

Earnest Prayer

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Thank you for coming. It is a singular honor to be with you today, and I pray that this morning we will feel the Spirit instructing us in our collective and individual needs. Those of you who know me may be expecting me to talk about dance, children, or education, and I am very passionate about those things. I would love to sit down with you and talk about them some time. Perhaps you're expecting me to share some of the inspirational experiences I've had with some very unselfish BYU students who reach out to children in schools and touch their lives in ways that are so satisfying. But these simply are not the messages the Lord would have me share with you today.

I know it is traditional to *conclude* a talk or lesson with personal testimony, but as I begin this devotional address today, I would like to start with my testimony of prayer. I know that God hears and answers our prayers, and I testify that the act of praying changes us.

My testimony of prayer began as a child as I learned to pray from my sweet mother. Mom, who passed away just one year and one week ago at the age of 89, was a lifelong example of sincere prayer. As a single mother raising seven children she never doubted that praying was one of her greatest assets. I am so grateful for her patient teaching and reminding throughout

my life. She often asked, "Marilyn, have you said your prayers?" I remember the winter mornings when mother would drive us to school. Neighborhood friends often gathered at our house to go with us. Mormon and non-Mormon alike were invited to crowd into our front room next to the old upright piano and faded green couch. We would kneel in family prayer with our friends before piling into our blue Plymouth to swoosh down the unplowed snowy roads on our way to West Jordan Junior High School. No matter the season, we never left the house without first invoking the blessings of protection from our Father in Heaven, nor did we miss very many evening prayers. Mother guided us in opening and closing the day with family prayer. I also remember seeing her kneel next to her bed as I was growing up, as she sought the strength and insight she knew prayer provided. And I never saw her eat anything without first insisting on a blessing. During her last few years, she grew very forgetful, but never about prayer. Speaking to our Heavenly Father was so deeply a part of her

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that prayers and blessings were never forgotten. If she forgot anything it was that we had already blessed the food (so our meals together were sometimes doubly blessed).

My testimony of prayer began as many of our greatest life lessons do—with the example of a faithful parent, in my case my mother, who taught and encouraged from the earliest days I can recall. The best lessons, of course, are the lessons of example. She always prayed.

But my own testimony of meaningful personal prayer deepened only through practicing it. Like Enos, who said:

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 1:4; emphasis added]

That scriptural passage gives reinforcement and instruction about three principles I have found important for accessing the peace and power of meaningful personal prayer.

First of these three lessons is: Enos hungered. How was it that Enos hungered? He was out hunting, but it was not physical hunger he felt as he recalled the words of his father:

And I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God, before I received a remission of my sins. . . . 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. [Enos 1:2–4]

Enos was in need of change—in need of repentance—he was hungry for spiritual peace, eternal assurance, and joy.

This hunger can be likened to praying with the firm faith and real intent that we read about in Moroni and have been counseled to pursue from modern-day apostle Russell M. Nelson.

To access information from heaven, one must first have a firm faith and a deep desire. One needs to “ask with a sincere heart [and] real intent, having faith in [Jesus] Christ” (Moroni 10:4). “Real intent” means that one really intends to follow the divine direction given. [“Ask, Seek, Knock,” Ensign, November 2009, 81; emphasis in original]

What do you hunger for? What do you need? Each family responsibility and church calling I have been blessed with and challenged by has prompted prayers of great need in my life. So has my work and stewardship at BYU.

So we share something. Two of our most universal needs that we all share in common are, first, the need to personally change, to examine ourselves, and to repent; and, second, the responsibility and concern we have for others—our stewardships, callings, and work. I’d like to share two examples that taught me about accessing the power of prayer in these two times of need.

The first lesson came from my sister Ann. She had heard me complain at length about a particularly difficult situation I was having with a person I felt had wronged me and who seemed to take delight in seeing me struggle. This situation was consuming me. I was angry and frustrated. Ann suggested that I rethink my victim role and instead follow the admonition from the scriptures in Matthew 5:44: “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”

Ann shared a specific strategy that at first was very hard—but I accepted her challenge to pray sincerely every day for 30 days that this individual, my “enemy,” would have all the best things in life that I would want for myself and my own family. She reminded me that the key was to be sincere, specific, and consistent for the full 30 days. There was a part of me

that wanted this person to be miserable; I will admit that sincerely praying specifically for the blessings of love, protection, respect, success, and happiness for this person was really hard at first. But by day 14 I had relearned the power of prayer to change the one who is praying. I could clearly see that I needed to rethink the whole situation and to repent from my own pride and anger. By day 30 it had been transformative. Had my enemy changed? Not really. But the power of prayer and a good dose of repentance from my anger had liberated and changed me.

