

“Did You Think to Pray?”

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Some years ago I heard a story about a little boy in Primary class who was asked to say the opening prayer.

“Heavenly Father,” said the boy, “I thank thee for the letter *A*. I thank thee for the letter *B*. I thank thee for the letter *C*.”

The teacher realized this could be a very long prayer, but she restrained herself from stopping him.

He went on to give thanks for every letter of the alphabet through *Z*. Then he said, “And Heavenly Father, I thank thee for the number one. I thank thee for the number two.” And so on he went.

His teacher nearly panicked. She didn’t know how high the boy could count. She felt she had to stop him, but again something seemed to restrain her. The boy kept on praying until he reached the number twenty. And then he said, “And Heavenly Father, I thank thee for my Primary teacher, who is the only grown-up that ever let me *finish* my prayer.”

I have thought of that boy’s prayer often. He helped me realize that I, too, am thankful for the alphabet, the numbers, and the shapes and the colors and for everything I learned in elementary school—things so easily taken for granted, the foundation stones of all learning. I feel grateful for every miraculous gift of God,

for the wonders of His love, for the beauty of His creations, for all that is good and right and true flowing down from our Father in Heaven on high:

*For the beauty of the earth,
For the beauty of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies.*

[“For the Beauty of the Earth,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 92]

I am deeply thankful for the gift of prayer, which is surely among the greatest of gifts given by our Father in Heaven to His children on earth. Prayer is the ordained means by which men and women, and even little children, come to know God. It is our channel of communication with heaven. It is a priceless privilege.

My mother grew up in the small town of Liberty, Utah. When she was young, in the 1930s, her ward had an organist who could play only one hymn. The congregation sang

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other hymns a cappella, but at least once every Sunday they would sing, “Ere you left your room this morning, Did you think to pray?”

I especially love the third verse of the hymn:

*When sore trials came upon you,
Did you think to pray?
When your soul was full of sorrow,
Balm of Gilead did you borrow
At the gates of day?*

[“Did You Think to Pray?” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 140]

I think of “the gates of day” as the opening to a realm of eternal daylight—gates of prayer that connect us with our heavenly home and the realm of glory where God and Christ dwell. When we pray, we borrow strength, love, and light at the very door of eternity.

Yet all too easily our prayers can become repetitive and perfunctory, a mere check on a checklist of duties and tasks in a given day. “I said my prayers” can be a phrase as routine and ordinary as “I did my homework” or “I bought the groceries.” But prayer was never meant to be ordinary: it can be among the most exalted of privileges we enjoy in this mortal sphere.

Several years ago our oldest son shared with me a lesson he had learned about prayer. He was a very busy student at BYU. One evening he sat down to eat a quick dinner and, out of pure habit, said, “Please bless this food to nourish and strengthen my body.” He opened his eyes and looked at his food: a Twinkie and a can of soda. He realized there was no way that food was going to nourish and strengthen his body.

He later explained to me that the experience taught him the meaning of the phrase “vain repetitions.” When we repeat the same stock phrases over and over in prayer, but not with real intent—when our heart and mind are not in the prayer—then we are only engaging in vain repetition.

Heartfelt Prayer

Moroni’s admonition about praying to know the truth of the Book of Mormon applies to all prayers: namely, that we “ask with a sincere heart, with real intent” (Moroni 10:4). True prayer is *heartfelt*: the words convey our deeply felt desires and are coupled with a commitment to act on the divine guidance we receive.

Heartfelt prayer comes from the depths of the soul. Our mind and heart are directed toward God with full and complete attention. When we pray from the heart, we are not just saying words or “going through the motions”; we are seeking to draw nearer to our Father in Heaven, to commune with Him in a personal and intimate manner. Heartfelt prayer is the furthest thing from a memorized recitation. We do not simply talk *at* God; rather, we talk *with* Him. This does not imply a face-to-face conversation as Moses experienced, but it does suggest communing with God by listening to the still, small voice of the Spirit. It means allowing time both during a prayer and after a prayer to hear spiritual promptings.

In Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*, Claudius, king of Denmark, kneels in prayer to seek forgiveness, but, upon rising, he knows that his entire prayer has been insincere and in vain. He says:

*My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.*
[*Hamlet*, act 3, scene 3, lines 97–98]

The Lord desires that we speak with Him openly, honestly, and in plain, simple words. Any attempt at pretense in prayer is pointless, for the Lord knows our hearts perfectly; indeed, insincerity in prayer can become a subtle form of hypocrisy.

Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain’s great novel learned this when he tried to pray for forgiveness for having helped his black friend, Jim, escape from slavery:

I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. Why wouldn't they? It warn't no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from me, neither. I knowed very well why they wouldn't come. It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double. . . . Deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can't pray a lie. [The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), chapter 31; emphasis in original]

If we examine our personal prayers carefully, we may discover that we often say things we do not really mean or even desire. We are not praying truthfully. The best corrective to this is to focus on the words and phrases we use in prayer and make sure we mean what we say. It also helps to set aside adequate time for prayer so as not to be rushed; to couple prayer with meditation; and to pray, if possible, in a place of quiet solitude.

