

Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* Book 7, Chapter 7:

**WHAT SORT OF PRAYER THE GNOSTIC¹ EMPLOYS,
AND HOW IT IS HEARD BY GOD.**

Now we are commanded to reverence and to honor the same one, being persuaded that He is Word, Savior, and Leader, and by Him, the Father, not on special days, as some others, but doing this continually in our whole life, and in every way. Certainly the elect race justified by the precept says, *Seven times a day have I praised Thee* (Psalm 118:164). Whence not in a specified place, or selected temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his whole life, the Gnostic in every place, even if he be alone by himself, and wherever he has any of those who have exercised the like faith, honors God, that is, acknowledges his gratitude for the knowledge of the way to live.

And if the presence of a good man, through the respect and reverence which he inspires, always improves him with whom he associates, with much more reason does not he who always holds uninterrupted² converse with God by knowledge, life, and thanksgiving, grow at every step superior to himself in all respects -- in conduct, in words, in disposition? Such a one is persuaded that God is ever beside him, and does not suppose that He is confined

¹ *Gnostic*, literally, "one who is knowledgeable (of God)." In Clement's writings, Gnostic refers to a true Christian.

² Gk., *adialeiptōs*; 1 Thessalonians 5:17 – "Pray ceaselessly," that is, "uninterruptedly."

in certain limited places; so that under the idea that at times he is without Him, he may indulge in excesses night and day.

Holding festival, then, in our whole life, persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning; in all the rest of our conversation³ we conduct ourselves according to rule. The Gnostic, then, is very closely allied to God, being at once grave (or, serious) and cheerful in all things, -- grave on account of the bent of his soul towards the Divinity, and cheerful on account of his consideration of the blessings of humanity which God hath given us.

Now the excellence of knowledge is evidently presented by the prophet when he says, *Benignity, and instruction, and knowledge teach me* (Psalm 118:66), magnifying the supremacy of perfection by a climax.

**The Gnostic is the
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He is, then, the truly kingly man; he is the sacred high priest⁴ of God. And this is even now observed among the most sagacious of the Barbarians (i.e., the Jews), in advancing the sacerdotal caste to the royal power. He, therefore, never surrenders himself to the rabble that rules supreme over the theatres, and gives no admittance even in a

³ Gk., *politeia*, lit., "arrangement of the city/state"; the Church Fathers use this term to describe the totality of the Christian life arranged according to the Word of God.

⁴ Revelation 1:6; 5:10 – "[Jesus Christ] has made us kings and priests to His God and Father."

dream to the things which are spoken, done, and seen for the sake of alluring pleasures; neither, therefore, to the pleasures of sight, nor the various pleasures which are found in other enjoyments, as costly incense and odors, which bewitch the nostrils, or preparations of meats, and indulgences in different wines, which ensnare the palate, or fragrant bouquets of many flowers, which through the senses effeminate the soul.

But always tracing up to God the grave enjoyment of all things, he offers the first-fruits of food, and drink, and unguents to the Giver of all, acknowledging his thanks in the gift and in the use of them by the Word given to him. He rarely goes to convivial banquets of all and sundry, unless the announcement to him of the friendly and harmonious character of the entertainment induce him to go. For he is convinced that God knows and perceives all things -- not the words only, but also the thought; since even our sense of hearing, which acts through the passages of the body, has the apprehension [belonging to it] not through corporeal power, but through a psychical perception,⁵ and the intelligence which distinguishes significant sounds.

God is not, then, possessed of human form, so as to hear; nor needs He senses, as the Stoics have decided, "especially hearing and sight; for He could never otherwise apprehend." But the susceptibility of the air, and the intensely keen perception of the angels, and the power which reaches the soul's consciousness, by ineffable power

⁵ Gk., *dia tinos psychikēs aisthēseōs*, that is, "through some sense of the soul."

and without sensible hearing, know all things at the moment of thought.

And should anyone say that the voice does not reach God, but is rolled downwards in the air, yet the thoughts of the saints cleave not the air only, but the whole world. And the divine power, with the speed of light, sees through the whole soul. Well! Do not also volitions (or, choices) speak to God, uttering their voice? And are they not conveyed by conscience? And what voice shall He wait for, who, according to His purpose, knows the elect already, even before his birth, knows what is to be as already existent? Does not the light of power shine down to the very bottom of the whole soul; *the lamp of knowledge*, as the Scripture says, searching *the recesses* (Proverbs 20:22)? God is all ear and all eye, if we may be permitted to use these expressions.

