

Prayer: Try Again

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I am glad to be here this evening. We have had four of our five daughters attend BYU. With the first two daughters, I was led to believe that the BYU was a two-year school because they got married after their sophomore year and didn't come back. Our third daughter did finish here. I remember her graduation. She had married before she finished, and at her graduation we weren't sure which would come first, the baby or the diploma. But the diploma beat the baby by a few weeks.

I feel an anxiousness about my subject tonight because I know, as the scriptures have stated, that we are in the wind-down period of time that precedes the second coming of the Savior. The preparation is being hastened as never before. The signs of this hastening are all about us. The coming months and years will bring some important events in fulfillment of ancient and latter-day prophecies attesting to the times in which we now live. Each of you will have an opportunity to be part of these great experiences. Now it's true that not all will be prophets, apostles, bishops, or presidents, but the particular assignment is unimportant in the overall perspective of what is happening and what will happen. All of us are Heavenly Father's sons and daughters, and regardless of our ecclesiastical assignment, the eternal

rewards to the faithful are the same. There is no one here tonight—and I hope you will all listen to this—there is no one here tonight whose experience in life cannot be exciting, satisfying, happy, and profitable. None of us here came into mortality to fail or to be mediocre in the things that matter most. I firmly believe in this truth. And lest we forget, there are no greater blessings than those that can come to a successful husband and wife.

I don't know when I have prayed more fervently or worried more continually about being able to communicate with any group than I have in speaking with you this evening. I feel none of us will ever be exalted except as we increase our understanding of and our dedication and commitment to the subject matter of this fireside. I have chosen to speak about prayer.

Because of my desire to teach you this evening, I will share with you some experiences that are considered special and sacred by

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me and my family. I hope you will please forgive me for this. (Some of my family members have suggested that there are better things to talk about than one's self and loved ones.)

The greatest purpose and challenge in life is to learn to know and to live like the Savior. We learn to know Him as we live like Him—as we keep his commandments. Knowing Him is increased as we testify of Him. In this mortal experience, there are many Christlike things we can do, but unless we keep His commandments and testify of Him, we will not achieve our full purpose in life. The world has many good people who do many wonderful things but who cannot testify of the Savior and His mission.

Now there are several important things we can all do that will help us in our pursuit of our goal to know the Savior. We speak of selfless service to others, daily scripture study, daily prayer, keeping the commandments, and so forth. The list goes on and on. The number of things we must do seems endless.

In our pursuit of a righteous life, we all experience trials, disappointments, discouragements, and frustrations. You name it, and somebody has had it. Never-ending problems seem to be the name of the game. They come to all. None are shielded; none are exempt from problems.

If you will forgive me, I would like to give a personal reference or two. As was mentioned, I am the oldest of four boys in my parents' family. I remember when I became twelve years of age and was ordained a deacon. The first time I was assigned to pass the sacrament, I worried and was nervous (about like I feel this evening). My mother had given me a clean shirt, a tie, and neatly pressed trousers; but I had a problem in those days (I have problems nowadays, too, but I had one particular problem in those days). I had white hair (a different kind of white than now), and I used to have a cowlick. I don't know if any of you know what a cowlick is—it's hair that sticks up and doesn't know when to lie down. Well, it was all right

under regular circumstances for me to go around with this kind of chicken tail-feather cowlick, but I didn't want it to be that way when I passed the sacrament. So mother bought a jar of vaseline, and it seemed like most of it went on my head as we tried to pull down the unruly hair. The time came to pass the sacrament (this story is almost sacrilegious because of the sacred occasion of the sacrament, but one's feelings have to come out), and as I walked down the aisle passing the emblems, I knew that everyone in sacrament meeting was watching me. I knew there was nobody else they were looking at except me, and I was afraid my hair wouldn't stay where it was supposed to stay, even with that vaseline treatment. Then about halfway through the service it happened, and my hair flipped up. I quickly looked around, and I was sure, again, that everybody saw it. I remember looking up on the stand at our bishop. He was seated very comfortably on the stand with his arms in front of his rather robust front—not asleep but enjoying the sacrament service. When I looked up at Bishop Udall, I thought to myself, "Gee, it must be neat to be a bishop. He doesn't have any problems at all. He doesn't even know what has happened to my hair." Now that happened when I was twelve years old. Then I became a bishop some years later, and I found out that Bishop Udall wasn't resting as comfortably as I thought he was.

