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# PRAYER AND CERTITUDE

EMILE CAILLIET

JUST as life implies breathing and breathing life, prayer implies certitude and certitude, prayer. It is not only that prayer is conditioned by certitude, but certitude naturally issues in prayer. Look at it as we may, when the life of prayer is on the wane, the implication is that our certitude has deteriorated. So we believe, so we pray—or no longer pray as we used to. Nothing therefore could be more pertinent at this opening moment of our Day of Prayer than a serious check on the actual state of our basic Christian certitude.

We shall be guided in our thinking by the axiomatic statement of the 6th verse of the 11th chapter of Hebrews, that great chapter on faith: "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Not that we mean to exhaust in these brief moments the whole substance that a thorough exegesis of the text could yield in so rich a context. Our aim this morning is eminently practical. It may even be that we should think in terms of first aid if our situation turns out to be what I am afraid it is. This nature of our need must further dictate our method, our immediate context being essentially that of the need at hand.

To that context then, let us now turn.

## I

Practically everyone in this sanctuary remembers the fullness of spirit that hallowed his personal decision to come to this seminary. In many a case,

for example, that decision followed upon a blessed season of retreat at a summer Bible camp or in similar circumstances when an overwhelming awareness of the living God was forced upon him. The grasp of a mighty hand was felt. A decisive word was heard. A profound, total certitude made us truly his with "joy, joy, tears of joy." At that moment at least, then for a season, we knew "the evidence of things not seen," we tasted in all its sweetness "the substance of things hoped for." Prayer gushed forth freely, not as an expression of duty, not as a scheduled exercise in faith, but irresistible as faith itself which is the prayer of the believing heart. The need to worship had come into its own within us as the primary need of man it truly is—to wit the record of the temptation of our Lord.

Then something, or maybe many things happened. A course in theological studies was prescribed. The relevance of this or that discipline escaped us. Mysteries seemed to degenerate into problems, ultimately scientific problems on which Protestant scholars were at work side by side with Roman Catholics, Jews, and men who did not profess any form of religion whatsoever. What a confusion of tongues this was for us, what a "free for all"! We sensed at times something sacrilegious about it.

This distressing situation could not but be reflected to some degree on the seminary campus. Candid men upset in their faith would occasionally react in a mood of "quiet desperation." Discussion became highly emotional and as a

result was cut short. Christian love lost ground as arguments were polished up in a corner—like so many guns. Exclusive theological creeds were all the more loudly proclaimed as a radical uncertainty actually inspired their dogmatism. No man argues more loudly than the frustrated believer who increasingly experiences hell within. And while all this was going on the springs of prayer had been drying up. I need not labor the point and follow to the bitter end a story which in varying degrees is not far from being the story of Everyman. Neither do I mean to imply that some of the extremes just pointed out were the rule. In actual practice they rather turned out to be the exception. It is just that the overall picture should be kept within view at this time. It sadly illustrates the truth that as certitude goes, so goes prayer.

Our question then is: "Must our certitude be conditioned at every step by the fluctuations of research work? Should a minister, for example, wait for the latest weather report on the historical scene to know what he may proclaim in his next sermon or say by way of thanksgiving in his opening prayer? Is it, or is it not possible for a man to practice free inquiry and free discussion in the realm of biblical scholarship without destroying his soul in the process? An age-old question this, yet never so pressing as it has become in our day and age. It strikes at the very heart of a man's prayer life.

## II

Such, as I see it, is the immediate context of our concern as we now turn to Hebrews 11:6 for first aid. As we do so we are immediately impressed with the fact that the portion under con-

sideration refers to certitude, to a God-given certitude in a climate of perfect security for the believer: "He that cometh to God (here, in prayer) must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." We find here at least three basic propositions. Let us consider them one by one.

First, believe that God is. The whole of our prayer life is grounded in the biblical axiom of the reality of God in a genuinely biblical context, the implication being that mortal man need never go around this Axiom of all axioms—whether in terms of metaphysics, mysticism or religious experience. Any such procedure would turn this fundamental certitude into some great Perhaps type of religious view. The whole point is precisely that this certitude is the very anchor of our life. To hold on to it must be our initial step if we mean to go any further in our approach to God. This is why the Nicene creed begins with the assertion "I believe in one God."

