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# Spiritual Progress Through Prayer

A SERIES OF EIGHT MASTERFUL LESSONS  
FOR YOUR GROWTH THROUGH EFFECTIVE PRAYER



## LESSON TWO

Mayan Revelation Number 304

### Overcoming Hindrances To Effective Prayer

IN THIS LESSON:

THERE ARE MANY PATHS  
OF PRAYER

COORDINATE DESIRES  
AND REQUESTS

PUSH ASIDE DISTRACTIONS

IF PRAYER SEEMS FUTILE, PERSEVERE

REPLACE MISTRUST  
WITH CONFIDENCE

PREPARE THE WAY FOR  
GOD'S ANSWER

## BELOVED PERFECTOR:

THIS is your second Lesson in the Series "Spiritual Progress Through Prayer". It will help you to realize that the hindrances to communion with God are not difficulties that you alone face. They are universal. There were times when even the saints felt that they were not speaking to God, but to empty space. We all have days when we attempt to pray, but find our thoughts wandering to business or household affairs. You are not the only one who experiences bewilderment and discouragement when there is no indication that your requests will be granted.

No single Lesson can answer all the questions that arise when we feel our prayers are ineffectual. In this Lesson we deal with only the most common handicaps to vital prayer:

- distractions
- doubt
- a variance between our petitions and the secret longings of our hearts
- the temptation to stop praying when no answer seems to come
- failure to so live that we prepare the way for God to answer our prayers

These are some of the pitfalls everyone has encountered when trying to find the way into God's presence. There are ways, however, in which such pitfalls can be surmounted. Let us consider them.

Approach this Lesson with an eager desire to discover the attitudes and the techniques that have enabled men and women of spiritual stature to overcome handicaps to prayer. You, as they, can master these handicaps and have a real encounter with the Almighty. You can understand God's plan for your life and can gain the wisdom and the strength to carry on valiantly, even through periods of hardship, doubt, or disappointment. Join in our prayer:

PRAYER

Dear Father, we thank Thee for the promise that we can find renewed power through prayer. Help us to focus our thoughts upon Thy great love and generosity and not to be distracted when we are seeking Thee. Wipe from our minds every unworthy or selfish desire. Take the blinders of self-interest from our eyes so we may clearly see Thy plans for our days. Take

away the weight of discouragement, that we may arise from prayer and climb to new heights of daily living. Amen.



### THERE ARE MANY PATHS OF PRAYER

A few souls are so sensitive to God's Presence that whenever they seek the Almighty He becomes as real to them as a friend sitting in the same room. But most men and women are not so fortunate. They frequently join in hymns of praise to God without experiencing any sense of His nearness. They sincerely try to obey His laws, but never are conscious of close fellowship with Him.

Is prayer useless for such people? Certainly not! The results of worship are profound, although not easily measured.

There are many ways of praying. In his darkest hour Job uttered a cry for help: "Oh that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to his seat" (Job 23:3). In an hour of grief you may be too confused to form a coherent prayer; then, as Job, turn to God, and even if He seems far away do not cease to search for His Presence and His power.

Francis of Assisi found renewed strength just from whispering: "My God", or exclaiming, "Praise be to God for His wonderful goodness." When you are weary do not neglect the time you have set aside for regular prayer. You, as St. Francis, can lose your fatigue or confusion by repeating the word "Father" and concentrating upon God's watchful care. Both mind and body will become more relaxed when you affirm: "God will take care of me."

Augustine prayed in poetic language: "O Lord our God, under the shadow of Thy wings let us hope. Thou wilt support us, both when little, and even to gray hairs. When our strength is of Thee, it is strength; but, when it is our own, it is feebleness. We return unto Thee, O Lord, that from their weariness our souls may rise towards Thee, leaning on the things which Thou hast created, for with Thee is refreshment and true strength."

The satisfaction that can be found in simple petition and praise should not cause us to belittle the value of more eloquent prayer. The man who is gifted in the use of words naturally will want to use this talent as he speaks to God. The astronomer's knowledge of the laws that govern the constellations will shape his thinking as he approaches the Creator. The fisherman's dependence upon the wind and sea will color his expressions of thanksgiving as well as his petitions. The mother's concern for her child will be reflected in her prayers.

Richard Jefferies, a man who was keenly sensitive to God's witness in nature, wrote: "Through every grassblade in a thousand, thousand grasses; through the million leaves, veined and edge-cut on bush and tree; through the song-notes

and the marked feathers of the birds; through the insects' hum, and the colour of the butterflies; through the soft warm air, the flecks of clouds dissolving - I use them all for prayer."

