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***IN ANSWER  
TO PRAYER***

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# **In Answer to Prayer**

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# Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Titlepage](#)

[Text](#)

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**W. BOYD CARPENTER, D.D.**

LORD BISHOP OF RIPON

I HAVE been asked to write some thoughts on answers to prayer. I am afraid that I cannot give from personal experience vivid and striking anecdotes such as others have chronicled. God does not deal with all alike, either in His gifts of faith or in those of experience. We differ also in the use we make of His gifts. But if I mistake not the object of these papers is not merely to gather together an array of startling experiences, but rather to unite in conference on the great subject of prayer and the answers to prayer.

No doubt every Christian spirit holds within his memory many cherished experiences of God's dealings with him, and these must touch the question of prayer. But the greater part of these experiences belong to that sanctuary life of the soul which, rightly or wrongly, we keep veiled from the world. There are some matters which would lose their charm if they were made public property. There is a reticence which is of faith, just as there may be a reticence which is of cowardice or unfaith. But like the little home treasures, which we only open to look upon when we are alone, so are some of the secret treasures of inward experiences. Nevertheless, none of us can have lived and thought

without meeting with a sort of general confirmation or otherwise of the efficacy of prayer; and though I cannot chronicle positive and striking examples, I can say what I have known.

I have known men of a naturally timid and sensitive disposition who have grown at moments lion-like in courage, and they would tell you that courage came to them in prayer. I have known one man, who found himself face to face with a duty which was unexpected and from which he shrank with all his soul. I have known that such a one has prayed that the duty might not be pressed upon him, and yet that, if it were, he might be given strength to fulfil it. The duty still confronted him. In trembling and in much dismay he undertook it; and when the hour came, it found him calm and equable in spirit, neither dismayed nor demoralised by fears. Such a one might not tell of great outward answers to prayer; but inward answers are not less real. At any rate, the Psalmist chronicled an answer such as this when he wrote: "In the day when I cried Thou answeredst me and strengthenedst me with strength in my soul" (Psalm cxxxviii. 3).

There is, further, a paradox of Christian experience which may be noted. The soul which waits upon God finds out sooner or later that the prayers which seem to be unanswered are those which may be most truly answered. For what is the answer to prayer which the praying heart looks for? There is no true prayer without the proviso—Nevertheless not what I will, but what Thou wilt. In other words, there is no true prayer without reliance upon the greater wisdom and greater love of Him to whom we pray. Thus it is that God's answer may not be the answer as we looked for it. We form our expectations: they take shape from our poor little limited surroundings; but the prayer in its spirit may be wider than we imagine. To answer it

according to our expectations might be not to answer it truly. To answer it according to our real meaning—*i.e.*, according to our spiritual desire—must be the true answer to prayer.

One illustration will suffice. A man, pressed by difficulty and straitness, may pray that he may be moved to some place of greater freedom and ease. He thinks that he ought to move elsewhere. He prays for guidance and the openings of God's providence. In a short time a vacant post presents itself: he applies for it, it is just the thing he wished for. He continues his prayers. The post is given to another. His prayers have not been answered: such is his conclusion; but is not the answer really—"Not yet—not yet—wait awhile. My grace is sufficient for thee"? He waits; he leaves his life in God's hands. After an interval another opening occurs, and almost without an effort he is moved to the vacant place. It is this time, perhaps, not the kind of place he thought of; it is less interesting, it is more onerous, it fills him with fear as he undertakes its duties. He has prayed, but the answer came not as he wished or thought or hoped. The years go by. He looks back from the vantage-ground of distance. He can measure his life in better proportions. He sees now that the movements of his life have a deep meaning. He perceives that to have gone where he wished to have gone, and even where he prayed to be placed, would have been to miss some of the best experiences and highest trainings of this life. He begins to realise that there is not a spot which he has visited, not a place where he has toiled, which has not brought to him lessons that have been most helpful, nay, even needful, in his later life. He sees that God has sent him here or there to fit him for work which, unknown and unexpected in his earlier days, the future was to bring.

The least-answered prayer may be the most-answered. It is the realisation that experiences fit us for the duties of later