

## **Prayers for the Dead.**

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IN the short notice we had in our last issue in connection with King George's death we had purposed to make some reference to this subject which may be said to have a topical interest in view of the prominence given to it by ecclesiastics in high positions, and others, of prayers offered for the dead King but on second thoughts we deemed it better to reserve the discussion of this subject for this issue of the Magazine. There can be no doubt that the practice of praying for the dead is increasing with great rapidity. A spurious sentimentalism of a religious hue, ignorance of God's Word, and the innate proneness of men to wander from the paths of truth lie behind the movement. The custom has been largely fostered by the Church of Rome, the Anglo-Catholics in the Church of England, and the Scoto-Catholics in the Church of Scotland. War memorial services for departed soldiers have been a happy breeding ground for these Romish practices. In a lesser degree, prayers at the grave, we fear, are also in many cases lending themselves to this un-scriptural practice. For while many who follow this practice against which our Church protests avoid anything in their prayers at the grave savouring of the above practice yet there are others who take full advantage of the opportunity of instilling into the minds of those present the insidious poison of Rome.

The Church of Rome, accepting as she does the Apocrypha, as canonical, appeals to II. Maccabees, xii. 29-43, as her authority for prayers for the dead but the Reformed Church rejected the Apocrypha. It is to the Bible it made its appeal and furthermore the teaching of the Scottish Presbyterian Church emphasised the doctrine that it is only what is commanded in Scripture which is allowable in worship, in contrast to the Church of England position that what is not condemned is permissible. There is a great difference between the two positions though at first sight the difference may not appear to be so fundamental and far-reaching as it is. The Presbyterian position is founded on Christ's words in His commission to the disciple: - "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20).

When we turn to the Bible the first thing that strikes us is its silence on a matter which receives so great a place in the teaching of those who believe in this practice. There is not one word or instance authorising it either by precept or by example in the Scriptures for the blessed or other dead. This in itself is rather remarkable if the doctrine is so important and beneficial as its advocates assert. The Lord Jesus nowhere teaches the doctrine. He taught His disciples how to pray but there is not one word in the model He gave them teaching them to pray for the dead. His high priestly intercessory prayer (John, xvii.), "one of the most beautiful and most comprehensive prayers" that was ever offered up to God has not one sentence in it which encourages or countenances the practice. He prays for His disciples, for those who shall believe on Him in the future but there is not a word or hint of prayer for those who are gone. Surely this should cause those who advocate the practice to pause.

There is an important utterance of our Lord in the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke, xvi. 19-32) which is of a positive nature and which makes it clear that prayer for the dead cannot help those who have departed this life. True, we have the prayer of the Rich Man, with its three fatal defects - (1) prayer in the wrong place, (2) to the wrong person, and (3) at the wrong time - but this does not help the advocates of prayer for the dead. The words, however, which our Lord puts into the mouth of Abraham declare, as few words can, the fixity of the state of the dead - "And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from hence (Luke, xvi. 26). That "great gulf" fixed bars effectively the utility of any prayer for the unregenerate dead. The teaching of the Scripture as to the state of the blessed dead is that it is one of unalloyed happiness, of perfect knowledge, of full enjoyment of God's peace and blessing, a sorrow-less and sinless state for all eternity. If by some means those who pray for the blessed dead would get even a glimpse of their happy and perfect state how poor and meaningless would all that they are asking for them appear. Is it not folly on the part of men or women to pray that God would grant rest eternal and light perpetual to any who have entered into heaven seeing God has done to them exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think (Ephes. iii. 20). On the other hand if they have gone to eternal perdition is it not daring on the part of any mortal to pray that God would grant rest eternal and light perpetual and thus reverse His righteous sentence?

But it is argued that there are certain passages in Scripture which, if they do not actually authorise the practice, at least countenance it. These are (1) II. Timothy i. 16. ("The Lord give mercy unto the house of Onesiphorous;") (2) I. Peter, iii. 18-20 ("For Christ also hath once suffered for, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also He went and preached to the *spirits in prison*; which sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a-preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water,") and I. Peter, iv.. 6 ("For, for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the Spirit"). These texts now demand our attention and we hope to show that they do not lend themselves to the interpretation put upon them by advocates of prayers for the dead.

