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Spiritual Progress Through Prayer

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



LESSON FOUR

Mayan Revelation Number 306

Personal Growth Through Prayer

IN THIS LESSON:

CENTER YOUR THOUGHTS UPON GOD

BECOME MORE HUMBLE
AND MORE GRATEFUL

ACCEPT THE FLOW OF
DIVINE POWER

ESTABLISH A DEFINITE
PRAYER PATTERN

YOUR PERSONALITY
CAN BE TRANSFORMED

BELOVED PERFECTOR:

WE now approach the fourth Lesson in the current Series on Prayer. It deals with attitudes and practices you will want to strengthen or establish in your prayer life.

A plant shrivels and dies unless it is exposed to the sun's rays. It cannot develop without water and nutriments. In a similar manner, the soul is dependent upon God for sustenance and growth; and prayer is the channel by which His transforming power can enter your life and mine.

We live in an age when materialism threatens to blind us to eternal values. It is not that the majority of people deny God; it is rather that their awareness of His presence is dim. Their religion is not vital enough to direct their lives and to sustain them day by day.

We are dazzled by the achievements of science. We are proud that man can soar into space. Yet, we are fearful of the destruction that could be wrought by nuclear fission. We all are victims of a haunting doubt that man is able to control the instruments of doom which he has created.

Even while we brag about the advances that have been made in the twentieth century, we are disheartened by the increase in the divorce rate, the number of broken homes, the terror of juvenile delinquency and the millions of people who are dependent upon stimulants or sedatives. Every year more and more people find it necessary to seek psychiatric care.

We know that men and women and youth become aimless, or insecure, or dissolute when they believe that their lives count for nothing. Pessimism, discouragement, and fear are like quicksand which can suck one into the depths.

This can happen only when we lose contact with the one who made us in His own image. We do not become caught in the grip of fatalism when we take time each day to seek God's presence in prayer. We do not try to escape from our problems when we are confident that we can meet and solve them with God's help. Even when we come face to face with critical illness and death, we do not become despondent when we are confident that we can tap the limitless spiritual power available to us.

Some day you may find yourself confronted by a wall of trouble, or pain, or grief. In that hour will you be able not only to stand firm, but to find a way out of your dilemma and to go forward triumphantly?

You WILL do so if you are not merely a beginner in prayer. You WILL do so if you have learned how to claim the strength which is promised to all those who "wait upon the Lord". This waiting takes time, and concentration upon God's message for you. It requires a willingness to listen to His voice and to follow where

He leads. Growth in personal poise and power comes when you enforce strict self-discipline and then trustingly open your life to the warmth of God's love.

Approach this Lesson by asking the Father to give you an alert mind and an eager heart. Seek to gain new insight into the ways of effective Prayer.



PRAYER

Dear God, how much I need to learn about the power of prayer! Too often I have prayed only with my lips and not with my heart. At other times I have attempted to bend Thy Will to my selfish way, instead of striving to shape my desires to fit Thy divine plans. Sometimes my prayers have been formal. Sometimes they have been hasty. And sometimes I have fallen asleep while offering my prayers.

Teach me, Father, how to seek Thee in spirit and in truth. Reveal to me Thy Presence, Thy Wisdom, and Thy Love. Help me to steadily grow in understanding and in spiritual power.

-- Amen



CENTER YOUR THOUGHTS UPON GOD

*W*E achieve personal growth through prayer when we meet certain conditions that draw us into God's Presence and make us capable of understanding divine Truth. Jesus outlines these conditions for us. Men like Paul, Francis of Assissi, E. Stanley Jones, and countless others, have demonstrated in their lives that amazing power does come to those who steadily pray as Christ taught His disciples to pray.

The first step is to turn our attention to God, to praise Him and to thank Him for His wonderful goodness to us and to all men. Petitions for those things we need, both material and spiritual, form a normal part of prayer. But it is a mistake to hold our personal desires so close to our eyes that they block our vision of God. Prayer at its highest begins with adoration of the One who made us and sustains us.

The Psalmist declared: "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty."

-- (Psalm 91:1).

How desperately men and women of the twentieth century need to discover a way into the Presence of God! Strong walls may protect us from cold winds and air conditioning can keep out the summer's heat, but we long for a refuge from the feverish business world, or from the social demands that press upon us. We, as the Psalmist, need the security God offers to all who seek Him in spirit and in Truth.

