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Help from on High

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From the Life of Howard W. Hunter

Howard W. Hunter learned to pray when he was a young boy. “My mother had taught me to pray and to thank Heavenly Father for all the things that I enjoyed,” he said. “I often thanked Him for the beauty of the earth and for the wonderful times that I had at the ranch and by the river and with the Scouts. I also learned to ask Him for the things that I wanted or needed. . . . I knew that God loved me and listened to me.”¹

Throughout his life, President Hunter turned to prayer as a source of divine assistance, and he taught others to do the same. For example, when he was serving as a bishop, a man in his ward expressed bitterness toward another man. President Hunter’s counsel reflected his testimony of the help that comes through prayer:

“I said to him, ‘My brother, if you will go home and pray for him every morning and every night, I’ll meet you two weeks from today at this same time and then we will decide what should be done.’”

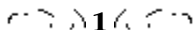
After following this counsel, the man returned and humbly said of the other man, “He needs some help.”

“Are you willing to help him?” President Hunter asked.

“Yes, of course,” the man said.

“All the venom was gone and all the bitterness was gone,” President Hunter later recalled. “This is the way it is when we pray for one another.”²

Teachings of Howard W. Hunter



Our Heavenly Father promises to give us assistance and guidance in times of need.

All of us face times in our lives when we need heavenly help in a special and urgent way. We all have moments when we are overwhelmed by circumstances or confused by the counsel we get from others, and we feel a great need to receive spiritual guidance, a great need to find the right path and do the right thing. In the scriptural preface to this latter-day dispensation, the Lord promised that if we would be humble in such times of need and turn to him for aid, we would “be made strong, and [be] blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time.” (D&C 1:28.) That help is ours if we will but seek it, trust in it, and follow what King Benjamin, in the Book of Mormon, called “the enticings of the Holy Spirit.” (Mosiah 3:19.)

Perhaps no promise in life is more reassuring than that promise of divine assistance and spiritual guidance in times of need. It is a gift freely given from heaven, a gift that we need from our earliest youth through the very latest days of our lives. . . .

In the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have help from on high. “Be of good cheer,” the Lord says, “for I will lead you along.” (D&C 78:18.) “I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy.” (D&C 11:13.)

I testify of the divinity of Jesus Christ. God does live and imparts to us his Spirit. In facing life’s problems and meeting life’s tasks, may we all claim that gift from God, our Father, and find spiritual joy.³



Like Joseph Smith, we can turn to the scriptures and prayer to be taught from on high.

The boy-prophet Joseph Smith . . . sought to know the mind and will of the Lord at a time of confusion and concern in his life. . . . The area near Palmyra, New York, had become a place of “unusual excitement on the subject of religion” during young Joseph’s boyhood years there. Indeed, the entire district appeared to him to be

affected by it, with “great multitudes,” he wrote, uniting themselves to the different religious parties and causing no small “stir and division” among the people [Joseph Smith—History 1:5].

For a boy who had barely turned fourteen, his search for the truth was made even more difficult and confusing because members of the Smith family differed in their religious preferences at the time.

Now, with that familiar background and setting, I invite you to consider these rather remarkable thoughts and feelings from a boy of such a tender age. He wrote:

“During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness; but though my feelings were deep and often poignant, still I kept myself aloof from all these [factions] . . . ; so great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.

“My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. . . .

“In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

“While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

“Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know” [Joseph Smith—History 1:8–12].



We can follow Joseph Smith's example in seeking wisdom from God.

Of course, what happened next changed the course of human history. Determining to “ask of God,” young Joseph retired to a grove near his rural home. There, in answer to his fervent prayer, God, the Eternal Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ visited Joseph and counseled him. That great manifestation, of which I humbly testify, answered many more questions for our dispensation than simply which church young Joseph should or should not join.

But my purpose . . . is not to outline the first moments of the Restoration, though it is one of the most sacred stories in the scriptures. I wish, rather, simply to emphasize the impressive degree of spiritual sensitivity demonstrated by this very young and untutored boy.

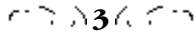
How many of us, at fourteen or any age, could keep our heads steady and our wits calm with so many forces tugging and pulling on us, especially on such an important subject as our eternal salvation? How many of us could withstand the emotional conflict that might come when parents differ in their religious persuasions? How many of us, at fourteen or fifty, would search within our souls and search within holy writ to find answers to what the Apostle Paul called “the deep things of God”? (1 Cor. 2:10.)

How remarkable . . . that this lad would turn profoundly to the scriptures and then to private prayer, perhaps the two greatest

sources of spiritual insight and spiritual impression that are available universally to mankind. Certainly he was torn by differing opinions, but he was determined to do the right thing and determined to find the right way. He believed, as you and I must believe, that he could be taught and blessed from on high, as he was.

