

Souls Aflame: The Prayer Heritage of the Latter-day Saints

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Let me begin with a legend. There is a story of a grandfather, a holy man, who, caring for his grandson, sent him out to play. Shortly the boy returned sobbing as if his heart would break. He explained, "I was playing hide-and-seek with my friends. I went and hid and waited, but no one came for me. They all ran away." The grandfather embraced him and said, "Now you know how God feels. He hides, and no one comes for him."

This church does not have a collection of what in classical terms is called devotional literature or an official manual which is a set of spiritual exercises. What we do have is a pool of experience, rich experience. This morning I would like to derive from it some bits and pieces which I believe will help draw us closer to the Lord. There are religions in the world that develop their prayer practices after the preconceptions of their theology are taken into account. We have an opposite heritage: our theology has been derived from prayer—safer, sounder, and saner, I believe.

But first may I mention two hard reflective hangups that occur in the discussion of prayer in the wider world and which have not only been resolved but dissolved for us if only we will. There is first the notion that God, being all-knowing, is therefore unchanging. Since he

knows all that will occur, having, it is said, absolute foreknowledge, prayer is pointless. For if God knew yesterday what is happening today, including all that I am going to do, it is pointless to ask that it be changed. One can insist that his foreknowledge is not a cause. One can still ask, "But am I a cause truly if, in fact, the eventuations could not have been otherwise?"

The heritage of prayer in this church teaches us that, whether or not we settle the question of foreknowledge, there is a point in reaching up to that Person, not a thing, who is himself free and has used his freedom to forbid to himself the use of force. He is not a computer, I am grateful to report. He is a conscious Being. And it is our relation in freedom to his freedom that does make a difference. Our history is replete with instances again and again of the inevitable, as it seems, not happening because of the intervention of our prayers and his response.

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But there is a second confusion. Surely God, being God, must know what is best for us. If we pray and ask him to change his mind, he would hardly be wise to answer yes. If we pray for our own hurt, God, being a loving God, would do well to answer us no to our good. If we are simply praying to remind him of what he already intends, why pray at all? A kind of intellectual lockjaw comes from such reflection. But, in truth, again the Restoration makes it clear that we have needs, and so does he. He needs us to listen as well as to ask. It is said among the Jews that God, preferring our prayers to mere silence, caused great affliction among the Israelites so they would at least cry out from their pain. We do need and he does need.

His will, one would almost gather from diaries and journals which report firsthand experience, can be swayed, in part because the very prayer process changes us, and God can respond to that change; and in part because in the two-way relationship that exists we are to learn and grow through his response.

Of Faith as Trust

May I turn now to questions that are more soulful and not merely intellectual and reply with experience. There is some circularity in faith itself. "Faith," a child once said in a Sunday School class, "means believing what you know darn well isn't so." Faith is sometimes thought to be, in the religious world, a substitute for knowledge and, in fact, a form of credulity. It is thought to be assurance *that* something is or isn't. But the first principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not such faith. It is faith *in* a person about whom we already have some knowledge. Faith does not exist in a vacuum. Trust in a person is based upon acquaintance with the person, or at least belief about the person. It may begin secondhand. But the whole point of the gospel is to make it firsthand. He who counsels us "Pray always" is asking that we come to him in confidence.

Of Crutches

Second, it is said that prayer is a crutch. After all, mature people stand on their own two feet. They don't have to pray. Prayer is a form of wishful thinking, a kind of wanting pie in the sky.

First of all, there is nothing wrong with crutches for people who need them, nothing wrong with escalators and elevators. Agnosticism is a kind of crutch. It is a perennial postponement of decision. And what is it but a faith that assumes postponement is safer than commitment? Atheism is a pair of iron braces. It claims to know more than can be known. Somebody observed that atheists don't find God for the same reason bank robbers don't find policemen. They are really not looking very hard. But in almost every section of the Doctrine and Covenants the admonition is, "Seek and ye shall find." The implication is don't seek and you likely won't.

