

Obstacles to Prayer

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Five sobering examples from the scriptures show what could block our prayers. For Saul, the obstacle was disobedience.

First and last, true religion is a personal relationship with our Savior, Jesus Christ. Prayer is the key to establishing that relationship. As one prays obediently, he learns to know and to treasure the things of the Spirit. The fruit of that relationship is righteousness, doing good for one's fellowmen as the Holy Spirit guides one. The basic sequence of events in the conversion of an ordinary man into a righteous man is: (1) He hears the gospel and is touched by the Holy Spirit. (2) The Holy Spirit teaches him how to pray. (3) As he prays the Holy Spirit guides him in purifying his life through faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands for the receiving of the right to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. (4) Now being in the narrow way, he prays even more effectively under the influence of the Holy Spirit and endures to the end of becoming like the Savior: full of righteousness.

In the sequence listed above it is not just prayer that counts; it is effective prayer. Prayer is effective when one receives the guidance and gifts of the Spirit of the Lord. Some persons know how to pray but cannot; others know not how. The net effect is that they all are blocked from spiritual growth. But it is something about themselves that blocks that growth. The glad tidings of the gospel are the information we need to know to change ourselves to be able to pray effectively.

Though this world wallows in the misery of spiritual death, no individual needs to remain like the world. Because the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored, accompanied by divine priesthood authority and the true church of Jesus Christ, the way is open to every person to learn effective prayer and thus to come unto the Master and to do his works. The gospel is a formula for success. No person who accepts and lives it will fail to overcome the world and its misery.

In the scriptures we find record of persons who were not, at least for a time, successful. They were not, at those times, living the gospel and thus were cut off from the manifestations of the Spirit. Through repentance, each could have offered effective prayer and would then have received the help he needed. These examples are given to us in the scriptures that we may profit from their experience with obstacles to effective prayer. Hopefully we will not need to repeat those experiences. Let us examine the stories of King Saul, Laman and Lemuel, King Noah, Peter, and Saul of Tarsus.

1. *Disobedience.* In a time of great distress and trial for the house of Israel, the Lord chose Saul of the tribe of Benjamin to be their king. Anointed under the hand of Samuel, the prophet, Saul also received instruction from the Lord through Samuel. In his obedience he had great success. But then he grew great in his own sight and felt he no longer needed to obey.

During this time, the Lord instructed Saul to go to Amalek and utterly destroy it because of their persistent wickedness, slaying "man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass." (Please read [1 Sam. 15:1-5](#).) Saul's obedience was only partial, was self-serving: he spared Agag, king of the Amalekites, and the best of the Amalekite sheep and oxen. When Samuel discovered this, Saul rationalized that the livestock were to be used for sacrifice for the Lord.

"And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

"For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king. ...

"And as Samuel turned about to go away, [Saul] laid hold upon the skirt of his mantle, and it rent.

"And Samuel said unto him, The Lord hath rent the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbour of thine, that is better than thou." ([1 Sam. 15:22-23, 27-28](#).)

The story of King Saul stands as a solemn warning to all of us. If the time ever comes that we think we can better serve God by following our own wisdom than we can by following the direction of the Lord through his Holy Spirit and through his holy prophets, we have apostatized. If we thus reject the Lord, we have broken the slender thread of communication. Our prayers cannot then be effective.

We might speculate as to what caused King Saul to disobey. Was it pride? Was it fear of the people? Was it carelessness or thoughtlessness? Whatever the cause the result was the same: Saul no longer feared God. The purpose of prayer is to gain the knowledge and strength to do the will of God. Disobedience makes of prayer a mockery in us, even as it did for Saul.

2. *Hardness of heart.* Laman and Lemuel were born to the same goodly parents that blessed Nephi with great knowledge of spiritual things. But whereas Nephi received those teachings in humility and faith, Laman and Lemuel rejected the words of their father as the imaginations of an unrealistic man. In his obedience, Nephi went on to receive great revelations and knowledge of his own. But in their hardness of heart, Laman and Lemuel were barely affected even by the visitation of an angel.

Again we are caused to wonder why these older brothers were so obstinate, spiritually speaking. Were they incapable of exercising faith? Or were they able only to respect things that were natural? Regardless of the cause of their problems, the moral for us is clear: If we are to be men and women of God we must prize and cultivate the tender feelings of our hearts. The first intimations of revelation from the Holy Spirit are feelings in our heart—feelings of good and bad, feelings of sympathy for suffering, feelings of longing for spiritual insight. To ignore or to quash these feelings is hardheartedness. Those who demand that everything be decided in terms of physical things are thus hardhearted. They cannot learn to pray and to be guided by the Holy Spirit because they reject it when it tries to get through to them.

Had Laman and Lemuel realized that it was not Lehi and Nephi that they were rejecting, but rather, that they were denying their own hearts, perhaps they could have repented. Perhaps they could

then have experimented with those feelings to see if the gospel promises are true. They could have examined the scriptures, being led by their own hearts to understanding. But they did not. They rejected themselves as being intelligent enough to grasp spiritual things by denying their hearts the opportunity to feel.

