

LITERARY PORTALS TO PRAYER

ELIZABETH GASKELL



ILLUMINATED BY

THE MESSAGE®

COMPILED AND INTRODUCED BY

PATRICIA A. LYNCH

She has a purpose in life;
and that purpose is a holy one.

ELIZABETH GASKELL



*Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping,
eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—
and place it before God as an offering.*

THE MESSAGE

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Prayer is sometimes difficult.

Perhaps we need spiritual inspiration. Something to reignite our spiritual life. A way to initiate a new and fruitful spiritual direction.

Great literature can do these things: inspire, ignite, and initiate.

Which is why ACTA Publications is publishing a series of “Literary Portals to Prayer.” The idea is simple: take insightful passages from great authors whose work has stood the test of time and illuminate each selection with a well-chosen quotation from the Bible on the same theme.

To do this, we use a relatively new translation by Eugene Peterson called *The Message: Catholic/Ecumenical Edition*. It is a fresh, compelling, challenging, and faith-filled translation of the Scriptures from ancient languages into contemporary American English that sounds as if it was written yesterday. *The Message* may be new to you, or you may already know it well, but see if it doesn’t illuminate these writings of Elizabeth Gaskell in delightful ways.

We publish the books in this series in a size that can easily fit in pocket or purse and find a spot on kitchen table, bed stand, work bench, study desk, or exercise machine. They are meant to be used. And we feature a variety of authors so you can find the one or ones that can kick-start your prayer life.

So enjoy these portals to prayer by Elizabeth Gaskell illuminated by *The Message*. And look for others in this series, including Louisa May Alcott, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, Herman Melville, and others. Consider them, if you will, literary lectio divina.

Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
President and Publisher
ACTA Publications

INTRODUCTION



Wives and Daughters, *North and South*, *Cranford*...the works of Elizabeth Gaskell have reached new audiences through these award-winning BBC costume dramas and awakened a new appreciation of this ground-breaking nineteenth-century writer, a contemporary of Charles Dickens and a friend and biographer of Charlotte Brontë.

I first encountered Gaskell through *Cranford*, one of my mother-in-law's favorite PBS series. Then, needing some period-appropriate reading for a Civil War living history group, I picked up *North and South*. Not *that* North and South, but the North and South of industrial England. This exercise—searching for passages that inspire prayer—has been a gift, allowing me to open her works again with a different kind of attention and to read *Ruth* for the first time.

For me, opening one of Gaskell's books is like "reading" an icon or, in her case, a Pre-Raphaelite painting. We step into her world: the lush beauty of the Cheshire countryside and the cramped, dark wretchedness of factory towns. Page by page we enter an era of rising tension between the poor, oppressed, and outcast; the masters, shopkeepers, and men of business; and the privileged class of lords and ladies.

Her works have been described as "Condition-of-England" fiction, social realism, and industrial narrative, but there is also much romance and humor. And reconciliation. Gaskell fashions a narrative that allows the social superior to

recognize the humanity of the social inferior and the social inferior to look into the heart—often the softened heart—of the one who has been his or her master or lord.

While Gaskell shares the world view of her friend and editor Charles Dickens, her characters are drawn with a different sensibility. Even when she writes with a masculine voice, she betrays the heart of a woman and the spiritual insights of her father and her husband, both Unitarian ministers. With her references to her characters' colloquial use of Scripture (she calls it a "rough kind of Bible language"), I think the whole family would have approved using *The Message* to illuminate her writings.

As you reflect on these passages from just a few of her works, I hope you will be moved to spend time with Gaskell's books in their entirety. Does the plight of the Gregson family tug at your heart-strings? Do you sympathize with Molly Gibson or Margaret Hale in protecting their secrets and suffering the ill-judgment and mistrust of family and community? Are you indignant at the summary dismissal of a prospective servant girl who has the "misfortune" of knowing how to keep the books? Are you angered by the injustices of the industrial masters and moved when their eyes are opened to the sufferings of the men and women who populate their factories? And do you see a reflection of the struggles of Gaskell's world in your personal life and in today's society? If your answer is yes, Elizabeth Gaskell is the perfect portal to prayer for you.

Patricia A. Lynch
Hales Corners, Wisconsin

ELIZABETH GASKELL



SELECTIONS FROM

Cousin Phillis, 1864

Cranford, 1851-1853

The Heart of John Middleton, 1850

Libbie Marsh's Three Eras, 1847

Mary Barton: A Manchester Life, 1848

My Lady Ludlow, 1855

North and South, 1863

Ruth, 1853

Wives and Daughters, 1865

NEVER WALK AWAY

As we did not read much, and as all the ladies were pretty well suited with servants, there was a dearth of subjects for conversation. We therefore discussed the circumstance of the Captain taking a poor woman's dinner out of her hands one very slippery Sunday. He had met her returning from the bake-house as he came from church, and noticed her precarious footing; and with the grave dignity with which he did everything, he relieved her of her burden, and steered along the street by her side, carrying her baked mutton and potatoes safely home. This was thought very eccentric; and it was rather expected that he would pay a round of calls, on the Monday morning, to explain and apologize to the Cranford sense of propriety: but he did no such thing; and then it was decided that he was ashamed, and was keeping out of sight. In a kindly pity for him we began to say, "After all, the Sunday morning's occurrence showed great goodness of heart," and it was resolved that he should be comforted on his next appearance among us; but, lo! he came down upon us, untouched by any sense of shame, speaking loud and bass as ever, his head thrown back, his wig as jaunty and well-curved as usual, and we were obliged to conclude he had forgotten all about Sunday.

