



Heavenly Father, Are You Really There? On What It Means for a Prayer to Be Answered

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What does it mean for prayer to be answered? Prayer transforms the soul through honesty, faith, and divine guidance.

I served as the Primary music leader for many years, and over time, I watched as the children clearly indicated with their smiles and enthusiasm which Primary songs were among their favorites. It is no surprise that the kids cherish Janice Kapp Perry's *A Child's Prayer*.

Adult members love this Primary song too, perhaps because the lyrics express the fragility of our faith. As the devout Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor points out, in our secular world, religious faith is continually "cross-pressured;" that is, non-believing scientific materialists frequently call the veracity of our religious beliefs into question.

A Child's Prayer begins with two sobering rhetorical questions:

Heavenly Father, are you really there?
And do you hear and answer every child's prayer?

The first stanza concludes with a hopeful tone:

Some say that heaven is far away,
But I feel it close around me as I pray.

As with the Primary children, in reaching toward heaven in this way, all our prayers, at least in some measure, constitute an attempt to confirm that God is really there.

The concept of prayer and the central role that prayer plays in the life of a Latter-day Saint. Let's consider what kinds of prayer there are. What do the scriptures teach us about how to pray? And perhaps most importantly, what does it mean for a prayer to be answered?

Although we often think of prayer generically, prayer takes many forms. Prayers of thanksgiving, such as the blessings we say over our food, constitute the more quotidian types of prayer. Liturgical prayers, the most formal category, are recited in rote form as part of our worship services. Liturgical prayers project a mystical quality, reminding us of the miracles we are contemplating. That we recount rote prayers at baptisms, the temple endowment, and the blessing of the sacrament reinforces our belief that God is mindful of these ordinances, having set forth specific language for us to hear in connection with them, that "they may always have His spirit to be with them" (Doctrine and Covenants 20:76-79).

We offer dedicatory prayers at the opening of sacred buildings, and at the beginning and end of our religious services. In times of public distress, we sometimes say silent prayers in our hearts. And as modern revelation instructs, even the "song of the righteous is a prayer unto me" (Doctrine and Covenants 25:12).

All these varieties of prayer are familiar to us, but it is petitionary prayer, perhaps, that is our most common conception of prayer. These are prayers in which we petition Heavenly Father for specific blessings, hoping that He will grant us the righteous desire

of our hearts. Pleading for a loved one to be healed of a serious illness, asking for success with a new job application, or imploring for a successful pregnancy—all these are examples of petitionary prayers.

Many of our petitionary prayers are not answered in the way we would hope. Consider the countless millions of prayers offered up in times of deep human despair that appear to go unanswered. Prayers from Auschwitz, Poland, during World War II, and from the New Orleans slave auction in the Antebellum South are chilling examples. Our beliefs assure us that God hears such prayers, but He often seems to answer them in ways we do not expect and cannot understand. This is why it is important to consider what it means for a prayer to be answered.

The scriptures clearly outline the methods, contours, and boundary conditions of prayer. Alma taught us to “counsel with the Lord in all thy doings” (Alma 37:39); his colleague Amulek reminded us that Alma’s admonition extends to prayer over temporal things: “Cry unto him when ye are in your fields, yea, over all your flocks ...” and “... Cry unto him over the crops of your fields, that ye may prosper in them” (Alma 34:20 & 24). We learn from Enos that sometimes it is necessary to spar spiritually with our Father in Heaven. Enos recorded, “I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God” (Enos 1).

The Gospel of Matthew is a rich repository of knowledge concerning prayer. In it, Christ instructs us “when thou prayest, enter into thy closet ... and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly” (Matthew 6:6). Jesus warns us to avoid vain repetitions, noting that some “think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matt 6:7). Importantly, Christ also reminds us that “your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (Matt 6:8). In this vein, the Gospel of Matthew assures us that the God we worship is generous and kind; He knows what we need. “... What man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?” (Matt 7:9). We can count on our Father in Heaven to give bread.

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Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul helps us understand that sometimes in our extremity, we are bruised and battered, finding ourselves speechless at the hour of prayer. In his letter to the Romans, Paul explains that in such times of despair: "... we know not what we should pray for ... but the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). Sometimes we commune with God by opening our hearts to Him without saying a word, with "groanings that cannot be uttered."

The Epistle of James succinctly summarizes what the scriptures teach about prayer: The "fervent prayer of the righteous availeth much" (James 5:16).

Examples from the scriptures of first prayers are especially instructive. Joseph Smith's initial foray into praying out loud was truly remarkable. From the "boy's first uttered prayer," we learn that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that a restoration of the gospel was at hand. Joseph Smith's first prayer was surely among the most important prayers ever formed by the tongue of man. Following the boy prophet's example, we should take to heart the admonition that "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God" (James 1:5).

The inaugural prayer of King Lamoni's Father, recorded in the Book of Mormon, is another poignant example of a first prayer. Upon introduction to the gospel by Aaron, one of the missionary sons of Mosiah, the powerful and worldly king articulates his very first prayer. In truly striking humility, he prays that "if there is a God," as Aaron had assured him, "I will give away all my sins to know thee" (Alma 22:18). In this fascinating pronouncement, the ancient American king summarizes the ultimate purpose of prayer: to know God and thereby give away all our sins. How ironic to have a heathen, Lamanite king teach us so eloquently on this point of doctrine. Sometimes burgeoning faith is faith in its purest form.