The second example of these two universal needs is Sister Peck, who was called to be Relief Society president in Riverton, Utah, where my husband and I purchased our first home. She was very young, in her early 20s, and had just delivered her second child when she received her calling. Ours was a rapidly growing ward with a diverse and large number of sisters. Needless to say, she had a full plate. At times Sister Peck shared her feelings of inadequacy, but more often she expressed her gratitude for the opportunity to serve each of us. But it was one of her counselors that told us something about Sister Peck that I will never forget: Sister Peck prayed for each sister in our ward by name in their weekly presidency meetings. That amazed me. In Alma we are invited to “pray over our flocks.” Sister Peck prayed over each member of her flock by name. If she could do that with each sister in our ward, couldn’t I do more of that, too? Think for a moment about those who you know are praying for you. How do you feel when you realize that others who you wouldn’t expect to remember you in their prayers do pray for you? Who could you and I pray for even more specifically?

The second principle illustrated in Enos 1:4 is: Enos kneeled. He said, “I kneeled down before my Maker.”

You don’t need to be a dancer who studies the meaning of movement to recognize the

significant symbolism of kneeling. This gesture of humility and reverence does so much for the one kneeling. During a season of my life when that became impossible because of a serious knee injury with its consequent multiple surgeries, I longed for the privilege to kneel again in prayer more than I longed to walk and to dance again. The first time my knee could bend enough to kneel, tears of gratitude poured out. They still do.

The scriptures give us a number of references to the importance of kneeling and the attitude of worshipful reverence that it represents. Isaiah instructs, “Every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isaiah 45:23). Alma records, “[Ammon] fell upon his knees, and began to pour out his soul in prayer and thanksgiving to God” (Alma 19:14). In the Doctrine and Covenants we are admonished to offer prayer upon our knees (see D&C 88:131), and in numerous other places in the scriptures we find this simple counsel, to kneel down.

In his fall 2009 general conference address, Boyd K. Packer said:

Learn to pray. Pray often. Pray in your mind, in your heart. Pray on your knees. Prayer is your personal key to heaven. The lock is on your side of the veil. [“Prayer and Promptings,” Ensign, November 2009, 46]

Having silent prayer unceasingly in our mind and heart is wise and worthwhile. But striving to find a place to be alone, to kneel down, and to pray aloud has made a difference for me. Praying out loud is an empowering commitment. It is one of the principles of prayer that we see Enos emulate.

The third lesson from Enos is: Enos prayed out loud. He records:

And I cried unto him in mighty prayer and supplication. . . . I [did] cry unto him; yea, and when the night came I did still raise my voice high that it reached the heavens. [Enos 1:4]

This third principle—praying aloud as Enos did—must have had particular significance for him. I believe it may have helped him be ready to hear the responding voice of the Lord.

And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. And I, Enos, knew that God could not lie; wherefore, my guilt was swept away. [Enos 1:5–6]

Enos found forgiveness, increased faith, and perspective as he prayed fervently on that day. He gained the desire to keep praying for his loved ones and the preservation of their sacred records. Eventually he was even moved to pray for his enemies as he “raised his voice” up to heaven through the night.

Praying aloud has had particular significance for me, too. Its active nature takes a different kind of consideration and energy than silent prayer. Speaking out loud while alone requires finding a place of solitude and sanctuary, a sacred space. Out-loud speaking slows down the tendency to rush a prayer. Time itself becomes part of the sacred process. Speaking audibly while praying alone has over my life been an active confirmation, a self-witnessing of my own faith in a loving Father in Heaven, who is listening. It is certainly not always possible to pray out loud or in solitude, and we are given council to pray unceasingly. A silent prayer in our heart is always appropriate. But when your circumstances permit you to do so, I challenge you to consider saying your personal prayers aloud, if you don’t already do so, and to consider how that might make those prayers more meaningful.

How should we speak in this solitary time of prayer? We should use the same language of prayer we know shows reverence in public. Again this reinforces our personal relationship to the Deity. It changes our prayers from simply a list of things we are thankful for and a list of requests to a more worshipful experience.

My dance colleague Ed Austin’s devotional address from May 2002 enlightens us on this subject. He reminded us of what Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught us about “the special language of reverence and respect.” Elder Oaks asserted, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches its members to use special language in addressing prayers to our Father in Heaven” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Language of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 15; as noted by Edwin G. Austin Jr. in his BYU devotional address, “Reverence: The Act of Showing Respect,” 21 May 2002).

