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Author(s): David L. Clark

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# “IF I PRAY NOT AMISS”

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David L. Clark

**Abstract:** *In 2<sup>nd</sup> Nephi, it is suggested that the Lord answers prayers but that requests made in prayer should not violate some kind of standard that would make them “amiss.” This undefined standard most likely excludes many prayers requesting immunity from those conditions of mortality which all mortals accepted and embraced with great enthusiasm in the great Council in Heaven. However, except for limited latter-day explanations of that great conference, our eager acceptance of all details of the conditions of mortality did not carry over into mortal memory. Consequently, when we request exemption from those conditions joyfully endorsed in premortal time, perhaps many qualify for the “prayers amiss” category. Exceptions from mortal conditions are granted only for divine and sometimes incomprehensible purposes.*

In 1839, after several months of imprisonment in the Liberty Jail under miserable conditions and without respite, the Prophet finally expressed his complete frustration: “O God, where art thou?”<sup>1</sup> echoing the thoughts of generations of humans who have suffered similar and even worse inflictions while waiting for God to respond with the help requested in prayer. However, unlike Joseph, whose plea was answered impressively, many of those whose prayers for help in dire situations are not answered have asked why there was no deliverance from evil for them. Such events have contributed to the development of the classic Problem of Evil: Why does an omnipotent God permit evil that He could prevent?<sup>2</sup> Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the resolution of the problem is the Prophet’s explanation of the eternal nature of

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1. Doctrine and Covenants 121:1.

2. For a general discussion on the problem of evil from a broad perspective, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem\\_of\\_evil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Problem_of_evil).

matter and the nonsense of a creation *ex nihilo*. Briefly put, a Latter-day Saint interpretation is that God did not create Earth nor its inhabitants from nothing (*ex nihilo*) but organized matter that was co-eternal and had its own set of characteristics, populating it with individuals whose spirits are co-eternal with God and capable of exercising agency. David Paulsen has discussed the traditional interpretations of the question and outlined how our understanding differs from the standard Christian concept of omnipotence and *ex nihilo*.<sup>3</sup> God, the organizer of select matter with which He coexisted, cannot be held responsible for inherent characteristics of that matter nor of actions related to its agency, and He consequently depends on empathy and the atonement in the mortal crusade against evil.<sup>4</sup>

Nephi, after the death of his father Lehi was soon involved with his contentious brothers on various issues, and in response he wrote a kind of “psalm” on the plates his father had given him, in which he expressed his concerns, hopes, problems, shortcomings, and testimony. At the conclusion of his psalm, he noted, almost casually, a significant observation: “Yea, I know that God will give liberally to him that asketh. Yea, my God will give me, if I ask not amiss; therefore I will lift up my voice unto thee.”<sup>5</sup> So it is important to avoid asking for things that are amiss. Given the constant encouragement in the scriptures to pray always and pray about almost anything,<sup>6</sup> the obvious question is “What kind of prayer is amiss?”

Latter-day Saint literature frequently addresses the question of prayers amiss. The Book of Mormon records that when Moroni summarized his final counsel to the remnants of Lehi’s posterity, he reminded them that “it is counted evil unto a man, if he shall pray and not with real intent of heart; yea, and it profiteth him nothing, for God

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3. See David L. Paulsen, “Joseph Smith and the Problem of Evil,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2000): 53–65. Also, see Paulsen, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, New Series 13, no. 2, 1999, 114–46, for additional discussion, including the contribution of William James to the problem.

4. See Tyler Johnson, “Empathy and the Atonement,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4, (2016), 105–22.

5. 2 Nephi 4: 15–35.

6. See Alma 34:18–28. Speaking to the poor and despised among the Zoramites, Amulek instructed, “Cry unto him for mercy,” for humility, for your flocks, for your crops, for your household, and for aid against the enemy and the devil, and as well he gave other advice.

