

Improving Our Prayers

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I feel fortunate to be here this morning and grateful to spend a few moments with you. This university is very dear to me. The decisions that have been made over the years regarding this institution have not been made lightly.

As a church, we have invested sacred resources in this university and especially in the students. What happens here is important to the Brethren, to the Church, and to the Lord.

We are hopeful that those who walk upon this sacred ground will be an influence for good in their homes, in their communities, and throughout the world.

There is greatness here. You can feel it.

Who knows what literature, law, science, invention, insight, research, and art will flow from here? Who knows how the world will be blessed as a result of your efforts and inspiration?

One of the reasons you will achieve great things is because you will not be alone. The Lord is waiting to open the windows of heaven and magnify your righteous endeavors. He will bless your homes and your relationships. If you will come unto Him and serve Him, He will take the talents and abilities you possess and magnify them in marvelous ways.

So that we may come unto the Lord, we must communicate with Him through prayer. There may not be a commandment uttered

more frequently than that we lift up our hearts and our voices in prayer to our Heavenly Father.

“Pray always,” the Lord has commanded to us in these latter-days, “and I will pour out my Spirit upon you, and great shall be your blessing” (D&C 19:38). The Book of Mormon teaches, “Ye must pour out your souls in your closets, and your secret places, and in your wilderness” (Alma 34:26).

The Apostle Paul taught that we should “pray without ceasing. [And] in every thing give thanks” (1 Thessalonians 5:17–18).

Jesus the Christ, our Exemplar, often prayed to the Father. If the Savior of all mankind felt such a need to supplicate the Father, how much more should we lift up our voices in prayer!

Every person here today lived at one time in heavenly realms. We walked with our Heavenly Father. We knew Him. We heard His voice. We loved Him.

And although we were eager to enter mortality and continue our progression, we

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must have regretted the separation that would accompany it. We must have sorrowed that a veil would cover our eyes and the bright memories of our lives would be cloaked in the forgetfulness of mortality. How we must have yearned to stay close to our Father in Heaven. How we must have covenanted to ever reach after Him and commune with Him.

Undoubtedly our separation from our Heavenly Father was softened when He promised that as we sought after Him in prayer, He would reach toward us.

Now we are here. Our memories of our premortal life are dim and dark. We have forgotten those things we supposed we could never forget. Unfortunately and tragically we sometimes even forget our Heavenly Father, whom we loved so dearly.

May I ask you today to consider the effectiveness of your prayers? How close do you feel to your Heavenly Father? Do you feel that your prayers are answered? Do you feel that the time you spend in prayer enriches and uplifts your soul? Is there room for improvement?

There are many reasons our prayers lack power. Sometimes they become routine. Our prayers become hollow when we say similar words in similar ways over and over so often that the words become more of a recitation than a communication. This is what the Savior described as “vain repetitions” (Matthew 6:7). Such prayers, He said, will not be heard.

Our beloved prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, has observed:

The trouble with most of our prayers is that we give them as if we were picking up the telephone and ordering groceries—we place our order and hang up. We need to meditate, contemplate, think of what we are praying about and for and then speak to the Lord as one man speaketh to another. [TGBH, 469]

Do your prayers at times sound and feel the same? Have you ever said a prayer mechanically, the words pouring forth as though cut from a

machine? Do you sometimes bore yourself as you pray?

Prayers that do not demand much of your thought will hardly merit much attention from our Heavenly Father. When you find yourself getting into a routine with your prayers, step back and think. Meditate for a while on the things for which you really are grateful. Look for them. They don't have to be grand or glorious. Sometimes we should express our gratitude for the small and simple things like the scent of the rain, the taste of your favorite macaroni and cheese recipe, or the sound of a loved one's voice.

Thinking of things we are grateful for is a healing balm. It helps us get outside ourselves. It changes our focus from our pains and our trials to the abundance of this beautiful world we live in.

Think of those things you truly need. Bring your goals and your hopes and your dreams to the Lord and set them before Him. Heavenly Father wants us to approach Him and ask for His divine aid. Explain to Him the trials you are facing. Set before Him your righteous desires.

Our prayers can and should be focused on the practical, everyday struggles of life.

If we are commanded to pray over our flocks, then why should we not pray over our fields? If we should pray over our crops, then why not over other important challenges we face?

Some believe that the more eloquent a prayer, the more effective. Too often these prayers are not so much meant for the ears of the Almighty as they are for the ears of the audience. Do you want to commune with the Infinite? Then approach Him with reverence and humility. Don't worry so much about whether your words are polished or not. Worry instead about speaking from your heart. In faith, set before Him your righteous desires and your petitions, knowing that He will hear you.

