

Facsimile.

THE
Prayer of the Presidents

BEING

WASHINGTON'S

"New Year Aspiration"

WITH

Jefferson's Plural Pronouns, etc.

AND

Adams' and Lincoln's Accretions.

*From the Manuscript of a Minister of
Lincoln's Administration*

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A NEW-YEAR ASPIRATION

OUR Father who art the infinite Soul over all, around all and in us all:

Although we know that thou dost govern the world by uncapricious law, and that thou, being all-wise and all-good, needest no supplication of ours to remind *thee* of *us*—to teach thee our wants, or to stir thy parental tenderness toward us—yet we also know that *we* do need to remind ourselves of *thee*; that we often must need turn to thee as doth a helpless infant to the sheltering arms of its parent,—

“An infant crying for the light,
And with no language but a cry;”¹

that we, as if instinctively, clutch and cling to the Rock that is higher than we, in our gropings and our yearnings for some reliable refuge, some sure shield, some satisfying solace to the wants and the woes of this world:

“To thee we pray, for all must live by thee.”²

We know too that thou hast ordained that the soul must *crave* good in order to *get* good, —must hunger and thirst after rightness to be filled—to be squared with wisdom, strength and beauty; that thou hast so created us that “as a man thinketh and feeleth, so is he,”³—that as is the spirit and extent of one’s habitual contemplations and quests so must his or her soul expand and be exalted, or sicken, shrivel and grovel,—his or her joys blight in inanition and perish, or bloom and endure “unto everlasting life.”⁴

We realize too that spiritual good is the only permanent good; that

“’Tis immortality, ’tis that alone,
Amid life’s pains, abasements, emptiness,
The soul can comfort, elevate and fill.”⁵

1. Tennyson. 2. John Wesley. 3. Proverbs 23:7. 4. St. John 6:27. 5. Edward Young.

Hence now a while we suspend all merely ephemeral concerns, and, retiring hither with unity of sympathy, together struggle to rise from our feebleness and our darkness unto thee who art “the light of all our being, the strength of all that is strong, the wisdom of what is wise, and the foundation of all things that are.”⁶ And while we breathe upward the prayer of fervent aspiration, or strain forward with new hope upon the rest of our probation, or glance backward with fond or sad retrospection, contrition softeneth our hearts, and gratitude must need dwell upon our tongues.

To deepen the penitence of “a broken and contrite heart which, O God, *thou* wilt not despise”⁷ (however *man* may disparage the poor publican’s humility and aggrandize the proud Pharisee), we would consider the many manifestations of thy good will toward us, “the multitude of thy tender mercies,” and all the felicities of our social life in this goodly heritage from the Christian forefathers and mothers who bequeathed us “unstained freedom to worship God;” a heritage preserved and amplified by the statesmen, the warriors, the scientists, the forthtellers and the other factors inspired by thee in the production of national good character. Let the vicissitudes we have witnessed

“While with ceaseless course the sun
Hasted through the former year, * * *
Teach us henceforth how to live
With eternity in view.”⁸

Although we have some light afflictions, we would view our momentary troubles as results of limitations thou hast fixed in our constitutions for discipline of character.

“And not a grief can darken or surprise,
Swell in the heart or fill with tears our eyes,
But it is sent in mercy and in love,
To bid our helplessness seek strength above.”⁶

Yet we would not idly dream that the attainment of spiritual

6. Anonymous, quoted by President Lincoln, perhaps from Theodore Parker.

7, Psalm 51:7. 8. John Newton.

excellence is any merely supernatural matter. We would admonish ourselves that no impulse or emotion wanting good will hath any moral merit; that each and every good disposition must be planted and cultivated; that we must *ourselves* “cease to do evil, *learn* to do well, *seek* judgment”⁹ or never find it. Would that whenever in ways of unwisdom, we might welcome to our souls the desolation of the prodigal son among the husks, and discern that the consequent wretchedness cometh of thy beneficence.

