

James O. S. Huntington

The Work of Prayer

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*To my mother,
who first taught me to pray*

*“Pray for my soul. More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Therefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
So is the whole round earth in every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.”*

Alfred Lord Tennyson

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Editor's note: The biblical quotations in the following pages are taken from the Douay-Rheims edition of the Old and New Testaments. Where applicable, quotations have been cross-referenced with the differing names and enumeration in the Revised Standard Version, using the following symbol: (RSV =).



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Chapter One



Understand What Prayer Is

“All through this life, in our prayers as in everything else, we are under a discipline of mystery, working on little by little towards the world of perfect light where the mystery will be opened, and the satisfaction of awaking in the Lord’s likeness will be complete.”

Frederic Dan Huntington



We belong — for a while — to two worlds. One of these is the world about us, made up of the things that we see and hear and touch and taste and smell, and of similar things at present beyond the reach of our senses. I sit here at the table and look around the room. There are shelves of books, chairs, a case of drawers with a card catalog. Through the windows I see trees against the blue sky, the grass on the lawn below, the roof of a building a few rods away. I hear the rustle of leaves, sounds of men chiseling stone and driving nails, down the road a boy whistling. And, beyond all these sights and sounds, there are, I know, other sights and other sounds — fields in which birds are singing, the dull roar of great cities, broad rivers, the ocean with the everlasting thunder of its restless waves, and, far beyond, the sun, the moon, other planets, and distant stars.

This is one world. And I belong to it. My body is one of the things that, together, make it up. My body is one of

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the objects in this room, along with the table, the chairs, and the books.



The world of spirits

And then there is another world. It is made up not of things but of living spirits, of spirits who think and know and feel and love. These spirits — spirits of angels and spirits of men, some of them in bodies like my own and some who have left their bodies — make up a world of spirits. And they belong to one another in that spiritual world. There is “a wonderful order” in which they have their place.

*Angels and living saints and dead,
But one communion make.¹*

This spiritual world is what we speak of as “the other world,” the “next world.” But in using such expressions, we forget that we are in that “other world” more truly than we are in “this,” that the “next” world is really the “nearest” world — “Nearer to us than breathing / Closer than hands and feet.”

¹ Cf. Isaac Watts, Hymn 152.

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Moreover, the spiritual world not only lies behind and penetrates the outer world, but it does, at certain times and places, invade the material world, by manifesting its presence and exercising its power, as, with every day-break, the light from the sun invades the darkness of this earth. I belong to this spiritual world, for I am a spirit. I can think and know and feel and love. I am one of the spirits that make up the world of spirits.



God made both worlds

God made both of these worlds. He made all things about me, or the stuff from which they were fashioned by men's hands. He made my body. But God Himself is not one of the objects of this world around me — not even the brightest and most beautiful of them. All the objects of this world might pass away into the nothingness from which they came. But if they were to vanish as “the unsubstantial fabric of a vision,” God would not change. What He was before He made all things, that He still is and will be, even though all else should cease to be. “Thou art the same.” “From everlasting to everlasting Thou art God.”²

² Cf. Ps. 101:28; 89:2 (RSV = Ps. 102:27; 90:2).

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So, again, God made all spirits, of angels and of men. He made me, a spirit. And not only did He make all spirits as He made all things, but He made those spirits for union with Himself, to know Him, fear Him, love Him, work along with Him. In God, who is Spirit, the spirits that He made truly belong to one another. “Hearts can meet only in God.”

So the spiritual world has its center and unity in God, far more truly than this earth and the other planets have their center in our sun.



How we live in each world

To go back to where we started: we belong to these two worlds — the world of bodies or things, and the world of spirits or persons. To live in the world of bodies, I must go out and take from that world what my body needs. I must open my lungs to be filled with air, my mouth to be fed with food, my ears to hear, my eyes to see, my mind to know the things about me.

To live in the world of spirits, I must go out and find in that world what my spirit needs. I must come into communication with God, so that I may know Him, and other spirits in Him. I must try continually to know Him better,

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so that I may love Him, and others for His sake. I must act out my love to Him by seeking to please Him, to work along with Him, in His plans for me and for His other creatures, for His whole creation.



Why prayer is necessary

In yet fewer words, if I would live the life of the physical world, I must breathe. If I would live the life of the spiritual world, I must pray. It is not always easy to breathe; there are times when every breath is a struggle, an agony. But if I give up breathing, my body will lose its place in this outward world; that is, it will die.

It is not always easy to pray; there are times when prayer is a struggle, an agony. But if I give up praying, knowing what prayer means, if I give up all that comes to me through prayer, my spirit will lose its place in the spiritual world; that is, it will die, in the sense in which spirits can die.

On the other hand — for still the likeness holds to some definite extent — if I learn to breathe better, if by practice I gain in the habit of “deep-breathing,” then my body grows stronger; it has a fuller measure of the life of the material world.

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So also, if I learn to pray better, if by practice I come to pray more deeply, with more profound earnestness and trust, then my spirit will grow stronger; it will have a fuller measure of the life of the spiritual world; it will think more clearly, know more fully, feel more keenly, love more intensely; it will come into closer communion with God, the Father of spirits, and with other spirits in Him.



The spiritual world is supremely important

We belong to two worlds then. Is there any doubt as to which of these two worlds is of supreme importance? The world of things outside of us “passeth away.”³ Scientific men can almost reckon the time at which this earth will turn into a ball of discolored ice, and all life will be extinct. And long, long before that — in fact, within a comparatively few years — each one of us will have drawn the last breath and our place in this world will know us no more. But the world of spirits is the “eternal world.” God does not grow old. Although He is “the Ancient of days,” yet His “years shall not fail.”⁴ “God had no beginning and

³ 1 John 2:17.

⁴ Dan. 7:9; Ps. 101:28 (RSV = Ps. 102:27).

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will have no end.” With Him, as St. Augustine⁵ says, “there can be neither ‘was,’ nor ‘will be,’ but only ‘is.’ ”

The world of spirits who are in union with God is the eternal world. In Him those spirits can have eternal life; they can have that life now, not merely hope to have it by and by. “This is the testimony, that God hath given to us eternal life.”⁶

But this eternal life is the life of an immortal spirit — an acting, knowing, loving life. God, who in Spirit, is always acting, knowing, loving. He is pure act. To live by His life we, too, must act and know and love; we must act from Him as our Source, know Him as our Strength, love Him as our Savior. Our Lord said, “My Father *worketh* until now and I *work*.”⁷ “This is life eternal: to *know* Thee, the only true God.”⁸ And St. John says, “We have passed from death to life because we *love*.”⁹

Here, then, is the inevitable necessity of prayer. For prayer is not only the way to know God; it is the act of

⁵ St. Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo.

⁶ 1 John 5:11.

⁷ John 5:17.

⁸ Cf. John 17:3.

⁹ 1 John 3:14.

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the spirit knowing God and loving Him. Prayer is communion with God; it is entering into fellowship with Him. In its highest and completest exercise, it is sharing His life.