President Spencer W. Kimball also taught, “In all our prayers, it is well to use the pronouns *thee*, *thou*, *thy*, and *thine* instead of *you*, *your*, and *yours* inasmuch as they have come to indicate respect” (*Faith Precedes the Miracle* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972], 201; emphasis in original).

There are three beautiful prayers offered by the Savior during His earthly ministry and recorded in the scriptures. They are found in Matthew 6:9–13, John 17:1–26, and 3 Nephi 19:20–23. They are models by which we can emulate our Savior when He prayed.

Finally, President Joseph Fielding Smith was clear when he said, “The Father and the Son should always be honored in our prayers with the utmost humility and reverence” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr., 5 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1958], 2:15).

So far we have been addressing principles learned from Enos and other leaders of the Church about how to pray. Please consider with me now the privilege of praying itself.

In his address entitled “The Lifeline of Prayer,” President James E. Faust stated, “Access to our Creator through our Savior is surely one of the great privileges and blessings of our lives” (“The Lifeline of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 59).

Annapurna

I want to share a story about what discovering the notion of sincere personal prayer to a loving Father in Heaven—the kind of prayer we have been discussing today—did for a young Hindu woman in Hyderabad, India. First I need to set the scene. In August 2001, I had the opportunity of traveling to India as artistic director of BYU's The Dancers' Company. While there, we performed and taught in several major cities. We had studied and prepared to be respectful guests by learning as much as we could about the culture and customs of the people of India before leaving Provo. But with a culture as ancient, diverse, and complex as India's, we were only moderately versed in their beliefs and social customs. When I got there I observed in the people I met a consistent dedication to education and family. The people of India are well read. I also saw great charity and spiritual qualities in the people, most of whom are Hindu. It was inspirational and one of the most marvelous experiences of my life. I'm so grateful I was able to share it not with just the dancers but with the other directors and my husband and my daughter, who danced on the company that year.

There are not a lot of Mormons in India, but while we were there we met a small number of wonderful Latter-day Saint missionaries, humanitarian service missionaries, and convert members. It is not economically or socially easy to convert from Hinduism to Mormonism. Not only are the theologies extremely different, but a person loses social status and is often cut off from their family by simply becoming a Christian. Again, I am not expert about the complex social systems of India, but I can tell you that I witnessed a variety of circumstances wherein the separation of those from different castes was manifested. For example, at one of our first performances, I was sweeping up some rice that was left on the stage at the completion of a dance in which the soloist slowly drops rice from her hands. Some of the native

Indians who were backstage called to me to stop, cautioning, "Only the untouchables do that kind of menial labor." Untouchables are members of a group considered below even the lowest social caste, or *varna*. The woman whose story I am about to share, Annapurna, came from the highest *varna*.

I vividly remember the day I met Annapurna and our motorized rickshaw taxi ride together. Please forgive me just a little longer while I set the scene a bit more. These vehicles are basically a motor scooter with a buggy-like attachment that can carry about three passengers at a time. They are soft-sided and have no protection or seat belts for the passengers. Because they're small and lightweight, the drivers often careen wildly through streets as they strive to get as many fares as possible in a day's work. Riding in these vehicles usually created heightened anxiety in me as I worried for my life—I'm even gripping the podium right now, remembering this—and the lives of the BYU students riding in them with us. But there were times when we just simply had to ride in these rickshaws because our transportation choices were limited.

Upon arriving at the airport in Hyderabad more than two hours late, Annapurna, her husband (a new branch president), and their 11-month-old baby met us. They had helped arrange transportation for our small group that day as we hurried to get to the LDS church where we were scheduled to present a midweek youth fireside. I rode in a rickshaw with one of the dancers and Annapurna. Her husband and baby went in a small car with the other members of our group. We needed to hurry! After a few minutes of observing the rickshaw driver dodge and dart through busy traffic, I realized that watching the road wasn't a good idea. Annapurna was a lovely hostess and her English was very good, and as we bounced along we exchanged the usual courteous greetings shared by people who have just met. Then I became very curious. I asked her to

share her conversion story and how she made the dramatic change from Hindu to Latter-day Saint. The Spirit that engulfed us that late afternoon during our rickshaw ride was tangible. The atmosphere inside that little cubby in the back of that motor scooter changed. We all were unaware of the dangerous twists and turns and were completely drawn into her story.