Nor would we be oblivious of the blessings to us accruing from toil and trials of remoter benefactors, down along the ages of thine evolution of humanity’s most sacred ideals; but, for what thou hast done for us through the world’s glorious martyrs in every good cause, be devoutly thankful to thee and to them, especially to JESUS OF NAZARETH.

We would admonish ourselves that all our serious troubles come of our not keeping our souls imbued with the holy spirit of our great GUIDE AND TEACHER. Would that we might never forget that the only way of *life* is HIS way,—his method,

“Self-introspection deep, to catch and hold
Communion holy with the higher self;”¹⁰

his means,

“A constant dying for to live true life,
Renouncing all of lower self untrue
And insubordinate to higher self;”¹¹

exercising all the propensities wherewith thou hast endowed us, but perverting none: loving but not lax; cheerful “with them that do rejoice,”¹² but

“With moderation dominating all
Precipitately flippant levity;”¹³

reticent and repressed so long as we should be “swift to hear, slow to speak,”¹⁴ but never, through fear of some unmagnanimous critic’s

9. Isaiah 1:17. 10. St. Matthew 6:6. St. Luke, 9:18. 11. Matthew Arnold.
12. Romans 12:15. 13. Philippians 4:5. 14. St. James, 1:19.

imputation of loquacity, tardy to let our light twinkle and communicate whenever duty's occasion shall suggest that there will

"So shine a good deed in a naughty world;"¹⁵

slow to wrath against possibly inadvertent trespasses, but swift to hear of oppression and rectify evil doings; eager to imitate "whatsoever things are decent, lovely and of good report" for recreation, but never in mirth "to hold the mirror"¹⁵ of mimicry up to seeming eccentricity unless to shew as we would be shown, or

"To minister
Fit medicine to minds by care distraught;"⁶

sober but not sombre or ascetic; reverent but not superstitious; direct of dealing and of diction, but, like JESUS

"In parable in converse with a throng
Enthralled by demonology derived
From Babylon, e'er condescending well
To study all the spirit of the age,
And utilize its mental furniture,
E'en though its folk-lore, phantasy-bewitched
And wild bedevilled, seem to freer thought
Mere heir-loom rubbish drifted down the stream
Of time from earth's child races cherishing
Barbaric myths."⁶

Would that we might foster faith—fidelity to conviction—but never, through intellectual indolence, lapse into the credulity which ignores to distinguish between the function of faith and the province of reason, and to analyze increments of tradition. We would meekly bow to solemn mysteries—whatever surpasses our reason—but vigilantly combat absurdities—whatever contradicts and insults reason. We would stand up militant with moral courage against all pernicious new fashions, but warily first cast out of our own eye that refractive prejudice against reformatory innovation upon "traditions of the elders"¹⁶—that Pharisaism—which JESUS was wont to denounce even at peril of his precious

15. Shakespeare. 6. Anonymous, quoted by President Lincoln; perhaps from Theodore Parker. 16. St. Matthew 15:3.

earthly life. We would be hospitable to "truth for authority"¹⁷—

"Loyal to truth e'en when her crown is thorns"¹⁸—

but jealously scrutinize any partisan platforms or creed-fabrics proffered us by chief priests, political scribes or other benevolent zealots as "authority for truth."¹⁷ Yea, verily, we would use all our faculties but abuse none of them.

"We ask not that for us the plan
Of good and ill be set aside,
But that the common lot of man
Be nobly borne and glorified."¹⁹

And although such self-subordination in the exercise of the intellect, the sensibilities and the will may cost us unremitting forecast and circumspection, and weary reminder that

"There is care and struggle in every life,
But no strength cometh without the strife,"

may we never shrink from the complete self-surrender, the obedience to the law of our being, indispensable to that equipoise in the action of the soul's forces neglectful non-maintenance whereof constitutes sin.