Of Doubt

But, it is said, I don't pray because I have doubts. I doubt things about myself, about the gospel, and even about God. Truly doubt and faith do not coexist in the same person at the same time. But they can exist within a second of each other. Witness Heber C. Kimball's standing by the door as Brigham Young was lying on what appeared to be his deathbed. "I do not think," said Heber, "Brigham will ever rise from that bed." But then after a moment of meditative prayer he lighted up and said, "He shall live." And he prophesied several events to come (*see* Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1945], p. 434). He was right the second time. From doubt to faith.

On another occasion, we are told, he stood in the old tabernacle in Salt Lake and announced to a threadbare and barely surviving people, "State goods will soon sell in Salt Lake City for less than they sell for in New York. In the name of the Lord, amen."

Someone on the stand said, "I don't believe a word of it."

As he turned from the pulpit, he himself said, "I guess I missed it that time." Brigham Young said, "Let it stand." It did stand. When the gold rush came, it was actually and completely fulfilled (see Whitney, *Kimball*, pp. 389–90). He was right the first time. From faith to doubt.

It is an honest prayer to say "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24). And it was, after all, the Prophet Joseph Smith, who said (and he was a man of faith), "If I had not experienced what I have, I could not have believed it myself" (*Teachings*, p. 361).

Of Words

But, it is said, I don't pray because I am not good with words; I would rather someone else would do the talking. Understandable. But our history is replete with instances of people who had mind-boggling verbal gifts and also the absence thereof. Many, like Moses, could only stammer and needed an Aaron. In our midst today are those who are both deaf and dumb, whose lips are sealed. But they yet may pray from their core, wordlessly. Joseph Smith changed the line of Paul that says "The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). The Prophet's version: "With striving which cannot be expressed [meaning words]" (*Teachings*, p. 278). But if one does have trust in the living God, he can from his core reach upward, put an arrow on those imprisoned needs, and they will be carried by One who speaks for all of us, a Mediator named Jesus Christ. They are then perfectly communicated and responded to. What relief when we thus pour out our souls!

Of Postponed Answers

But, it is said, I do not pray because my prayers have not been answered. Answered? Do we mean not heard? Ah, but they have been—and recorded. We are taught that one

day *we* ourselves will have a perfect bright recollection of all that has occurred in our lives here. But what of all that has been before that? Our historian, B. H. Roberts, thought long and hard on the record he studied so often and so deeply. He tried to account for the radical differences among and between those who have received the gospel in this dispensation, observing that some seemed almost to be born with it. He concluded that their response to the gospel and its powers was far beyond anything they could have learned in the short space of mortality. He concluded they brought it with them. His summary is, "Faith is trust in what the spirit learned eons ago" (B. H. Roberts, *Scriptural Notebook*, BYU Special Collections under "F").

We do come bringing, though locked under amnesia, the residual powers and distillation of a long experience. To those of us who see the hand of the Lord everywhere and to those of us who see it nowhere, the same promise is made: the day will come when we shall know that we have seen him and that he is the light and is in us without which we could not abound (see D&C 88:50).

There is locked in all of us, as there was in Enos—and I read Enos to say that he was surprised to find it was there (see Enos 7:8)—more faith than we presently know. He was heard, and we are heard. But it may not be the response of God here and now we wish. Yet have you not lived long enough to say to the Lord, "Disregard previous memo"; to thank him that he answered no, and to ask that he erase some of the petitions that you now realize were foolish or hasty or even perverse?

On Being Specific

Now may I take slices from autobiographical accounts? Are we to pray in practical and specific terms? Brother Brigham Young was hung up on a sandbar crossing a river on the plains. His companion, troubled, said, "Let's pray."

Brigham replied, "Pray? I prayed this morning. Let's get out and push." There is a

time for total concentration in prayer and a time for answering prayer with your own muscles—helping.

But this is the same man who was specific enough to bring to the Lord concrete and urgent feelings, even hostile ones. His prize saddle was misplaced or did not hang properly, and the horse trampled it into shreds. He sharply rebuked the neglectful man and then made a beeline for the bedroom where he said (someone overheard him), “Down Brigham.” Then he knelt and prayed, “Lord, I’m sorry. I was angry. Take my anger away and help me to do better next time.”

“When I am angry,” he said to a friend, “the first thing I do is pray.”