But, we may say, Joseph Smith was a very special spirit, and his was a special case. What about the rest of us who may now be older—at least older than fourteen—and have not been destined to open a dispensation of the gospel? We also must make decisions and sort out confusion and cut through a war of words in a whole host of subjects that affect our lives. The world is full of such difficult decisions, and sometimes as we face them, we may feel our age or our infirmities.

Sometimes we may feel that our spiritual edge has grown dull. On some very trying days, we may even feel that God has forgotten us, has left us alone in our confusion and concern. But that feeling is no more justified for the older ones among us than it is for the younger and less experienced. God knows and loves us all. We are, every one of us, his daughters and his sons, and whatever life's lessons may have brought us, the promise is still true: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.” (James 1:5.)⁴



**Prayer is one way to receive spiritual
knowledge and guidance.**

The learning and wisdom of the earth and all that is temporal comes to us through our physical senses in earthly, temporal ways. We touch, we see, we hear and taste and smell and learn. However, spiritual knowledge, as Paul has said, comes to us in a spiritual way from its spiritual source. Paul continues:

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:14.)

We have found, and know, that the only way to gain spiritual knowledge is to approach our Father in Heaven through the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ. When we do this, and if we are

spiritually prepared, we see things our eyes have not previously seen, and we hear things we may not have previously heard—“the things which God hath prepared,” using Paul’s words. (1 Cor. 2:9.) These things we receive through the Spirit.

We believe, and testify to the world, that communication with our Father in Heaven and direction from the Lord are available today. We testify that God speaks to man as he did in the days of the Savior and in Old Testament times.⁵

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We can pray always, not just in desperate times.

Our modern times seem to suggest that prayerful devotion and reverence for holiness is unreasonable or undesirable, or both. And yet, skeptical “modern” men have need for prayer. Perilous moments, great responsibility, deep anxiety, overwhelming grief—these challenges that shake us out of old complacencies and established routines will bring to the surface our native impulses. If we let them, they will humble us, soften us, and turn us to respectful prayer.

If prayer is only a spasmodic cry at the time of crisis, then it is utterly selfish, and we come to think of God as a repairman or a service agency to help us only in our emergencies. We should remember the Most High day and night—always—not only at times when all other assistance has failed and we desperately need help. If there is any element in human life on which we have a record of miraculous success and inestimable worth to the human soul, it is prayerful, reverential, devout communication with our Heavenly Father.

“Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my meditation,” the Psalmist sang.

“Hearken unto the voice of my cry, my King, and my God: for unto thee will I pray.

“My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.” (Ps. 5:1–3.)

Perhaps what this world needs, as much as anything, is to “look up” as the Psalmist said—to look up in our joys as well as our afflictions, in our abundance as well as in our need. We must continually



“Prayer is the utterance of the soul to God the Father.”

look up and acknowledge God as the giver of every good thing and the source of our salvation. . . .

There are wide areas of our society from which the spirit of prayer and reverence and worship has vanished. Men and women in many circles are clever, interesting, or brilliant, but they lack one crucial element in a complete life. They do not look up. They do not offer up vows in righteousness [see D&C 59:11]. Their conversation sparkles, but it is not sacred. Their talk is witty, but it is not wise. Whether it be in the office, the locker room, or the laboratory, they have come too far down the scale of dignity who display their own limited powers and then find it necessary to blaspheme those unlimited powers that come from above.

Unfortunately we sometimes find this lack of reverence even within the Church. Occasionally we visit too loudly, enter and leave meetings too disrespectfully in what should be an hour of prayer and purifying worship. Reverence is the atmosphere of heaven.

Prayer is the utterance of the soul to God the Father. We do well to become more like our Father by looking up to him, by remembering him always, and by caring greatly about his world and his work.⁶

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**We develop our ability to receive spiritual knowledge
as we take time to meditate, ponder, and pray.**

Developing spirituality and attuning ourselves to the highest influences of godliness is not an easy matter. It takes time and frequently involves a struggle. It will not happen by chance, but is accomplished only through deliberate effort and by calling upon God and keeping his commandments. . . .

The Prophet Joseph Smith . . . has given us perhaps the clearest statement of all on the need to become spiritual as well as the time and patience which we must recognize are part of the process. [He] said: “We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker, and is caught up to dwell with Him. But we consider that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment” [*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 210–11].⁷

We must take time to prepare our minds for spiritual things. The development of spiritual capacity does not come with the conferral of authority. There must be desire, effort, and personal preparation. This requires, of course, . . . fasting, prayer, searching the scriptures, experience, meditation, and a hungering and thirsting after the righteous life.