The Lord's promise "Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you" (D&C 88:63) captures the essence of heartfelt prayer. Heartfelt prayer is not just a list of things to give thanks for and things to ask for. It entails coming to know God. It means seeking understanding of divine truths, seeking to better understand the purposes of one's life and how to best please God; it means talking with the Lord about things that matter most, what Nephi called "the things of my soul" (2 Nephi 4:15). Such experiences in prayer are sacred and will be cherished throughout our lives.

When we truly pray from the heart, we open our innermost feelings to our Father in Heaven: we tell Him of our challenges, our feelings of inadequacy and weakness; we share our emotions and feelings about decisions that face us or trials and adversity we experience; we freely express our sorrows and joys. Now, God knows our innermost thoughts and feelings even better than we do, but as we learn to

share them with Him, we make it possible for His Spirit to enter our souls and teach us more about our own selves and about the nature of God. By making ourselves totally honest, open, and submissive before God, our hearts become more receptive to His counsel and His will.

Prayer should always be reverent and respectful, but our Father in Heaven assuredly is less concerned about the outward form of our prayers than about the state of our heart. Kneeling in prayer is an expression of humility and reverence and is the manner we often assume when offering our most heartfelt prayers. Nevertheless, not all are able to kneel, and many cannot kneel for very long and still concentrate. The Lord will hear our prayers if they are said standing, sitting, or even lying on our back in a hospital bed—provided we genuinely pray from the heart. My mission president once said that some of his best prayers were said running between two foxholes during World War II.

What should we ask for when we pray? The Bible Dictionary offers this important insight:

*Prayer is the act by which the will of the Father and the will of the child are brought into correspondence with each other. The object of prayer is **not** to change the will of God. [Bible Dictionary, s.v. "prayer," 752–53; emphasis added]*

Prayer should never be a matter of trying to change God's mind, to persuade Him of the rightness of our request, or to counsel Him as to what is best. God's will is perfect. He knows all things and sees the end from the beginning. He knows better than we do what is best for us. Sometimes we fervently plead for the Lord to give us certain things that He knows are not ultimately in our best interest or in that of a loved one: for example, to receive a certain job offer in a specific city or to prolong the life of a terminally ill or aged family member. The first order of prayer should be to learn the will of God and be given the strength to accept it.

“Thy will be done” ought to grace all prayers, as it does the Lord’s Prayer.

Receiving Answers to Prayer

Perhaps the most frequently asked question about prayer is this: “When I am seeking an answer about a question or decision in my life, how do I distinguish between the voice of the Spirit and my own feelings and desires?” It is a good question, for the Spirit often speaks to us in the form of feelings, but then we also have feelings that come from within ourselves. How do we know the difference?

To begin with, revelation requires effort on our part. We cannot expect answers without first preparing to receive revelation. When Oliver Cowdery struggled with translating the plates, the Lord counseled him to “study it out in your mind; then . . . ask me if it be right” (D&C 9:8). We begin by learning all that we can about our decision or problem, and then we prayerfully ponder and weigh what course may be right, seeking counsel as appropriate from parents, family members, and friends. Then, *after* we have made a decision, we go to the Lord with the proposed answer or decision and seek confirmation. Normally He will not give us revelation regarding specific questions until we have taken this step and are prepared to ask if our decision be right.

Receiving answers to prayers also requires that both mind and heart be in tune. When Oliver Cowdery first began to translate the plates, the Lord told him this:

Behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost. . . .

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation. [D&C 8:2–3]

Notice that revelation comes both *in the heart* and *in the mind*. The feelings of the heart and the understanding of the mind come together to give us an answer. If we have a good feeling, but our minds are unsettled, we should

continue to study and pray. If in our mind we have developed a plan of action that makes sense but does not feel right, we may not yet have the answer. Only when heart and mind are in accord can we be confident that we have reached the right conclusion.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught the importance of our mind in the revelatory process when he said:

When you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon . . . ; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation. [Teachings, 151]

It is important to understand that the feelings that come with personal revelation are not excited, agitated, or highly emotional. If we want a particular answer badly enough, we may stir up feelings of excitement or artificial enthusiasm within us and take that for an answer, but this is only a form of self-deception. The voice of the Lord comes as “a still, small voice,” and we must silence our own prejudices to hear it. In this regard I believe that we can overanalyze the scriptural phrase “your bosom shall burn within you” (D&C 9:8). In my experience this simply means a feeling of inner peace. Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught the following:

What does a “burning in the bosom” mean? Does it need to be a feeling of caloric heat, like the burning produced by combustion? If that is the meaning, I have never had a burning in the bosom. Surely, the word “burning” in this scripture signifies a feeling of comfort and serenity. [“Teaching and Learning by the Spirit,” *Ensign*, March 1997, 13]

Another way to describe the feeling associated with revelation is a sense of correctness or rightness. The answer will feel right, rather

than leaving one with a sense of uneasiness or wrongness.