As you know, we have five daughters. One of the things that happens in our home when our daughters turn sixteen—that magic age—is that they can do two things: First, if they have taken the driver's education course, they can get a driver's license; and second, if someone asks them, they can have a date—although that hasn't always worked out in just the way they wanted it to. We had one daughter who had her first date upon turning sixteen, and then there was a dry spell that lasted for months and months and months. One day my wife and I were talking about some problems we were

trying to solve that were very important and, I thought, very serious, when this sixteen-soon-to-be-seventeen-year-old said to us, “Dad, you don’t know what problems are. Here I am sixteen, and I’m ready, but nobody else is.” And so it is that trials seem to have their part in each of our lives.

I honestly thought as a bishop and stake president down in Arizona that the General Authorities were fortunate in that they didn’t have anything to worry about except running the church. And then I became one. Since I have become acquainted with the General Authorities, I have found that all of them, brothers and sisters, have some very serious matters—in their personal lives, in their families, and with their health—that challenge the very best in them. And these are trials that I certainly wouldn’t want to trade with them.

We’ve all been aware of President Kimball’s health experiences and problems. I remember how eight years ago, just eight years this coming conference, I was called into the Presiding Bishopric and how we were invited into the room in the temple where the newly sustained Brethren were to be set apart. Prior to the setting apart the Brethren were going to give a blessing to President Kimball, who was then President of the Quorum of the Twelve, because he was going to have open-heart surgery within a matter of a few days. (I think Dr. Nelson will remember many things about this.) As they gave him the blessing, many thoughts went through my mind because President Kimball had been raised in Arizona, as I had been, and I had paid particular attention to him for many reasons. I remembered many of the trials that he had had, the very serious health problems he had had. I knew he sang in a quartet at one time with members of the Twelve, and I understood he sang beautifully. And then he had cancer and had to have that voice taken away from him. I thought as I saw him seated in his chair, with the Apostles’ hands on his head, “Why? Why should a man

who has been through what he has been through—he’s President of the Quorum of the Twelve; he’s seventy years old—why should he have to go through open-heart surgery?” I knew the Lord could heal him in an instant if he chose to, and I wondered why? Well, now I understand, as I’m sure you do, that the Lord was preparing a man, an apostle, to be his prophet. He wanted a prophet and a president who would listen to him; he wanted one who could receive the promptings of the Spirit and who would be open to them. These are the reasons for the continual trials with which we are all faced. We need these experiences so that we might draw closer to the Lord and learn to depend on him for everything. That is what He wants for each of us. More than anything, He wants us to know Him.

Now for the next few minutes, I would like to visit with those of you who have become discouraged in your personal prayers, the ones you say when no one else is listening. I’d like to talk to those of you who have stopped praying or who do not pray as frequently or as fervently as you once did. Perhaps you find it difficult to pray because you aren’t sure the Lord is listening; maybe you aren’t sure if He is even there; or maybe you feel guilty or unworthy. But whatever the reason, your communication isn’t what it ought to be.

Have you ever knelt down alone and asked the Lord for something that is really important to you and then gotten up and found that your prayer wasn’t answered as you had hoped? I have. Have you ever prayed and prayed for days and days for something special and then found that it didn’t work out? I have. In times past, on more than a few occasions, I have gotten up off my knees and wondered in despair, “What’s the use—He isn’t even listening,” or “Maybe I’m not worthy,” or “Maybe I just don’t understand the signals.”

A few years ago, after one such frustrating experience in prayer, I was reflecting on my experiences with my earthly father who has

been dead for some time. I remember that when he was alive, I could always go to him and talk to him about anything, and he would listen to me. He was not a perfect man, but he would listen, and I want you to know that I know that whenever one of Heavenly Father's children kneels and talks to Him, He listens to each one. I know this as well as I know anything in this world—that Heavenly Father listens to every prayer from His children. I know our prayers ascend to heaven. No matter what we may have done wrong, He listens to us.

Now, I also believe He answers us. I don't believe He ignores His children when they talk to Him. The problem in our communication with the Lord is that not all of us have learned how to listen for His answers, or perhaps we are not prepared to hear Him. I believe we receive His answers as we prepare ourselves to receive them. Now let me explain this.

As we go through life, we oftentimes build a rock wall between us and heaven. This wall is built by our uncorrected or unrepented-of mistakes or actions. For example, in our wall there may be stones of many different sizes and shapes. There could be stones because we have been unkind to someone, for we place a stone between us and the Lord when we are unkind. Criticism of leaders or teachers may add another stone. A lack of forgiveness may add another and another. Vulgar thoughts and actions may add some rather large stones in this wall. Dishonesty will add another; selfishness another, and so on.