I find it helpful to review these admonitions from Almighty God:

“If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries

and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal” (D&C 42:61).

“Ask the Father in my name in faith, believing that you shall receive, and you shall have the Holy Ghost, which manifesteth all things which are expedient unto the children of men” (D&C 18:18).

“Let the solemnities of eternity rest upon your minds” (D&C 43:34).

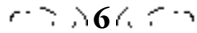
“Treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man” (D&C 84:85).

“Search diligently; pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for your good, if ye walk uprightly and remember the covenant wherewith ye have covenanted one with another” (D&C 90:24).

“God shall give unto you knowledge by his Holy Spirit, yea, by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost” (D&C 121:26).

These are promises that the Lord will surely fulfill if we prepare ourselves.

Take time to meditate, ponder, and pray on spiritual matters.⁸



God will help us progress spiritually one step at a time.

Part of our difficulty as we strive to acquire spirituality is the feeling that there is much to do and that we are falling far short. Perfection is something yet ahead for every one of us; but we can capitalize on our strengths, begin where we are, and seek after the happiness that can be found in pursuing the things of God. We should remember the Lord’s counsel:

“Wherefore, be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great.

“Behold, the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind; and the willing and obedient shall eat the good of the land of Zion in these last days.” (D&C 64:33–34.)

It has always been encouraging to me that the Lord said it is the “willing and obedient [who] shall eat the good of the land of Zion in these last days.” All of us can be willing and obedient. If the Lord had said the perfect shall eat the good of the land of Zion in these last days, I suppose some of us would be discouraged and give up. . . .

The place to begin is here. The time to start is now. The length of our stride needs be but one step at a time. God, who has “designed our happiness,” will lead us along even as little children, and we will by that process approach perfection.

None of us has attained perfection or the zenith of spiritual growth that is possible in mortality. Every person can and must make spiritual progress. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the divine plan for that spiritual growth eternally. It is more than a code of ethics. It is more than an ideal social order. It is more than positive thinking about self-improvement and determination. The gospel is the saving power of the Lord Jesus Christ with his priesthood and sustenance and with the Holy Spirit. With faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and obedience to his gospel, a step at a time improving as we go, pleading for strength, improving our attitudes and our ambitions, we will find ourselves successfully in the fold of the Good Shepherd. That will require discipline and training and exertion and strength. But as the Apostle Paul said, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” (Philip. 4:13.)

A modern-day revelation makes this promise: “Put your trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously; and this is my Spirit.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy;

“And then shall ye know, or by this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, which are pertaining unto things of righteousness, in faith believing in me that you shall receive.” (D&C 11:12–14.)⁹

Suggestions for Study and Teaching

Questions

- After reading section 1, reflect on times when you have needed heavenly help. How has the promise of divine help in times of need blessed your life?
- In section 2, what can we learn from Joseph Smith's example that could help us when we face confusion? How can we develop greater spiritual sensitivity like Joseph's?
- Ponder President Hunter's teachings about how we receive spiritual knowledge (see section 3). How can we increase our desire and ability to gain spiritual knowledge? What are some ways that spiritual knowledge has helped you?
- What are the dangers of viewing God "as a repairman or a service agency to help us only in our emergencies"? (See section 4.) How has prayer been a blessing to you?
- In section 5, President Hunter teaches us how to develop spirituality. Why is effort necessary to develop spiritual strength? What can we learn from the scriptures that President Hunter cites in this section?
- Review President Hunter's teachings in section 6 about spiritual growth. How has spiritual growth been a step-by-step process for you? How can President Hunter's teachings in this section be helpful if you feel that you are falling short in your spiritual growth?

Related Scriptures

Psalm 25:5; Proverbs 3:6; 2 Nephi 32:8–9; Alma 5:46; 34:17–27; 37:36–37; D&C 8:2–3; 88:63; 112:10; Joseph Smith—History 1:13–17

Teaching Help

Invite class members to search the chapter, looking for sentences or paragraphs that are important to them. Ask them to share these sentences or paragraphs and to explain why they are meaningful.

Notes

1. In Kellene Ricks, "Friend to Friend: From an Interview with Howard W. Hunter, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles," *Friend*, Apr. 1990, 6.
2. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (1997), 39–40.
3. "Blessed from on High," *Ensign*, Nov. 1988, 59, 61.
4. "Blessed from on High," 59–60.
5. "Conference Time," *Ensign*, Nov. 1981, 13.
6. "Hallowed Be Thy Name," *Ensign*, Nov. 1977, 52–53.
7. "Developing Spirituality," *Ensign*, May 1979, 25.
8. *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, 36–37.
9. "Developing Spirituality," 25–26.