A unique feature of personal prayer relates to the intrinsic honesty that inevitably accompanies this private dialogue with God. When we kneel in secret prayer before the all-seeing eye of God, no pretense or deception is possible. We are completely exposed in the naked reality of our imperfections. Knowing this, our private prayers take on a no-nonsense quality that is perhaps unparalleled in other arenas of human discourse.

The 19th-century American author and literary critic Mark Twain famously emphasized this truism about prayer in his iconic novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At a key juncture in the story, Huck considers promising God that, going forward, he will change his wicked ways and do the right thing. But being honest with himself, he ultimately concludes that his commitment is not earnest and that he cannot deceive God in any case.

“I was trying to make my mouth SAY I would do the right thing and the clean thing,” Huck says, “... but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can’t pray a lie—I found that out” (Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*).

The context of this scene is complex; Huckleberry was already doing “the right thing.” But he made the essential point nonetheless. That we cannot pray a lie means that our dialogue with God can cut to the chase and be brutally honest and sometimes painfully authentic.

The Lord’s Prayer, as enumerated in the Gospel of Matthew, is the prototype, illustrating the basic elements of prayer (Matthew 6). That a similar version of the Lord’s Prayer also appears in the Book of Mormon suggests that we should pay it particular attention (3 Nephi 13). Indeed, Christ commanded the disciples “... after this manner therefore pray ye” (Matthew 6:9). The prayer begins with a declaration of God’s holy status and our subordinate orientation to Him. “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” A simple supplication for the necessities of life follows: “Give us this day our daily bread.” This phrase appears to set boundary conditions on what is appropriate to ask of God. There is no mention of fortune or fame here. The crux of the matter comes next: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” We are to seek forgiveness for ourselves, and we must promise to forgive others. And finally, a humble request for guidance and strength: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil;” that is, help us to live lives of goodness, justice, and mercy. The Lord’s Prayer is short and breathtakingly simple. It is a humble plea for strength to live a holier

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life focused on forgiveness, forgiving, and divine guidance. Primary children pray simple prayers like this.

This humble quest to live a holy life, as reflected in the aspirations of The Lord's Prayer, stands in stark contrast to the puffed-up confidence in the arm of flesh we see in our secular world. The militant atheists of our day point a scornful, derisive finger at those who pray, asserting that prayer is a silly, superstitious act, likening prayer to black magic or a sorcerer's spell. In these criticisms, these sanctimonious nay-sayers of prayer unwittingly reveal a key element at the foundation of true prayer. The spells of black magic in literature and legend typically involve a deal with the devil, in which the petitioner agrees to sell his soul in exchange for fortune, power, or fame.

True prayer, in stark contrast, necessarily requires a promise on the part of the petitioner to live a holier life, one that is more full of love and honor, compassion and sacrifice. Rather than selling one's soul as in black magic, true prayer is an effort to perfect it. In this sense, prayer is indeed magical. Perhaps this is the main reason that the Book of Mormon reminds us that the "[evil spirit](#) teacheth not a man to pray, but teacheth him that he must not pray" (2 Nephi 32:8). The adversary seeks to prevent the soul-perfecting magic of prayer from happening.

So what does it mean for a prayer to be answered? There are, of course, many responses to this thought-provoking question. There is no doubt that many petitionary prayers are answered as we hope. The God we worship is a loving God. We sometimes receive, as the Psalmist refers to them, "tender mercies" (Psalms 25:6), and as did the Old Testament's Gideon, "dry fleeces" on the dew-soaked ground (Judges 6:39).

Our God "is a God of miracles" (2 Nephi 27:23). He will sometimes do great works among us, as He did when he delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace (Daniel 3). But many times the hoped-for blessings do not materialize, and the fiery furnace burns on—when the loved one's illness is not cured, the hoped-for job offer does not come, the longed-for pregnancy is not realized. These are the times when answering the question "What does it mean for a prayer to be answered?" takes on special significance. Among the many answers that one could offer, perhaps chief among them is that a prayer is answered when a soul is transformed through prayer.

The prayers we say over our food simply illustrate this assertion. When we say a blessing before our meals, we don't think that something miraculous happens to the food. The miracle is taking place in our hearts. Through a brief prayer over "our daily bread," we acknowledge the bounty of the earth, this life as a gift, that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). When said earnestly, such a prayer changes us a little for the better, reminding us that "man shall not live by bread alone" (Matthew 4:4).

There are countless examples of this transformation via prayer. A prayer is answered when the downtrodden and dejected child of God, through prayer, finds the courage to carry on in the face of daunting challenges, internalizing the hard reality that there "must be opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11). A prayer is answered when the sorrow filled soul, racked with regret over the past, charts a course toward repentance through prayer. A prayer is answered when a Latter-day Saint seeking to live a holier life, to be meek and mild, and to "trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good," (D&C 11:12) finds the resolve through prayer to do so. A prayer is answered when, through prayer, the petitioner comes to understand how they can be an answer to someone else's prayer. Most of all, a prayer is answered when, through prayer, we seek to "give away all my sins to know thee."

True prayer
requires a
promise on the
part of the
petitioner to live
a holier life,...

Let's return now to the Primary children and their beloved song, *A Child's Prayer*:

Heavenly Father, I remember now

Something that Jesus told disciples long ago:

"Suffer the children to come to me."

Father, in prayer I'm coming now to thee.

Pray, he is there;

Speak, he is list'ning.

You are his child;

His love now surrounds you.

He hears your prayer;

He loves the children.

Of such is the kingdom, the kingdom of heav'n.

God's ways are often inscrutable to His creatures, but we can be reassured that He hears our prayers and answers them in ways that always bless us over the long haul. Earnest prayer transforms us. Speak, He is listening.

About the author

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