

“Prayer: A Small and Simple Thing”
Virginia H. Pearce

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For further information write:

BYU Women’s Conference

161 Harman Continuing Education Building

Provo, Utah 84602

801-422-7692

E-mail: womens_conference@byu.edu

Home page: <http://womensconference.byu.edu>

President Samuelson, Sister Beck and Sister Rogers, I am honored by your invitation to participate in this conference. And I am delighted to be with you, my dear Relief Society sisters. I believe I know something of the preparations you have made to leave family, jobs, and other duties behind. I happen to have five daughters here this morning, and so I have seen up close and personal what it takes to arrange to leave their lives, and among them 22 children, and figure out how this day was—how today and tomorrow those people were going to get along without them. And when I multiply that times all of you, I am stunned. I think the invasion on Normandy Beach was nothing, child’s play in terms of coordination and planning, to this.

I think I also know something of your expectations and desires for this time together. I love you and I have full confidence that there will be a generous outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord today and tomorrow.

Our theme comes from the 37th chapter of Alma—a verse we all know so well, memorable in its alliteration and paradoxical in its promise. Alma, speaking to his son Helaman about the importance of keeping the scriptural record, said: “Now ye may suppose that this is foolishness in me; but behold I say unto you, that by small and simple things are great things brought to pass...”ⁱ

Isn’t that comforting in our world, where extravagant, larger-than-life, huge events and expectations are before our eyes continually? I have a little tiny sign on my computer at home—it’s not embroidered, cross-stitched or framed. It’s just a little sticky note and it says:

KEEP IT SMALL.

KEEP IT SIMPLE.

GIVE IT TIME.

Reading these words—sometimes out loud—never fails to settle me down.

One of our great Relief Society forbears, Emmeline B. Wells, said it much more poetically:

“Faith urges on the weak, and gives them grace.
And thus we often see the fragile ones outdo
Those who were strong when starting in the race.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Given time, our very smallness—our fragileness—actually allows God’s grace to work in us and to triumph over those who might have seemed stronger and larger in the beginning.

My mother wore this simple gold band on her finger. As she grew older, with arthritic hands, she often wore the ring on a chain around her neck—this chain, in fact. She and I went to lunch one afternoon a couple of years before her death. We were talking about nothing in particular when she stopped and asked me if I knew the story about the gold band. “It’s 18K gold, you know, more than 100 years old, and I want to be sure you know its story.” And then she proceeded to tell me again about my great-grandmother’s ring.

Martha Elizabeth Evans was 17 years old when she first met George Paxman. He was new in town—lean, with a fine bone structure and deep-set blue eyes. She was a petite, five-foot-two young woman with smooth skin and an abundance of fine hair, unbelievably soft to the touch.

They fell in love and two years later, in the fall of 1885, as they made eternal promises to one another, he put this gold band on the fourth finger of her left hand.

The hopeful young couple moved into a two-room adobe house with a dirt roof while George’s carpenter skills played their part in building a majestic white limestone temple, towering on a hill above the little adobe village of Manti, Utah. The young husband worked eight hours a day and received scrip for a weekly \$4.00 worth of goods in the local store and produce from the tithing office. It was a sweet way to begin married life.

On a June evening in 1887, a month before their first little girl turned one year old, George came home from working on the temple where he had helped hang the large east doors. He was in terrible pain. Alarmed, Martha loaded him in a wagon and made the strenuous trip through the mountains to a hospital, where he died three days later of a strangulated hernia. Eight months later, Martha gave birth to a second little girl—my grandmother—whom she named Georgetta after her beloved George.

A 22-year-old widow with two little girls, her faith in God, and a gold band on her finger, Martha faced the future.

But now comes the story my mother wanted to be sure I knew. One day, several years after George’s death, Martha was invited by a neighbor to replenish her mattress tick with new straw. In Martha’s words: “Just as I finished filling the tick, I looked at my hand and my ring was gone. I could have cried. When I got home I spread sheets out on the floor and went through the straw piece by piece, but no ring was there. I decided to go back [to the neighbor’s] anyway and looked around the straw again. I prayed that I might find it.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Well, the neighbor helped her look, but it seemed to be of no use. And just as she had given up, she kicked the straw with the toe of her shoe and the ring appeared.

Martha told and retold this story to her daughters and their children. Her grandmother's story convinced my mother that prayers are heard and that prayers are answered. This ring is a loving link honoring marriage and eternal loyalty, but to me it is a reminder about the power of prayer.