We may fail to find God because we doubt His personal concern. Let us call out for His help, even in fumbling fashion, and new opportunities emerge before us. Our eyes are opened so we can see a way that was obscured. Timidity vanishes when we realize that we are not working alone!

Consider the case of Franz Werfel, the talented Austrian who gave us so many thought-provoking plays and novels. Werfel had won a measure of success in Central Europe. Then the Nazi persecution forced him to flee for his life. He escaped from one dangerous situation to another, finally arriving at the well known shrine at Lourdes. Werfel had been sceptical of the existence of God. But faced by imminent death, he flung himself on his knees. He said that "on the slimmest chance that God might be real" he asked the Almighty to protect him and his wife. He promised that if his life was spared he would write the story of the shrine.

Franz Werfel confided to Fulton Oursler that after his earnest prayer he experienced a peace of mind such as he had never known before. We know that when he reached the United States he wrote the best seller, "The Song of Bernadette". Through prayer, Werfel had found not only security but a challenge. Through prayer, (an impulsive plea to a God he only half believed in) a fugitive found his way to "the shadow of the Almighty". Werfel told his friends: "In my sorry plight I came to know God and since that day I have never lost my feeling that the Divine Presence is always with me."

You don't need to wait until you are in a desperate situation before you seek the security God offers to each of His children. No doubt, as an advanced student of Mayanry, you have, on many occasions, clearly felt the Presence of God, very near and very real. But your aim is to continue to grow spiritually until you feel the Divine Spirit is always working with you and in you.

Whenever you begin to pray, think of God approaching you and drawing you to Him. Open the door of your life to Him. Respond to your instinctive desire for worship. Begin your prayer with adoration. This will raise your sights and purify your thoughts. Even as you pour out your love to God you will become increasingly aware that your concerns are safe in His hands. While you contemplate His infinite purposes your own desires will be clarified and ennobled.



BECOME MORE HUMBLE AND MORE GRATEFUL

THE transforming of our lives is dependent upon our ability to find true communion with God. Frequently, pride is at the root of our failure to make prayer an experience from which we arise with peace and confidence.

In one form or another, self-love keeps creeping into our thoughts. Only as we open our minds to the white light of eternal Truth - only as we become aware of the greatness of God and His limitless wisdom and love do we clearly see our own imperfections and shortcomings. Then we become humble indeed!

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican dramatizes the danger of

self-righteousness (see Luke 18:9-1). One who is religious and upright must be cautious lest he allow his virtues to become a screen that separates him from God. How can we see God when we are obsessed with ourselves? How can we grow spiritually when we are satisfied with what we have done? Let us be very grateful for the religious heritage that is ours and in true humility bow before the Giver of every good gift.

Harbor no secret pride in your possessions, or in your intellect, or in your virtues. Turn to God as your Teacher. Follow Him as your Leader. Honor Him as your Father.

A desert prophet told his followers: "The love of praise is like an onion: When you peel off the outer skin you find another underneath. And as you strip that off, you find another. Beneath each sheath of self-regard and gain-glory, you discover one of a slightly different color. It is impossible to wipe out pride once and for all. It must be put to death daily."

When you meet with success, give God the credit. When you are dogged by disappointments, slights, and reproofs, don't cringe and hide. You may be weak, but God is offering His limitless support. Lean upon His Arm, and conduct yourself in such a way that you know you have His approval. Accept both praise and censure in a spirit of meekness combined with dignity. Humility is one of the stepping stones on the path to spiritual heights.

Thanksgiving is closely associated with the humble heart. If we approach God without an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for all He has done for us, we limit our realization of His Presence. We put a stumbling block in the path of our spiritual progress.

We become chained to our moods whenever we try to measure God's goodness by the immediate results of our prayers. We have advanced far enough so we do not expect the Heavenly Father to pour material gifts into our laps every time we ask for them. But frequently we measure the value of prayer by the change in our subjective feelings.

When you are weighted down by disappointments, follow the advice of the gospel hymn:

"Count your many blessings,
Name them, one by one,
And it will surprise you
What the Lord has done."

When you are lonely, thank the Father for His promise that He will never leave you. Even as you voice your gratitude that you can come to God as a child to his parent, you will feel less forlorn. But a word of caution needs to be included here. In an earlier Lesson the importance of perseverance was stressed. Do not become discouraged if a momentary sense of security is followed by another onslaught of bewilderment or loneliness.