The second proposition proceeds to single out for emphasis this one attribute of God: he is "a rewarder." There is here no suggestion of mercenary service for the sake of what you and I may expect to get out of it. Rather the implication is that of a personal God who cares, a most precious implication for us on this Day of Prayer. Here once more, how foolish to retreat from such a blessed assurance into a maze of ontology, esoteric mysticism, or religious experience in general! I remember one occasion when a learned preacher opened his prayer with a far-fetched apostrophe aimed at some cosmic nowhere. My neighbor on the bench, a godly pastor of souls whose

name I shall not disclose because you know him so well, could not help but exhort the preacher in a murmur: "Call him 'Father' and ask him for something!" Again we may rest assured that our friend was not thinking of that "something" in terms of immediate profit. His emphasis was on the candor of the asking. Indeed the reason our God is eminently the God of prayer is that he is the personal God who cares—a rewarder.

Yet our text hastens to qualify that word "rewarder" with this third proposition: God is a rewarder "of them that diligently seek him." We like to emphasize the fact that the Bible is essentially the great saga of God's search for man, and this point is well taken. We would not be seeking God had he not already found us. Each and every act of providence originates in his prior purpose. Yet there always lurks within us the danger of isolating certain features from what the Bible as a whole teaches. Paul, let us remember, saw no conflict between God's working his own pleasure in man, and that same man working out his own salvation. And so it is that Hebrews 11:6 urges upon us the duty of seeking the great Seeker. God is ultimately known through God, but he is also known by man who is neither a robot nor a clod of earth. He is known in the context of a universe which continues to depend upon him, the Creator, for its existence. While this world's sequences are established by him, involvement in them remains a man's responsibility. It is a sad truth that the mark may be missed by this or that man through his own fault, if not through his deliberate rebellion. Hence the further emphasis on the word "diligently" in the phrase, "a rewarder of

them that diligently seek him." To seek diligently is to seek with a steady, earnest, persevering attention, as one who highly esteems the object of his quest. This definition is not far from characterizing prayer itself. This is why those who know single out prayer as the most demanding activity of man. It is further so because a man's genuine quest for God is never isolated from the rest of this man's activity. It becomes as it were the line of force of his whole life and conversation. Indeed our original certitude of men who know in whom they have believed should dominate and orient every single assent we give or choose to withhold. Yet in actual practice we seem too readily inclined to do just the opposite.

### III

We have by now come closer to a diagnosis of our trouble. It appears that the reason we suffer our certitude to falter and by the same token our prayer life to deteriorate, is that we allow the fluctuations of human knowledge to condition the certitude of a God-given faith which is the prior fact. In other words, we readily mistake assent for certitude and certitude for assent. It is therefore of vital importance that we should distinguish between the two before we attempt to see how they are related.

First then, as to the distinction. No one, to my knowledge, has better brought it out than Newman in his *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*. There he has drawn a dividing line between "assent" which may and does change, and "certitude," which endures. Such certitude, as he saw it, is essential to the life and destiny of man.

In the context of Newman's distinc-

tion, then, let us first realize that assent, or the withholding of assent, pertains essentially to the realm of scholarship. In that realm the accepted criterion of truth is general agreement among the qualified authorities in the field, whatever their personal feelings may be on the issue under consideration. Provided you are not afraid of long words you may characterize the outcome as depersonalization through socialization of thinking. Yet everybody's truth is in effect the truth of nobody, nay, not even God's truth. A group of specialists now becomes the measure of all things, at least for the time being. Fresh information being brought forth, the next generation of scholars will revise today's pronouncements. The fact is our learned body finds in this likelihood its greatest source of gratification. Nothing can please a scientist more than the detection of an area of experimentation and critical study likely to prove fruitful of further experimentation and critical study. In his Terry Lectures at Yale University, *On Understanding Science*, as well as in subsequent writings, James B. Conant has in effect singled out this state of affairs as the most characteristic aspect of genuine research.

