

Better than Sheep and Goats

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He who mocks the infants' faith
Shall be mocked in age and death;
He who shall teach the child to doubt
The rotting grave shall ne'er get out,
He who respects the infants' faith
Triumphs over hell and death.

—William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence"

THE SAVIOR COUNSELS HIS FOLLOWERS to "[a]sk, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8).

As a young boy I believed in these words with such steadfast sureness that I actually formulated a list of wishes to bring before the Lord. The adversity of life, however, has taken that simple child-like faith and dashed it against the rocky shoals of reality.

Had my religious training been tempered with the hard truths of earthly existence, perhaps my collision with reality would have been less painful and disillusioning. Despite my disenchantment with the simplistic teachings of my youth, my spiritual odyssey has brought me to the conclusion that without prayer we are, as Tennyson wrote in "The Passing of Arthur," no "better than sheep or goats that nourish a blind life within the brain."¹ The arduous journey that ended with the restoration of my hope and faith in prayer may prove helpful to others.

1. Alfred Tennyson, *The Poetical Works of Tennyson* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), 449.

PRAYING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

Aleksander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* depicts a typical day in a Stalinist labor camp. The cast of inmates includes Alyoshka, a devout Baptist. Indeed, Alyoshka's religious conviction is the catalyst that brings about his incarceration. Despite the degrading environment, Alyoshka perseveres in his principles and admonishes his fellow sufferers to pray. The cynical Ivan Denisovich scoffs: "[P]rayers are like petitions—either they don't get through at all, or else its 'complaint rejected.'"²

Alyoshka objects to Ivan's faithless attitude. He accuses Ivan of not praying "long enough or fervently enough . . . Prayer must be persistent. And if you have faith and say to a mountain, 'make way,' it will make way."³ Ivan bluntly replies: "I never saw mountains going anywhere . . . pray as much as you like, but they won't knock anything off your sentence."⁴

Certainly the fetters restraining Alyoshka diminish his effectiveness as an advocate for prayer powerful enough to move mountains. His petitions to the Lord have not freed him from his chains of bondage. In fact, he shares equally the deplorable filth of his non-praying cell mates.

Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of prayer parallels Somerset Maugham's portrait of Philip Carey, who, as the central character in *Of Human Bondage*, prays night after night that his club foot will be made whole. After persistent pleas fail to remove his handicap, young Philip cautiously confirms his understanding of Christ's promise in Matthew with his guardian, who happens also to be a minister: "Supposing you'd asked God to do something . . . and really believed . . . like moving a mountain, I mean, and you had faith, and it didn't happen, what would it mean?"⁵ Philip's uncle, ignorant of the boy's quest for a miracle, replies: "It would just mean that you hadn't got faith."⁶

When my two-year-old son was near death as the result of a horrific accident, I placed my trust in incessant prayer. After administering a priesthood blessing to our baby boy, my bishop informed me that the ordinance he had just performed would bring about my son's recovery if I had the faith. His unintended cruelty, shrouded in piety, amplified to insistence that our child's survival was contingent upon my faith and prayers. Misguided faith in prayer did not end with Philip Carey's uncle

2. Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991), 175.

3. *Ibid.*, 175-76.

4. *Ibid.*

5. W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1915), 60.

6. *Ibid.*

nor is it found exclusively outside the Mormon church.

Upon the death of our son, an all-consuming bitterness exiled even a lingering desire to consult with God. My luminary had been extinguished! Self-respect seemed to dictate the cessation of worship or prayer. But my spiritual emptiness ultimately led me to the scriptures for a better understanding of prayer and the full meaning of the great expectations created by those haunting verses in Matthew.

CONDITIONS UPON PRAYER

The scriptures reveal a plethora of conditions and mitigating factors that circumscribe, qualify, and limit the seemingly boundless promise of “[a]sk, and it shall be given you.” For example:

- * Ask not for what is contrary to God’s will: Helaman 10:5
- * Ask in faith, believing: Mark 11:24; James 1:26; 1 Nephi 15:11; Alma 22:16; D&C 18:18
- * Ask not amiss: James 4:3; 2 Nephi 4:35
- * Ask in the spirit, according to God’s will: D&C 46:30
- * Ask not for what you should not: D&C 8:10
- * Ask for that which is right: 3 Nephi 19:24
The prayer of the righteous is heard: Proverbs 15:29; James 5:16
- * Pray without ceasing: 1 Thessalonians 5:17
- * With thanks let your request be made known: Philippians 4:6
- * God knows what things you need before you ask: Matthew 6:8

If an attorney devised a contract with the broad and vague contingencies enumerated above, a suit for breach of contract would be impossible to litigate successfully because the terms and conditions are too subjective. The very conditions placed upon a successful petition to God are so amorphous that the petitioner can never be certain whether he has fully complied with all the prerequisites.

To me the scriptures present a contractual offer—ask, and you will receive. The stipulations on the fulfillment of the bargain, however, are not found in the main clause, but scattered among other provisions not directly connected with the actual offer.

If God knows what I need before I ask, why bother to knock at heaven’s door? If I cannot proceed with self-assurance that my entreaty possesses enough faith or righteousness to realize my heavenly solicitation, why pray? If God’s will remains paramount, why not allow my future to be dictated by fate and no longer trouble a deaf heaven with my bootless cries?

In an onslaught of confusion, I carefully analyzed the nature of

prayer. I attempted to ascertain why God had ordained this exercise. A glimmer of hope began to battle my doubts, and I came to identify three core attributes of prayer that turned me once again to commune with my maker.

FUNDAMENTAL DESIRE

Following their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, one of Adam and Eve's first actions was to invoke God (Moses 5:5). Implicit in their supplication is an acknowledgment that God exists. He is our creator, the father of our spirits. All children are instilled with an instinctive desire to communicate with their father in heaven.

