

Prayer

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I would like to begin our discussion this evening by reviewing a story that we are all very familiar with. It is about a young man who lived in a large city. In many ways it was like the cities we live in today. It was crowded, noisy, and filled with people going about their daily activities of work and play—people who were frustrated and stressed at trying to keep up with the life around them. It was a city filled with temptation. There were many voices crying for his attention—voices that invited him to indulge in selfish desires for things, power, fame, and pleasure; voices that encouraged him to cheat a little here and lie a little there; voices that taunted him to join in because everyone was doing it.

This young man had many choices to make. He had a family—a family that was probably a lot like many of our families. It was a family that had both strengths and weaknesses. His parents were good people who took seriously their responsibility to teach their children correct principles and desired that their children would follow the Lord. They were parents who probably made mistakes now and then in their attempts to accomplish this. The father was a priesthood leader. He was diligent in fulfilling his responsibilities to his family and to the Church. Some of the children of the family

were respectful and obedient. Others wanted to follow their own mind and will—just like in our families.

This young man was like you young people who are here tonight. He was bright, serious-minded, respectful, diligent, and obedient. He loved his parents and family, and he loved the Lord. He wanted to make the right choices. Like most of you, he listened to his father. But it was hard. And as time went on it became harder and harder. The words of his father separated him from his friends and from the world around him. He wanted and needed to know for himself if the things that his father taught him were true.

We read in the scriptures how he did that and what happened:

Having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father. [1 Nephi 2:16]

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Faced with life-altering decisions in his life, this young man turned in humility to his Heavenly Father in prayer, and he received an answer to his prayer. This young man's name was Nephi.

Nephi had a choice to make in his life. It was very much like the choices we all have to make in our lives every day. Even though our world may look very different from his, the influences that were pulling on him were very much like the influences that pull on us. He had to make a choice between the things of the world and the things of the Lord. We have those same kinds of choices. Nephi chose to put his mind and will into the hands of the Lord. He chose to go to the only true source of truth and righteousness in prayer, he chose to listen to the answers the Lord gave him, and he chose to obey. This simple act of prayer not only opened the door to a great life of opportunity and blessings for Nephi, but it also serves as an example to us in our lives today.

Nephi himself taught in 1 Nephi 19:23 that we should "liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning." And so tonight we are going to talk about the great principle of the gospel that was demonstrated by Nephi. We are going to talk about prayer. We are going to look to the scriptures and to the prophets for understanding. We are going to "liken" these teachings to our own lives.

As we do so, will you think about prayer in your life and honestly and seriously think about the answers to some questions I am going to ask—such questions as: What should I be praying about in my own life? When and how can I pray? When I pray, do I pray with intensity and faith? Do I feel that my prayers are heard? Do I really believe that the Lord will answer me? Do I understand how the answers to prayers come? Do I recognize and accept the answers, even if they are not what I want them to be? Do I understand what it means to wait patiently on the Lord? Do I pray with real intent, thereby ordering my life according to

the answers I receive? Do I go forward and act on the answers I am given?

Before we answer these questions, let's talk about the principle of prayer. Prayer is simply the process by which we are able to communicate with our Heavenly Father. And it is a two-way communication. Elder Richard G. Scott teaches us that "prayer is a supernal gift of our Father in Heaven to every soul" (in *CR*, March–April 2007, 5; or "Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer," *Ensign*, May 2007, 8). No matter who we are, where we are, what our needs are, or what we have done, we are not alone. We have a loving Father in Heaven who has made Himself available to us if we will just turn to Him.

Prayer does many things. Prayer is one of the ways we can express gratitude. It brings comfort and peace. It is through prayer that we are able to receive a testimony. It helps us to sort out our feelings and thinking as we express our concerns and desires to our Heavenly Father. It can give us specific answers. Our minds can be enlightened because revelation comes through personal prayer. Prayer is where repentance begins, it is through prayer that we can know we have been forgiven, and prayer can help us to forgive ourselves and others. Prayer can help us find direction. It can help us in making decisions.

We can receive help in very specific ways. It is through prayer that we can find strength, both in spirit and in body. Prayer can provide protection from all sources of harm and evil. We can access every spiritual gift as we ask in sincere prayer. We find answers to all of life's questions as we ask in prayer. I know that there are healing powers in prayer—healing in terms of physical needs and healing of the spirit.

Prayer involves the individual—you and me—and it also involves the whole Godhead. All three members of the Godhead are involved in this way: When we pray to our Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ,

who is our advocate, answers come from our Heavenly Father by the Holy Ghost. It is through the Holy Ghost that we feel the love of the Father and the Son.