(1). Prayer for the house of Onesiphorus. It is maintained by some that Onesiphorus was dead at this time but apart from the fact that Paul nowhere inculcates prayers for the dead there is no evidence that Onesiphorus was dead at the time the Apostle prayed for his house. The expression simply indicates his absence from Ephesus at the time. He had not yet returned from Rome. If he were dead his household would scarcely have retained his name. The Apostle in the concluding verses of his second epistle to Timothy sends his salutations to "the household of Onesiphorus" (iv. 19). If II. Timothy, i. 16, indicates that Onesiphorus was dead then II. Timothy, iv. 19, on the same lines of interpretation, indicates that the Apostle was sending salutations to a dead man.

(2). The spirits in prison. The interpretation of this passage has taxed the skill of the greatest biblical exegetes and it has been resorted to to bolster up the practice of prayers for the dead based on what, we believe, the false interpretation that Christ went and preached to the dead in order that they might get another opportunity of accepting the gospel. This is the doctrine of the Larger Hope which cannot be discussed at the present. Our interest, meantime, is with the interpretation above stated and on which is based the plea that inasmuch as Christ went and preached to the dead therefore it is not only allowable to pray for the dead but every encouragement is thus given to do so. As incidentally stated this interpretation is at variance with the Apostle's words and receives no countenance from the drift of the context. Does the text speak of a ministry of Christ in the world of the dead? If so, is it a ministry

of grace or judgment? To what period is the ministry to be referred? Is it a ministry of the pre-incarnate or risen Christ? How is it that the men of Noah's day are introduced? These questions indicate some of the points involved in the Apostle's statement. Without entering into the various interpretations that have been given of this difficult passage it may be said that one interpretation finds in the Apostle's words an assertion of its ministry of grace on the part of Christ in the world of the dead. There are one or two points fatal to the theory of the Larger Hope which cannot be passed over. Why was it that this so-called ministry was confined to the men of Noah's day and why is there no mention of the effect produced by this so-called preaching in the world of the dead? The above interpretation runs right athwart the general teaching of Scripture. "It fails to explain why the time of disobedience is given so specifically, or why the details of the building of the ark, the divine long suffering, and the salvation of the eight souls are introduced as they are. It gives no adequate account of the remarkable fact that the men of Noah's day, and only these, are mentioned."

There is another interpretation, however, which has been accepted by a succession of interpreters from the earliest times to the present day and which is in keeping with the general doctrine of Scripture and does justice to the context. The *scene* of the preaching, according to this interpretation, is confined to earth and the time to Noah's day. It takes the preacher to be Christ Himself in His pre-incarnate state preaching through Noah's message and the building of the ark and the various tokens of God's long suffering. The Apostle, according to this view, is exhorting those to whom he is writing to be content to suffer for there is a blessing in so doing, provided they suffer for well-doing. They are asked to look at the Lord's example and to think what the issue of injurious suffering was to Him. If He suffered He was raised to glory. In the past before He appeared in the flesh He acted in the same gracious way when He went and preached to the guilty generation of Noah's time (whose spirits are now in prison, through Noah's message), by the building of the ark, and the various warnings of the time. He has the same gracious purpose still of which baptism is a figure and He can still save the oppressed righteous as He saved believing souls in Noah's house. This interpretation gives no countenance of benefits to the unbelieving dead and is therefore no support to prayers for the dead.

The other passage in Peter has also its difficulties. The Apostle's aim is clear. It is to encourage tried Christians to keep themselves apart from pagan vices

however they may be blasphemously slandered by their heathen neighbours. The following paraphrase brings out the Apostle's meaning: Be done with pagan practices even though the heathen will persecute you and justify their persecution by reviling you. Christ, however, is Judge and the cause of those who die, no less than those who live is safe in His hands. Their brethren had died but their case is secure for the very object with which the gospel was made known to them was that, although in their bodies they met death yet in their spirits they might have life and if those whom he is addressing be called upon to suffer death it will be with them as it was with their brethren. There is thus nothing in this text any more than in the previous one to countenance the view that the gospel was preached to those in the world, or the dead. It lends no support, therefore, to the hope that inasmuch as there may be a larger hope that prayer for the dead is availing. Scripture lends no encouragement to believe that those who pass time's boundary will have another opportunity in the world to come. There are some other matters in connection with the teaching of our Confession, etc., on this subject which we intend (D.V.) taking up in a future issue.

