The strike began on November 23, 1909 and lasted until February 1910, when many of the demands of the workers had been met, including better pay, shorter working hours and equal treatment of workers in- and out-side of the union.

ideal, and devoted himself to it, has prayed. It is a natural human function, as natural as it is for the plant to grow. If you ask me, "Why should men pray?" I must answer you that they pray because they can't help it. As they must breathe, so must they pray. It is a great human necessity. If you really understand the true meaning of prayer, you might as well ask, "Is there any sense in breathing?" as to ask, "Is there any sense in prayer?"

But you are saying that I am evading the question that I started out with. No, I have been preparing to answer it. I have said that all through the ages man has attempted to make in his own image a God or gods who should stand for him as the symbol for his conviction that he lives in a universe in which the ideals that he cherishes have a legitimate place, and that the universal forces are working together with him for their realization. Now if he believes that the power which is assisting him is concentrated in some particular god, whom he has created, then it is perfectly natural for him to address his prayer to that God. The kind of a prayer that he asks depends upon the state of his civilization, and culture, and the conditions under which he lives. He may ask his God to assist him in war, he may ask his god to bring an abundant harvest, or he may offer a prayer of thanksgiving for the harvest already reaped. He has the faith that his god will answer the prayer. Now in our own time, when we see that the power and the force which in ages past men have concentrated into a personal God created in their own image, is not as a matter of fact so concentrated. What shall we say about prayer? The answer is this, that the prayer directed to such a personal god by a person who believes that the universal forces are not so concentrated is mere mummery. But the wish, the longing for that which is of value, of real value, in human life, expressed in words or left in the secret chambers of the mind, is a real prayer. The servant in the house gives a good turn to the significance of prayer when the word used to symbolize the fact is wishing. And I believe that wishing, longing for truth, for justice, for goodness and beauty, for the realization of the ideal, is just a true natural function of human life, and that the efficiency of human life in realizing that ideal, and coming to know that truth, depends largely on the intensity and the frequency of wishing, and the longing of the true prayer. The quantity and the quality of the work done on anything varies with the intensity of the desire to have it done. There may be

many who wish to see the shirt-waist-makers receive justice at the hands of society, but the wish, the desire for that end, has not become so intense and keen that we take the most valuable thing that we have, and give it to the answering of our prayer, and realize that our prayer cannot be answered except as we throw ourselves into the work involved in realizing the conditions that we long for. So, the fact of prayer, being a human function, is not affected by whether or not one happens to believe in a big man god as the concentrated personality of the universal powers that make ideals legitimate things, or whether or not one believe that the powers that men at one time believed were concentrated in a personality, are now believed to be diffused through all the universe, and everything is pulsating with them. Prayer is that comparison of the things as they are with the things as they ought to be, when the comparison is accompanied with the conviction that the universe makes for things as they ought to be, and we come it agents. So, the question of the sense of praying reduced itself to the form, and the place of prayer.

There is no question as to the form of the unuttered prayer. It is simply as the prayer takes the form of words. Words, at best, are but feeble symbols of ideas. God is the word that men have used to express their conviction of the ideal achieving capacity of the universe.