

Mark Twain, "The War Prayer" (1905)

Twain (author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) wrote this short story a few years after the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), both of which he opposed. Partly due to pressure from his family and friends, he decided not to publish it during his lifetime. It was not until 1923, thirteen years after his death, that the story was published in an anthology of his writings.

5 It was a time of great and exalting excitement. The country was up
in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism; the
drums were beating, the bands playing, the toy pistols popping, the bunched
firecrackers hissing and sputtering; on every hand and far down the receding and
fading spreads of roofs and balconies a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in
the sun; daily the young volunteers marched down the wide avenue gay and fine
in their new uniforms, the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts
cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion as they swung by; nightly
the packed mass meetings listened, panting, to patriot oratory which stirred the
10 deepest deeps of their hearts and which they interrupted at briefest intervals with
cyclones of applause, the tears running down their cheeks the while; in the
churches the pastors preached devotion to flag and country and invoked the God
of Battles, beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpouring of fervid eloquence
which moved every listener.

15 It was indeed a glad and gracious time, and the half dozen rash spirits that
ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness
straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's
sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

20 Sunday morning came—next day the battalions would leave for the front;
the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their faces alight with material
dreams—visions of a stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge,
the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the
fierce pursuit, the surrender!—then home from the war, bronzed heroes,
welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory! With the volunteers sat
25 their dear ones, proud, happy, and envied by the neighbors and friends who had
no sons and brothers to send forth to the field of honor, there to win for the flag
or, failing, die the noblest of noble deaths. The service proceeded; a war chapter
from the Old Testament was read; the first prayer was said; it was followed by an
organ burst that shook the building, and with one impulse the house rose, with
30 glowing eyes and beating hearts, and poured out that tremendous invocation

—“God the all-terrible! Thou who ordainest, Thunder thy clarion and lightning thy sword!”

35 Then came the “long” prayer. None could remember the like of it for passionate pleading and moving and beautiful language. The burden of its supplication was that an ever – merciful and benignant Father of us all would watch over our noble young soldiers and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their patriotic work; bless them, shield them in His mighty hand, make them strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset; help them to crush the foe, grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory.

40 An aged stranger entered and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, his eyes fixed upon the minister, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet, his head bare, his white hair descending in a frothy cataract to his shoulders, his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness. With all eyes following him and wondering, he made his silent way; without pausing, he ascended to the preacher's side and stood there, waiting.

45 With shut lids the preacher, unconscious of his presence, continued his moving prayer, and at last finished it with the words, uttered in fervent appeal, “Bless our arms, grant us the victory, O Lord our God, Father and Protector of our land and flag!”

50 The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside—which the startled minister did—and took his place. During some moments he surveyed the spellbound audience with solemn eyes in which burned an uncanny light; then in a deep voice he said

55 “I come from the Throne—bearing a message from Almighty God!” The words smote the house with a shock; if the stranger perceived it he gave no attention. “He has heard the prayer of His servant your shepherd and grant it if such shall be your desire after I, His messenger, shall have explained to you its import – that is to say, its full import. For it is like unto many of the prayers of men, in that it asks for more than he who utters it is aware of—except he pause and think.

60 “God's servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of His Who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this—keep it in mind. If you beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act you are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor's crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it.

70 “You have heard your servant's prayer—the uttered part of it. I am
commissioned by God to put into words the other part of it—that part which the
pastor, and also you in your hearts, fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and
unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard these words: ‘Grant us the
victory, O Lord our God!’ That is sufficient. The whole of the uttered prayer is
compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you
75 have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which
follow victory—must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit
of God the Father fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me
to put it into words. Listen!

80 “O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to
battle—be Thou near them! With them, in spirit, we also go forth from the sweet
peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear
their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling
fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of
the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste
85 their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their
unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with
their little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in
rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds
of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the
90 grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight
their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their
way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!
We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is
ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with
95 humble and contrite hearts. Amen.”

(After a pause)

“Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most
High waits.”

100 It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no
sense in what he said.