Another reason many prayers have little power is that we lack faith. We approach our Heavenly Father like a child who asks something of his or her parents knowing they will

refuse. Without faith, our prayers are merely words. With faith, our prayers connect with the powers of heaven and can bring upon us increased understanding, hope, and power. If by faith the worlds were created, then by faith we can create and receive the righteous desires of our heart.

What is faith? Faith is absolute confidence in that which is in absolute conformity to the will of heaven. When we combine that confidence with absolute action on our part, we have faith.

Faith without works is dead. Sometimes we expect Heavenly Father to answer our prayers when all we have done is utter a prayer. The doors of heaven will ever be closed to those who hold out their hands waiting for the blessings of heaven to drop from heaven upon them.

The legendary football coach Knute Rockne implied the same principle when he said, "I've found that prayers work best when you have big players" (www.creativequotations.com/one/471.htm).

The powers of faith are activated by action. We must do our part. We must prepare. We must do all that is in our power, and we will be blessed in our efforts.

Prayer is a private matter between you and Heavenly Father. Both He and you know when you have done what you can. Do not give a thought as to whether or not your best compares with others. In the eyes of Heavenly Father, that doesn't matter.

When you have absolute confidence in things that are in conformity to the will of God and you act with all your power to achieve them, then will you "ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (Matthew 7:7).

Perhaps one of the great challenges the Church faces in our day is that of prosperity. President Brigham Young said:

The worst fear that I have about this people is that they will get rich [and] forget God. . . . This people will stand mobbing, robbing, poverty, and all manner

of persecution, and be true. But my greater fear for them is that they cannot stand wealth. [Life of a Pioneer: Being the Autobiography of James S. Brown (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1900; New York: AMS Press, 1971), 122–23; also cited by Preston Nibley in Brigham Young: The Man and His Work (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1936), 128; see also Bryant S. Hinckley, The Faith of Our Pioneer Fathers (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956), 13]

President Ezra Taft Benson added:

This particular test seems like no test at all . . . and so could be the most deceiving of all tests.

Do you know what peace and prosperity can do to a people—it can put them to sleep. . . .

The Lord has on the earth some potential spiritual giants whom He saved for some six thousand years to help bear off the Kingdom triumphantly, and the devil is trying to put them to sleep. [Ezra Taft Benson, "Our Obligation and Challenge," regional representatives seminar, Salt Lake City, 30 September 1977, 2–3, unpublished typescript; see also TETB, 403]

Prosperity can deaden us to spiritual things. It can give us the illusion of power. When we are sick, we can go to a doctor and get healed. When we are hungry, we can feed ourselves. When we are cold, we can get warm. In short, most of the problems of life we can solve ourselves—we can answer many of our own prayers.

Because of the relative ease many have in acquiring their daily bread, they can become deceived into thinking they are saviors unto themselves. In their pride and foolishness they feel they have little need of a Heavenly Father. They think little of the power that created the universe or of Him who gave His life that they might live.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we are warned of these modern-day idolaters: "They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and

after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world” (D&C 1:16).

Such men fulfill the prophecy of Paul:

For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,

Without natural affection . . .

. . . highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;

Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away. [2 Timothy 3:2–5]

Man has ever worshiped the things he loves. That which we love becomes our treasure, and when that treasure is the wealth, pleasures, and praise of the world, is it any wonder that the heavens are closed to the prayers of such? Those who worship the things of this world will one day cry to their riches and plead with them to save them. In that day they will learn the coldness of their god and realize the terrible error of their ways.

Another reason that our prayers have little power is because we fail to succor those in need around us. The Book of Mormon teaches:

If ye turn away the needy, and the naked, and visit not the sick and afflicted, and impart of your substance, if ye have, to those who stand in need—I say unto you, if ye do not any of these things, behold, your prayer is vain, and availeth you nothing. [Alma 34:28]

Our willingness to aid those in distress around us has ever been the benchmark of the disciples of Christ. Indeed, the Savior taught that our very salvation depends upon the level of our compassion for others (see Matthew 25:31–46). We love to talk of the doctrine of grace and of how because of the Atonement of the Savior we can be saved. In spite of our weakness, our sin, and our failures, if our hearts are humble and pure and we repent, “we know that it

is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

In the end we are all beggars. We cannot merit the blessings of eternity. We can only do the best we can, cleave unto the Spirit, and depend upon the grace of a merciful Heavenly Father for His blessings.

How like unto this is our response to the poor and the distressed? In like manner they plead with us directly or indirectly for our succor. If we turn our backs upon them, can we, in turn, suppose that our Heavenly Father will be merciful to us?

As we are to those in need, so our Heavenly Father will be to us in our time of need.