As we build the wall in front of us and we cry out to the Lord in heaven, He still sends His messages from heaven, but instead of being able to penetrate our heart, they hit the wall that we have built up and they bounce off. His messages don't penetrate, so we say, "He doesn't hear us," or "He doesn't answer." Sometimes this wall is very formidable. The great challenge of life is the experience of destroying this rock wall or, if you please, of

cleansing ourselves, of purifying this inner vessel, so that we can be in tune with the Spirit.

Now, let me give you some examples. I suppose we have all had someone do something to us that we didn't like, and that made us mad. We can't forget it, and we don't want to be around that person. This is called being unforgiving. Now the Lord has had some very strong words to say to those who will not forgive one another. Many years ago I had an experience with being unforgiving. I felt I had been taken advantage of, and I did not like the person. I did not want to be around him. I would pass to the other side of the street if he came down the side I was on. I wouldn't talk to him; and long after the issue should have been closed, it was still cankering my soul. One day my wife, who is very astute and knows when I'm not doing everything I should, said, "You don't like so and so, do you?"

"No, I don't," I said, "but how could you tell?"

"Well, it shows—in your countenance it shows. Why don't you do something about it," she said.

"Well, like what?"

"Why don't you pray about it."

I said, "Well, I did pray once, and I still don't like him."

"No," she said, "Why don't you really pray about it?"

Then I began to think, and I knew what she really meant. So I decided that I was going to pray for a better feeling about this person until I had one. That night I got on my knees, and I prayed and opened up my heart to the Lord. But when I got off my knees, I still didn't like him. The next morning I knelt and prayed and asked to have a feeling of goodness toward him; but when I finished my prayers, I still didn't like him. The next night I still didn't like him; a week later I didn't like him; and a month later I didn't like him—and I had been praying every night and every morning. But I kept it up, and I finally started pleading, not

just praying, but pleading. After much prayer—and I can't tell you a specific time because it didn't happen like that—the time came when without question or reservation I knew I could stand before the Lord, if I were asked to, and that He would know that at least in this instance my heart was pure. A change came over me after a period of time. Now that stone of unforgiveness needs to be removed from all of us, if it happens to be there, and I suggest that persistent prayer might be a way to remove it.

Another stone that creeps into this wall between us and heaven is evil speaking. Have you ever come home from a sacrament meeting, priesthood meeting, or Relief Society meeting and said, "Boy, what a dumb lesson," or "Boy, why did the bishop do that tonight; wasn't he thinking?" or "Boy, I wish they would get a better teacher for us; she's a lemon," and on and on. I believe that every time we speak evil of anyone who is a servant in the kingdom—and I'm not just talking about the prophets—we are sowing the seeds of apostasy. We talk about speaking evil of the Lord's anointed, but I believe that *anointed* applies to all who are working in the kingdom. I believe that you can't speak evil of a bishop, a counselor, or a teacher without putting a stone in your path that might keep the messages of heaven from reaching you. So I would suggest that we look for elevating things to say about people and not for the degrading things, no matter who we are talking about.

One of the stones that presents a very real problem for many is unworthy thoughts. Many are the stones that are placed in the wall between us and heaven because of vulgar thoughts and actions. Now I'd like to give you some suggestions for solving that problem. One way is the process of praying and pleading and asking for strength. Beyond that there are some other things that we can do. Our minds are tremendous reservoirs, if I can use that term. Our minds have the capacity to

retain anything that we put in them. They can take it. We can put filth, garbage, trash, or vulgarity into our minds, or we can fill them with beauty and spiritual experiences. Our minds just seem to take everything in like a sieve, and they never seem to fill up. Our minds, however, are not like our physical bodies. When we put something into our physical body that isn't right, that is dirty, that is trashy, that is not good for us, our physical body can get rid of it in a brief period. But our minds will keep the trashy kinds of things for days and weeks, months and years, and sometimes for a lifetime. So the important thing to do, remembering that the mind has a hard time cleansing itself, is to be careful of what you put in it. Magazines that are suggestive or even more than suggestive should not be looked at.

Don't answer this question aloud, but let me ask you: Do you ever go to a show in which there are some bedroom scenes or nudity displayed on the screen; and, if so, do you have the courage to get up and walk out? Or do you say, "Why not? Everybody talks about this now, everybody's watching this kind of thing; why not just stay?" I suggest to you, brothers and sisters, that every time you look at something that would not have the approval of the Master you are filling your mind with something that you will have a hard time getting rid of. As we review Church court cases we find, if a proper report is given, that the mind's processes and thoughts eventually lead to the act. Those who unceasingly fill their minds with things that are filthy and ugly are the ones who are led step-by-step into terribly destructive experiences. So have the courage to walk away from any experience that fills your mind with garbage, and then plead with the Lord for experiences that will fill your mind with refreshing thoughts. There are many rocks that need to be destroyed.