receiveth none such.”<sup>7</sup> Certainly an example of prayer amiss. And in the Doctrine & Covenants, “do not ask for that which you ought not,”<sup>8</sup> and “if ye ask anything that is not expedient for you, it shall turn into your condemnation.”<sup>9</sup> Other examples of prayers amiss were given by the Prophet Joseph Smith in an 1830 letter to the Colesville Saints when he instructed, “Pray not with covetous hearts that ye may consume it upon your lusts.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, Joseph F. Smith advised that “we should not ask the Lord for that which is unnecessary or which would not be beneficial to us.”<sup>11</sup> President Hinckley’s observation that those who pray to a Mother in Heaven are misguided clearly defines another type of prayer amiss.<sup>12</sup> A Latter-day Saint writer went to the heart of the problem of “prayer amiss” when she wrote, “How many of my prayers have been amiss because they were offered in an attempt to convince God to trample on the agency of someone else? I remember a period of time when I was fasting weekly and praying fervently that a loved one would change. When I begged to understand why my prayers weren’t answered I received a one-word, startling reply: ‘agency.’”<sup>13</sup> Infringing on the agency of others is a significant category of prayers amiss, but there is an even larger arena of possible prayers amiss related to activities in the premortal Council in Heaven.

In the Church’s unique interpretation of this premortal major council, in attendance were all participants who were to experience mortality.<sup>14</sup>

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7. Moroni 7:9.

8. Doctrine and Covenants 8:10.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 88:65.

10. From a letter Joseph Smith and John Whitmer sent to Colesville Saints, Aug. 30, 1830, based on D&C 46:9. Joseph Smith, “Prayer and Personal Revelation,” in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 131.

11. Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1959), 218.

12. Sheri L. Dew, *The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley: Go Forward with Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 457.

13. Darla Isackson, “When We Pray Amiss,” *Meridian Magazine*, 27 July 2005, <https://ldsmag.com/article-1-694/>.

14. See John H. Lund, “Council in Heaven,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1992), 328–29. The history of thought concerning the premortal existence from ancient traditions to the present is explored in detail in Terryl L. Givens, *When Souls Had Wings: Pre-Mortal Existence in Western Thought*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 212, 220. This includes discussion of early Latter-day Saint premortal doctrine but with no reference to the Council in Heaven.

Among the agenda items of that Grand Council was the plan of salvation and an explanation of its function in mortality. The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote, “At the first organization in heaven we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed, and the plan of salvation made and *we sanctioned it.*”<sup>15</sup> According to John Taylor “It is evident that at that Council certain plans had been proposed and discussed, [including] ... a full discussion of those principles.”<sup>16</sup> Bruce R. McConkie concluded that the plan was taught to all the hosts of heaven, and all its facets were “*debated and evaluated.*”<sup>17</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball explained that “the Lord made a blueprint, as any great contractor will do before constructing. He drew up the plans, wrote the specifications, and presented them.”<sup>18</sup> And more recently, Terryl Givens concluded that the order and ordinances of the Kingdom “*were non-negotiable, set in stone, ‘by the Priesthood in the council of heaven before the world was.’*”<sup>19</sup>

From these observations we can surmise that by the conclusion of the Council, we must have understood that our mortal existence would involve all the challenges we would encounter in mortality, *both work and pleasure, health and sickness, joy and sorrow, happiness and disappointment, achievement and failure, peace and war, and eventually (and perhaps sooner than might be wanted), death and loneliness for those who survive.* Both the bright and darker sides of mortality were explained. While we would like to know more of this transcendental council, accounts are brief; in reference to the account given in the Book of Mormon, Neal Maxwell has pointed out that information “was not given there in overwhelming abundance.”<sup>20</sup> But the full spectrum of the mortal experience was explained; and in response to this complete tutorial on mortality, according to the description in the scriptures,

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15. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 1980), 6:60, emphasis added.

16. John Taylor, *Mediation and Atonement*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Publishing, 1892), 93, emphasis added.

17. Bruce R. McConkie, *The Promised Messiah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 48–51, emphasis added.

18. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 29.

19. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought: Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 299, emphasis added.

20. Neal A. Maxwell, “*But for a Small Moment,*” (Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1986), 91.

all participants in that great Council shouted for joy. The joy was then enhanced by a heavenly choir of morning stars,<sup>21</sup> which must be interpreted as an enthusiastic acceptance of the entire plan. Or, as Givens and Givens have written, "If we were involved in the deliberations that culminated in creating and peopling this world, then we are not passive victims of providence. *We would have entered into the conditions of this mortal state aware of the harrowing hazards mortality entails.*"<sup>22</sup>