Jefferies was not posing, nor trying to impress either God or his fellowmen by this statement. It was a sincere expression of a deep feeling.

This is what you and I want our prayers to be. God listens and responds whenever we come to Him, each in his own way. A humble man prayed: "Thank you, Father, for loving me even when I do not deserve it. Forgive me, Lord, for the mistakes I have made. Guide me throughout each hour of this day that I may do what is right. Amen."

At times our prayers may be as simple as this. Lack of fluency need never be a hindrance to effective prayer. When you feel at a loss for words, just approach God in true humility, and as you acknowledge His all-sufficient Power ask for the wisdom and the support He alone can give. Honestly place all you have and all you are into His keeping and you will receive the benefits that come from prayer.

Remember that there are many paths to prayer. The mystic may pray: "O Lord, I fling myself with all my weakness and misery into Thy ever-open arms." The scientist may draw near to his Maker by contemplating the regularity of the tides or the tremendous power within the atom. The farmer can feel his partnership with God as he gives thanks for the rain and for the fertility of the soil, and as he asks for strength to plow and to plant and to harvest.

Any effort to substitute for your own prayer the exact expression that proved effective for someone of another mind or temperament will make it difficult for you to feel that God is near. You should choose the path to prayer which is most natural for you. Why should you try to force your thoughts into words and phrases that are artificial?

It is not necessary to be eloquent in your plea to God. Talk to Him quite naturally. Be absolutely sincere, and avoid all pretense. Before you lies an open way into His Presence.



### PUSH ASIDE DISTRACTIONS

**D**ISTRACTIONS are great handicaps to effective prayer. Many of these come from without. You start to pray and there is a knock on the door, the phone rings, or the baby cries.

You may live in an environment in which you can seldom set aside even ten minutes for uninterrupted prayer unless you firmly believe that it is essential for your well-being. So find a place and a time every day when you can be quiet and alone with God. This may require intelligent planning and rigid

discipline, but it is well worth the effort. Tensions will be eased, your thinking will be clarified, and your power will be increased when you have sought and found the guidance and the strength that comes from communion with the Divine.

Distractions that press from within can shatter the mood for prayer just as quickly as those that come from without. So whether you are entering a church to pray, or kneeling by your bed, or putting your head upon your office desk for a moment of silent prayer, don't let your imagination lead you astray. If you were keeping a date with the President of the United States you would be thinking of him. You would be thinking of what you wished to say to him and would not allow your thoughts to wander to duties you had to perform later, and you would not be recalling words of criticism that were made of you yesterday. When you have made a date with God, accord Him the same attention you would give a man or woman of high esteem to whom you were coming to ask a favor.

Clarify your desire for prayer. Become absorbed in what you wish to say to God, and then be alert for His response. It is necessary to guard against drowsiness, as well as against wandering thoughts. Teresa of Avilla used to chide her associates for acting like "pussy cats", for purring over their prayers. When you are weary you will need to make an extra effort not to become lethargic as you pray.

Keep mentally alert and spiritually sensitive to the voice of God if you would receive full value for the time spent in prayer. Avoid distractions from without and every thought that would prevent you from having close communion with your Maker. If necessary, sing a hymn or repeat a formal prayer to foster a mood for talking with God and for listening to Him. Or contemplate the wonder of His world and the extent of His power. Quiet your busy mind by listening to music, or listing God's gifts to you. Thank Him for His generosity and love. Then you should be in a frame of mind to sincerely ask and receive whatever you need to enable you to live triumphantly.



#### REPLACE MISTRUST WITH CONFIDENCE

**M**ISTRUST erects a barrier between the seeker and God. It prevents him from receiving the guidance and the strength he so desperately needs.

We read in the Gospels that miraculous healings came to those who had faith. When blind men came to Jesus crying, "Thou son of David have mercy upon us," the Master asked them, "Believe ye that I am able to do this?" Then Jesus touched their eyes and said, "'According to your faith be it unto you' And their eyes were opened." (Matthew 9:27-30) Earlier in the same Chapter (verses 20-22) we read that when a woman with a wasting illness that had plagued her for twelve years came behind Jesus and "touched the hem of his garment", he healed her. "For she said within herself, 'If I may but touch his garment, I shall be whole.'"

"But Jesus turned him about and when he saw her he said, 'Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole.'"