I believe in prayer, and have felt impressed to speak today about this small and simple practice by which great things are brought to pass.

Prayer is certainly the most basic religious ritual—of all faiths. All those who believe in God seek Him in some form of prayer. It is the earliest religious behavior we teach to our tiny children. And yet, the process of prayer cannot be fathomed by the human mind. None of us understands how it works, even though we may have had a lifetime of experience with it.

But we do know some things.

The first thing we know is that *prayer rests on the principle of faith*. We have faith in the doctrine that we are children of a Heavenly Father; that we are separated from Him during this time of mortality; and that our goal is to become like Him so that we can once again return to His presence. Think about that. When we understand that God is our Father and we are His children, then prayer becomes natural and instinctive.^{iv}

We also know that *prayer is an expression of agency*. Earnest, sincere, heartfelt prayer is a deeply personal choice. No one can force us to reach out with all of our hearts. No one can compel us to feel after our Maker. I love the way Isaiah expresses this heartfelt desire to pray:

“With my soul have I desired thee in the night; yea, with my spirit within me will I seek thee early...”^v

And so, our small and simple choice to pray allows God to unlock the powers of heaven in our behalf. The Holy Ghost is free to fill our minds and hearts, leading us towards Him and our eternal destiny. I can think of no greater thing.

We know also that *prayer grows out of humility*: When we pray it signals a recognition that we cannot live this life alone, that we are dependent upon the Father and His Son for our very breath. Now, I know some very smart people. And I know some gifted and highly skilled people. I know some very, very rich people. But I have never met any person who has sufficient resources to meet the all demands of this life on his or her own. We need God. And if our troubles can take us to God, we can be thankful for them.

This painting, by Carl Bloch, is called *Christus Consolator*.^{vi} It, along with other magnificent pieces, is on display this week in the BYU Museum of Art. I hope, if you haven't seen this exhibit yet, you'll take an opportunity to visit it during the next two days.

I love to look at each individual who seeks consolation from Christ. You can see the troubles of mortality on their faces. These are they who know they cannot do it alone. Bloch described the joy we can take in adversity when we know it brings us to Christ. He said: “When things are at

their worst they then become their absolute best. I think then that I have so much to thank God for, and it would be foolish to demand that one should be happy in this life. By that I mean always sparkling, always seeing the ideal under the light sky.

[*Landscape from Hellebaek, The Master's Hand*, Figure 20, p. 33] ^{vii}

“No, grey skies and rain splashing are part of it—one must be washed off thoroughly before one goes in to God.” ^{viii}

I like that artist's image—being washed off thoroughly by the grey skies and rains of life as we kneel in humility, in our fragileness, asking for God's help. “Be thou humble; and the Lord thy God shall lead thee by the hand, and give thee answer to thy prayers.” ^{ix}

I have a good friend whom I will call “Jane.” Jane is a covenant-keeping member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Her life has many facets: church service, full-time work, devotion to family, neighborliness, church callings. She is smart and funny and faithful. And, like all of us in mortality, she confronts heart-rending challenges—the greatest of which has to do with her family. As her children matured, some of them began to choose different paths. She witnessed them making choices that she knew would lead to unhappiness, and she was heartbroken—even frantic. She went over and over her parenting decisions of the past and was filled with guilt. Maybe this was all her fault. She found herself anxious and fearful—wondering what she could say and how and when she could say it so that the errant child would see the light and return. She worried about every interaction with the child—her own, as well as her husband's, the ward members', the neighbors'—everyone's! To say she felt tormented and out of control would be accurate.

And she prayed. My, did she pray! Her heart was “drawn out in prayer unto him continually for [her own] welfare, and also for the welfare of [the children].” ^x

One afternoon in fast meeting, she listened to a friend she admired describe how she had been troubled with a particular problem with one of her children and had determined to go to the temple once a week. The friend then testified in gratitude that after many months her prayers had been answered, and the problem had been miraculously solved.

Jane was touched, she came home, kept praying, and felt inclined to make a personally ambitious yearly goal of temple attendance. She felt sure that the Lord would honor such a significant personal sacrifice.

Now I am going to interrupt our story here to point out some of the things we have talked about. Jane had faith. She understood her relationship to her Father in Heaven. She exhibited humility, an understanding that she needed divine help. And she made an individual personal choice to pray. As she continued her very personal conversation with the Lord, kept her covenants, and went to church, the Holy Ghost sent the words of her friend's testimony deeply into her heart. Continuing to pray, Jane acted on the promptings she received to attend the temple more often.