Some of us have been taught that should be the last thing we do, that we should soak our head in a bucket and then pray. “I never am so angry but that I can pray,” said Heber C. Kimball (*JD* 3:231). And as for the related emotions, the same holds true.

Of such a practice Brigham Young once said, “I do not recollect that I have seen five minutes since I was baptized that I have not been ready to preach a funeral sermon, lay hands on the sick, or to pray in private or public.” Think of that! And then he added, “I will tell you the secret of this. . . . If you commit an overt act, repent of that immediately, and call upon God to deliver you from evil and give you the light of His spirit” (*JD* 12:102–3) rather than spend a week rationalizing and defending what you have done amiss or not done aright. He did it.

Of Lacking the Heart for It

But again, can we pray when we hardly have the heart for it? Lorenzo Snow leaves us the glimpse that after he was, as he felt, still-born into the Church, nothing really significant happened in and after his baptism and confirmation. He kept praying for life, for the witness of the Spirit. It didn’t come. Not feeling as he was wont but that the heavens were as brass

over him, he nevertheless went to an accustomed place for prayer. He had no sooner opened his lips than the Spirit descended upon him. He describes it as like the rustling of silken robes. (They did not have the word *electricity* then.) There descended upon him a Spirit that was more tangible in its effect upon every part of his body than the surroundment by water in baptism. He was filled, praying when he didn’t want to pray (*see* Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Records of Lorenzo Snow*, pp. 8–9; *Juvenile Instructor* 22:22–23).

Of Reverence and Candor

But are we not to bring a certain proper reverence to prayer? And if we are not in that mode should we not repent and wait? Listen to Heber C. Kimball. He is praying with his family and in the midst of the prayer says, “Father, bless Brother So-and-so.” And then begins a loud laugh. I can imagine the heads of his children popping up and their eyes opening. After a slight pause he said, “Lord, it makes me laugh to pray about some people,” and went on with his prayer (*see*, Whitney, *Kimball*, p. 427). I leave it to you, was that light-mindedness or profound intimacy with the Lord who knows we have a funny bone? He gave it to us.

My father taught me this ancient legend about Adam and Eve. As they were departing there was a solemn farewell, and the Father recognized far more clearly than they what they, as vanguard pioneers into the real world, were going to face. They said good-bye. But just before the couple disappeared in the mists, the Father couldn’t stand it. He called them back and gave them a sense of humor.

We are blessed with the admonition not to betray the sacred. That is light-mindedness (*see* D&C 88:121). But we are also blessed that we should have “a glad heart and a cheerful countenance” (D&C 59:15). And if you cannot laugh at yourself and even at some of the absurdities of this world, you take yourself too seriously.

Prayer can even manifest that phase of one's core with divine approval.

Of Confusion and Affliction

But, again, there is a problem of method. Do you have to say it a certain way? Do you have to have an appropriate technique? "Lord," one of our diarists records, "I don't know whether I am sincere or not. I don't know whether I want to pray or not." A superb prayer.

But can you cry out of affliction with any hope of help? Of course. It was Joseph Smith who, in a dungeon ironically called Liberty Jail, asked the questions we all sooner or later will ask: "O God, where art thou?" And, "How long, O Lord?" To the first the answer was, "I am here." And to the second, "Not long. But a small moment, Joseph." (Note that it was the Lord's definition of time.) "If thou endure it well and art faithful, thou shalt triumph" (see D&C 121:1, 3, 8). I am impressed, as an amateur in our history, with the number of miracles of overcoming, of solving problems. But I give it to you as my testimony that equally impressive are those divine blessings that enabled people to endure what they could not overcome; to hold on; to wait and wait and wait faithfully.

Of the Impossible

But can one pray for the impossible? There is, in certain traditions about divine omnipotence, the notion that one could ask for the preservation of the life of a friend who had been killed in a foreign war the day before; and that God, having command of time, could actually answer the prayer yes. Not so, I submit. There are laws. There are conditions. And God himself cannot change them. Yes, we cry out, he could and sometimes does prevent this or that. But he could not prevent it and still accomplish others of his, and of our, multiple purposes. It must be rough to be the Father of everyone.