The main trouble with this situation, however, is that what is tolerable in the scientific realm in general, may, and actually does prove unbearable in that realm where the ultimate destiny of a plain man is at stake. Let our scientist recover his humanity simply by being involved in an automobile accident for example, and he will find out for himself. Why, his detached speculation and occasional findings may well have little, if anything to do with the deeper reality of the things that are. He who is

satisfied to exist in the long shadow of Kant has long been resigned to having a ceiling placed above his thinking. Yet even going to the Ethical Society to church will prove of little help to him at the hour of personal need under God's high heaven. Either God is or is not; either he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him or he is not—an inescapable alternative even for a scientist in his human capacity or, should we say, especially for him because he has received much and from him much may be demanded. If he turns out to be as responsible a man as a scholar he should ponder the statement of a poet and thinker whom no one would accuse of anti-intellectualism, Walt Whitman, to the effect that it is ultimately native personality, and that alone ("not culture or knowledge of intellect whatever") that endows a man to stand in life. Yet we know, do we not, that only a *reborn* native personality will meet the test. And this is another way of saying that "the just shall live by faith," proceed from the certitude of faith.

No wonder a frigid academic tranquility at the service of a never-ending inquiry may at times be apprehended as incongruous by a student who is losing his grip on faith. Admittedly such a man can hardly be cheered by that sad, professorial mirth of relaxed gravity which triumphs in a climax of bright-eyed criticism. Far be it from me to disparage scholarship in general and strict logic in particular. The fact is that both can go a long way to relieve and help along a man's dedicated will, once the certitude of faith has directed him to the right path. To say that assent and certitude are different

is far from implying that they are mutually exclusive.

Having therefore distinguished between the certitude of faith and depersonalized, socialized assent in the realm of scholarship, let us now try to detect their true relationship. One way of doing it with special reference to our subject, is to discover why certitude and assent are so easily confused in the first place. When our text states unequivocally that God is and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him, there is no doubt in our mind as to the identity of this God. Why, he identified himself to Moses (Exodus 3:14) as "he who is"—the *same* God that spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To us of course he is more especially the God who was in Jesus Christ. What we are saying is that faith in this God belongs in the roaring loom of that particular history which unfolds in the Bible. We believe in God, in *this* God, because of what he has said and done from time immemorial. As a result our faith in him would seem to rest upon history and this is obviously a serious situation. It is the Gordian knot of our difficulties. But then we should make sure of what the word "history" actually implies.

The misleading element in our situation is that we too readily take "history" to mean—which it obviously cannot—a purely objective record of happenings viewed in their totality. The closest approximation to this I know, would be a tape recording or better, cinemascope type of presentation. Yet, and let this be said reverently, could it have been at all possible to have such a record of the actual life of Jesus, what would it avail the naturalistically-minded unbeliever? He would be likely to shrug his shoulders at "the nonsense of it all."

The testimony of the Bible concerning whatever is most profound, most serious, and most true, is that the normal result of the action of the Word of God is to provoke man to contradiction, and move him to disobedience. Down to this day the Word of God has remained the great divider of men. Out of a group of equally able scholars who had restored the scene of the Crucifixion through the same tested methods of investigation, some would take their stand beside the repentant thief and hear in a hallowed moment from lips divine the message of salvation; others would somehow find themselves on the side of the other thief who did not repent, and say to Jesus in their own way: "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us," because their naturalism would call for objective tests. And so we still stand, all of us, on the place which is called The Skull, as poised upon a dizzying mountain divide. On one side, a world seemingly bereft of God; on the other, a God-bathed perspective only beheld by those who know that God is, and "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." And yet this is all around the same world of Creation viewed from the very point where the Savior's blood was shed for its redemption. What is constantly "repeated" here, as Kierkegaard would say, is the Drama of all dramas of history—therefore our own drama also.