Devotional prayer has a quality that connects us with our origins. Kneeling before God—acknowledging his role and position in our lives—legitimizes God's ordination of prayer. Communion of this nature need not contain petitions for favor or a change of destiny.

In an address to a delegation of former slaves, Abraham Lincoln summarized the joy of maintaining a relationship with the Lord: "It is difficult to make a man miserable while he feels he is worthy of himself and *claims kindred to the great God who made him.*"⁷

Prayer seems to be the only expression whereby we may claim kindred to the great God. Indeed, without prayer, we are, as Tennyson stated, no "better than sheep or goats."

EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE

Moments arise when the richness and diversity of life are so overwhelming that we intuitively look for someone to whom we can say "thank you" for these incredible gifts. Frequently the only appropriate recipient of our gratitude is God.

Indeed, the scriptures counsel that thanks should be offered to the Lord (Ps. 50:14; Dan. 6:10). Elder Neal A. Maxwell has stated: "Some prayers ought to be prayers of sheer adoration."⁸ Kahill Gibran shared a similar vision of prayers offered in the fullness of joy and abundance.

The most devastating disloyalty can be lack of appreciation. When Caesar recognizes Brutus as one of his assassins, it was the "[i]ngratitude, more strong than traitors arms, quite vanquished him."⁹ Alice Walker,

7. Abraham Lincoln, *Speeches and Writings, 1859-1865* (New York: The Library of America, 1989), 355, emphasis added.

8. Neal A. Maxwell, "What Should We Pray For?" in *Prayer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.), 49.

9. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (London: Octopus Books Limited), "Julius Caesar," Act III, sc. ii.

perhaps with less conventional grace than Shakespeare but with forthright candor, characterizes ingratitude in this manner: "[M]ore than anything else, God loves admiration . . . I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it."¹⁰

The carnival of colors and shimmering shades of existence inspire those rare episodes of sheer wonder. Prayer provides the perfect avenue for heartfelt appreciation and, yes, adoration of the Creator. Imparting such reverence to our maker should be completely void of solicitations.

OBTAINING FORGIVENESS

Inevitably life's journey confronts each of us with the need to repent. Prayer is one of the keys in obtaining forgiveness. While seeking a cleansing from our sins is a petition of sorts, the ritual, in and of itself, of seeking redemption has merit. Hence, the repentant gains benefit whether her petition is granted or not. Acknowledging our wrongs and committing to God an altered course has tremendous therapeutic value.

Too many requests to God are grounded in the material world. Forgiveness, however, belongs exclusively to the spiritual realm. Repentance is a miracle in harmony with God's plan for humanity; therefore, a plea for pardon is dramatically different from a plea for God's intervention in earthly dilemmas.

Daniel DeFoe's *Robinson Crusoe* illustrates the difference between a prayer for physical rescue from human plight and spiritual salvation. Crusoe is stranded on an island. A Bible from the wreckage of Crusoe's vessel washes the gospel of Jesus Christ ashore. Left with limited entertainment options, Crusoe studies the Bible and undergoes a genuine conversion.

His remorse for a past strewn with every conceivable violation of heaven's law sends Crusoe to his knees:

Now I began to construe the words . . . "call on me, and I will deliver you," in a different sense from what I had ever done before; for then I had no notion of anything being called deliverance but my being delivered from the captivity I was in, for though I was indeed at large in the place, yet the island was certainly a prison to me, and that in the worse sense in the world; but now I learned to take it in another sense. Now I looked back upon my past life with such horror, and my sins appeared so dreadful, that my soul sought nothing of God but deliverance from the Lord of guilt that bore down all my comfort. As for my solitary life, it was nothing; I did not so much as pray to be delivered from it or think of it; it was all of no consideration in comparison to this; and I added this part here to hint to whoever shall read it, that

10. Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), 167.

whenever they come to a true sense of things, they will find deliverance from sin a much greater blessing than deliverance from affliction.¹¹

Crusoe, marooned and detached from civilization, does not petition his maker for deliverance from his isolation, but begs instead for absolution. We live in a material world, so it should not be surprising that many seek earthly gifts when praying. But there comes eventually to all spiritually hungry men and women a realization that we last but a short time. Such understanding discourages the expenditure of energy on gratifying appetites and ambitions. When we reach this point, our prayers reflect a change in values by what we now seek—absent are pleas for fulfillment of earthly ambitions and settlement of worldly concerns.

Because Crusoe removes his prayers from earthly concerns, his risk of disappointment significantly dissipates. He has freed himself from the trap of appetite and ambition. Maintaining prayer in a spiritual context is precisely how Alyoshka, the vigilant Baptist in the Stalinist labor camp, responded to his detractors: "The Lord's behest was that we should pray for no earthly or transient thing . . . We must pray for spiritual things, asking God to remove the scum of evil from our hearts."¹²

CONCLUSION

Obviously numerous influences persuade people to pray. When I surrender the concept that God will intervene in the course of human events to grant me a favor or so that I avoid disharmony or interruption, an entirely new spiritual vista opens.

God will not meddle in the natural ebb and flow of life's challenges simply to provide a reprieve from the basic nature of existence—struggle and growth—because a prayer was uttered. Life is difficult. We are all every day trying to find our way out of one kind of trouble or another. The alleviation of day-to-day difficulties by prayer would foil the eternal learning process.

Supplication to God may not rearrange our physical circumstances in the material world, but prayer can bolster our spirits and provide the vehicle whereby we commune with God, offer thanks, pay our devotions, and find the joy of forgiveness.

11. Daniel DeFoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: The New American Library, 1961), 98.

12. Solzhenitsyn, 176.