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## "Pray Always": Learning to Pray as Jesus Prayed

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Donald W. Parry

Speaking to an Area Conference in Taiwan in 1975, President Marion G. Romney stated that “there isn’t any commandment from the Lord that is repeated more often than the commandment to pray to the Lord” (*Area Conference 7*). Approximately forty years ago a Mormon scholar noted that the Book of Mormon is “a unique record of a praying people” and that “perhaps none of our scriptures are so full of instructions to mankind regarding prayer as is the Book of Mormon. The first page relates a prayer of the Prophet Lehi for his people, and the last chapter contains the admonition of the Prophet Moroni to test the truthfulness of the book by prayer” (Berrett 192).

Nowhere in all of the Book of Mormon is the subject of prayer taught and emphasized in such a concentrated fashion as it is in 3 Nephi 11–20, wherein approximately sixty verses are dedicated to the subject of prayer and some eleven prayers are offered. Noteworthy is the central role that Jesus Christ plays in teaching the concept of prayer to the Nephite multitude. During his stay with the Nephites, Christ gives the Sermon at the Temple (very similar to the Sermon on the Mount) in which he instructs the people how to pray. Later he also gives them the baptismal and sacramental prayers. In addition to teaching the Nephites to pray, Jesus offers numerous prayers to the Father in their behalf. Considering the emphasis on prayer in

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this section of the Book of Mormon, I have focused this paper on two aspects of prayer: first, I examine Jesus' teachings, instructions, and commandments regarding prayer during this period; second, I show that Latter-day Saints are required to make Jesus' teachings on prayer applicable in their personal lives.

## Definition of Prayer

Prayer is the goal of an individual to place him or herself in spiritual harmony with God the Father and Creator of all. According to latter-day prophets and apostles, prayer consists of much more than directing "mere words" or thoughts towards deity, but represents "the pulsation of a yearning, loving heart in tune with the Infinite." Prayer is "a message of the soul sent directly to a loving Father. . . [it is] spirit vibration" (McKay 308). Prayer is having "a consciousness that there is something within us which is divine, which is part of the Infinite, which is the offspring of God, and until we can feel that harmony with that Infinite, we have not sensed the power of prayer" (302). Prayer, accompanied by works, "is the invisible switch to tune us with the infinite" (Kimball 62), it is placing ourselves "in harmony with divine forces" (Widtsoe, "The Articles of Faith" 288), it is attuning ourselves "with the spirit or light which 'proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space' (D&C 88:12). In that light is to be found sure answers to all our needs" (Romney, "Prayer and Revelation" 50). Further, "prayer is the passport to spiritual power" (Kimball 115). To "live without prayer is to live a mere animal existence. It is to leave the best part of our natures in a starving condition; for without prayer the spirit is starved, and men dwindle in their feelings and die in their faith" (Cannon 2:170).

Jesus delivered specific instructions to the Nephite community outlining proper approaches to prayer. On one occasion he instructed "after this manner therefore pray ye" (3 Nephi 13:9–13). He had already told them not to pray as the hypocrites,



standing in synagogues and on the street corners to be seen of men (3 Nephi 13:5), and not to use vain repetitions.

It is certain that prayer consists of much more than simple words “that may have no deeper source than the physical organs of speech,” but “prayer is made up of heart throbs and the righteous yearnings of the soul” (Talmage 238). The mention of “heart throbs” here recalls the fact that many prophetic writers have connected the term “heart” with prayer. For instance, Lehi prayed “with all his heart” (1 Nephi 1:5). An effective prayer is one in which an individual prays with “real intent of heart” (Moroni 7:9), with “all the energy of heart” (Moroni 7:48), and with “the sincerity of his heart” (D&C 5:24). In these passages, the heart represents the spiritual and inner emotive aspect of ourselves.

