

“Know He Is There”

MARVIN J. ASHTON

I have always been impressed with an experience President Hugh B. Brown, former member of the First Presidency, shared with me when I was serving a mission under his direction in the British Isles. He told about his mother’s encouraging words as he left on his mission when he was about twenty years of age. This, essentially, was her message, as I recall.

Hugh, you remember when you were a little boy and you would have a bad dream or wake up in the night frightened, you would call from your room: “Mother, are you there?” and I would answer and try to comfort you and remove your fears. Now as you go on a mission and out into the world there will be times when you will be frightened, when you feel weak, inadequate, alone, and have problems. I want you to know that you can call to your Heavenly Father as you used to call to me and say: “Father, are you there? I need your help.” Do this with the knowledge that he is there and that he will be ready to help you if you will do your part and live worthy of your blessings and needs. I want to reassure you that he is there and will answer your prayers and needs for your best good.

What a blessing it is and can be in the future—when we have special challenges, heartbreaks, unusual experiences, or disappointments—to know that he is there and we can cry unto him in faith and complete trust.

Very often over the years I have had peace and patience knowing that he was there and would not forsake me even though some prayers were going unanswered. What a joy and strength it would be in all of our lives to have the childlike faith and complete trust to know that he is there and that we can cry out unto him under all circumstances. Thank God for a wise mission president who taught me to know he was there, even though immediate replies and responses were not always positive.

Perhaps it would be good for our souls to build the relationship and understanding that he is there, even our loving and eternal Father, and that oftentimes delays to our urgent pleas

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can be best for us. Who is to say it isn't more important to know that he is there than to receive immediate answers? Oftentimes I think of the conditions under which Joseph Smith pled within the confines of horrible prison conditions. It appeared that his needs and pleas were justified as he was confined from his family, his Church, and his friends. He undoubtedly suffered intense mental as well as physical anguish. Answers appeared not to be the Lord's way at that time. Nevertheless, Joseph seemed to be sustained by the overruling knowledge that God was there, knew him, and loved him. While answers to his pleadings and prayers were delayed, God was building a stronger prophet.

Recall with me his words:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them? [D&C 121:1–3]

Relief and release were not imminent, but an eternal principle was being stressed.

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. [D&C 121:7–8]

God was there, and he heard. But his purposes and timetables were and are eternal. Often we mortals misunderstand, and instead of answers there are sometimes delays, tests, and trying by fire.

What a great strength it would be to all of us in times of desperation and wonderment to humbly approach his throne with "Please hear my prayers. Answer them in thy great wisdom for my best good. But please give me the constant reassurance that thou art there and that peace, contentment, and the courage to continue are mine because I have faith and can come to thee who has promised not to forsake us."

Incidentally, one of my favorite "cry-out-during-the-night" children's stories is that of a four-year-old boy who came during the middle of the night to his father and mother's bedroom, sobbing and crying with great enthusiasm. When his mother drew him near and put her arms around him to give comfort, saying, "What happened?" he said, "I fell out of bed." She asked, "How did you fall out of bed?" And he cried, "Because I wasn't in far enough." This could be used to put over an extensive message as shared by a child, but let me just say in passing it has been my experience that most people who fall out of the Church do so because they were not in far enough.

What a wonderful situation it would be if we could with feeling and understanding know that God is there, the Church is there, friends are there, leaders and families are there to give us comfort, direction, and reassurance. Oh, that there were more people inclined when special situations arose to say to a classmate or an associate, "I need to be sure that you are there while I am going through this present trying situation."

Recently, an inactive member of the Church, and a constant critic of what we do and don't do, talked to me for a few minutes. He seems to delight in nipping at my heels and at the Church whenever we get together. Despite his "having-all-of-the-answers" attitude, our relationship is good. He said, "The Church and BYU's policy is now easy to read. With enrollment ceilings and Church schools being restricted by quotas and membership

guidelines, students, administrators, or faculty can comply with set standards and policies or get out. They will be either in or out promptly.”

When I hear this kind of banter and bashing comments, I sometimes am annoyed, and other times I’m amused. For the fun of it, after he made this remark, I said, “Did you reach that conclusion on your own, or did it come through prayer?”

His response: “I don’t have to pray any more.”

I reminded him our policy and guidelines over the years have always been that we want students *in* and not *out*. Every standard and every procedure is wrapped around the truth that we are all God’s children and looking out for each other’s best interests.

It seems to me that when it has been necessary over the years to let someone out for misconduct or failure to comply, it is to have them *out* so that they can get back *in*.