In the Old Testament we read that David was one who understood adversity and the need to rely upon his Heavenly Father. As a youth he faced and conquered the giant Goliath. Afterward, the jealous King Saul sought to take his life. David fled with a small band and was constantly hunted by the king. During day or night, his life was in jeopardy. Through this experience he understood his dependence upon his Heavenly Father.

In Psalm 37 David revealed an inspired process for active prayer and faith. It is a step-by-step process that may serve as a pattern for us to follow as we seek to increase our faith and improve the efficacy of our prayers.

“Fret not” is the first step (verse 1). *Fret* means to worry or to brood about something. The first thing we must do is stop worrying. When we worry about the future, we create unhappiness in the present.

Righteous concern may lead us to take appropriate action, but worrying about things we cannot control can paralyze and demoralize us. Instead of worrying, focus on doing all that you can and then leave the worrying to your Heavenly Father. If your heart is right with Him, He will take care of the worry and the fear. We must learn to “fret not.”

The second step is to “trust in the Lord” (verse 3). Why should we trust in Him?

Because He is our loving and all-wise Father in Heaven. Because He is the giver of all good gifts. Because He knows us and wants us to be happy, successful, and to return to Him. God is in His heaven. He is perfect. He loves us.

I remember the many times my dear mother trusted in our Heavenly Father for my safety. I played quarterback at East High School and running back at the university. During all that time I don't think my mother ever stopped praying for my safety. She trusted in our Father in Heaven, depending on Him to protect me from major injury during the games. Although I had my share of bumps and bruises, I never had a major injury.

I suppose my mother breathed a sigh of relief when I told her that I was going to leave the football field for a season. I met with my beloved bishop, Marion G. Romney, to express a desire to serve a full-time mission. But that short, worry-free season soon ended when I was called to serve in the German/Austria Mission. Three months after I arrived in Salzburg, the name of the mission was changed to the Switzerland/Austria Mission.

The year was 1937. I arrived in Salzburg, Austria, at the very time Hitler was amassing 300,000 troops on the border for the Anschluss, his invasion of Austria.

My mother and father gathered the family to kneel in prayer morning and night and pled for my safety. I know that I felt the influence of those prayers. I trusted my Heavenly Father would hear their prayers. I trusted in my prayers that He would preserve my life.

A month before Hitler invaded Austria, I was transferred to Switzerland. My testimony is that our prayers had been answered.

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding," we read in the scriptures. "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6).

The third step is "do good" (Psalm 37:3). We do good because we are followers of Christ.

We do good because we are members of His church. We do good because we have made solemn covenants to serve as a light unto the world. Our Heavenly Father expects our actions to serve as a living testimony to our words. As we do good, the Lord can bless our efforts.

This is not to say that we must never make a mistake, "for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The Lord requires that we seek Him with a humble heart, that we repent of our sins, and that we continue to do the best we can. As we make mistakes, we should learn from them and strive not to repeat them. As we do so, we become ever more Christlike, ever more as men and women of God.

As our actions contradict our professions of faith, our prayers become weak. When we do good, the Lord can work through us and magnify our efforts.

The fourth step is to "delight thyself also in the Lord" (Psalm 37:4). What a wonderful doctrine! Instead of worrying or grumbling that our prayers have gone unanswered, we should delight ourselves in the Lord. Be grateful. Be happy. Know that the Lord, in His time, will bring about all your righteous desires—sometimes in ways we predict, sometimes in ways we could not have possibly foreseen. What a wonderful recipe for happiness and peace.

Those who delight in the Lord even in times of adversity will carry with them through their trials an inner and abiding peace. The next time you are tempted to grumble, think of this passage and, instead, delight yourself in the Lord. Your step will be a little lighter, your worries a little less oppressive, and people may even want to be around you more.

The fifth step is to "commit thy way unto the Lord" (verse 5). No matter what your worries are, commit yourself to keeping His commandments. Brethren, honor your priesthood. Sisters, cleave unto the principles of light and truth.

The sixth step is to "rest in the Lord" (verse 7). Sometimes the hardest thing we can do is wait.

The Lord has His own timetable, and, although it may frustrate us, His timing is always perfect. When we rest in the Lord, we allow Him to work His will for us in His own time and in His own way.

Rich blessings are promised to those who pray in this manner: “So shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed” (verse 3). The Lord “shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (verse 4). “He shall bring it to pass” (verse 5). “And he shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noonday” (verse 7).

Prayer is the way we commune with the Infinite. It is a time of gratitude, a time of introspection, a time of emotion: sorrow, joy, enlightenment, and peace.

The more time we spend in righteous prayer, the more our beings will be filled with light. “And if your eye be single to my glory,” the Lord has promised, “your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things” (D&C 88:67).

