

Prayer

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Praying is more than "saying prayers." True prayer is an experience that takes place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

One fundamental distinction between the saint and what the scriptures call the "natural man" is in their use of prayer. The natural man may say prayers, but it is not a spiritual experience for him. He is only reacting to his physical environment as he has been instructed or as he thinks prudent. Praying, as distinct from merely saying prayers, has a spiritual dimension. The transformation from a natural man to a saint is marked by the ability to recognize and to respond to spiritual environment.

The person who is learning to be a saint must learn about the nature of God and man and the world, about the gospel and the Church of Jesus Christ. He must learn to control himself in faith, repentance, fasting, and mighty prayer, and in using the Holy Spirit as his guide. Finally, he must successfully use the understanding he has to bring to pass much righteousness. He then has something of infinite worth: the ability to do good in this world. As an intelligent man could not expect to step into a modern jet aircraft and fly it successfully without much learning and training, so such a man would not think that he could pray successfully without even greater preparation for that more difficult task.

What Is the Purpose of Prayer?

We live in a universe of order. Law governs and controls all things, both physical and spiritual. This is another way of saying that there is a regularity of causes and effects apparent everywhere. One application of this principle is that all things act (effects) in relation to their environment (causes). Some things are acted upon; they simply react in a regular way to what is happening in the environment. Water solidifies when the surroundings are cold, boils away when they are hot, and flows freely when the surroundings are at a medium temperature.

Some people suppose that man is like water, only responding to his natural environment. They observe that men buy what is advertised, shun that which is disgraced, cleave unto that which is pleasurable. These people predict successfully what most men will do by assessing their physical environment. They can do this because the natural man is not free. He is acted upon like water. Since most men are natural, the accuracy of such predictions runs high.

But, thanks to God, no natural man need remain natural. Though he must respond to his environment under the law of cause and effect, all men who have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ preached with the power of the Holy Ghost have a choice of environments. Having heard, they then can choose between reacting to their physical environment, as does the natural man, or they can react to the spiritual environment of which the gospel makes them aware. As long as the Holy Spirit labors with them, they can choose to respond to either one. This is the agency, the freedom of man: to choose to be natural, governed by the physical

environment and their own flesh, or to be spiritual, governed by their own spirit as it yields to the Holy Spirit.

"Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great mediation of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.

"And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit;

"And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom." (2 Ne. 2:27–29.)

Prayer is turning to the spiritual. It is seeking the will and the power of God through the Holy Spirit in order to yield to the spiritual order of reality. It is the key to the companionship of the Holy Spirit. Having that companionship, one need not lapse into the control of the lusts of the flesh and the pressures of the world. It is choosing to be part of the realm where God reigns, where his will is done. It is a rejection of the opinions and wisdom of men who know not God. It is the beginning of salvation. Oh how great the goodness of our God, who prepares a way for us to escape from the deadly and desultory causes of the natural, fallen world!

Prayer is communion with the Almighty. He who finds himself aghast at the evil order of this world will likely seek something better. As he prays he discovers that the power of God reaches down into this fallen realm with a sweet, peaceful, assuring, and comforting influence that gives witness of truth, hope for a better world, and power to withstand evil. Without the opportunity to pray and to receive those precious gifts from the Holy Spirit, man would not be free. He would indeed be the trapped, damned animal he is thought to be by those who do not know God.

"And now, my beloved brethren, I perceive that ye ponder still in your hearts; and it grieveth me that I must speak concerning this thing. For if ye would hearken unto the Spirit which teacheth a man to pray ye would know that he must pray; for the evil spirit teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray.

"But behold, I say unto you that ye must pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform anything unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul." (2 Ne. 32:8–9.)

How to Pray

When a person "says prayers" he is doing something stimulated by his physical environment. He is repeating words and phrases appropriate to some time or circumstance such as mealtime or the beginning of a meeting. Saying prayers is not a bad thing to do. But it is insufficient.

True prayer begins with a yearning in the soul of man, a reaching out for spiritual contact with God. True prayer grows in strength and efficacy as the Holy Spirit enlivens and guides the yearning soul. The ultimate of true prayer comes as a man is able to submit himself completely to the Lord God whom he has come to love;

then what he prays for and how he prays are given to him by the Holy Spirit. This prayer is the obedient response of a little child who, with wonder, awe, and gratitude, worships the true and living God. Of himself, the child of God doesn't know what to ask for. But through spiritual insight he sees the hand of his Father in all things. His bosom swells with gratitude as he glimpses the wondrous work of godliness. As he is given, he asks for those things which are good in the sight of his God and gives praise and thanks in the same manner. The theme of all is the phrase used by the Savior: "Thy will, not mine, be done."