At one time I was visiting with an excommunicated member of the Church and used this approach to tell him he had been disciplined and was out of the Church so it would now be possible for him to come back in, with a greater strength and appreciation for the gospel.

Thank God the great majority realize that every policy and standard recommended is to keep them in comfortably and securely and not to drive them out. I have always thought the Savior, Jesus the Christ, drove the money changers out of the temple so they could come back in with righteous desires and new commitments.

What a strength it should be to all of us to read and reread and hear and rehear these choice words:

*Lord, accept our true devotion.
Let thy Spirit whisper peace.
Swell our hearts with fond emotion,
And our joy in thee increase.
Never leave us, never leave us.*

Help us, Lord, to win the race.

Never leave us, never leave us.

Help us, Lord, to win the race.

[“Lord, Accept Our True Devotion,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 107]

I bear witness that God will never leave us. He does not want us out. He wants to help us be our best. He is there, loves us, is our advocate, and will touch our souls in a very special way if we just realize he is always there for us.

Our Heavenly Father loves each of us. We are his children. He wants us to return to him. It is the adversary’s purpose to deter us from a course that leads to happiness and eternal life. Knowing that, our Heavenly Father ordained prayer as a means by which we could always keep in contact with him and not become a stranger to him. We will know with total assurance that he is there and that misuse of free agency on our part is not a prayer-motivated conduct pattern.

If we know he is there, that he loves us, and is our advocate, why do we pray? Individuals pray for different reasons, but the primary purpose of our prayers is to attune ourselves to our Heavenly Father so that we can receive light and truth. It is light and truth that enables us to forsake the evil one.

From the very beginning the Lord commanded our first parents, Adam and Eve, “Thou shalt do all that thou doest in the name of the Son, and thou shalt repent and call upon God in the name of the Son *forevermore*” (Moses 5:8; emphasis added).

When we have periods of darkness, misunderstanding, or lack of proper vision, we should pray always. In our dispensation the Lord has said in many revelations, “Pray always.” He said that to Joseph Smith, to Martin Harris, to Thomas B. Marsh, to the Church, and to others. Now listen carefully to the Lord’s words that apply to each of us: “What I say unto one I say unto all; pray always lest that wicked one have power in

you, and remove you out of your place” (D&C 93:49). Regrettably, some of those counseled in this revelation did not heed the counsel and were removed out of their place.

President Heber J. Grant once said:

The minute a man stops supplicating God for his spirit and direction, just so soon he starts out to become a stranger to him and his works. When men stop praying for God’s spirit, they place confidence in their own unaided reason, and they gradually lose the spirit of God. [“Some Sentence Sermons,” Improvement Era, August 1944, p. 481]

I ask you, does this declaration adequately describe my critical friend who no longer prays?

For what do we pray? As near as I can tell, the Lord has not placed any limitations on where we pray or what we should pray for. There is only this caution: We are not to pray just to gratify our selfish desires. He said: “Do not ask for that which you ought not” (D&C 8:10).

Here are some of the Lord’s admonitions on where to pray, how often, and for what we should pray.

And again, I command thee that thou shalt pray vocally as well as in thy heart; yea, before the world as well as in secret, in public as well as in private. [D&C 19:28]

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. [Alma 34:18–27]

What if we don’t feel like praying? We may all benefit from this admonition from Nephi: “If ye would hearken unto the Spirit which teacheth a man to pray ye would know that ye must pray; for the evil spirit teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray” (2 Nephi 32:8).

Perhaps we could do well to involve ourselves in more and more quiet saying of prayers. There are strength and power and discipline rewards in communicating with God on a continuing personal and private basis. Quietly we can pray for the patience to have our secret prayers answered. Sometimes we fail to recognize answered prayers because we are deaf to his quiet promptings.

Listen to President Brigham Young’s counsel on the matter of praying even when we don’t feel like it or when earthly requests have not been satisfied.

It matters not whether you or I feel like praying, when the time comes to pray, pray. If we do not feel like it, we should pray till we do. . . . You will find that those who wait till the Spirit bids them pray, will never pray much on this earth. [DBY, p. 44]

And he continues:

If I did not feel like praying, . . . I should say, “Brigham, get down here on your knees, bow your body down before the throne of him who rules in the heavens, and stay there until you can feel to

supplicate at that throne of grace erected for sinners.” [DBY, p. 46]

And here is an invitation to pray when you don't feel like it.