Now let me continue with her story. Quoting Jane, “After 10 years of increased temple attendance and constant prayer, I am sorry to say that my children’s choices have not changed.”

And then there was a pause...

“But I have. I am a different woman.”

“How?” I asked her.

“I have a softer heart. I am filled with compassion. I can actually do more and am free of my fear, anxiety, guilt, blame, and dread. I have given up my time limits and am able to wait on the Lord. And I experience frequent manifestations of the Lord’s power. He sends tender mercies, small messages that acknowledge His love for me and my children. My expectations have changed. Instead of expecting my children to change, I expect these frequent tender mercies and am full of gratitude for them.” She continues, “I have a new openness and sensitivity to the Spirit and I no longer worry myself to death over what I will say and how I will say it. If I feel inclined to speak, I don’t hesitate, and the words feel as if they are given to me.

“All of my relationships are better, especially with my children and husband. I can do and say things that I could never do or say before. My children are respectful of my temple devotion. They are sweet and supportive of me, as is my husband. He and I are cemented together by these difficulties rather than blaming and pulling apart. Our marriage has never been more joyful. My ability to appreciate and enjoy the good things of my life is heightened. I am simply more present.

“My prayers are changed. I express more love and am more thankful. I pray to be equal to the tasks before me. I pray for an increase of charity and patience and faith. I am grateful for the trials that led me here. I wouldn’t change a thing that has happened. The Lord works in marvelous ways and I truly am filled with the peace that passeth all understanding.”^{xi}

Prayer and temple attendance are not dramatic, sensational, or one-time activities. But repeated over and over, year after year, they are small and simple things by which great things come to pass. In fact, this gradual process of change seems to be the way the Lord often works with us. Yes, we have scriptural stories of seemingly sudden and complete change, but more often we become “new creatures”^{xii}—like those in the city of Enoch—“in process of time.”^{xiii}

I find the word *consecration* intriguing. It means “to make holy and sacred...to sanctify...” Consecration means that we dedicate our thoughts, our actions—our very lives to God. And in turn, He can consecrate our experiences—sanctify them, make them holy—no matter how difficult, foolish, or destructive.

It is written: “...in everything give thanks; waiting patiently on the Lord, for your prayers have entered into the ears of the Lord...he giveth this promise unto you, with an immutable covenant that they shall be fulfilled; and *all things wherewith you have been afflicted shall work together for your good*, and my name’s glory, saith the Lord.”^{xiv}

All things shall be for our good? How does that work?! I don't know, but I believe the words of Nephi: "ye must pray always, and not faint; that ye must not perform any thing unto the Lord save in the first place ye shall pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul."^{xv}

When I listened to Jane, I felt how the Lord had consecrated her difficulties with her children to the eternal welfare of her soul. Wasn't it something to hear her describe the changes? I thought I could see before my very eyes someone who had prayed with all the energy of her heart and who had been filled with pure charity—a gift bestowed freely on all true followers of Christ.^{xvi}

How could this not also be helpful to her children?

Nephi talks about his prayers for his people. Think of Jane and her prayers for her children. Think of yourself and your prayers for those you love. "For behold there are many that harden their hearts against the Holy Spirit, that it hath no place in them;...I pray continually for them by day, and mine eyes water my pillow by night, because of them; and I cry unto my God in faith, and I know that he will hear my cry. And I know that the Lord will consecrate my prayers for the gain of my people."^{xvii}

I don't know how He will do this—agency must be exercised—but my faith tells me that someday when those loved ones make a choice to come to Christ and His Atonement begins to operate in their lives, our prayers will be part of a miracle that can not only change their future but can consecrate their past experience to the welfare of their souls. Perhaps rather than creating torment and bitterness and despair, their past sins will become experiences that deepen their compassion toward others and their gratitude for their Savior. Isn't that an amazing transformation, possible only through the Savior's infinite power?

Like Jane, we often add fasting, temple worship, and priesthood blessings to our prayers as we importune the Lord in times of exceptional need. I don't know how that works either, but as I have added these things, I have personally experienced the power of increased consecration and felt my heart open wider to receive the will of the Lord. And one of the great outcomes of effective prayer is that through it my will and the will of the Father become one and the same.

I also know that as others have joined their prayers, fasting, and temple worship on behalf of me and mine, I have indeed felt an increase in the Lord's presence. And why would that not be so? Faith coupled with pure charity—the love we extend when we pray, fast, and add names to temple rolls—makes a difference. It unifies us with one another. It unifies us with the Lord.