### Posture of Prayer

Given the emphasis placed upon the posture of an individual during prayers in 3 Nephi 11–20, it may be concluded that prayer posture is important. Jesus provided instructions regarding the posture of prayer, and then showed the Nephite Saints at Bountiful how to pray. Twice Jesus commanded them to “kneel” in prayer (3 Nephi 17:13–14; 19:16–17). Once the twelve disciples instructed the multitude to “kneel down upon the face of the earth” and to pray “unto the Father in the name of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:6). They also knelt down upon the earth and prayed with the multitude (3 Nephi 19:6–8). Jesus Christ himself showed them what to do as he knelt in prayer and “prayed unto the

During private formal prayers, individuals should both bow and kneel down before God. Such a posture evidences humility, submission, and meekness. Elder Bruce R. McConkie has explained that “our Father is glorified and exalted; he is an omnipotent being. We are as the dust of the earth in comparison, and yet we are his children with access, through prayer, to his presence. . . . Almost by instinct, therefore, we do such things

as bow our heads and close our eyes; fold our arms, or kneel, or fall on our faces” (12).

## Language of Prayer

Although the Book of Mormon Saints had been praying to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ before the resurrected Jesus ministered to the Nephites (see for example 2 Nephi 33:12), the Savior reinforced this practice among the Nephites during this three-day post-resurrection visit. His command to pray unto the Father was explicit—on eight occasions Jesus taught the multitude to pray to the Father in his name (3 Nephi 17:3; 18:19, 21, 23, 30; 20:31; 27:28; 28:30). The twelve disciples, heeding his instructions regarding prayer, also instructed the multitude to pray to the Father in Jesus’ name (3 Nephi 19:6). Similarly, they “did pray unto the Father also in the name of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:7–8). Jesus himself followed this pattern. On one occasion he “knelt upon the ground, . . . groaned within himself, and said: Father . . .” (3 Nephi 17:14). On another occasion he walked “a little way off from” the multitude and “bowed himself to the earth, and he said: Father . . .” (3 Nephi 19:19–20). On two other occasions Jesus “prayed unto the Father” (3 Nephi 19:27, 31).

Individuals should approach God in prayer similar to the way they approach their earthly fathers. Joseph Smith once said that “it is the first principle of the gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with Him as one man converses with another” (*History of the Church* 6:305). While using the appropriate prayer pronouns (*thy, thee, thou, thine*) individuals should converse with Heavenly Father as they converse with friends and family members. Joseph Smith’s admonition regarding prayer is helpful: “Be plain and simple and ask for what you want, just like you would go to a neighbor and say, I want to borrow a horse and go to mill” (qtd in “Recollections” 151–52).

The command to pray to the Father in the name of Jesus Christ has been accepted without reservation by the Latter-day



Saints in this dispensation. In 1916, Joseph F. Smith declared that “we . . . accept without any question the doctrines we have been taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith and by the Son of God Himself that we pray to God, the Eternal Father, in the name of His Only Begotten Son” (*Conference Report* [Oct 1916] 6). It is therefore not appropriate to pray to any other being than the Father.

If the instructions are crystal clear concerning to whom we must address our prayers, then why did the Nephites pray directly to Jesus, as recorded in 3 Nephi 19:18? The answer in part lies in the fact that Jesus is a resurrected deity. “And they did pray unto Jesus, calling him their Lord and their God.” A second explanation for the multitude’s praying to Jesus is found in his words to Heavenly Father, “they pray unto me because I am with them” (3 Nephi 19:22). It is also possible that the Saints began praying to Jesus as a natural reaction to and an acknowledgement of his glory.

## Formal and Informal Prayer

Two types of prayers are identified in 3 Nephi 11–20—formal and informal prayers. Formal prayers consist of specific styles and conventions. Such prayers include giving thanks for one’s meals, family and individual prayers, the invocation and benediction at church meetings, and the baptism and sacrament prayers. Informal prayers portray a spiritual attitude, a constant sense of the presence of divinity that an individual has within him or herself and which the individual knows is found within God.