Prayer is a climb to God. Thrilling ascents may be followed by plateaus where little progress is evident. During such periods, press on. Read the Bible, study your Lessons, and

pray regularly. Keep praising God for all He has done for you and keep expecting further revelations of His Presence, His Peace, and His Power. Your faith and constancy will be richly rewarded.



ESTABLISH A DEFINITE PRAYER PATTERN

YOU will recall that our last Lesson stressed the value of regular prayer habits. We saw the danger of limiting our periods of prayer to moments when we feel a spontaneous urge to commune with God. While recognizing that FLASH PRAYERS should be a part of the religious life of every seeker for Truth, we are aware that spiritual maturity comes only to those who make the effort to establish and maintain regular prayer practices.

You have, I presume, selected a definite time - or times - when you will seek God's Presence. You have chosen a "secret place", and made a daily appointment to meet the Father there. You keep your Bible, devotional books, and study materials close by. When you enter into this spot at the time you have set aside for prayer, you come with reverence and with expectancy.

It is your high hope that during these periods set aside for spiritual searching you will find guidance so you can better grapple with the problems which are before you. Here you will gain peace of mind when you are distraught and strength when you are weary. Regular periods of prayer also provide an ideal opportunity for personal growth. Spiritual development is more rapid when one intelligently formulates a definite prayer pattern and then follows it day after day.

We are all well aware of the tendency of the mind to wander. We recall days when our prayers were futile because we clung so closely to our busyness that we never made contact with the Divine. Routines established when we are at our best, if followed day after day, can carry us through periods of special stress, or of unusual fatigue.

You may have already established a devotional pattern that has guided you well through the years. If so there is no reason to change it; but you may wish to adopt, or to adapt, the following procedure:

First. BE STILL. Grow quiet and relaxed as you turn toward God. Repeat a Bible verse like "Be still and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10). Or say, "In quietness and confidence shall be your strength." (Isaiah 30:15). Or think of the words of the beautiful hymn by John Greenleaf Whittier:

"Drop Thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease.
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace."

Sometimes it is possible to quiet our minds by listening to soft music; or by thinking of a secluded garden spot, or of a friend whose presence brings us

comfort, or of the Master who promised, "Lo, I am with you always." (Matthew 28:20). Often responsibilities or worries chase at our heels until we shake them by forcibly turning our thinking into other channels. One of the best ways to do this is to repeat, either silently or aloud, some verse, or prayer which helps us to shut out worldly concerns and to open the door to God's Presence. This "centering down", as the Quakers call it, is an important part of our devotional life.

Second. READ or STUDY. Even when the period you have set aside for spiritual growth is brief, it is important that you use part of it for study. Some insight is intuitive. Far more comes through drinking in the wisdom of those who have reached spiritual heights.

The Bible is our most valuable source book. Turn to it frequently, seeking not so much to read a whole chapter at one time, as to find some verse that speaks to your need. Build a devotional library of books, pamphlets, and study materials from which you can glean wisdom and comfort. Copy or memorize a thought from one of these and dwell upon it frequently throughout the day.

Third. PRAY. Begin, as was mentioned earlier, with adoration and praise. Turn your full attention toward God. Become aware of His Presence. Just the realization that He is with you will lighten your burden and bring you some degree of peace, while thanksgiving will shrink your grievances.

Pray that God's spirit of love may fill the minds of all men and direct the destiny of the world. Remember that each generation should have a part in exalting His Truth. If you and I fail to make what we say and do line up with our requests to God, then our praying is a mockery. We must put our minds and our hands to the tasks that will play some small part in ushering in a better world.

Pray: "Thy will be done." Express your willingness to subjugate your desires to God's great purposes. The opportunities before you may seem very limited. Your talents may appear small indeed. But open a child's eyes to the high adventure of giving his life in service, or lift the load of someone whose burden is so heavy that it is breaking his spirit, or heal the wound of one who has been injured by prejudice or misunderstanding. Let God's love shine through your life by all you say and do!

Don't waste time in futile excuses. Seek ways in which you can have a part in the fulfillment of God's will. In the Father's sight no one is useless, so don't plead, "I am too young", or "I am too old". Do not attempt to shirk responsibility by saying, "I am too timid", or "I am too busy". Whenever you pray, "Thy will be done", believe that God's will can be fulfilled, and at the same time be willing to use your talents and bend your efforts to accomplish some holy task.

Of course, you will also want to pray for your personal needs. God is interested in all that concerns you. He wants to supply your daily bread and all your temporal requirements. He is offering you knowledge and strength and peace of mind. It is natural and right that you should ask God to grant anything which is essential for your total well-being. If, however, you have first sincerely prayed, "Thy will be done", your request for health for yourself or a loved one will be modified by saying, "Grant this, Lord, if it seems best to you."