In general, then, an unworthy opinion of God preserves no piety, either in hymns, or discourses, or writings, or dogmas, but diverts to groveling and unseemly ideas and notions. Whence the commendation of the multitude differs nothing from censure, in consequence of their ignorance of the truth. The objects, then, of desires and aspirations, and, in a word, of the mind's impulses, are the subjects of prayers.⁶ Wherefore, no man desires a draught, but to drink what is drinkable; and no man desires an inheritance, but

⁶ *Prayers*, Gk., *hai evchai*, which also simply means “vows” (see 1 Kingdoms 2:9 – “The One who gives a prayer [*evchē*] to the one praying [*evchomenos*]”). The other common Greek word for prayer, *prosevchē*, intensifies the same meaning, that is, a vow or commitment specifically directed toward God.

to inherit. And in like manner no man desires knowledge, but to know; or a right government, but to take part in the government. The subjects of our prayers, then, are the subjects of our requests, and the subjects of requests

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are the objects of desires. Prayer, then, and desire, follow in order, with the view of possessing the blessings and advantages offered.

The Gnostic, then, who is such by possession, makes his prayer and request for the truly good things which appertain to the soul, and prays, he himself also contributing his efforts to attain to the habit of goodness, so as no longer to have the things that are good as certain lessons belonging to him, but to be good.

Wherefore also it is most incumbent on such to pray, knowing as they do the Divinity rightly, and having the moral excellence suitable to him; who know what things are really good, and what are to be asked, and when and how in each individual case. It is the extremest stupidity to ask of them who are no gods, as if they were gods; or to ask those things which are not beneficial, begging evils for themselves under the appearance of good things.

Whence, as is right, there being only one good God, that some good things be given from Him alone, and that some remain, we and the angels pray. But not similarly. For it is not the same thing to pray that the gift remain, and to endeavor to obtain it for the first time.

The averting of evils is a species of prayer; but such prayer is never to be used for the injury of men, except that the Gnostic, in devoting attention to righteousness, may make use of this petition in the case of those who are past feeling.

**Prayer is
converse
with God.**

Prayer is, then, to speak more boldly, converse with God. Though whispering, consequently, and not opening the lips, we speak in silence, yet we cry inwardly. For God hears continually all the inward converse. So also we raise the head and lift the hands to heaven, and set the feet in motion at the closing utterance of the prayer, following the eagerness of the spirit directed towards the intellectual essence; and endeavoring to abstract the body from the earth, along with the discourse, raising the soul aloft, winged with longing for better things, we compel it to advance to the region of holiness, magnanimously despising the chain of the flesh. For we know right well, that the Gnostic willingly passes over the whole world, as the Jews certainly did over Egypt, showing clearly, above all, that he will be as near as possible to God.

Now, if some assign definite hours for prayer -- as, for example, the third, and sixth, and ninth -- yet the Gnostic prays throughout his whole life, endeavoring by prayer to have fellowship with God. And, briefly, having reached to this, he leaves behind him all that is of no service, as having now received the perfection of the man that acts by love. But the distribution of the hours into a threefold

division, honored with as many prayers, those are acquainted with, who know the blessed triad of the holy abodes.

Having got to this point, I recollect the doctrines about there being no necessity to pray, introduced by certain of the heterodox, that is, the followers of the heresy of Prodicus. That they may not then be inflated with conceit about this godless wisdom of theirs, as if it were strange, let them learn that it was embraced before by the philosophers called Cyrenaics. Nevertheless, the unholy knowledge (gnosis) of those falsely called [Gnostics]⁷ shall meet with confutation at a fitting time; so that the assault on them, by no means brief, may not, by being introduced into the commentary, break the discourse in hand, in which we are showing that the only really holy and pious man is he who is truly a Gnostic according to the rule of the Church,⁸ to whom alone the petition made in accordance with the will of God is granted, on asking and on thinking. For as God can do all that He wishes, so the Gnostic receives all that he asks. For, universally, God knows those who are and those who are not worthy of good things; whence He gives to each what is suitable.