The pattern of our lives determines our eligibility to receive the promptings of the Spirit and to hear the answers to our prayers. Again,

let there be no misunderstanding. Heavenly Father does answer our prayers, but often we aren't prepared to hear Him. Some prayers are not answered immediately, and that's where we may become discouraged. Some are answered immediately, but some do take longer. If you will forgive another experience, a couple of years ago I had an assignment that took me to Germany. I had had a bout with the flu before I left, and I wasn't sure if I ought to go or not; but I felt that I had better because of what had been planned and because of the many who were depending on me. After the flight from New York to Frankfurt, I was tired and not feeling well. I was alone, and I didn't speak German, so I checked into the hotel at the airport. Before going to my room, however, I went to the pharmacy in the airport, and I got a throat spray to disinfect my throat. It was the kind of can that you push the button and the medication comes out through a finger-length piece of plastic tubing that you stick down into your throat.

I went to my room and prepared to rest for a while; but when I began to spray my throat, the plastic tube came loose and drove itself down my throat and into my chest. I couldn't feel it, but I knew there was a three-inch piece of plastic somewhere, and I didn't know what to do. I coughed. I did all that I could to get rid of it. Then I began to worry—not that I would die, for I knew that I wasn't near death—but because I knew that there were people waiting for me in various countries where I was to be going for the next three weeks, and I knew that if something didn't happen right away I would end up in the hospital to have the plastic pipe removed surgically. So I needed an immediate answer. I needed an immediate response. I knelt at my bed, and I told the Lord that I had no place to go, that I didn't speak the language, that I didn't know a doctor, that I didn't know anyone, and that there were people waiting for me. And I asked Him to please remove this tubing.

I got up from praying, and in two seconds it came out of my throat. You see, there are some answers to prayers that come immediately.

Then, there are other times when you wonder if He is ever going to answer. About twenty-two years ago our fourth daughter was born. After she was born, the doctor told my wife that she shouldn't have any more children. We talked about it, and she said, "I feel that there is another child for us." We talked to the doctor, and he said, "No, you can't." My wife told him, "Well, I think I can," but he persisted in telling her no. Doctors just don't know what my wife knows. She is motivated by other things, I suppose. So we decided, of course, that we were going to have this baby.

Well, a year went by, and the baby didn't come; and two years went by, and finally one of the girls said to me, "Are you sure we're supposed to have another baby?" My wife had said that she knew we could have one, and they said, "Mother said we were going to have one, so where's the baby?" I replied, "Well let's go ask her." So we went and collectively asked her, "Are you sure we're going to have a baby?" She said, "Yes, but we haven't prayed long enough; we haven't prayed hard enough." So we prayed for another year and still no baby came. Then we asked the question again, "Are you sure you know what you're talking about?" "Yes," was her reply. So we prayed and prayed and prayed for one and two and three and four and five and six and seven and eight years! And then one day at the table she said, "Guess what? We're going to have a baby." And there she is, right on this front row. Prayers, you see, are sometimes answered quickly, but other times you pray a long, long time before you get what you want.

As we learn how to listen to the promptings of the Spirit, as we prepare ourselves to receive them, we must also learn to obey what we feel prompted to do and this element is important. Many feel the promptings of the Spirit, but not

all have the courage to obey. We've all had the experience of knowing and not doing.

I remember attending a stake conference not long ago and hearing a very cute example of receiving the promptings but not being obedient. After the morning session of the conference, we were having dinner at the stake president's home. His counselors and their wives were there. One of the counselors was a rancher with a family of eight or nine children, as I recall, and his ranch was made up of many square miles. Before we sat down to eat his wife was kind of smiling because, she said, I had talked that day about being obedient to the promptings of the Spirit. She continued to smile and said: "Early in our married life, my husband was out on the ranch late one night, and he had a breakdown. So he knelt and prayed and asked Heavenly Father to let me know that he was having problems so I could go out and find him."

