Improving Our Prayers

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Do you feel that the time you spend in prayer enriches and uplifts your soul? Is there room for improvement?

Every person on the earth 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 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.

Have you considered the effectiveness of your prayers, your efforts to reach toward Him from this mortal life? 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?

Make Prayers Meaningful

There are many reasons our prayers may 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” (see Matt. 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.”

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?

Will prayers that do not demand much of your thought 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 food, 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 should pray over our crops (see Alma 34:24), 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.

Pray with Faith

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 blessings to drop from heaven upon them.

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.

The Challenge of Prosperity

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.”

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).

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.

The Need for Charity

Another reason our prayers have little power is that 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 Matt. 25:31-46). If we turn our backs upon the poor and the distressed, 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.

A Pattern for Prayer

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 (see Ps. 37:1). To 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” (see Ps. 37:3). 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 and 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 in Salt Lake City and running back at the University of Utah. 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 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-Austrian Mission. Three months after I arrived in Salzburg, the name of the mission was changed to the Swiss-Austrian 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” (Prov. 3:5-6).

The third step is “do good” (see Ps. 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” (Rom. 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” (see Ps. 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.

The fifth step is to “commit thy way unto the Lord” (see Ps. 37:5). 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” (see Ps. 37:7). 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.

Prayer Brings Light

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 growth 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.

You recall the Prophet Joseph Smith’s experience with darkness and light in the Sacred Grove. President Lorenzo Snow (1814-98) wrote of an experience of his own:

“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.” 3

My brothers and sisters, 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.

**Blessings Available to All**

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 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” (Rev. 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.

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.


3. Quoted in Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (1884), 7-9