Sister Julie Beck encourages us as Relief Society sisters to pray. She said: "Think of our combined strength if every sister had sincere prayer every morning and night or, better yet, prayed unceasingly as the Lord has commanded."^{xviii}

Praying for one another brings strength. It knits our hearts together in unity and love. And this pure love—charity—opens our hearts to receive the blessings that the Lord desires to give us, but that are made conditional on our asking for them.^{xix}

Sometimes answers to prayer are quite clear—simple and direct. But often prayer becomes a long and personal conversation. We continue to pray and work, and find that in inexplicable ways the problems are gradually resolved or changed. Sometimes even our righteous and heartfelt desires are modified. Gradually, our desires become His desires. Our pleading becomes part of the experience.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught that the Lord works on us through the very process of prayer: “Some have difficulty with the reality that prayers are petitions even though God knows all and loves all anyway. True, we are not informing God, but we are informing ourselves by reverently working through our real concerns and our real priorities and by listening to the Spirit. For us merely to say, ritualistically, “Thy will be done” would not be real petitionary prayer. This would involve no genuine working through of our feelings. There would be no experience in agonizing, in choosing, and also in submitting.”^{xx}

And so, the power of praying is more than saying at the end of the prayer, “Thy will be done.” It is actually finding that His will has become our will. Often the change in our part of the conversation is almost imperceptible. It is small and simple and occurs over time. It is difficult to talk about because by its very nature it is personal and unique—something that is happening between the Father and the individual. And it is unpredictable. He may answer me so immediately and distinctly at one time and so gradually at another that I think nothing is happening. But if I make the choice to keep believing, and I demonstrate that choice by continuing to pray, I am quite sure His will *will* be made manifest, and it will, in the end, seem to me to be just right.

Sometimes we may feel we are simply left on our own to do the best we can. I believe that if we were to wait to act every time we prayed until we recognized a clear answer, most of us would be waiting and wasting a good part of our lives.

Elder Richard G. Scott asks the question: “What do you do when you have prepared carefully, have prayed fervently, waited a reasonable time for a response, and still do not feel an answer?” He continues: “You may want to express thanks when that occurs, for it is an evidence of His trust. When you are living worthily and your choice is consistent with the Savior’s teachings and you need to act, proceed with trust....God will not let you proceed too far without a warning impression if you have made a wrong choice.”^{xxi}

President Hinckley had a personal motto that is quite practical. He taught it in many settings:

“Things will work out. If you keep trying and praying and working, things will work out. They always do.”^{xxii}

And so we have to pray and then keep moving forward, trusting that if it is a direction that will *not* be for our good, the Lord will help us know. Otherwise, we trust that the Lord is bound to own and honor the decisions we have made using our own best judgment.^{xxiii}

Back to my great-grandmother Martha Elizabeth. She prayed for the ring. She looked down and she found it. She acknowledged the answer. I think of other prayers Martha Elizabeth must

have offered—many more critical to her future than the one about the ring. I think of the desperate prayers she must have offered as she drove her husband in the carriage in search of a doctor. That prayer was not answered as Martha would have hoped. Somehow it was not part of His plan for Martha and George that they should have a full lifetime together.

But on the day that Martha lost her ring, God granted her prayerful desire. However, I believe that finding the ring was a minor miracle when compared to the real message. I think the real message to Martha was that God was aware of her sadness and love for her long-gone sweetheart whom the ring represented. He was telling her that He knew and loved her and that He was there for her. And stunningly, this reassurance of His presence and love is much greater than any other possible outcome.

My friend Jane talked about receiving those kinds of messages from Heavenly Father, those frequent manifestations of the Lord’s power, the tender mercies, the small messages that acknowledged His love for her and her children. And she began to expect them, though—frequently and to be full of gratitude and express that for them.

In Martha’s life, in Jane’s life, surely in yours, and most certainly in mine, God has not always granted those things that we have wanted—even asked for desperately. But He frequently puts His divine signature^{xxiv} on small events of the day. And His presence—the indescribably settling quality of His great love—more than recompenses for all tragedies and disappointments. He says, with these tender mercies: “I am here. I care about you. You are living your life with my approval. Everything will work together for your good. Trust me.”

And so the miracle of prayer doesn’t reside in the ability to manipulate situations and events, but in the miracle of creating a relationship with God.^{xxv}

Think about that carefully, would you? What does it do for you to have an assurance that the Lord is with you? Everything.