And she did. He had prayed, and she, feeling the promptings of the Spirit, had gone out, gotten in the pickup, and found him broken down somewhere on the ranch. She continued:

That got to be kind of a thing with us. Over the next twenty years whenever he got in trouble, he would pray, and I would get the promptings, and would get in the car and go out to find him. While I was carrying our last baby, and I was about nine and one-half months pregnant [and that means you really are], and I was in my mid-forties. It was about ten-thirty at night, and I was seated waiting for either him or the baby, whichever came first, when I got the impression, "Your husband is in trouble; go out and help him." I was just too big and too tired and too old, and I just couldn't do it, so I said to the Lord, "You'll just have to help him get home yourself." Then at about one-thirty in the morning he came in, and he didn't say, "Hi, honey," or anything. He just came right to me and said, "What's the matter? Didn't you get my message?" I said, "Yes, but I just couldn't come out, so I had the Lord do it for me."

One of the great challenges of life is to live to receive the message and then to have the courage to obey it.

Now, I want to give you an additional thought on what to pray for. We're all alike, and we seem to want the best for us, but some times what we consider to be the best isn't right for us, especially when the Lord doesn't think we're ready for it. May I suggest that when you pray for something very special that you pray for two things. First, pray for the blessing that you want, whether it's a new baby, or a job, or better grades, or whatever; and second, ask the Lord for the blessing of understanding. Then if He feels for some reason that the blessing isn't appropriate for that time, the blessing of understanding will come. Then the frustrations that oftentimes come because we feel our prayers are not answered will blow away in the wind.

Now, tonight, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, regardless of your circumstances, in good times or in bad, I plead with you to do the following. Tonight, if it's possible, go where you can be alone. If you can't be alone, do what I suggest anyway. And if your roommate doesn't pray, perhaps your example tonight will be all that he or she needs to make a fresh start. Go and kneel. Think about who you are praying to, for oftentimes we kneel and start to pray so quickly that we don't have in mind to whom we are praying. Frequently, I will try to picture in my mind a painting of the Savior. Now, I'm not exactly sure what Heavenly Father looks like, but that image gives me something to contemplate as I kneel. And then as you think to whom you are praying, speak out loud to Him, or if you wish, whisper to Him and address Him as your Father and say what you would like to say to Him. Don't repeat trite phrases that you have heard others say; instead, be sincere with Him, and talk about the things you want to talk about. Thank Him for what He has done for

you. Confide in Him; let Him know what's in your heart. Ask Him for some help. Now those of you who may have had some particularly difficult experiences may only want to ask Him for a desire to pray. That may be all you will want to ask for tonight, but at least ask for that—a desire to pray. Then plead with Him, enjoy Him, tell Him you love Him. I don't know how many of you have prayed out loud and in that vocal prayer have told the Lord that you love Him, but that is a great experience. And then, after you have talked to Him, listen to Him. Now you must listen carefully or you are going to miss His answers. Sometimes people will pray for a minute, or two, or five, or fifteen, and then not even listen for a second. Maybe something different would happen if you continued to kneel at your chair or your bed after you prayed for a minute, or two, or five, or fifteen until you get that good feeling, that warm feeling, that tells you that you have received an answer. Then you know the Lord has heard your prayer, you know He's there, and you know that you have finally figured out a way to allow Him to get His messages through to you. A great experience comes to those who feel the Spirit.

My dear brothers and sisters, I testify to you that the Lord is in His heavens. I testify to you that I know He listens to us and that I know He answers us. I also know that we must be prepared to hear Him. I testify to you that without prayer we will never really know our Heavenly Father or His Son, the Savior. And I testify to you that without prayer we cannot return to Him, for we will have closed the door. Now understand that He does not close

the door—we do. I plead with those of you who are discouraged to not give up. I think we have all had at least one experience, and maybe many more, in our lives when we have had an unusually warm and good feeling about something spiritual. But those feelings, the warmth of the Spirit that comes as we learn to talk to the Lord, are available to all of us, and I plead with you to not give up.

Remember the incident that is recorded in the New Testament of how after the Savior had been crucified, some of the disciples had gone fishing? They had gone out on the Sea of Galilee that afternoon with their nets, and they kept throwing their nets over and over and over; and every time they threw their nets, they brought them back empty. They fished all night, and when morning came their boats were still empty. They were tired and discouraged by their failure, and they started for the shore. When they approached the shore they saw a man walking. They didn't recognize Him, according to the scriptures, but it was the Savior. As they got closer to the Savior, He told them to cast out their nets one more time. Now they didn't argue with Him; they didn't say, "We've tried"; they didn't say, "I tried praying and it didn't work," or "I'm discouraged." Instead, they listened; they had faith; and they obeyed. They lowered their nets in the waters one more time, and this time they brought forth nets overflowing with fish (See John 21:1-6).

May the Lord bless you to persevere in righteous purposes, my brothers and sisters; and I testify to you that He lives, that He is in His heavens, and that He loves you. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.