**The petition made in
accordance with the
will of God is granted.
God gives to each
what is suitable.**

⁷ 1 Timothy 6:20 – “[A]void the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge.”

⁸ Lit., *the ecclesiastical canon*, that is, the standard Faith and practice of the Church.

Wherefore to those that are unworthy, though they ask often, He will not give; but He will give to those who are worthy.

Nor is petition superfluous, though good things are given without claim.

Now thanksgiving and request for the conversion of our neighbors is the function of the Gnostic; as also the Lord prayed, giving thanks for the accomplishment of His ministry, praying that as many as possible might attain to knowledge; that in the saved, by salvation, through knowledge, God might be glorified, and He who is alone good and alone Savior might be acknowledged through the Son from age to age. But also faith, that one will receive, is a species of prayer gnostically laid up in store.

But if any occasion of converse with God becomes prayer, no opportunity of access to God ought to be omitted. Without doubt, the holiness of the Gnostic, in union with [God's] blessed Providence, exhibits in voluntary confession the perfect beneficence of God. For the holiness of the Gnostic, and the reciprocal benevolence of the friend of God, are a kind of corresponding movement of providence.

**He who is saved will
above all voluntarily
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For neither is God involuntarily good, as the fire is warming; but in Him the imparting of good things is voluntary, even if He receive the request previously. Nor shall he who is saved

be saved against his will, for he is not inanimate; but he will above all voluntarily and of free choice speed to salvation. Wherefore also man received the commandments in order that he might be self-impelled, to whatever he wished of things to be chosen and to be avoided.

Wherefore God does not do good by necessity, but from His free choice benefits those who spontaneously turn. For the Providence which extends to us from God is not ministerial, as that service which proceeds from inferiors to superiors. But in pity for our weakness, the continual dispensations of Providence work, as the care of shepherds towards the sheep, and of a king towards his subjects; we ourselves also conducting ourselves obediently towards our superiors, who take the management of us, as appointed, in accordance with the commission from God with which they are invested.

Consequently those who render the most free and kingly service, which is the result of a pious mind and of knowledge, are servants and attendants of the Divinity. Each place, then, and time, in which we entertain the idea of God, is in reality sacred.

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When, then, the man who chooses what is right, and is at the same time of thankful heart, makes his request in prayer, he contributes to the obtaining of it, gladly taking hold in prayer of the thing desired. For when the Giver of good things perceives the

susceptibility on our part, all good things follow at once the conception of them. Certainly in prayer the character is sifted, how it stands with respect to duty.

But if voice and expression are given us, for the sake of understanding, how can God not hear the soul itself, and the mind, since assuredly soul hears soul, and mind, mind? Whence God does not wait for loquacious tongues, as interpreters among men, but knows absolutely the thoughts of all; and what the voice intimates to us, that our thought, which even before the creation He knew would come into our mind, speaks to God. Prayer, then, may be uttered without the voice, by concentrating the whole spiritual nature within on expression by the mind, in un-distracted turning towards God.

And since the dawn is an image of the day of birth, and from that point the light which has shone forth at first from the darkness increases, there has also dawned on those involved in darkness a day of the knowledge of truth. In correspondence with the manner of the sun's rising, prayers are made looking towards the sunrise in the east.⁹ Whence also the most ancient temples looked towards the west, that people might be taught to turn to the east when facing the images. *Let my prayer be directed before Thee as incense, the uplifting of my hands as the evening sacrifice*, say the Psalms (140:2).

⁹ Also, the sunrise is an image of the Resurrection of Christ (Malachi 3:20; Luke 1:78-79).

In the case of wicked men, therefore, prayer is most injurious, not to others alone, but to themselves also. If, then, they should ask and receive what they call pieces of good fortune, these injure them after they receive them, being ignorant how to use them. For they pray to possess what they have not, and they ask things which seem, but are not, good things.