One great obstacle to receiving answers from God is fear, for fear is the opposite of faith. I have heard President Boyd K. Packer teach many times, “Brethren, do not take counsel from your fears.” If you are fearful about leaving Provo or the state of Utah, it will be difficult for the Lord to give you an answer to take a job elsewhere. If you are afraid of getting married, you will somehow never find the answers needed to get there. If we fear to act on the inspiration we receive, it will become more difficult in the future to receive answers. If we learn to move forward in faith as the Spirit guides, we will make progress in life and grow in the principle of revelation. Remember Paul’s great counsel to Timothy: “God hath not given us the spirit of fear” (2 Timothy 1:7).

A Prayer in Paris

Now, brothers and sisters, sometimes circumstances will arise in our lives when we face an urgent need for divine guidance and have neither the time to study it out nor any possible way of learning more about what course we should take. In such circumstances the Lord will surely guide us if we are open to the promptings and impressions of the Spirit.

In the summer of 1976 I spent two months in the Soviet Union with 150 other American students studying Russian. When the program ended late in July, we were given a week free to travel at our own expense anywhere in Europe before catching a charter flight from Paris back to the United States. I spent that week on a shoestring budget visiting friends and converts in the Düsseldorf Germany Mission, where I had earlier served.

Unfortunately, after booking a second-class train ticket from Düsseldorf to Paris, I realized I was down to the equivalent of only \$38 in cash. I had no traveler’s checks or credit cards. As the train sped toward Paris, I began to

worry about how I would find a place to spend the night with so little money.

Arriving at the main train station in Paris, I got off the train with my luggage and looked around. I didn’t know anyone in France, and I didn’t speak the language. The sun was just setting, and I knew it would soon be dark. Suddenly I felt very lonely and somewhat anxious. I offered a simple, heartfelt prayer to the Lord: “Heavenly Father, please help me find a safe place to spend the night.”

An impression came to me as plain and clear as any I have ever felt: *Walk two blocks forward and turn left, and there will be a hotel where you can spend the night.* With a deep feeling of peace I walked the two blocks forward and turned left. About a hundred feet in front of me was a small sign: Hotel. I knew this was where the Lord had led me to spend the night. Entering the hotel lobby, I stepped forward to the front desk where a man was sitting. “One single room, please,” I said. The man hardly looked up.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “Every room is booked. We have no vacancies.” He proceeded to ignore me.

I asked, “Are you sure that you have no rooms? Perhaps there’s been a change or a cancellation?”

He looked up at me and said firmly, “Young man, we have no rooms. It is the peak of the tourist season, and we have been booked solid for weeks. Every hotel around has been booked for weeks. You will not find a room anywhere in Paris.”

What could I do? I began to leave the hotel, but as I reached the door onto the street, I thought, I *can’t* just leave. The Lord led me here. I went back to the desk and said, “Sir, could you *please* at least look in your book and verify for sure that you have no rooms available this evening?”

Somewhat miffed, the clerk stood up, almost slammed his reservation book on the desk, and began flipping the pages quickly. “You see,” he

said, “there is nothing. We have no rooms, we have no rooms, we have no . . .”

Suddenly he stopped and stared at the page in puzzlement for a long time. Then he became very businesslike and said, “Well, it appears after all that we do have one single room vacant. That will be \$35.”

I do not remember much of that night, only that I felt safe and very blessed. The next morning I learned that the bus to Charles de Gaulle Airport stopped right in front of the hotel. To my great relief the fare was only \$3. I arrived at the airport in time to catch my flight to JFK Airport, where, with only a few small coins left in my pocket, I was met by my beloved fiancée, Susan.

I have reflected on that experience many times. I was no one really—one of tens of thousands of students traveling through Europe that summer. The Lord could have said, “You

got yourself into this, you can get yourself out.” I suppose I might have slept in the train station or just wandered the streets all night. But, instead, as a loving Father, He led me to a place of refuge when I sought it in humble prayer.

I testify that He will bless and be merciful to you, too, as you seek Him in prayer. I know that God the Eternal Father lives. I know that His Son is our Redeemer. I was eighteen years old when I first received a pure witness by the power of the Holy Ghost that Jesus Christ is a living being, a real person, my friend and support in every time of need. In the intervening years I have come to know that the fruits of the Spirit are joy beyond expression and a deep inner peace that passes all understanding.

May His joy and peace be with each one of you at this sacred season of the year. I offer this prayer and bear this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.