Annapurna came from a devout Hindu family. Her father, grandfather, and great-grandfathers for many generations were all Brahman priests. Her brothers were expected to follow in the family tradition, and she and her sister were expected to marry young men from their own varna, or social caste, who would qualify to become Brahman priests. Again, I am not expert on the practices of this religion, but, as she explained to me, she had spent much of her life memorizing and learning all the rituals and sacred prayers, or Vedas, that were a part of the practice of her religion. She said:

I always felt like the many steps that had to be taken in order to reach deity were so complicated and took so long that I wished for an easier or better way. I yearned to access enlightenment, or what I know now as a loving Father in Heaven, more directly and immediately, but I didn't know how and never shared my thoughts with anyone because I knew that kind of thinking was unacceptable in my family.

When Annapurna was 17 her wonderful grandmother—the light of her life—died. Annapurna's grief was immense. She told us:

I desperately wanted to see my daa-dee-ma again and was struggling with accepting that she was gone. Imagining her essence going on into another form just wasn't comforting me. I kept feeling like my grandmother was near. I wanted to believe that I could talk to her as I had known her—my daa-dee-ma.

Annapurna yearned to pour out her heart in grief and find comfort or hope but had no one who understood the way she was feeling. Then she was befriended by a member of the Church. She discovered that Mormons pray every day, often several times a day, to a loving Father in Heaven. They don't have to attend a shrine or travel to a far-distant temple and follow a series of long, specific Vedas, offerings, and steps to reach God. He is always there ready to listen and comfort. Annapurna wanted to know more about this way of praying. She began to pray like a Mormon prayed, and that was the beginning. She knew this was the answer she had been looking for all of her life. She studied the life of Jesus Christ, read the Book of Mormon, and was taught the gospel. She was baptized a couple of years later but did not know how to tell her family.

Now the story really gets interesting. Annapurna's sister, whom I mentioned earlier, had attended school in another city, and they had been separated for a number of years. Like Annapurna, she had been devastated by their grandmother's death. In a country where less than 3 percent of the population are Christian and in 2001 less than 5 percent of those Christians were LDS, the odds of two sisters meeting two different Mormons in two different cities within a month of each other are extremely low. But that is just what happened. Annapurna's sister was drawn to the LDS belief that families are forever, that through Jesus Christ and His gift of resurrection she could not only see but also be with her grandmother again. Without the other sister knowing, each of them had been baptized within a short time of one another. I remember how Annapurna said that she told her sister, "I have to tell you something very important and I hope you will not hate me." Her sister responded, "I have to tell you something and it may mean that we will never see each other again." Each confessed at the same time: "I have been baptized into the Mormon Church."

I met Annapurna only a few years after her baptism. She shared with me that most of her family ties had indeed been severed. She no longer had the privileges of the Brahman caste in her social life. Everything in her life had changed, but she was grateful to have found the truth of the gospel because of her lifelong desire and feeling that she could and should be able to communicate with God more directly. She discovered prayer. Our 45-minute ride had ended but it felt like we had been going for only a few minutes. The Spirit had been so strong and her testimony of prayer so powerful that time ceased to exist on that ride. I realized as I climbed out of the rickshaw that evening in front of the little building used as both chapel and recreation hall by the Hyderabad Saints that I had taken my personal knowledge of prayer for granted most of my life.

Let's read the rest of the statement from President Faust's address.

Access to our Creator through our Savior is surely one of the great privileges and blessings of our lives. I have learned from countless personal experiences that great is the power of prayer. No earthly authority can separate us from direct access to our Creator. There can never be a mechanical or electronic failure when we pray. There is no limit on the number of times or how long we can pray each day. There is no quota of how many needs we wish to pray for in each prayer. We do not need to go through secretaries or make an appointment to reach the throne of grace. He is reachable at any time and any place. ["The Lifeline of Prayer," Ensign, May 2002, 59]

Ultimately, as President Spencer W. Kimball promised:

There is a knowledge that our Father in Heaven wants each of us to have, and that is a personal knowledge that he hears and answers our prayers. ["Pray Always," Ensign, October 1981, 3]

Closing

In closing, I testify to you again that our Heavenly Father is intimately interested in hearing from us and that He is omnipresent and available to listen at all times. I also testify that as we sincerely pray unto the Father through our Savior Jesus Christ, we will be changed. I am grateful for the restored gospel of Jesus Christ, for a living prophet, and for the guidance that prayer provides. May we all more fully appreciate this privilege and commit ourselves to making our personal prayers more meaningful.

Lastly, may I end on a personal note to you students here at BYU and to my family: Students, we the faculty love you. We pray for you name by name when possible and invoke the Lord's choicest blessings upon you. Thank you for reciprocating and praying for us. We feel your prayers.

To my husband, children, and grandchildren—to all of my family: Please know that I am particularly grateful for the answers to prayers that led me to you, Craig, my eternal companion, and that have helped and guided us as we have raised our family. Thank you all for being here today. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.