The Master assures us that all things are possible when we believe. He

says that we will be able to receive whatever we need when our lives are grounded in faith.

But doubt creates so great a handicap that your longings are frustrated and your requests for strength and healing cannot be fulfilled. You will recall that the Bible tells us that in His own country Jesus "did not many works because of their unbelief" (Matthew 13:58). And that when the disciples were troubled because they could not heal the man who was beside himself, and they asked the Master why they were powerless, Jesus said it was because of their unbelief (See Matthew 17:14-20).

Prayer is futile without hope and trust. So whenever doubts threaten to disturb your prayers, replace them with complete confidence in God's goodness. If you will live in harmony with God's laws you can trust Him to provide for your needs. He may change the circumstances that threaten destruction to your health and happiness, or He may supply you with sufficient power to overcome them. Your mind will be free of tension if you accept the truth that when trials come you are not beyond the range of God's love and guidance. When your life is broken, He knows how to repair it, so every time you feel bewildered or lost, turn to your Heavenly Father and He will give you security and direction for the days ahead.

Every morning affirm your belief in God's goodness. Have complete confidence that He will provide for all your needs. You may ask for physical strength, and be given spiritual strength instead. You may ask for wealth, and be given the wisdom to use well the resources that you have. You may ask for greater influence, and be shown how to find satisfaction in humble service. God may answer your petitions in unexpected ways, often showering you with greater gifts than those for which you asked.

Approach God in childlike trust. Lay aside misgivings and fears of the future, for those serve as a hindrance to effective prayer. Rely upon God, not upon yourself. This attitude will open your mind and heart to receive the miraculous healing, the burst of new vigor, or the peace that God is waiting to bestow upon you.



#### COORDINATE DESIRES AND REQUESTS

STRANGE as it may seem, we often petition God to grant us what is out of keeping with our sincere desires. A mother prayed that God would lead her son into Christian service; but when the boy volunteered to go to Malaya as a missionary she was disturbed instead of pleased. A business man prayed that God would quiet the tensions within his city, but he had no wish to do anything to bring justice to the group that was being treated unjustly. A mother prayed that God would keep her children from evil ways, but she didn't want to give up any of the personal practices which daily gave them an example of self-indulgence and of clever ways in which to cover up deceit.

God knows your deepest feelings. If the words from your lips, or the thoughts of your unspoken petition to your heavenly Father, do not voice your true

desire, how can God answer your prayer?

The key to prayer is in Jesus' words: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7)

When we are beginners in the school of prayer, we may be quite self-centered, asking chiefly for those things that will ease our lives and give us material satisfaction. We may pluck the words - "ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" - from Jesus' promise, and may even close our prayers with "In Jesus' name", and expect our selfish requests to be granted.

But, as we advance, we learn the meaning of the condition of His promise: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you." As we abide in Him we experience an overwhelming longing to let God's will be our will. Our desires are no longer self-centered and we sincerely pray, "If it be Thy will". Desiring only what is God's will for our good, our requests are His desires for us and are granted. This - the willing submergence of self into the longing for His good to be demonstrated in us - is the "magic" of prayer.



#### IF PRAYER SEEMS FUTILE, PERSEVERE

THERE is a human tendency to pray in the manner to which we have become accustomed, and to let our words or thoughts fall into familiar patterns. When these become somewhat mechanical they fail to lift our beings into a mood of complete love of God and absolute confidence in Him. We often pray half-heartedly, yet hope God will give a quick answer to our petitions. It is hard for us to realize that some delay in granting our requests may help to bring us greater good than we ask or imagine.

A quick answer to all our prayers might contribute to false pride in our own power, instead of gratitude to our Maker and Redeemer. We need to be patient and to pray more diligently throughout the dark periods when we see no tangible reward for our efforts.

Continue to praise God, even when your way seems difficult. Thank Him for His goodness, even when the answer to your request has been delayed. Continue to trust Him and to enter into His Presence with great reverence and with high expectation, even when you fail to understand why you have not received a clear answer to your petitions.

It is futile to expect that when we pray we will always have our burdens lifted immediately. We beg for health, for guidance, or for peace of mind, and do at times rise from our knees feeling strong and renewed, knowing that we can go forward supported by the Everlasting Arms. But there are other times when moments spent in prayer do not dispel the gloom, or confusion, or sense of inadequacy that hangs over us.