"And if ye are purified and cleansed from all sin, ye shall ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus and it shall be done.

"But know this, it shall be given you what you shall ask." ([D&C 50:29-30](#).)

It may seem strange that in certain prayers one might simply repeat what he is given to say by the Holy Spirit unless one realizes that true prayer is worship. Its essence is a feeling of the heart. The measure of a prayer is the intensity and the depth of that feeling. Does one hunger to do good in this world? Does that feeling wholly fill his soul? Is he oblivious to everything else but the fact that he is in the presence of his beloved Master? Does he cry out from anguish at the realization of his own nothingness contrasted with the goodness of God? Does he receive the Holy Spirit as a consuming fire to burn out the dross within, almost unto the consuming of his flesh? If these things take place, the child of God is achieving and experiencing what the scriptures call "mighty prayer." While it is true that this may not happen every day or even often, what poverty of soul entraps one who has never felt the fire of mighty prayer! Having achieved full worship even once would color and heighten every prayer thereafter, for the remainder of one's life.

To pray, then, one must understand the nature and attributes of God. He must receive of the Holy Spirit and worship in spirit and truth. The more he can deliver himself, body and spirit, to what the Spirit shows him is good, the more humble is his prayer. The more he can focus all that he is and has, the more mighty that worship.

Small wonder that prayer at its greatest is private and individual, a thing done with the door shut. How strange to think of being seen by men at the same time as being honored by God. No wonder the life of a faithful saint is a constant communion with the Master, no matter what else is happening.

"Behold, I went to hunt beasts in the forests; and the words which I had often heard my father speak concerning eternal life, and the joy of the saints, sunk deep into my heart.

"And my soul hungered; and I kneeled down before my Maker, and I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication for mine own soul; and all the day long did I cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens." ([Enos 1:3-4](#).)

Meditation

The helpmate of mighty prayer is meditation. In meditating, one tries to minimize his involvements with the physical world for a time in order to concentrate on something inner, on ideas and feelings. As a person prays sincerely with the Holy Spirit as his guide, that Spirit will bring to him many thoughts and feelings. This is part of the process of revelation. To take full advantage of

this revelation, one would do well to mull over the matter under consideration, piecing together what one already knows with the new insights received.

It is one thing to have a revelation. It is quite another to understand and obey. Understanding comes in the process of careful, prayerful reflections of meditation upon what one has received. To pray is often like asking for food and then being blessed with a sumptuous meal. What would you think of a person who, when thus honored, merely took a sniff, then put the meal on a shelf and left it? Though greatly blessed, he would not be nourished.

So it may be with those who pray and do not meditate. They may have much but may be little edified.

Meditation cannot be taught, because it is something personal and private; it is the venturing of the soul into the unknown. But it can be learned by anyone who has the courage to think for himself. A likely initiation to meditation is to ponder the scriptures, the words of the living and the dead prophets of God. Banish all commentaries for a moment; forget hearsay teachings. What does the Lord actually say? What does the Spirit whisper as to how this passage or that doctrine should be understood? Where two scriptures appear at first reading to be contrary, what is the real intent of each?

That soul who has bravely ventured into the sea of scriptural interpretation, who humbly seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit and rejects the opinions of men, soon makes a marvelous discovery. In the midst of the tumult of human interpretation there is a rock! He cannot see it, for it is spiritual, but he can plant his feet firmly upon it. Then the winds and waves of opinion can beat upon him from any direction. He is no longer tossed to and fro by every wind and wave, but rests firmly on that rock, and on his own two feet. He now has a foundation for his salvation. He has found the rock of revelation from the Savior.

In mulling and pondering the scriptures, our venturer has found the Holy Spirit to be an able and willing guide as well as a comfort and a bulwark. Flashes of insight come. Now he sees how God is both just and merciful. He rejoices to learn how God can govern and control all things yet man can be free. He is overcome as he glimpses what the Savior has done for him. Now, having his own light from eternity, he is a new person, a little child born again in the image of the Master.