But this unique interpretation of the Great Council was in premortal time. Now move forward. As humans filled the earth, they experienced the full range of the mortal conditions but without memory of the premortal Council and their enthusiastic response to its agenda. In mortal time, humans looked forward to joy but were less comfortable with sorrow; they enjoyed achievement but wanted no part of failure; health was greatly desirable, but please no sickness, no accidents and certainly no war or premature death! As humans experienced the full range of mortal conditions and the darker side of mortality clearly explained and accepted in the Council, these became a challenge to Earth's inhabitants and led to frustrations, pleadings, and cries similar to those of the Prophet Joseph Smith: "O God, where art thou?"<sup>23</sup> As mortals with a truncated vision of eternity, we clearly are not comfortable with all the conditions of mortality. But might the repeated prayers for exemptions from the darker side of mortality be examples of the "prayers amiss" referred to by Nephi? Are such prayers not antithetical to those principles we enthusiastically agreed to in that Great Council in heaven? Perhaps it is important that we be constantly reminded that we once rejoiced for the challenges of work and pleasure, joy and sorrow, achievement and failure, sickness and health, accidents and recovery, death and safety, disbelief and testimony, happiness and sadness, trial and error, and peace and war.

Jenkins Lloyd Jones suggested,

Anyone who imagines that bliss is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed. Most putts don't drop. Most beef is tough. Most children grow up to be just people. Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration. Most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. ... Life is like an old-time rail journey — delays,

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21. See Job 38:7.

22. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God Who Weeps: How Mormonism Make Sense of Life* (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2012), 53, emphasis added.

23. Doctrine and Covenants 121:1.

sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders, and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed. The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride.<sup>24</sup>

Succinctly put, we may often pray for the wrong thing. Perhaps our prayer should be more a supplication for help in coping with the conditions of mortality rather than a request for exemption from the more difficult and darker parts. President Kimball endorsed this conclusion: “If all the sick for whom we pray were healed, if all the righteous were protected and the wicked destroyed, the whole program of the Father would be annulled and the basic principle of the gospel, free agency, would be ended. No man would have to live by faith.”<sup>25</sup> He then advised that in prayer, “ask [God] to assist you to remain true to your covenants and keep clean and worthy and active” and “thank the Lord for the courage and strength he helped you muster to avert a threatened calamity.”<sup>26</sup>

And Neal Maxwell added:

Petitioning in prayer has taught me, again and again, that the vault of heaven with all its blessings is to be opened only by a combination lock. One tumbler falls when there is faith, a second when there is personal righteousness; the third and final tumbler falls only when what is sought is, in God’s judgment —not ours — right for us. Sometimes we pound on the vault door for something we want very much and wonder why the door does not open. We would be very spoiled children if that vault door opened any more easily than it does. I can tell, looking back, that God truly loves me by inventorying the petitions He has refused to grant me. Our rejected petitions tell us much about ourselves but also much about our flawless Father.<sup>27</sup>

There appears to be agreement among both ancient and modern prophets that exemptions from the conditions of mortality should not be an expected commodity. Life is not a smooth train ride free from the necessity of faith. Perhaps, as President Kimball suggested, our prayers

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24. Jenkins Lloyd Jones, “Big Rock Candy Mountains,” *The Deseret News*, 12 June 1973.

25. Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972), 97.

26. *Ibid.*, 131, 134.

27. Neal A. Maxwell, “Insights,” *New Era* (April 1978), <https://www.lds.org/new-era/1978/04/insights?lang=eng>.

should not be constant requests for mortal immunity but be directed more for help in coping with our mortal conditions. And faith, righteousness, and God's will generally are in place before exemptions are granted. However, while an enhanced understanding of the pre-mortal existence and the purpose of life allows us to avoid the world's common problem of evil that blames God for injustice in the world, our observation that He sometimes makes exceptions introduces a unique Latter-day Saint interpretation of the problem. Prayers amiss aside, why does an omnipotent God answer some prayers that request mortal exemptions from premortal agreements but not others?

Probably everyone has had the same experience as Mary Ellen Edmunds, who wrote, "Isn't it hard sometimes to say and mean those words: 'Thy will be done'? (Some mistakenly say, 'For dumb! That cancels out your prayer!') ... I sit in meetings where testimonies are being shared about miracles, and I hurt for others sitting in the chapel who are suffering because the miracle *they* had hoped for didn't happen."<sup>28</sup> In one sense the phrase "Thy will be done" is an unnecessary, even rhetorical benediction to a prayer because humans do not counsel God and because the phrase presumptuously suggests that "I think I have a better idea, but what the heck, do what You think is best." However, in Christ's case, it was the premier demonstration of humility, a God who experienced ultimate mortal suffering but acknowledged to His Father at the conclusion of His mortal existence that Their plan should and would be fulfilled.