The more our souls are filled with light, the more we become like our Father in Heaven and the more we are capable of feeling the fruits of the Spirit. This light grows within us, often slowly. It banishes the darkness of this mortality. It sets to flight fear and doubt and all desire to do evil. It fills the soul with love, peace, and unspeakable joy.

The challenge of this mortality is to come out of the darkness into the light. Through prayer, the light of the Spirit can distill upon us line upon line, precept upon precept, until, as Brigham Young taught, the Holy Spirit “opens the vision of the mind, unlocks the treasures of wisdom, and [we] begin to understand the things of God” (JD 1:241).

The things of God can only be understood by the Spirit of God. The Apostle Paul taught, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto

him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

In the Book of Mormon we learn again and again of people who fell away from the light and embraced darkness. “Because of their unbelief they could not understand the word of God; and their hearts were hardened” (Mosiah 26:3).

As we commune with our Father in humble prayer, our hearts receive the gentle outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Lord tells us, “That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day” (D&C 50:24).

Those who do not have this light ever struggle with disbelief. They cannot understand the things of God because their souls have little light. On the other hand, as our souls become filled with light, we begin to understand clearly things that once were dark.

Let me recount Joseph Smith’s experience with darkness and light:

At the time . . . it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the priests and the converts were more pretended than real; for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued—priest contending against priest, and convert against convert; so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions. . . .

During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these parties, though I attended their several meetings as often as occasion would permit. . . . But so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong. . . .

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all

wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. . . .

So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. . . .

. . . I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely overcame me, and had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

But, exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . , I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.

It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!

. . . I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join.

I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong. . . .

He again forbade me to join with any of them. . . . When I came to myself again, I found myself lying on my back, looking up into heaven. When the light had departed, I had no strength; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. [JS—H 1:6–20]

Lorenzo Snow wrote of such an experience:

Some two or three weeks after I was baptized . . . I began to reflect upon the fact that I had not obtained a knowledge of the truth of the work . . . , and I began to feel very uneasy. I laid aside my books, left the house, and wandered around through the fields under the oppressive influence of a gloomy, disconsolate spirit, while an indescribable cloud of darkness seemed to envelop me. I had been accustomed, at the close of the day, to retire for secret prayer, to a grove a short distance from my lodgings, but at this time I felt no inclination to do so. The spirit of prayer had departed and the heavens seemed like brass over my head. At length, realizing that the usual time had come for secret prayer, I concluded I would not forego my evening service, and, as a matter of formality, knelt as I was in the habit of doing, and in my accustomed retired place, but not feeling as I was wont to feel.

I had no sooner opened my lips in an effort to pray, than I heard a sound, just above my head, like the rustling of silken robes, and immediately the Spirit of God descended upon me, completely enveloping my whole person, filling me, from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, and O, the joy and happiness I felt! No language can describe the almost instantaneous transition from a dense cloud of mental and spiritual darkness into a refulgence of light and knowledge, as it was at that time imparted to my understanding. I then received a perfect knowledge that God lives, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and of the restoration of the holy Priesthood, and the fulness of the Gospel. . . .

. . . That night, as I retired to rest, the same wonderful manifestations were repeated, and continued to be for several successive nights. The sweet remembrance of those glorious experiences, from that time to the present, bring them fresh before me,

imparting an inspiring influence which pervades my whole being, and I trust will to the close of my earthly existence. [In Eliza R. Snow, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884; reprint, 1975), 7–9; emphasis in original]

My brothers and sisters, such spiritual experiences are available to all who come before their Eternal Father with a broken heart and contrite spirit. One of the things we must do in this mortality is chase away the darkness. We must fill our souls with the light of the Holy Spirit.

The rich blessings that can come into our lives through prayer are available to all. The poor have as much access as the rich. The movie star has no advantage over the laborer. We are all equal in our ability to approach the throne of our Heavenly King.

The Lord does not care whether we are smart, rich, talented, famous, or skilled. He loves us because we are His children. The Savior tells us, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

As we approach our Heavenly Father in the name of Christ, we open the windows of heaven. We can receive from Him truth, light, and knowledge.

Prayer is the doorway through which we commence our discipleship to things heavenly and eternal. We will never be alone so long as we know how to pray.

I leave you my witness that our Heavenly Father lives and answers prayers. Jesus is the Christ. The Prophet Joseph Smith restored the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. This church today is led by a prophet of God, President Gordon B. Hinckley. I am not alone in proclaiming these truths. Through the power of prayer, millions of people throughout the world add their voice to the growing chorus. God speaks to man today! He directs His church.

It is my earnest desire that members of the Church will reexamine their own lives through the context of prayer. That we may ever lift up our voices to our Heavenly Father and fill our souls with celestial light is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.