It is understood that many formal prayers may be offered at set times and in established places by disciples of Christ as they are prompted by the Holy Ghost. The question may be asked, however, how often is an individual obligated to offer formal prayers to Heavenly Father? The Prophet Joseph Smith provided guidance in this area, teaching us that we must pray three times a day. “You must make yourselves acquainted with

those men who like Daniel pray three times a day toward the House of the Lord" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 161). Evidently, Joseph Smith was making reference to Daniel 6:10: "Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God." The teaching regarding praying three times per day is found also in the Book of Mormon, where Amulek taught that the individuals should "cry unto [God] in your houses . . . both morning, mid-day, and evening" (Alma 34:21).

There is evidence that Joseph Smith and his family practiced this teaching. Eliza R. Snow recorded that "three times a day he had family worship; and these precious seasons of sacred household service truly seemed a foretaste of celestial happiness" (qtd in Payne 65). Hyrum Smith, the Prophet's brother, also learned the principle regarding daily prayers. According to Eliza Ann Carter, "When I was living at Hyrum Smith's I thought that he was the best man I ever saw, he was so kind to his family and he prayed in his family three times a day" (qtd in Snow 134).

Family prayers are perhaps as essential to one's spiritual progress during mortality as are individual prayers. President Hinckley advances several thoughts on the matter:

I know of no single practice that will have a more salutary effect upon your lives than the practice of kneeling together as you begin and close each day. Somehow the little storms that seem to afflict every marriage are dissipated when, kneeling before the Lord, you thank him for one another, in the presence of one another, and then together invoke his blessings upon your lives, your home, your loved ones, and your dreams.

God then will be your partner, and your daily conversations with him will bring peace into your hearts and a joy into your lives that can come from no other source. Your companionship will sweeten through the years; your love will strengthen. Your appreciation for one another will grow. (72)



Regarding informal prayers, the divine dictum from Jesus among the righteous Nephites was to “pray always.” This command was directed both to the twelve disciples and to the multitude (3 Nephi 18:15, 18). The multitude was told that “they should not cease to pray in their hearts” (20:1). The parallel commandment found in the law of Moses is recorded in Deuteronomy 6:4–9. The children of Israel are commanded to “love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” “These words,” says Moses, “shall be in thine heart,” teach them to your children, and “talk of them” when you sit “in thine house, . . . and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.” In other words, prayers must be given because of the love of God.

In this dispensation, the prophets and apostles have continued the plea that the Saints should pray always. Joseph F. Smith taught that “we should carry with us the spirit of prayer throughout every duty that we have to perform in life” (*Conference Report* [Oct 1914] 6). Reed Smoot admonished, “Let us pray early and late, and let the prayer not only be by the lips but from the heart” (78). George Q. Cannon felt that “when they do not bow the knee, it is still their duty to pray in their hearts” (2:166–67). John A. Widtsoe taught that “a man should pray always; his heart should be full of prayer; he should walk in prayer. . . . Prayer may be said to be the soul’s whole desire” (*A Rational Theology* 76–77).

How does one pray always? One way to pray always is to think of Christ at every moment, on every occasion. “Look unto me in every thought” (D&C 6:36) is the divine command. As Alma notes, individuals should look to God during every activity, at all times, and in all places:

Yea, and cry unto God for all thy support; yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord, and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord; yea, let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea, let the affections



of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever. Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day. (Alma 37:36–37)

The central thesis of the passage is to see that all of our thoughts and doings are unto the Lord—the exact meaning of the expression “pray always.”

Praying always entails constantly being conscious of God and his plan of salvation. It consists of having a continual attitude which directs us during every waking moment of mortality, of maintaining a spiritual posture of thankfulness and reliance on the Lord, of desiring the companionship of the Holy Ghost. Brigham Young noted that to pray always is to live as we pray: “I do not know any other way for the Latter-day Saints than for every breath to be virtually a prayer for God to guide and direct his people. . . . Every breath should virtually be a prayer that God will preserve us from sin and from the effects of sin” (43–44).