Clearly, prayers laced with repeated demands for mortal immunities or requests that might impinge on the agency of others are amiss. And one must be careful in claims of success. On the personal level, I remember hearing a testimony claiming that prayer restored life to a "pet" goldfish and how this affected a wife and mother present at the meeting and whose prayers for help for her young husband with multiple sclerosis were not similarly answered. Certainly, exceptions from conditions of mortality are certified monthly in fast and testimony meetings. And some must be valid. God can make exemptions from evil in mortality but for reasons known only to Him.

Perhaps some problems could be avoided if we examined the scriptural model for prayer. In the seminal recipe for proper prayer, in addition to praise, forgiveness and inspiration, there is only one

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28. Mary Ellen Edmunds, "Peace Amidst Suffering," in *The Arms of His Love: Talks from the 1999 Women's Conference Sponsored by Brigham Young University and the Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 224.

request for what could be interpreted as a specific, immediate, mortal-physical help: “Give us this day our daily bread.”<sup>29</sup> But as John Welch has written, even the request for daily bread is often interpreted to be the bread of life or a request for “spiritual manna from heaven.”<sup>30</sup> Of additional interest is the fact that the “daily bread” part of the Matthew record of the Lord’s Prayer is omitted in the Book of Mormon version,<sup>31</sup> perhaps an indication of the same understanding expressed by Welch and many others.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting thing to be learned from an examination of all that has been written or talked about regarding prayer is the almost universal advice that our prayers should be spiritually tuned rather than requests for exemption from conditions of mortality or requests that could impinge on the agency of others. Neal Maxwell counseled, “Exceptional souls are not developed, however, by being made exceptions to the challenges that are common to mankind.”<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, after providing an explanation of what we commonly observe in the lives of our General Authorities, he concluded, “Hence it seems prudent for us to realize that just because one is set apart or ordained to a certain calling or assignment, he or she must not expect to be set apart from the stresses of life. There appear to be no immunities.”<sup>34</sup>

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29. Matthew 6:9–13. See also, B. H. Roberts, *The Truth, The Way, The Life: An Elementary Treatise on Theology*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, UT: BYU Studies Monograph, 1994), 506–7. Roberts points out that the Lord’s Prayer “was not given as a set form to be always followed, and used on every occasion, but rather as an illustration of the spirit in which prayer should be offered.” And he reminds us that the Lord’s Prayer has an error that Joseph Smith corrected in his translation of the New Testament. The Lord would not lead us into temptation, so why ask him not to? The correction is “suffer us not to be led into temptation.”

30. John W. Welch, “The Lord’s Prayers,” *Ensign* (January 1976), 14–17, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1976/01/the-lords-prayers?lang=eng>.

31. See 3 Nephi 13:9–13.

32. See Jack Wellman, “The Lord’s Prayer — Meaning and Lessons From The Our Father Prayer,” *Christian Crier* (blog), 13 May 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2014/05/13/the-lords-prayer-meaning-and-lessons-from-the-our-father-prayer/>. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2014/05/13/the-lords-prayer-meaning-and-lessons-from-the-our-father-prayer/>. See also William Stillman, “My Personal Interpretation of the Lord’s Prayer,” *The Blog, Huffington Post*, updated 2 April 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-stillman/lords-prayer\\_b\\_4697047.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-stillman/lords-prayer_b_4697047.html).