Having learned to think, to meditate upon the scriptures, the venturer is now prepared to meditate upon the spiritual gifts that come in connection with his own prayers. Now mighty prayer is so rich an experience that he can hardly contain it. Ideas, hopes, and feelings tumble into his mind, then are carefully fit together under spiritual guidance, into the fabric of his new life. They become part of his robe of righteousness as he prepares to meet the Bridegroom.

He who learns to meditate on the things of the Holy Spirit need never suffer the rebuke that came to Oliver Cowdery:

"Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

"But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will

cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

“But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me.

“Now, if you had known this you could have translated; nevertheless, it is not expedient that you should translate now.

“Behold, it was expedient when you commenced; but you feared and the time is past, and it is not expedient now.” ([D&C 9:7–11.](#))

Consultation

As a spiritual experience and an access to spiritual life, prayer is like anything of great power is: when misapplied the harm possible is equal to or greater than the good that can be gained from it when correctly applied. The possibility exists in prayer that Satan, who also is a spiritual being and who also delights to give people “revelation,” may attempt to pawn off his own influence as a substitute for the ministrations of the Holy Spirit. The past is full of examples of these devious actions of the adversary beginning with Adam and Eve and extending down to his latest attempts on our own spiritual lives.

When people pray, and especially when they try to make prayer a spiritual experience, Satan stands ready to counterfeit. Some telltale evidences of his influence are feelings that we should give in to the desires of our flesh, that we should do something contrary to the teachings of the scriptures, that we should do things that will bring us the honors of men or the rewards of this world. But the real test is not that simple, for there are occasions when the Lord would have us do something different from what others have been commanded to do, or he may lead us to have the honors of men and rewards of this world. We must be sure that it is the Lord that whispers to us.

One learns to discern the voice of the Spirit through experience. In following spiritual guidance, one can learn surely to tell the difference between the enticings of the Holy Spirit and the temptations of the adversary. To be sure in discerning that difference is perhaps the most essential feature of the transformation of the natural man into the saint. Only then can one show in his life that full and heart-felt faith which is the only means of pleasing God.

It is the heritage of every child in the stakes of Zion to learn from his father and mother how to recognize and live by the still, small voice of the Spirit, thus to know how to worship in mighty prayer. As the children of Zion come to know the voice of the Lord, then can they unite in those mighty prayers that are part of bearing off the Kingdom in triumph.

“And at that day, when I shall come in my glory, shall the parable be fulfilled which I spake concerning the ten virgins.

“For they that are wise and have received the truth, and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day.

“And the earth shall be given unto them for an inheritance; and they shall multiply and wax strong, and their children shall grow up without sin unto salvation.” ([D&C 45:56–58.](#))

The Fruit

Another great form of worship of God is the consequence of true prayer. True and mighty prayer ought to lead above all to the doing of righteous deeds. As we pray and partake of the power and true order of heaven, we then should seek to translate the spiritual gifts we have received into the physical actions of our lives. Righteousness is blessing others. Our Master, Jesus Christ, is the fountain of all righteousness. As we humbly pray in his name we are filled with his wisdom, with his compassion, with his concern for the poor and the needy, with his concern for those who sit in darkness. Being filled with his love, we then go and do those things which we have been shown. In so doing, his pure love becomes our pure love for others.

Is there a problem in this world that worship of the Lord Jesus Christ cannot solve? If we worship in spirit and in truth, in mighty prayer and in righteous deeds, every problem will find a happy ending. Thus it is that the stone cut out of the mountain without hands will roll forth until it fills the whole earth with love, the pure love of Christ.

“Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren, that ye may begin to exercise your faith unto repentance, that ye begin to call upon his holy name, that he would have mercy upon you;

“Yea, cry unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save.

“Yea, humble yourselves, and continue in prayer unto him.

“Cry unto him when ye are in your fields, yea, over all your flocks.

“Cry unto him in your houses, yea, over all your household, both morning, mid-day, and evening.

“Yea, cry unto him against the power of your enemies.

“Yea, cry unto him against the devil, who is an enemy to all righteousness.

“Cry unto him over the crops of your fields, that ye may prosper in them.

“Cry over the flocks of your fields, that they may increase.

“But this is not all; ye must pour out your souls in your closets, and your secret places, and in your wilderness.

“Yea, and when you do not cry unto the Lord, let your hearts be full, drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare, and also for the welfare of those who are around you.

“And now behold, my beloved brethren, I say unto you, do not suppose that this is all; for after ye have done all these things, 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, and ye are as hypocrites who do deny the faith.” ([Alma 34:17–28.](#))

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