In October of 2008 my husband and I were busily preparing to respond to a mission call. It had been a year of perpetual motion for us. My father had died in January, necessitating the business of dividing and distributing all of his “stuff.” Oh, we do leave lots of things behind when we cross to the other side, don’t we? Just as we were finishing that, my husband retired from his medical practice, and we were loading and unloading more boxes of “stuff” into an ever crowded basement. There were lots of family events, some travel, and the preparation of our mission papers. And now, here we were with a mission call, making arrangements to rent out our home—yes, moving more stuff—when everything stopped.

Responding to some symptoms that were becoming increasingly problematic, my husband went in for tests and was diagnosed with a fatal and untreatable disease. He lived just short of one year from the day of diagnosis.

It was a unique year for us—one of quiet and slow living—of unbusyness. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf explained, “When growing conditions are not ideal, trees slow down their growth and devote their energy to the basic elements necessary for survival.” He continued, “It is good

advice to slow down a little, steady the course, and focus on the essentials when experiencing adverse conditions.”^{xxvi}

We did just that.

We talked, we cried, we read and re-read verses of scripture, we pored over talks from the brethren, we spent sweet time with family and friends. We went to bed every night and got up every morning. Most of all, though, we prayed. We prayed together, we prayed separately, we prayed vocally, we prayed silently. We prayed with loved ones. We fasted and prayed. We went to the temple and prayed. We prayed constantly. We pled with our Father in Heaven in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ.

I tell you this by way of personal testimony. Prayer works. It does indeed call down the powers of heaven. It reconciles our will with the will of the Father. It consecrates even our most adversive experiences to the welfare of our souls. Through combined prayer we experience love, unity, and power that is impossible to describe. We may not be granted that which we desire, but we end up grateful with all of our hearts for that which the Lord gives us.

And along the way we experience tender mercies over and over—those unmistakable messages from Him: “I am here. I love you. You are living your life with my approval. Everything will work together for your good. Trust me.”

Even though we may not see, minute to minute, that we are moving forward and making progress, I believe we will be able to one day look back at our lives and see that we were, in fact, doing just what we needed to be doing at just the right time in just the right place. We can trust that the Lord will work in and through us. Mormon expressed it beautifully: “And now, I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will.”^{xxvii}

Like Mormon, I do not know all things, but I do know that the Lord works in faithful, prayerful people to do according to His will. I know that by small and simple means are great things brought to pass.

Of that I bear testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

ⁱ Alma 37:6

ⁱⁱ Wells, Emmeline B., “Musings and Memories” SLC, UT: *Deseret News*, 1915, 221.

ⁱⁱⁱ personal history in author’s possession

^{iv} Bible Dictionary, pp 752-753

^v Isaiah 26:9

^{vi} Christus Consolator *The Master’s Hand, the Art of Carl Heinrich Bloch*, Figure 61, p. 114, by Dawn C. Pheysey and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Brigham Young University Museum of Art, Provo, UT, Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, UT, 2010

^{vii} *ibid*, p. 33

^{viii} *ibid*, p. 55

^{ix} D&C 112:10

^x Alma 34:27

^{xi} Philippians 4:7

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- ^{xii} Mosiah 27:26
- ^{xiii} Moses 7:21
- ^{xiv} D&C 98:1-3
- ^{xv} 2 Nephi 32:9
- ^{xvi} Moroni 7:48
- ^{xvii} 2 Nephi 33:2-4
- ^{xviii} Beck, Julie B., "What Latter-day Saint Women Do Best: Stand Strong and Immovable," *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, p. 110
- ^{xix} Bible Dictionary, p. 753
- ^{xx} Maxwell, Neal A., *That Ye May Believe*, Bookcraft, 1992, p. 91
- ^{xxi} Scott, Richard G., "Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer," *Ensign*, May 2007
- ^{xxii} Dew, Sheri, *Go Forward With Faith*, Deseret Book 1996, p. 423
- ^{xxiii} *Journal of Discourses*, V. 3:205 Brigham Young taught: "If I ask him to give me wisdom concerning any requirement in life, or in regard to my own course, or that of my friends, my family, my children, or those that I preside over, and get no answer from Him, and then do the very best that my judgement will teach me, He is bound to own and honor that transaction, and He will do so to all intents and purposes."
- ^{xxiv} Lund, Gerald, *Divine Signatures: The Confirming Hand of God*, Deseret Book, 2010
- ^{xxv} Bible Dictionary, p. 752-753
- ^{xxvi} Uchtdorf, Dieter F., "Of Things That Matter Most," *Ensign*, Nov. 2010
- ^{xxvii} Words of Mormon 1:7