He who learns to pray truly and effectively is never a person who is hardhearted. In all humility he turns inward, cultivates those feelings of his heart, that still, small voice. In these things, unseen to anyone but himself, he comes to true prayer, to spirituality, to pure love, to eternal life.

3. *Selfishness.* King Noah was the son of a good father who taught him correctly. But Noah sought only to enjoy the material things of life at the expense of others. Unlike his righteous father, King Noah did not labor to support himself, but taxed his people of one-fifth of their possessions to build many elegant buildings for himself and to support his many wives and concubines. Through his personal indulgence and selfish example, King Noah weakened his people both spiritually and temporally. This proved to be their downfall, even though they were warned of the consequences of their actions by the prophet Abinadi. (Please read [Mosiah 12.](#))

Another name for selfishness is carnal security. People who overvalue the things of the physical order have to have more and more goods and pleasures to stay satisfied. This kind of appetite cannot be satisfied except through oppression: getting someone else to do the work to provide material abundance. It is a curious paradox that people who live for material pleasures generally detest work and try to find a slave to do it for them, whereas people who treasure the things of the spirit learn to love work and they work hard to produce material blessings for others.

The point of all this is that selfishness and glorying in carnal security cut one off from the Holy Spirit so that he cannot pray effectively. True prayer leads to righteousness; but righteousness is achieved only in sacrifice. The last thing the selfish person wants is sacrifice, so he naturally does not pray very successfully.

4. *Weakness.* The story of Peter, the great chief of the Master's apostles, is instructive in that Peter's wavering shows us an important pitfall to avoid. On the night of his betrayal, the Savior warned Peter of this weakness when he said Peter would thrice deny his knowledge of the Savior before sunrise. True to the prophecy, Peter did deny his relationship with Jesus, but immediately repented of his actions when he realized what he had done. (See [Luke 22:31–34, 54–62.](#))

Before we condemn Peter for denying that he knew the Savior, let us remember two things: he did not yet have the constant companionship of the Holy Spirit, and when he did receive that great gift, he was never after in that predicament. But he did waver before he received that gift. He did not yet fully realize that all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord, and that therefore there is nothing to fear. He did not yet fully understand the love his Lord and Savior had for him. Later he, as Paul, fully understood:

“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” ([Rom. 8:38–39.](#))

Many of us, weak in the spirit, do waver. Weakness stifles the impulse to pray; worse, it works against our obedience when we have prayed. To serve the Lord well one must have confidence and daring. But the true confidence is born of the companionship of the Comforter. True daring is trust in the Lord, knowing that there is a narrow path to success through any difficulty if only we can love and serve him with all our hearts, might, minds, and strength.

5. *False traditions.* Saul of Tarsus was zealous in his religion. But his religion, once of God, had been adulterated by the false traditions of men. Those false traditions kept him from listening to his own conscience until the Lord chastized him. (See [Acts 9:3–6.](#))

The traditions of the Pharisees had led Saul far astray. False ideas from any apparent source, are the work of the father of lies, who would captivate us all in error and darkness. But into this dark world there comes a ray of glorious light, the Holy Spirit bearing witness of Jesus Christ and the Father and leading all who accept them into all truth. The traditions of men of the world are always fraught with debilitating error. But there is one truth that righteous men always pass on to others who will listen: men should put their trust in God, not in the arm of flesh. The traditions of men have one possible righteous purpose: to point each soul to a personal relationship with God. That personal relationship is achieved in true prayer.

The happy part of these five stories of failure from the scriptures is that two of them were preludes to success. Peter and Saul were not hardened and destroyed by their disastrous experiences. They were humble enough to learn the lessons involved, to turn to the Lord, to become mighty in his work. King Saul, Laman and Lemuel, and King Noah had that same opportunity at one time. If they had been genuinely sorry, they could have gone before the Lord in repentance and in mighty prayer to seek a newness of life in him.

You and I, perhaps also having had disastrous experiences, have the same choice. We can humble ourselves and learn to be like the Lord by yielding to the enticings of his Holy Spirit. Or we can continue in the ways of King Saul, Laman and Lemuel, or King Noah. The size of our kingdom matters not. The least of us can be disobedient like Saul, hardhearted like Laman and Lemuel, selfish like Noah, or we can repent and become mighty instruments for good as did Peter and Paul.

If we repent, it will be through mighty prayer. That grand opportunity is no less effective today than it was for Father Adam, for Noah, for John the Beloved, for Joseph Smith. If we would have our prayers be as effective as those of President Spencer W. Kimball, we must learn to pray as he and all the holy prophets do.

We have not been sent into the world to fail. We have been sent to fulfill the prophecies and to lay hold of every good thing, through faith and mighty prayer, for “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” ([James 5:16.](#))

[illustrations] Illustrated by Michael Clane Graves