*More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them
friend?*

[Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King, The Passing of Arthur*, lines 413–21]

Now an additional thought or two about unanswered prayers. Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Over the years I have listened to or observed from troubled lives of individuals various reactions to prayer. Here are just a couple of examples:

A brokenhearted mother who has prayed and mourned over a wayward son. In spite of her fasting and prayers, the young man continues on his wayward course. At present I am sorry to report I am concerned about both the son and the mother because they tell me they are sour on prayer.

A brother who is faithful in the Church—paying his tithing, serving in the Church, and attending the temple—but who experienced failure in his marriage. He can't understand why the Lord doesn't get his wife to change. He tells me he prays for her to change every day.

These are just a few examples of individuals who felt their prayers were not answered, promptly or properly.

Dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith. [Ether 12:6]

We are looked upon by God as though we were in eternity. God dwells in eternity, and does not view things as we do. [Teachings, p. 356; emphasis added]

That is a statement from the Prophet Joseph Smith. God sees things from an eternal perspective—not viewing things as we do.

Generally our Heavenly Father will not interfere with the agency of another person unless he has a greater purpose for that individual. Two examples come to mind: Saul, who became the Apostle Paul, and Alma the Younger. Both these men were deterred from their unrighteous objective of persecuting and trying to destroy the Church of God. Both became great missionaries for the Church. But even as the Lord intervened, they were given choices. Alma, for example, was told: “If thou wilt be destroyed of thyself, seek no more to destroy the church of God” (Alma 36:11).

We are to exercise faith. We are placed on earth as a probation. It is not now, nor was it ever, the intention of a wise, omniscient Heavenly Father to solve all our problems. Life is not—and never will be—an “uninterrupted holiday.” God expects us to struggle—so we may become godlike. The edict from Eden was that man should eat bread by the sweat of his brow!

Like a wise parent, our Heavenly Father sometimes says “no” to our pleas. It is therefore essential that we cultivate a feeling for spiritual things that will enable us to “feel” or recognize occasions when our Heavenly Father is telling us “no.” Even when his Beloved Son requested that the bitter cup of pain and sorrow be lifted in Gethsemane, our Heavenly Father had other plans. How eternally blessed we are because God permitted his Son to complete that suffering so we will not have to suffer if we repent.

“Whatsoever ye ask the Father in my name it shall be given unto you, *that is expedient for you*” (D&C 88:64; emphasis added). And again,

“Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, *which is right*, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you” (3 Nephi 18:20; emphasis added).

How do we know when something is expedient (appropriate, good, or fitting) for us? Again we are counseled: “Ask the Father in my name, in faith believing that you shall receive, and you shall have the Holy Ghost, which manifesteth *all things which are expedient* unto the children of men” (D&C 18:18; emphasis added).

I want you students to especially know today that I know that God hears and answers prayers. He has answered many of mine. I have lived sufficiently long on this earth to see that some of the prayers, which I concluded were not answered, were answered for my best good. I am still trying to recognize a “no” answer. I am still trying to recognize and accept silent answers.

I have total confidence and faith in the wisdom and omniscience of a loving, merciful Heavenly Father—to be dependent upon him and yet to communicate with him, I must make faithful personal effort on a never-ending basis.

I testify to you that he is a living, loving Father. He is approachable and, as the Prophet Joseph discovered, we can talk to him of our innermost desires and he will not upbraid!

Remember while in the depths of personal anguish in Liberty Jail the Prophet Joseph Smith cried to the Lord, “O God, where art thou?” (D&C 121:1).

God bless each of you to be patient, prayerful, and submissive to the Spirit as you attend this great university.

Let me conclude with an intimate “Are-you-there?” experience. Sister Ashton and I live in a condo apartment on State Street in downtown Salt Lake. From our sixth-level unit in the living room we have a direct full view of the Salt Lake Temple. The temple is framed beautifully in that setting, and we enjoy frequent views of the majestic structure, particularly at night when the lights are on or when the sun is setting.

A few years ago Sister Ashton suddenly needed immediate hospitalization. After taking her to the hospital, we prayed together, and then I went home and prayed privately. Because of the suddenness of the development and the deep affection I have for her, I was not able to sleep.

After a restless hour or so I got up out of bed, walked into the living room, and looked at the temple. Yes, the lights on the Salt Lake Temple are on all night. I remember well walking around the living room countless times looking at the temple and saying to myself with a bowed head with an unwavering faith, “I know he is there.” It was kind of a silent cry for that reassurance and strength we have been talking about today.

Pray constantly for help, endurance, and understanding. God does answer our prayers. Please know he is there. I testify he is, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.