33. Neal A. Maxwell, *We Will Prove Them Herewith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 116.

34. Neal A. Maxwell, *Sermons not Spoken*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 26.

David A. Bednar in an October 2008 Conference address reminded us that prayers might best be directed toward receiving spiritual help in reflecting on inappropriate talk and actions, guidance on becoming better humans, and forgiveness for our shortcomings. He also suggested that a valid prayer might include “remorse for our weaknesses and for not putting off the natural man more earnestly. Determine to pattern our life after the Savior more completely. Plead for greater strength to do and to become better.”<sup>35</sup> Boyd K. Packer counseled that our prayers should be a pleading to “receive ... inspiration and remain worthy to receive it.”<sup>36</sup> President David O. McKay suggested that appropriate prayer might include “O, let me not lose my head this day as I meet temptation, as I am tempted to misjudge my fellows. Keep me from trespassing upon the rights of others.”<sup>37</sup> His counselor Hugh B. Brown taught, “Let us pray for those who love us, for our leaders, church and state. Let us pray for those who need help and support our prayers with service. Let us pray for health and strength and wisdom. Pray for faith to carry on when our strength seems insufficient, and the answer is delayed.”<sup>38</sup> And Brigham Young counseled, “Every breath should virtually be a prayer that God preserve us from sin and from the effects of sin.”<sup>39</sup> Most of this counsel avoids requests for exemptions from Jenkins Lloyd Jones’s “train ride.” Perhaps one pragmatic function of prayer is that it allows us to prioritize those things that are important for our lives, including guidance in our response to life’s challenges as well as thanking God for “the ride.”

However, just as we have received considerable counsel on addressing the favored spiritual requests in prayer, there are obvious exceptions from some of the physical conditions of mortality. One might even relate exemptions from mortal conditions granted in prayer to the miracles of Christ and others before and since His time. While most miracles are certainly exemptions from conditions imposed by mortality, they are also for more spectacularly divine purposes, many perhaps even anticipated in that premortal Council. Christ’s miracles were important

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35. David A. Bednar, “Pray Always,” *Ensign* (November 2008), 41, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2008/11/pray-always?lang=eng>.

36. Boyd K. Packer, “Prayer and Promptings,” *Ensign* (November 2009), 45, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2009/11/prayer-and-promptings?lang=eng>.

37. David O. McKay, *Secrets of a Happy Life*, comp. Llewelyn R. McKay (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1967), 89.

38. Eugene E. Campbell and Richard D. Poll, *Hugh B. Brown: His Life and Thought* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975), 202–3.

39. Brigham Young, *Discourses of Brigham Young*, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1926), 67.

in demonstrating His divine nature to the disbelieving multitudes and thus critical to introduction of Christianity to the world. Miracles performed before and since Christ's time were also related to more critical eternal issues than some of our more common mortal problems, such as success or failure, or even sickness and health.

Other exemptions include Joseph Smith's prayers, which included requests for what might be called *physical* things. Mark L. McConkie records that the Prophet asked for things that included better food, protection, and help in casting out devils.<sup>40</sup> President Thomas S. Monson recorded a prayer for a woman who lost her voice just before a road show production and regained it in time for the performance following the prayer. Also answered were a prayer to find lost money and a prayer for good weather for Bruce R. McConkie's funeral.<sup>41</sup> Hugh B. Brown told the story of a World War II pilot returning from a bombing mission in a badly damaged airplane: crashing into the English Channel was apparently the only choice, but a prayer enabled the pilot to make it to an air base in England.<sup>42</sup> And President Hinckley wrote, perhaps with a twinkle in his eye, "Ask God to forgive your sins. ... Ask Him to help you realize your righteous and worthy ambitions. ... Ask Him to take away your worries and fears. Ask Him to help you *find a companion with whom you can share your life.*"<sup>43</sup>

The question, of course, is why some of the prayers for immunity are answered and others not. Terryl and Fiona Givens point out that "it is also possible that God's answers are sometimes too indirect, too oblique, for us to recognize because we are looking for something more palpable. ... And sometimes prayer expectations are too grandiose rather than too modest. ... If prayer is to succeed, it must bridge the divide between earth and heaven, a mortal heart and a divine mind. The only way this is possible is for us to relinquish all our preconceptions of how God may choose to answer our entreaties."<sup>44</sup> We absolve God from the evil inherent

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40. Mark L. McConkie, *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 116–17, 181–83.

41. Heidi S. Swinton, *To the Rescue: The Biography of Thomas S. Monson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010), 72, 78, 422.

42. Edwin B. Firmage, ed., *The Memoirs of Hugh B. Brown: An Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1988), 102–3.

43. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Way to Be!* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 114, emphasis added.

44. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 126, 128, 129.

in eternal matter used in creation. In asking for exemptions from the challenges of mortality, we rejoice when those prayers for immunity are answered. We are left with only the admonition to pray not amiss and to acknowledge that God’s answer may not resolve our request in the manner we would like.