Of Names

But, it can be asked, is there a name that he prefers that we are often to use? The answer is in the life of Christ, who chose, almost without exception, one word—*Abba*. In Hebrew it means *Father*. But it means a shade more than that. It means, as a child would whisper it, *Daddy*. Intimate. We are all given names after we are born. The Lord wills to give us a name after we are reborn. We take it upon us willingly and by covenant. It is his name. And through it and with it we are equipped to pray more powerfully than if we prayed only in our own name. In my imagination I wonder if, when the Father said, "Joseph, this is my Beloved," he might also have said, "Beloved, this is our Joseph." Or if, as they stood in visitation (which is more than vision), which at first must have been bewildering to Joseph, they could have said, "Remember us?" In prayer we are to use the name of him who "descended below all things" (D&C 88:6).

Now, brothers and sisters, from our history I come to a focus and a conclusion. There are levels beyond levels of prayer. There are heights beyond heights. There are promises in modern revelation that in due time, after we have proved that we are "determined to serve him at all hazards" (*Teachings*, p. 150), we may receive "keys" whereby we may ask with the full assurance of an answer (see D&C 124:97). Said Joseph Smith to Brigham Young on an occasion, "You have passed certain bounds and conditions, Brother Brigham. Now you can be receptive to certain revelations." Brigham passed the same keys to others, including Wilford Woodruff. Wilford Woodruff said at the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple that it had been made known to him by revelation that the reason a representative of the Woodruff family had been called to preside was that "the Lord could not find a weaker vessel" (S. L. Temple Dedication Notes, BYU Special Collections, April 1893, p. 125). Our whole history teaches us that out of weakness we can be made strong (see 2 Nephi 3:13; Jacob 4:7; Ether 12:27, 37; D&C

1:23; 133:58, 59; 135:5). Why does the Lord choose the weak? Among other reasons, because they can be taught and influenced. He has to use a jackhammer for the proud. Further, because they are transparently weak, those who have eyes to see are not confused about where the power, if there is power, comes from. It comes from God.

There are levels beyond levels, gifts beyond gifts.

This glimpse in summary. It was in a school of instruction, the School of Prophets—and prophetesses, too. (For the first thing the Smith brothers thought on a day of a rich spiritual outpouring in that room above the Newel K. Whitney store was, “Where is mother?” And they rode a piece and brought her to participate.) In that setting the Prophet asked that each in turn speak, that, as the revelation says, “not all be spokesmen at once . . . and that every man may have an equal privilege” (D&C 88:122). The subject was faith. Scriptures were quoted. The last man to speak, as it happened, was Brother Kimball who in effect said,

“It’s all been said, but I can say one thing, tell you a story. My daughter, Helen Mar, was standing near the table, and her mother left her saying, ‘Don’t touch those dishes. Don’t break one of those or I will whip you.’ Vilate left, and Helen Mar did what little children often do when they are told not to do it. Not just a dish was broken. The whole table leaf collapsed. All were broken.

“Now she went out, as she had watched her parents do, near a tree. We don’t know what she said, but it would have been simple enough: ‘Bless my mother that she won’t whip me.’

“Vilate returned. She saw the situation. She flared. She led the little girl by the hand into the bedroom. She assumed the angle. And then she couldn’t go through with it. And the arms of Helen Mar came around her neck, and she said, ‘Oh, mother, I prayed that you wouldn’t. I’m sorry, sorry.’”

When Brother Heber finished, every man in the room, including Joseph, was in tears. And Joseph said, “Brethren [these are grown-up, strong, independent, willful, intelligent men], that is the kind of faith we need, the faith of a little child going in humility to its Parent” (Whitney, *Kimball*, pp. 69–79). That sums it up.

In closing, then, just this verse.

Pray always, and I will pour out my Spirit upon you, and great shall be your blessing—yea, even more than if you should obtain treasures of earth and corruptibleness to the extent thereof.

Behold, canst thou read this without rejoicing and lifting up thy heart for gladness?

Or canst thou run about longer as a blind guide?

Or canst thou be humble and meek, and conduct thyself wisely before me? Yea, come unto me thy Savior. [D&C 19:38–41]

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.