"We want a principle within
Of jealous, godly fear,
A sensibility of sin,
A pang to find it near;"²⁰

—a soul not calloused but sublimed by sorrow. We want salvation—

"Salvation from our selfishness,
From more than elemental fire,
The soul's unsanctified desire,
From sin itself and not the pain
That warns us of its chafing chain."²¹

Thus guarding "the fountain"²²—right spiritual *condition*—may we keep pure the stream, the current of *conduct* of our probation. O that the weeds and thorns of the world may not choke the

17. Lucretia Mott. 18. C. S. Burnham. 19. Phoebe Cary. 20. Charles Wesley.
21. Whittier. 22. St. James 3:11.

growth of our graces, our development of reverence, gentlemanliness, gentle-womanliness, sweetness and light, even the divinely sweet reasonableness, the "grace and truth, the glory beheld"²³ in JESUS! Especially his divinely sweet sympathy

"Where'er a human heart doth wear
Joy's myrtle wreath or sorrow's gyves,
Where'er a human spirit strives
After a life more true and fair."²⁴

Thus may we fulfil thy creative purpose, evolving subjective harmony with our objective moral environment—

"Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it"¹⁵

thus "dwell together in unity" with our brother men, reconciling our interests to theirs, bearing patiently with their weakness or rejoicing in their strength; thus appreciate

"How grand in age, how fair in youth,
Are holy friendship, love and truth."

Thus may we strive to hasten the day when all men shall recognize thee as their father, and own JESUS lord of their hearts. Thus may our souls come into at-one-ment with HIS and with thee, to be nevermore bewildered by temptation or blinded by unreason; nevermore

"The soul, like barque with rudder lost,
On passion's changeful tide be tost;"²⁵

nevermore beguiled by vain pomp or other imposing concomitant of kingcraft; nevermore

"O'erworried lest the lucre fly away,
Or trembling at some Jova's fancied spite,
Extraneous intercession begging loud,"⁶

but the soul stand

"Without a fret at fortune's laggard pace,"⁶

and serene in being

"Thoroughly fortified
By acquiescence in the Will Supreme
For time and for eternity."²⁶

23. St. John 1:14. 24. Lowell. 15. Shakespeare. 25. Scott. 6. Anonymous, quoted by President Lincoln; perhaps from Theodore Parker. 26. Wordsworth.

Let each of us, in reviewing his or her experience of the swiftly gliding years, feel that

“So long thy power hath blest me, sure it still
Will lead me on
Through dreary doubt, through pain and sorrow till
The night is gone,
And with the morn those angel faces smile
Which I have loved long since and lost awhile.”²⁷

Thus, come whatever trials and come whatever enemies, may we make them our allies toward assimilating our disposition to that of JESUS, the pure in heart, until we be blessed to “see God;” till thine own truth illumine our understanding, thy justice abide supreme in our conscience, and thy love be a beatitude in our hearts forever. Thus in this realization—that

“Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure
By the cross are sanctified,
Peace is there that knows no measure,
Joys that through all time abide,”²⁸—

let come to us thy kingdom of peace on earth, and so be done thy good will.

Be all our address to thee—

“To thee, the soul’s Ideal
Of all the spiritually real”⁶—

as disciples of HIM who taught us to call thee Our Father, and gave us the aspiration:

“As greets the heart with gratitude
Each blessing hallowed and renewed,
Be inspiration from above
To newer sweetness, light and love
And whatsoever may incite
To wisdom, justice, truth and right.
As be another’s faults forgiven,
Forgiven be own tortuous sin;
Away temptation’s wiles be driven
As evil thinking not begin.
So may the spirit meekly shine
A kindled spark from soul divine,
And so, in JESUS’ love, be given
Faith, peace and patience, hope and heaven.”²⁹

Amen.

27. Cardinal Newman. 28. Sir John Bowring. 6. Anonymous, quoted by President Lincoln; perhaps from Theodore Parker. 29. See “The Life of Lives,” pp. 200, 217.