CRANFORD, CHAPTER 2, THE CAPTAIN



NEVER WALK AWAY

*Never walk away from someone who deserves help;
your hand is God's hand for that person.
Don't tell your neighbor "Maybe some other time"
or "Try me tomorrow"
when the money's right there in your pocket.
Don't figure ways of taking advantage
of your neighbor
when he's sitting there trusting and unsuspecting.*

PROVERBS 3:27-29



A LONG LIFE

Miss Matty undid the packet with a sigh; but she stifled it directly, as if it were hardly right to regret the flight of time, or of life either. We agreed to look at them separately, each taking a different letter out of the same bundle and describing its contents to the other before destroying it. I never knew what sad work the reading of old letters was before that evening, though I could hardly tell why. The letters were as happy as letters could be—at least the early letters were. There was in them a vivid and intense sense of the present time, which seemed so strong and full, as if it could never pass away, and as if the warm living hearts that so expressed themselves could never die, and be as nothing to the sunny earth. I should have been less melancholy, I believe, if the letters had been more so. I saw the tears stealing down the well-worn furrows of Miss Matty's cheeks, and her spectacles often wanted wiping. I trusted at last that she would light the other candle, for my own eyes were rather dim, and I wanted more light to see the pale and faded ink; but no, even through her tears, she saw and remembered her little economical ways.

CRANFORD, CHAPTER 5, OLD LETTERS



A LONG LIFE

*Oh, how sweet the light of day,
And how wonderful to live in the sunshine!
Even if you live a long time,
 don't take a single day for granted.
Take delight in each light-filled hour,
Remembering that there will also be many dark days
And that most of what comes your way is smoke.*

ECCLESIASTES 11:7-8



SHE GAVE HER ALL

On coming downstairs I found Mrs. Forrester waiting for me at the entrance to the dining-parlour.... At last out it came; the poor old lady trembling all the time as if it were a great crime which she was exposing to daylight, in telling me how very, very little she had to live upon; a confession which she was brought to make from a dread lest we should think that the small contribution named in her paper bore any proportion to her love and regard for Miss Matty. And yet that sum which she so eagerly relinquished was, in truth, more than a twentieth part of what she had to live upon, and keep house, and a little serving-maid.... And when the whole income does not nearly amount to a hundred pounds, to give up a twentieth of it will necessitate many careful economies, and many pieces of self-denial, small and insignificant in the world's account, but bearing a different value in another account-book that I have heard of. She did so wish she was rich, she said, and this wish she kept repeating, with no thought of herself in it, only with a longing, yearning desire to be able to heap up Miss Matty's measure of comforts.

CRANFORD, CHAPTER 14, FRIENDS IN NEED



SHE GAVE HER ALL

Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. Jesus called his disciples over and said, “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.”

MARK 12:41-44



I'LL HOLD YOU RESPONSIBLE

"I, madam, as the clergyman of this parish, am not to shrink from telling what I believe to be the truth to the poor and lowly, no more am I to hold my peace in the presence of the rich and titled." Mr. Gray's face showed that he was in that state of excitement which in a child would have ended in a good fit of crying. He looked as if he had nerved himself up to doing and saying things, which he disliked above everything, and which nothing short of serious duty could have compelled him to do and say...

He was near the hall door, and said something—half to himself, which we heard (being nearer to him), but my lady did not; although she saw that he spoke. "What did he say?" she asked in a somewhat hurried manner, as soon as the door was closed—"I did not hear." We looked at each other, and then I spoke:

"He said, my lady, that 'God help him! he was responsible for all the evil he did not strive to overcome.'"

MY LADY LUDLOW, CHAPTER 2



I'LL HOLD YOU RESPONSIBLE

“If you haven’t warned them, they’ll die because of their sins, and none of the right things they’ve done will count for anything—and I’ll hold you responsible. But if you warn these righteous people not to sin and they listen to you, they’ll live because they took the warning—and again, you’ll have saved your life.”

EZEKIEL 3:20-21



LITERARY: pertaining to or of the nature of books and writing, especially those classed as literature

PORTAL: a door, gate, or entrance, especially one of imposing power or utility

PRAYER: the lifting up of the mind and heart to divine reality

TO ILLUMINATE: to brighten, light up, make lucid or clear



In this unique and compelling aid to prayer, passages from the work of Elizabeth Gaskell, 19th-century English author, friend and colleague of Charles Dickens, and first biographer of Charlotte Brontë, are carefully chosen as “portals” through which to enter prayer in a new and fruitful way. Each verso (left) page contains an excerpt from one of Gaskell’s novels or short stories, and the opposite recto (right) page illuminates the selection with a Bible verse from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson.

This book is the perfect gift for fans of Gaskell’s intriguing prose, as well as those who have yet to discover her writing, and will serve as a welcome resource for those seeking a way to reignite their prayer life. Think of it as literary *lectio divina*.

Other volumes in this series include William Shakespeare, Herman Melville, Louisa May Alcott, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Hans Christian Andersen. Also available in an enhanced-size edition for public display, performance, and personal use.

Prayer/Literary



ISBN 978-0-87946-620-6 5 1 0 9 5 >



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