Dr. C. H. H. Wright in his *Intermediate State and Prayers for the Dead* after examining the writings of the Apostolic Fathers says: "In the previous chapter attention was drawn to the silence of the Apostolic Fathers on all questions concerning the intermediate state. Prayers for the dead originated, at least partly, from fanciful notions which by degrees sprung up in reference to the condition of the departed souls. The practice of prayers for the dead arose at first from small beginnings. Weeds, which spring up at first unperceived in earthly gardens, soon cover the face of the ground. Thus in like manner errors of various kinds have grown up silently and imperceptibly within the garden of the Lord. The Master often warned His disciples against this fatal tendency of human nature. The inspired writers of the New Testament spoke often distinctly of the growth of corruption within the Church of Christ" (pp. 243, 244). We have seen in our former article that the Scriptures in no way sanctions prayer for the dead but as time went on the custom, like many others of an anti-scriptural kind, gradually grew, as Dr. Wright has pointed out in the above passage, as weeds in the garden of the Church. The introduction of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, sad to say, was due to the great doctor of the Church, Augustine (354-430), who did such noble work in vindicating the doctrines of grace against Pelagius. He suggested that imperfect Christians might be purified in the intermediate state by purgatorial

fires. His great influence in the Church gave an opening to what was at first only a conjecture to a fixed belief. As time went on the false doctrine of purgatory became a paying concern to the Roman Catholic Church and as such has become a strong vested interest bringing in millions of pounds to the coffers of the Roman Catholic Church. According to the idea that the so-called purgatorial fires would purify those who had gone to Purgatory, that imaginary place, the faithful of the Church were not only willing to pray for their departed friends but to pay sums of money for their deliverance from the purifying fires. It would take us too long and besides would not help us much to follow the history of this false doctrine and prayers for the dead in the Church of Rome our main interest meantime is with the teaching of the Reformed Church in Scotland and here there is no uncertain sound. In the Confession of Faith used in the English congregation at Geneva and which was "received and approved by the Church of Scotland" these plain words occur: The defence of Christ's Church appertaineth to the Christian magistrates ..... to root out all doctrine of devils and men, as the Mass, Purgatory, *Limbus Patrum*, prayers to saints, and *for the dead*. In the Scottish Confession of 1560 there is nothing that can be construed in favour of praying for the dead. In the *First Booke of Discipline* (1560) the term "contrary doctrine" includes "the superstitious observation of fasting days, difference of meat for conscience sake, prayer for the dead and keeping of holy days of certain saints.....which things, because in God's Scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm." In the Confession of 1581 commonly called the King's Confession or the Negative Confession and which was embodied in the National Covenant of 1638, "prayers for the dead" as well as "purgatory" are strongly denounced. The Order of the English Congregation at Geneva, printed in 1556 and adopted by the Church of Scotland as its Book of Common Order in its section on burial, has not a word about even prayer at the grave to say nothing of prayer for the dead. The First Book of Discipline is more explicit in that it condemns the "singing of *mass, placebo, and dirige, and all other prayers over and for the dead*" as idolatry and repugnant to the plain Scriptures of God. There is no vagueness in the teaching of the Westminster Confession on the subject - "Prayer," it says, "is to be made for things lawful, and for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but, *not for the dead*, nor for those of whom it may be known, that they have sinned the sin unto death" (chap. xxi.). The Larger Catechism in its answer to Question 183 says: "We are to pray for the whole

Church of Christ *upon earth*; for magistrates, and ministers; for ourselves, our brethren, yea, our enemies; and for all sorts of men living or that shall live hereafter; *but not for the dead*, nor for those that are known to have sinned the sin unto death." The Westminster Directory of Public Worship in the section forbidding prayers at the grave gives as reasons that "they have been grossly abused, *are no way beneficial to the dead*, and have proved many ways hurtful to the living."

The late Dr. Cooper as one of the leading Scoto-Catholics in the Church of Scotland in a Sermon preached in 1894 - *The Blessed Dead and Their Remembrance in Prayer by the Church on Earth* - strongly advocated prayers for the blessed dead. The Sermon caused some stir at the time but we fear the practice has gone so far now that where indulged in it gives rise to little or no criticism.

We have seen that the practice of praying even for the blessed dead receives no sanction from the Scripture and is condemned by the recognized formularies of the Church of Scotland.