How does an omnipotent God decide who gets the exemption and who does not? I am not aware of any definitive answer to this incisive question. Partial answers include advice from the First Presidency: “Heavenly Father hears your prayers. He may not always answer as you expect, but He does answer — in His own time and according to His will. Because He knows what is best for you, He may sometimes answer *no*, even when your petitions are sincere.”<sup>45</sup> Lorraine M. Wright added insight when she told a women’s conference, “What happens when our prayers are not answered in the way we would like? What happens when the illness isn’t cured? What happens when the person dies anyway? ... We must draw upon our faith to help us understand. ... Clearly our calendar is sometimes not the same as Heavenly Father’s.”<sup>46</sup> And Darla Isackson observed, “When we try to convince God that our righteous acts should shield us from natural law, from consequences of our choices or the choices of others, or from the trials God uses to tutor and refine us, we are praying amiss.”<sup>47</sup> And “one of the best ways to avoid praying amiss is to trust God’s long-term plan and His timing and pray accordingly. So many times when we seem to be getting a ‘no’ answer, God is really saying ‘yes’ to much more important things that couldn’t be brought about if He said ‘yes’ to our current request.”<sup>48</sup>

In Paulsen’s discussion of William James’s, “God’s chess game,” he points out that God is one player and humanity the other, and the game proceeds as follows: While God may not foresee the actual moves His opponent will make, He does know all the moves that are possible, and He knows how to respond in a way which will permit His victory,<sup>49</sup>

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45. *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), s.v. “prayer.”

46. Lorraine M. Wright, “What’s Love Got to Do with it? Conversations That Heal,” in *The Arms of His Love: Talks from the 1999 Women’s Conference Sponsored by Brigham Young University and the Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 156.

47. Darla Isackson, “When We Pray Amiss,” *Meridian Magazine*, 27 July 2005, <https://ldsmag.com/article-1-694/>.

48. Darla Isackson, *Trust God No Matter What!* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legend Press, 2008), 52.

49. Paulsen, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James,” 126–27.

which I think is His goal as recorded in Moses 1:39: “For behold, this is my work and my glory — to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” How He answers individual prayer is best explained by this divine objective.

So what is the answer? Are those prayers simply misdirected that ask for relief from the mortal conditions we so joyfully embraced in our premortal life? Do our prayers ensnarl us in the trap of faulting God for not answering our requests when our prayers may simply be amiss? Should we acknowledge that answers to our pleadings might be beyond the framework we accepted in embracing mortality? Should our *prayers be directed more toward inspiration for help in coping with the elements of mortality*, using empathy and the atonement to assist us, *rather than asking for exemption or immunity from the joyfully accepted conditions of mortality*? In Christ’s agonized prayer for personal relief, the granting of which would compromise the atonement, He included the humble understanding that “Thy will be done,” a clear statement saying, “Answer me how and in the way — you choose — not constrain[ing] the manner in which the answer came.”<sup>50</sup> Chieko Okazaki suggested that we should not pray for simple solutions: “He wants us to take seriously that promise about the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. And this, in turn, means that Heavenly Father doesn’t want to hear only ‘nice’ prayers. He wants to hear real prayers, honest prayers.”<sup>51</sup>

God is not responsible for all things, and prayers that do not continually offend our premortal perceptions or challenge the agency of others may be answered. However, this understanding also endorses what Nephi wrote almost 600 BC: “I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.”<sup>52</sup> Such humility allows the modern Latter-day Saint, while avoiding prayer amiss, both to freely ask for appropriate avoidance of the unpleasant aspects of mortal experience and to understand that such exceptions will be real but uncommon, their purpose divine and often incomprehensible.

**David Clark:** *Following completion of studies at BYU, Columbia, and the University of Iowa, he taught at SMU and BYU but spent most of his professional career at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he*

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50. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 130.

51. Chieko N. Okazaki, *Lighten Up!* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 182–83.

52. 1 Nephi 11:17.

*served as chairman of the Department of Geology and Geophysics and associate dean responsible for the Natural Sciences at Wisconsin. His research focused on the geology of the Arctic Ocean, and from 1995-1999, he served as Chairman of the Polar Research Board of the National Academy of Science. He received the R.C. Moore Award for Excellence in Paleontology and the Pander Society Medal for micropaleontology research. He published two books related to theology and history of the restored Church of Jesus Christ and also has published in the Journal of Mormon History and BYU Studies.*