I want you to know that I know that these principles concerning prayer are true. We find these principles taught in the scriptures and in the words of the prophets. I have a personal testimony of the power of prayer because I have experienced many of the blessings of prayer in my own life. But what I really want to talk about tonight is how you feel about prayer in your life—how you are using it to access the powers of heaven. In order to do this, let's go back to those original questions.

What Do I Need to Pray About?

The first question is: What do I need to pray about in my own life?

Think about where you are in your life right now. Do you worry about things? Do you ever feel overwhelmed or confused? I am sure there are challenges and concerns. What are they? In the Book of Mormon, Amulek teaches us some of the things we should pray about. As we read this scripture together, keep track of the specific things mentioned. We are going to read from Alma 34, verses 17–26:

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. [Alma 34:17–26]

Does this suggest some things that we could pray about? To me it seems to suggest that we need to pray about everything.

Alma prayed for mercy that he might be saved. He was asking for the Atonement to take effect in his life. He was repenting. He prayed for his family, his possessions, to be a success. He prayed for protection from Satan and temptation. I think that when he was told to pray in his closet and secret places and his wilderness, the Lord wasn't talking about places he could pray—or at least He wasn't only talking about places. I think He was telling Alma to go to the secret places in his heart and in his life and pray for all of his personal struggles and weaknesses.

If we liken this scripture to our own lives, we can see many things we could pray about. For you this could include such things as your schoolwork, finding a profession, and meeting and finding a worthy and perhaps an eternal companion. What about beginning your families and your homes? What about your health? What about your own personal worthiness? Could it include your personal testimony, your desire to know how you should serve Him, your need to repent, and your need to be strengthened against temptation? Does this suggest praying for the Holy Ghost to guide you in all things?

When we pray we must be mindful to not just pray for the things we want. We must come to the place where we pray for the things the Lord wants for us. When we do this, we are in essence giving our lives over to Him. We are saying, "I cannot do this by myself. I do not want to do this by myself. I will do it Thy way."

When and How Can I Pray?

This leads us to the second question: When and how can I pray?

We do, of course, have regular prayers that we have all been taught to say—personal prayers in the night and in the morning. We have family prayers and prayers that accompany our gatherings. These are the first prayers we are taught to say. If we are not careful, they can become routine and even rote.

How many times do we offer a quick morning prayer and then jump up and race out of the door—never giving it another thought? How many times do we fall asleep saying our evening prayers or even skip them all together because we are just so tired? When we consider to whom we are speaking when we pray, how much He has done for us, and how dependent we are upon Him, it gives us pause to think. Taking time to ponder as we pray will give the Spirit opportunity to speak to us.

Family prayers can be powerful. They can unite family members and strengthen them in times of challenge. They can protect. They can bring comfort and peace. When our children were in the mission field, we would figure out the time difference between our home and the mission and then figure out what time—their time—we would be saying our family prayers at home so that they would know just when we were praying for them. Several of them have said that they felt those prayers and were strengthened by them in very specific ways at the very moment they were needed.

But we are taught in the scriptures that these formal prayers are not the only way we can approach our Heavenly Father. In Alma 34:27 we read, “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.”

We can always have a prayer in our hearts. What does that mean?

I think it is an attitude of upward reaching from our souls to heaven—to Heavenly Father. It is a fleeting but intense feeling of “Thank

you.” “Please help me.” “What is the right thing for me to do?” “What should I say?” “I am so sorry.” It is the yearning for comfort, strength, and guidance when you are in the midst of a situation. It is the feeling of gladness and joy at something beautiful. It is the recognition of the Holy Ghost operating in your life. It is opening our hearts to continual communication. This kind of praying can be more or less constant as we allow it to be. We control it by our activities, our environment, and the condition of our hearts.

What are some of the things that can stop this from happening? Loud and constant music, even good music, can just become noise that strangles a prayerful thought before it is ever formed in our minds. Surrounding ourselves with chaos, clutter, and confusion can stifle the Spirit. Becoming too busy and stressed by everyday life can distract our minds from heaven. Allowing ourselves to be in places where we know the Spirit cannot abide will block our prayers. Allowing inappropriate and ugly images to enter our minds through things we see on the Internet, in movies, on television, or in things we read will destroy our connection with heaven. Being angry, irritated, and annoyed by others can close our hearts.

“But,” you might say, “these things are part of our lives every day. How can we avoid them?” I believe that these things can be part of our everyday life if we let them. We are in control—or at least we can be in control.

It is so important that we each consider our lives and consider what we must do in order to qualify for the blessings of heaven. We will become aware of how close heaven is if we just reach for it. And the very act of reaching for it can help us put our lives in balance with the things of the Spirit. The closer we are to the Spirit, the more our hearts can be open and flowing to our Father in Heaven. For me, the prayer of the heart keeps me closer to the Lord than anything else I can do. And I

can do it any place and any time. It is a lifeline to me.