In their now classic book *The Riddle of the New Testament* (how revealing a title this is) Sir Edwyn Hoskyns and Francis Noel Davey feel finally constrained to admit that even the resurrection of Jesus Christ is, and I quote, "meaningless and ultimately trivial apart from the belief in the power of the living God and in the ultimate truth

of what Jesus said and did. It is also meaningless apart from the recognition that a particular historical life and death can have universal and ultimate significance." May I suggest that we bracket the preceding "apart from" clauses and sum up their message? What does it amount to? Namely to this: The resurrection as well as the sum total of historical knowledge to which scholars may give assent with reference to Jesus, is meaningless apart from the certitude that a tremendous Act of God was taking place in and through this same Jesus; in other words, apart from the belief that the God who was in Christ is, and "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Neither is this faith-principle arbitrarily introduced into the biblical record so as to impose its interpretation upon the historical pattern involved therein. It belongs to the very loom and orientation of the recorded pattern. This in fact is the reason why, push your way back as far as you can into the earliest tradition behind the gospels, you nowhere encounter that colorless type of material one likes to associate with the concept of "objective" history. All you encounter is Christology, a knowledge of Jesus immediately apprehended in the context of the Word of God in action. What is at stake in all this is nothing short of a specifically biblical notion of truth, in terms of a certitude rooted in the reliability and consistency of the Covenanter God who is faithful. Of this potentially active truth our Lord is the living expression. This is why he can say: "I am the truth." This is also why a certitude proceeding from the reliability and consistency of God can never be second to the patterns of clues laboriously

worked out in the human realm of assent.

Such is the scriptural background of the certitude unequivocally stated as a prerequisite in the axiomatic statement of Hebrews 11:6, "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." That certitude conditions the very relevance of New Testament scholarship as a whole. It constitutes the faith-principle without which the most outstanding historian is bound to miss the mark. Not for one moment that such a historian actually proceeds without any faith-principle. No single historian does. The reason he will miss the mark is that *either he does not see what is there, and this is darkness; or he sees what is not there, and this is error. In either case he sins against sanity which is health of intellect.*

Supposing on the other hand that our scholar should proceed in his interpretation from the faith of Hebrews 11:6, every notation that he makes will then nicely fall into place like a gem that is set where it belongs, henceforth producing the effect it was meant to produce. And so it is ultimately assent which depends upon the certitude of faith for its relevance, and not the other way around. Needless to labor the point that what is true of assent in biblical scholarship is true at all levels of scientific and philosophical knowledge, although in different degrees according to closeness of relation to God. Far from inviting anti-intellectualism, then, our text calls upon us to become full citizens in the realm of scholarship beholding the true landscape of God's reality as a whole, for having been made whole in it.

Stand therefore upon the perfect as-

urance of Hebrews 11:6. It is basic in a day such as this, and truly decisive. Because it refers to the prior fact which dominates, orients and conditions all others, it constitutes a certitude which is entirely immune from the vicissitudes of assent. And further, because it is so, it stands as the all-sufficient safeguard against these same vicissitudes. This is why, everything else being equal, the committed Christian student will fare better in the realm of scholarship than any other who does not name the Name of Jesus Christ. As he proceeds through the realm of assent in the light of his certitude, he will be enabled to make his own all that has been well said and done. The right perspective once restored, he will discover what important contributions the sciences and philosophy can make to the knowledge of the real universe of nature and of man. For he will no longer excommunicate men of goodwill—only people who are afraid will do that, because they feel insecure. His intellect's clear vision will help him immeasurably at all points where his certitude used to be hampered, dragging down his prayer life in the process. And mind you, I have been talking all along of conversion.

#### IV

Could it be that we actually ran into

trouble in this realm of prayer and certitude because our conversion had only been a partial one? By this I mean: Could it be that in the fervor of that hallowed moment at the Summer Bible camp we had only yielded a few patches of our being that happened to be particularly inflammable? That once those patches were for the most part restored to the old norm, we merely preserved the memory of the event by wearing a Christ badge on the same kind of suit that is in fashion at the general store? However that may have been we now know it can be so no longer. Our living God claims the whole of a man.

Because the life of prayer is in the last analysis a way of being, then, our whole reborn personality shall emerge in the power of God's life and light as we allow it to be increasingly guided and carried along by a renewed Christian certitude. Let ours, therefore, become a steady, earnest attention to him who "is, and is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." This morning of our Day of Prayer is a good time to start afresh. Let us begin now then, right where we are, and may the God of that great eleventh chapter of Hebrews bless us, as we at long last take our place among those elders who obtained a good report.

Inauguration  
of

The Reverend James W. Clarke, D.D., LL.D.

as

Francis Landey Patton Professor of Homiletics

January 31, 1956 at 4 p.m.

Subject: "Propriety of Prophecy."