This has been a universal experience. Again and again the Psalmist sang



of his confidence in God's love and protection. But he also prayed when his soul was tortured,

"O Jehovah, the God of my salvation,  
I have cried day and night before thee.  
Let my prayer enter into thy presence;  
Incline thine ear unto my cry.  
For my soul is full of troubles....  
Unto thee, O Jehovah, have I cried;  
And in the morning shall my prayer come before thee.  
Jehovah, why castest thou off my soul?  
Why hidest thou thy face from me?"

-- (Psalm 88:1-3; 13, 14).

In this Psalm David voices the torture he experienced when he called upon Jehovah but heard no answer. Read Augustine's *CONFESSIONS*, or Albert E. Day's *AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF PRAYER*, or listen to the testimony of any devout man or woman who for years has faithfully kept times of communion with God and you will learn that all have experienced times of "dryness", or periods when God seemed far away.

Turn again to the eighty-eighth Psalm, or to the fifth Psalm and you will see not only the anguish of the author, but his determination to continue to regularly seek God's presence. He made it a practice to "keep watch" in the morning, not skipping the time of prayer because he did not feel in the right mood.

You will experience spiritual growth through prayer if you will resolutely determine to daily seek God with your whole heart, whether you feel He is close by, or beyond the range of your vision. Perseverance is essential. Don't give up when you are weary. Don't conclude that prayer is futile because you hear no answer. Don't close the door to God's Presence because a cloud of gloom hangs over you.

Persist in praying regularly. Let no difficulties deter you. Keep your appointed time. Push aside weariness and impatience, and complaining. Give thanks that God has satisfied your hunger for food and your thirst for drink, and that He will satisfy your longing for His love and power.

Affirm your belief in God's goodness. Declare that He will guide and support you. Trust that you can pray your way through the darkness and emerge on the path which is bright because it is lighted with God's wisdom and love.

When prayer appears to be futile, persevere. If your mind is tempted to wander, read from the Bible, or from your favorite book of devotions. Then fix your thoughts upon the greatness of God. Dwell first upon His limitless power and then upon His father-like love. Talk to Him quite naturally. (He knows your needs and your secret longings.) Conclude your prayer by saying,

"Dear Lord, make me willing to accept what cannot be changed.  
Keep me patient when I cannot understand delays. Fill my  
life with absolute trust in Thy love. Let Thy spirit be seen  
in me. Amen."

### PREPARE THE WAY FOR GOD'S ANSWER

A group of influential business men in Dayton, Ohio were meeting to plan a fund raising campaign for a Boy Scout recreation area. They asked one of their number to close the session with a prayer. He hesitated, saying: "Every time I pray for a worthy project in the community I find I am appointed chairman of the committee to bring about its fulfillment."

This man had discovered that when he left the time of prayer he was caught up into active endeavor to fulfill the requests which he had made. He cooperated with God to secure the benefits for which he prayed.

If, through laziness or lack of confidence in our ability, we arise from the time of prayer without any willingness to put forth an effort to prepare the way for God to answer our prayers, we delay or block the fulfillment of the requests we have made. Trust God to fulfill your sincere desires, but begin now to do all you can to set the stage for victory in whatever area you are seeking Divine help.

On the day you pray for restored health, consistently follow the doctor's orders throughout every hour. Whenever you pray for increased strength, be sure that you take adequate food, exercise, and rest. When you pray for God's guidance in a new venture, study well every aspect of the problems you will be facing. Follow the advice of Fenelon: "Accustom yourself gradually to carry prayer into all your daily occupations. Speak, move, work in peace, as if you were in prayer."

Whenever you do this you find that more and more of your prayers are answered. You also begin to realize that during the times when you are devoting your entire attention to communion with God, His Presence becomes very real to you. Listen to God's whispers while you are busy at work or recreation, and you will hear Him speak more clearly when you seek Him in the silence. Let all your efforts help to promote the things for which you have prayed. This is a corollary of sincere prayer.

Effective prayer is not easy. It requires effort to shut out sounds and thoughts that are diverting, and to tune in on the Divine wave length. It calls for persistence when disappointments come, and when faith seems insufficient. It costs something to set aside definite periods for sustained prayer, and to patiently strive day after day to live as you pray. But the rewards are beyond all measure! Resolve now to make a consistent effort to overcome every hindrance to effective prayer.



### AFFIRMATION

I know God listens when I pray. With determination I will dispel doubts and wandering thoughts from my mind. With confidence in God's support I will daily strive to accomplish the goals for which I pray.

Blessings,

Your Instructor.