

PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

Boyd Jay Petersen

The scriptures often admonish us to pray continuously. Note that I said “continuously,” not “continually.” “Continually” means repeated with interruptions, but “continuously” means without interruptions. Paul tells the saints in Thessalonica to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes. 5:17); in the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord reminds missionaries to continue “praying always” (D&C 75:11); “Pray always,” states Nephi (2 Ne. 32:9); echoing Paul’s words, Alma calls on his followers to “pray without ceasing” (Mosiah 26:39); and when Jesus asks his followers in the New World to cease praying verbally, he demands that they “not cease to pray in their hearts” (3 Ne. 20:1).

To pray without ceasing is asking a great deal from human brains. We live in an age where we are constantly multitasking—talking on the phone while driving, listening to a podcast while exercising, or cooking dinner, feeding the dog, cleaning up a mess, answering a math homework question, and yelling at the kids in the other room to stop fighting all at the same time. However, what we call multitasking should really be called “task switching.” Our brains are, in fact, capable of thinking about only one thing at a time, so when performing two tasks at once our brains are really just switching between tasks at a really fast pace. Unfortunately, when switching between tasks, despite how fast it occurs, the brain must pause in between, so it is really less productive than when focusing on one task at a time.

So how can we pray unceasingly when our brains are incapable of focusing on two things at once? We can’t ignore the other tasks in our lives to focus exclusively on praying. In fact, most of us find it enough

of a challenge to get in three or four prayers per day with all of the other things we have to focus on.

While the brain can only think about one thing at a time, it is designed to handle multitasking quite well when actions or activities become so familiar to be habitual. Humans are able to carry out simultaneous complex tasks by practicing behaviors until they achieve a degree of what cognitive scientists call “automaticity,” where individual practices require less attention, allowing for the bundling of more tasks. That’s why children who are learning to walk must focus exclusively on the task, but adults pretty much have that task down and can do other things while walking. A friend of mine who is a music professor at Brigham Young University-Idaho studied how students learn new music skills. She found that when they were told to focus on one task, they were able to significantly improve that task. But when another task was also introduced, both tasks got worse. However, when musicians have practiced a technique for a significant amount of time and have achieved a high degree of automaticity in their technique, they can perform without really thinking about it.

Perhaps that is the key: we must practice enough to have prayer become an automatic process. But how do we do that? I certainly have not mastered this skill.

It may be significant that when the scriptures speak of praying unceasingly, they often also mention giving thanks unceasingly: Alma tells his followers that they are “commanded of God to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all things” (Mosiah 26:39). Paul states, “Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks” (1 Thes. 5:16–18). Interestingly, these two acts—praying and thanking—may be related. The word “think” is etymologically and phonetically related to the word “thank” and goes back to the Old English word *thanc*, which refers to a grateful thought or the expression of such a thought. In an essay titled “What Is Called Thinking?,” the philosopher Martin Heidegger notes this philological connection between the two

words and asks, “Is thinking a giving of thanks? Or do thanks consist in thinking?”¹ He responds, “In giving thanks, the heart gives thought to what it has and what it is.”² Heidegger then asks, “The supreme thanks would be thinking? And the profoundest thanklessness, thoughtlessness? . . . As we give thought to what is most thought-provoking we give thanks.”³

I find it significant that when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery came out of the water after baptizing each other, they were blessed, not with a surge of poignant emotion and heartfelt tears but with an outpouring of knowledge. “Our minds being now enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we never could attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of” (JS-H 1:74). Joseph Smith also defined the gift of the Holy Ghost as a gift of knowledge: “This first Comforter or Holy Ghost has no other effect than pure intelligence. It is more powerful in expanding the mind, enlightening the understanding, and storing intellect with present knowledge.” And Joseph defined revelation as “when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you,” adding that “it may give you sudden strokes of ideas.”⁴

In sum, I believe, thinking itself *may* be a perfect prayer and simultaneous act of thanksgiving. But thinking of what? If we are here to become like our Heavenly Parents, we should be cultivating divine

1. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, translated by Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 139.

2. Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 141.

3. Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 143.

4. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church*, 3:381; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on June 27, 1839, in Commerce, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards.

attributes and divine thoughts. One of the things Joseph Smith stated that has resonated most deeply with me is this:

The things of God are of deep import, and time and experience and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O Man, if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost Heavens, and search into and contemplate the lowest considerations of the darkest abyss, and expand upon the broad considerations of eternal expanse; he must commune with God. How much more dignified and noble are the thoughts of God, than the vain imaginations of the human heart, none but fools will trifle with the souls of men.⁵

I have the opportunity to teach college students, and I certainly would not suggest that I have continuously felt my mind enlarged in the ways Joseph Smith spoke of, but I have had sublime moments where I have felt a kind of surging power as students and I discover new knowledge. It feels like our entire classroom is charged with a kind of electric current. Even in “secular” matters, like Friday afternoon in my British Lit class where we were discussing the differences between classicism and Romanticism, that power has been present. When it does, it gives me joy, and I gain a feeling of abiding thanks for having been in that moment.

I also feel thoughtful praise when outdoors in the beauty of God’s creations. The silent prayer I utter in those moments is often beyond words. I had the opportunity to spend time during the holidays in the Portland, Oregon area, and while walking on trails from waterfall to waterfall or while standing on the beach observing the Pacific Ocean my heart rejoiced in the glory of God’s handiwork.

But there are also types of knowledge that can be harrowing and painful. This past year and a half, my life was pretty much ripped

5. Letter to the Church and Edward Partridge, Mar. 20, 1839, Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-the-church-and-edward-partridge-20-march-1839/12>.

apart as I went through a painful, though amicable, divorce. I have experienced the pain of losing both my parents, but going through this experience was much more excruciating. I would not wish this horror on anyone. During this time, my prayers have consisted mostly of short but constant supplications of “Please, God, please!” Not all of my prayers have been answered. I have always suffered from depression, and when it’s at its worst, I often feel the heavens are closed. But remember Joseph’s cry in Liberty Jail—“O God, where art thou?”—and the Lord’s response, “All these things shall give thee experience.”⁶ I can say that these events have given me new knowledge, new understanding, and new empathy for others. And many of my prayers have been answered, often in miraculous, if sometimes strange, ways.

However, not all thinking is created equal; not all thinking could be considered an unceasing prayer. The Doctrine and Covenants, for example, commands us to avoid light-mindedness (D&C 88:121). This has always bothered me because I firmly believe laughter is a gift from the divine. I have experienced God’s love in moments of laughter with friends and family. I have seen God’s face in the joy on a child’s face. I have felt God’s approval when I’ve brought a smile to someone else’s face.

Hugh Nibley once defined light-mindedness in a way that makes great sense to me: “What is light-minded is kitsch, delight in shallow trivia, and the viewing of serious or tragic events with complacency or indifference. It is light-minded, as Brigham Young often observed, to take seriously and devote one’s interest to modes, styles, fads, and manners of speech and deportment that are passing and trivial, without solid worth or intellectual appeal.”⁷ I deeply believe that laughter is a prayer of gratitude to God, but unworthy, trivial, or mean-spirited indifference are what the scriptures are warning about.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 121:1; 122:7.

7. Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 553.

In sum, I believe thinking itself can be a prayer. I also believe that God desires to expand both our minds and our souls. If we seek Christ, we will find ourselves stretched to the very limits. And as we think—as we actively engage our minds in productive, creative, joyous, and solemn thought—we will be offering a prayer of gratitude to our God.

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