Do I Pray with Intensity and Faith?

Our next question is: When I pray, do I pray with intensity and faith?

Turn back to Alma 34:17–27. This whole passage of scripture indicates that we need to have both intensity and faith. Notice the words: “*exercise your faith,*” “*call upon his holy name,*” “*cry unto him,*” “*pour out your souls,*” “*drawn out in prayer.*” This is more than just a dutiful prayer offered in a hurry.

All prayers need to come from deep inside our minds and hearts. How offensive it must be to the Lord—who has offered us so much, who stands ready to give every blessing expedient for our good—for us to hurry through our prayers or sleep through them or have our minds wander or our words be casual and disrespectful, such as using *you* and *your* instead of *Thee* and *Thou*. How often do we forget Him altogether until we have an urgent need?

Sometimes our prayers *are* an urgent plea for help. I remember one such prayer I offered when my then three-year-old son was missing. He had been playing with the other children in our yard. I had taken my eyes off of him only momentarily to check on the baby. But suddenly he was gone.

Immediately I offered a desperate prayer for help. The thought came into my mind that he was at the swimming pool of an apartment complex about three blocks away.

Now he had never been to that pool. He had never even been to the apartments. The pool was enclosed in a building and was kept locked at all times. He didn’t even know that it was there. But the feeling was strong.

Running, I called to my 10-year-old son, who was on his bike, to go to the swimming pool as quickly as he could. When he got there he found his little brother and another little boy of the same age who *had* known about the pool just beginning to wade into the shallow

end of the pool. They had all their clothes and shoes on—and even though the door had been open, there was no one else in the area.

Some prayers are intense, and we need answers right now! Thankfully not all prayers are like that. If we go before the Lord in prayer on a consistent basis, He will be there when we urgently need Him.

Praying with intensity seems to indicate faith that the prayer can be answered. Faith is simple and childlike for some of us. It may be borne out of love or out of never having had it tried. For most of us faith is something we have to consistently work to have. We might attain great faith through a singular experience, but the next time our faith is tried we seem to have to start all over again in really trusting the Lord. But I promise you that if you pray, believing that Heavenly Father is there, that He loves you, and that He can answer all prayers, your faith will grow and it will become stronger, and you will be able to come to a place in your life where you will know these things are true. Believing is the beginning of faith.

Do I Really Believe That My Prayers Are Heard and Will Be Answered?

Next question: Do I really believe that my prayers are heard and that Heavenly Father will answer me?

Let me tell you about one little boy’s prayer. His name is Brayden. He was very young at the time—five or six years old. He had been reading the Book of Mormon with his family. The family would read a few verses each day and then have family prayer.

One day they read the words in Moroni 10:4:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

It was Brayden's turn to pray that day. He began his prayer in the same usual way, using the same usual words, but then he said something different. He said, "Heavenly Father, is the Book of Mormon true?" Then he paused.

He paused for so long that his father glanced over at him to see if he needed help in finishing his prayer. But he didn't need any help. He finished by saying simply, "Thanks, Heavenly Father," and closed his prayer. The Spirit entered that home and bore witness to the whole family of the truthfulness of the scriptures. His prayer was one of simple, beautiful faith.

You are a child of God, just as is Brayden. You are of great worth to Him. He has commanded us repeatedly in the scriptures to "pray always." He has provided the Atonement to bring us back home. Why would He not answer your prayers? He will. I promise He will! But maybe it's not the Lord that we are questioning. Maybe it's our own worthiness we question. Maybe it's our lack of understanding of how God answers our prayers that makes us question.

In order to better understand and answer how Heavenly Father answers our prayers, let us join this question with the next three questions, which are:

"Do I understand how the answers to prayers come?"

"Do I recognize and accept answers, even if they are not what I want them to be?"

"Do I understand what it means to wait patiently on the Lord?"

When we qualify ourselves through personal worthiness, Heavenly Father always answers our prayers. Please note the word *qualify*. We have to be trying hard to be worthy of the Lord's blessings.

President Harold B. Lee said:

If you want the blessing, don't just kneel down and pray about it. Prepare yourselves in every

conceivable way you can in order to make yourselves worthy to receive the blessing you seek. [Stand Ye in Holy Places (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 244]

We have to be close to the Spirit to know what to pray for and to be able to discern His answers. But this does not mean we have to be perfect or anywhere near it in order to pray and get answers. This is because prayer is one of the ways we are able to repent and one of the ways we are able to become perfected.