The scriptures repeatedly state that we can receive blessings from the Lord by praying always: “Pray always, lest ye be tempted by the devil, and ye be led away captive by him” (3 Nephi 18:15); pray always that God, “through his infinite goodness and grace, will keep you through the endurance of faith on his name to the end” (Moroni 8:3); “pray always, and I will pour out my Spirit upon you, and great shall be your blessing” (D&C 19:38); “pray always that I may unfold [truth] to [your] understanding” (32:4); “[pray] always . . . that you may be ready at the coming of the Bridegroom” (33:17). In sum, Latter-day Saints who pray always will have power over the devil and temptation, strength through Christ to endure to the end, the presence of the Holy Ghost, higher knowledge from God, and the comfort of being prepared for Jesus’ second coming.

## Seeking the Holy Ghost through Prayer

One essential item that individuals should pray for is the companionship of the Holy Ghost as 3 Nephi 19:9 instructs: “And they did pray for that which they most desired; and they desired that the Holy Ghost should be given unto them.” Further, Jesus prayed, “Father, I pray thee that thou wilt give the Holy Ghost unto all them that shall believe in [the disciples’] words” (v 21). In our day we are told that “the Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith” (D&C 42:14). We are commanded to pray for the companionship of the Holy Ghost; Heber J. Grant promised that “if we earnestly and honestly seek the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord, I can assure you that we will receive it” (26).

Praying *to receive* the Holy Ghost, and praying *by the power* of the Holy Ghost are two different things. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, “we know not what we should pray for as we ought,” but with this divine aid “the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities; . . . the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Rom 8:26). The Holy Ghost will actually provide whoever is praying with precise particulars of what to pray for. Such was the state of the Nephite multitude who, while praying, “did not multiply many words, for it was given unto them what they should pray, and they were filled with desire” (3 Nephi 19:24).

Why is it necessary to pray with the power of the Holy Ghost? President Benson explains that “with the help of the Holy Ghost, we will know about what we should pray” (112). When we utter the things that God wants us to utter, then we are asking “in the Spirit,” which is akin to asking “according to the will of God.” When this occurs, our prayers will be answered, even as we ask (see D&C 46:30). Having the Holy Ghost dictate God’s will concerning us should be the goal of all Latter-day Saints, knowing that “the time will come when we shall know the will of God before we ask. Then everything for which we pray will be right. That will be when, as a result of



righteous living, we shall so enjoy the companionship of the Spirit that he will dictate to us what we should ask” (Romney, *Learning for the Eternities* 117–18).

Individuals who ask for the companionship of the Holy Ghost and pray by the power of the Spirit will discover marvelous things happening in their lives. Spiritually, their lives will become transformed through Christ into a new creation. God will give them temporal and spiritual directions dealing with all aspects of their mortal lives. The time will come when the Saint will be “purified and cleansed from all sin,” and then the righteous souls will “ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus and it shall be done. But know this, it shall be given you what you shall ask” (D&C 50:29–30).

After Jesus’ ascension, the disciples divided the large multitude into twelve groups and “did teach the multitude; and behold, they did cause that the multitude should kneel down upon the face of the earth, and should pray unto the Father in the name of Jesus. And the disciples did pray unto the Father also in the name of Jesus” (3 Nephi 19:5–7). Jesus’ instructions and examples of prayer among the Nephite community have equal application for followers of Christ today. We follow Jesus’ commands to direct our prayers to our Heavenly Father and to terminate our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ. We accept, with Joseph Smith, the challenge to offer up three formal prayers daily, and when we are not praying formally, we must pray always in our hearts. We are able, like the Nephite Saints, to pray anywhere—at home with our families, in private in our closets, with the Saints in church meetings, at work or at school, in the deserts, mountains, or green places, and so on. Following the instruction in 3 Nephi enables us to apply Jesus’ words regarding what to include in our prayers. Through praying as Jesus prayed, we come closer to him and become worthy to receive his direction in our lives.

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