Include in your prayer a petition for forgiveness. This is a universal

need, and of such great importance that our next Lesson will be devoted entirely to this subject.

Pray for strength to resist temptations - not only to stand firm against what we commonly call "sin", but to be delivered from all habits that can hamper your spiritual growth.

Give your day into God's hands. Surrender your problems to Him, acknowledging that His wisdom is sufficient and His Power is beyond all measure. Let your last word be one of praise to the Heavenly Father for His love and care. Undergirded by prayer, go forth in confidence. Trust God and completely surrender your life to Him.

Finally: MEDITATE. After talking to God in prayer, take a brief moment to dwell upon the assurance that you need not tackle your problems alone. Fix deeply in your mind the thought which you would make your Affirmation for the day.

One of the ancient mystics gave this advice to those who were seeking enlightenment: "Each day pick a spiritual bouquet." What he meant was: Choose some lovely or noble thought to add beauty and fragrance to your life, even when you are forced to walk where the world seems barren and ugly.

Pause a moment after your prayer to select the thought you would carry with you. Hold it fast as you approach the responsibilities that are yours.

The above is a pattern of prayer which, if followed faithfully, will foster spiritual growth. When under pressure for time, it may be abbreviated somewhat, yet remain essentially the same. Follow it day after day, or formulate a pattern of your own which is similar to it.



ACCEPT THE FLOW OF DIVINE POWER

DYNAMIC power can enter your life through meaningful prayer and sincere meditation. God supplies a ceaseless flow of energy that you can tap. It is never shut off; but sometimes you may fail to seek the life-giving stream. Roger Babson declared: "The greatest undeveloped resource of our country is Faith. The greatest unused power is Prayer." Claim this power for yourself.

ASK for strength and God will give you sufficient strength to meet the demands upon you today.

SEEK for God's guidance, and you will know which path to take.

KNOCK at the door of His dwelling place, and the Father will invite you in and you will be a guest at His feast, and you will not go away hungry for spiritual sustenance.

It is unfortunate that we sometimes are so weary and confused that we ask for God's help but refuse to accept what is offered. We repeat well learned

prayers, or cry out for help, and then turn away without accepting the guidance and strength that is offered! When we do this we frustrate our own efforts.

Make it a practice to approach prayer in a mood of expectancy. BELIEVE that God will respond to your sincere cry. Let your words of praise and thanksgiving precede your petitions; and before you leave the place of prayer, surrender to God all your desires and all your needs. Remember His promise: "My grace is sufficient for thee." (II Corinthians 12:9).

The word GRACE as used in the Bible refers to God's love and generosity to us, which goes far beyond what we expect or deserve. Our Heavenly Father is constantly showering us with material blessings, but also with the spiritual power that can replenish our inner reserves as fast as they are drained.

Approach God in a regular way and you will learn how to accept more and more of the Divine resources that are available to all those who seek Him in spirit and in Truth.



YOUR PERSONALITY CAN BE TRANSFORMED

LOUIS H. Evans affirmed: "The man who kneels to God can stand up to anything." There is a power to be gained from prayer which can make the coward brave, which can turn the weakling into one who is invincible.

Naturally this cannot be accomplished in a fleeting half hour. The personal growth you can experience through prayer is a slow, steady maturing of your mind and heart.

Paul had an electrifying experience on the Damascus Road, but thousands of prayers had preceded that hour. John Wesley had a heart-warming experience at Aldersgate which transformed the man who was tortured by fears and doubts into a person whose life was characterized by eloquent testimonies and boundless energy. While morning after morning Wesley sought God's Presence, no doubt his mind and heart were being prepared for the climactic experience which released him from indecision and waste of his powers.

Occasionally insight may break through like a flash of lightning. More often it comes as the gradual breaking of day after the night. Faithfully keep the practices of prayer which have been outlined and they will foster your spiritual growth.

Center your thoughts upon God.

Let His greatness make you humble. See His generosity and pour out your praise to Him.

Establish a definite prayer pattern. Discipline your mind and heart to follow this day after day.

When you arise from prayer, do not try to go your own way, and carry the

weight of your own burden. After surrendering your life to God, accept the guidance and the power He offers to you.



AFFIRMATION

Through prayer I can grow up into the person God intends me to be.



Blessings,

Your Instructor.