Heavenly Father not only answers our prayers; He always answers them in the way that will bless us eternally. This is a principle that is absolutely true. But there are many ways our prayers may be answered. He may say yes. He may say no. He may say not now. Sometimes we may feel that He is not answering us at all because we are not able to discern the answer. We have to trust in the Lord and trust His timing. We need to learn to recognize the answers when they come.

Some answers come bit by bit in order to strengthen our faith. Elder Dallin H. Oaks said:

We cannot force spiritual things. It must be so. Our life's purpose to obtain experience and to develop faith would be frustrated if our Heavenly Father enlightened us immediately on every question or directed us in every act. [The Lord's Way (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 36]

Some answers have already been given us, and the Lord is trusting us to act on them. Sometimes we are asking between two equally good things and the Lord is giving us a chance to use our God-given power of agency.

Perhaps in our urgent desire to receive a specific answer to a prayer we are unwilling to put our lives in the hands of the Lord and accept the answer we are given. We want what we want, and we want it now!

Maybe our problem lies in not recognizing how answers come. We are aware that some

prayers are answered in spectacular ways, such as Joseph Smith's First Vision, but most often answers come in more quiet ways. In Doctrine and Covenants 8:2–3 we read about two ways the Lord answers our prayers:

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation.

The first way mentioned is in our minds. These answers come through the still, small voice of the Holy Ghost as thoughts, ideas—knowledge. These may be flashes of inspiration that we recognize immediately, or they may be ideas that we have to work through and that develop over time. They are usually accompanied by a good feeling.

The second way mentioned is in our hearts. This has to do more with our feelings. We may have negative, confused feelings to warn us that the answer is no. Or the feelings may be sweet, peaceful, reassuring, and comforting. These feelings mean that the answer is yes. These feelings are sometimes likened to a burning sensation that is intense, or the feeling may be very subtle.

The key principles here are that we have been commanded to pray to our Heavenly Father. He hears every prayer. He will answer our prayers for our best good. When we know this deep in our hearts, we won't get discouraged and turn away from Him. When the answers are not recognizable immediately, we will remain faithful and constant—continually praying to discover His ways. The Spirit can help us, and we will learn to discern how the answers come and what the answers are. It can be different for every person, and it can even be different in each experience we have. I know that as we qualify ourselves to have the Holy Ghost with us constantly, we will be able to more clearly see and understand the answers to our prayers.

Do I Go Forward and Act?

The last question is: Do I order my life according to the answers to my prayers that I receive? Do I go forward and act?

I know that the Lord hears and answers prayers. But I also believe that if we continually pray and then refuse to listen and follow, He will not be as accessible to us in the future. In Doctrine and Covenants 101:7–8 we read:

They were slow to hearken unto the voice of the Lord their God; therefore, the Lord their God is slow to hearken unto their prayers, to answer them in the day of their trouble.

In the day of their peace they esteemed lightly my counsel; but, in the day of their trouble, of necessity they feel after me.

When we receive answers from the Lord, we have to move forward in trust and confidence. I don't think it makes Him happy when we continually seek for another answer when we have already received one. We need to remember what He has given us and act upon it in faith.

Do I Ever Feel Like I Do Not Want to Pray?

Now, if you will forgive me, I want to ask one more question: Do you ever feel like you do not *want* to pray?

In 2 Nephi 32:8 we read:

For 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.

President Brigham Young taught: "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*" (JD 13:155; emphasis in original).

My dear young brothers and sisters, you are at a beginning place in your lives. It is a new school year, a time for new experiences, new relationships—maybe eternal relationships.

You are starting your lives in many ways. You have many important decisions ahead of you. Concerning these decisions, Heavenly Father expects a lot from us. He expects us to do all we can do—to think, to work, to stretch our capacity. But if we are willing to do it His way, placing our lives in His hands, it will be so much easier. And we will get it right.

In the Bible Dictionary we learn:

The object of prayer is not to change the will of God, but to secure for ourselves and for others blessings that God is already willing to grant, but that are made conditional on our asking for them. [Bible Dictionary, s.v. “prayer,” 753]

All we have to do is humbly turn to Him and ask—and then listen and obey. Put simply, life just does not have to be as hard as we sometimes make it. In 3 Nephi 18:18–20 we read:

Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, ye must watch and pray always lest ye enter into temptation; for Satan desireth to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.

Therefore ye must always pray unto the Father in my name;

And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you.

Let us follow the example of Nephi. Let us turn to our Father in Heaven in humble prayer. Let us receive the blessings untold that He has reserved just for us and for our families.

I know that God lives! Jesus Christ lives! They know each of us. They love each of us. They wait for us. May we be quick to respond by turning to Them in humble prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.