But the Gnostic will ask the permanence of the things he possesses, adaptation for what is to take place, and the eternity of those things which he shall receive. And the things which are really good, the things which concern the soul, he prays that they may belong to him, and remain with him. And so he desires not anything that is absent, being content with what is present. For he is not deficient in the good things which are proper to him; being already sufficient for himself, through divine grace and knowledge. But having become sufficient¹⁰ in himself, he stands in no want of other things. But knowing the sovereign will, and possessing as soon as he prays, being brought into close contact with the almighty power, and earnestly desiring to be spiritual, through boundless love, he is united to the Spirit.

The things which are really good, which concern the soul, he prays that they may belong to him, and remain with him.

¹⁰ Gk., *autarkēs*, lit., “self-sufficient”; Philippians 4:11 – “Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content (lit., self-sufficient).”

Thus he, being magnanimous, possessing, through knowledge, what is the most precious of all, the best of all, being quick in applying himself to contemplation, retains in his soul the permanent energy of the objects of his contemplation, that is the perspicacious keenness of knowledge. And this power he strives to his utmost to acquire, by obtaining command of all the influences which war against the mind; and by applying himself without intermission to speculation,¹¹ by exercising himself in the training of abstinence from pleasures, and of fight conduct in what he does; and besides, furnished with great experience both in study and in life, he has freedom of speech, not the power of a babbling tongue, but a power which employs plain language, and which neither for favor nor fear conceals aught of the things which may be worthily said at the fitting time, in which it is highly necessary to say them. He, then, having received the things respecting God from the mystic choir of the truth itself, employs language which urges the magnitude of virtue in accordance with its worth; and shows its results with an inspired elevation of prayer, being associated gnostically, as far as possible, with intellectual and spiritual objects.

Whence he is always mild and meek, accessible, affable, long-suffering, grateful, endued with a good conscience. Such a man is rigid,¹² not alone so as not to be corrupted, but so as not to be

¹¹ Gk., *theōria*, that is, "contemplation."

¹² Gk., *austēros* ("austere"), or "harsh."

tempted. For he never exposes his soul to submission, or capture at the hands of Pleasure and Pain.¹³ If the Word, who is Judge, call; he, having grown inflexible, and not indulging a whirl the passions, walks unswervingly where justice advises him to go; being very well persuaded that all things are managed consummately well, and that progress to what is better goes on in the case of souls that have chosen virtue, till they come to the Good itself, to the Father's vestibule, so to speak, close to the great High Priest.

Such is our Gnostic, faithful, persuaded that the affairs of the universe are managed in the best way. Particularly, he is well pleased with all that happens. In accordance with reason, then, he asks for none of those things in life required for necessary use; being persuaded that God, who knows all things, supplies the good with whatever is for their benefit, even though they do not ask.

For my view is, that as all things are supplied to the man of art according to the rules of art, and to the Gentile in a Gentile way, so also to the Gnostic all things are supplied gnostically. And the man who turns from among the Gentiles will ask for faith, while he that ascends to knowledge will ask for the perfection of love. And the Gnostic, who has reached the summit, will pray

**He that ascends
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¹³ Gk., *lypē*, or "sorrow, grief"; see Genesis 3:16, 17.

that contemplation may grow and abide, as the common man will for continual good health.

Nay, he will pray that he may never fall from virtue; giving his most strenuous co-operation in order that he may become infallible.¹⁴ For he knows that some of the angels, through carelessness, were hurled to the earth, not having yet quite reached that state of oneness, by extricating themselves from the propensity to that of duality.

But him, who from this has trained himself to the summit of knowledge and the elevated height of the perfect man, all things relating to time and place help on, now that he has made it his choice to live infallibly, and subjects himself to training in order to the attainment of the stability of knowledge on each side. But in the case of those in whom there is still a heavy corner, leaning downwards, even that part which has been elevated by faith is dragged down.

In him, then, who by gnostic training has acquired virtue which cannot be lost, habit becomes nature. And just as weight in a stone, so the knowledge of such a one is incapable of being lost. Not without, but through the exercise of will, and by the force of reason, and knowledge, and Providence, is it brought to become incapable of being lost. Through care it becomes incapable of being

¹⁴ Gk., *to aptōtos*, lit., “the inability to fall (into sin).”

lost. He will employ caution so as to avoid sinning, and consideration to prevent the loss of virtue.¹⁵

Now knowledge appears to produce consideration, by teaching to perceive the things that are capable of contributing to the permanence of virtue. The highest thing is, then, the knowledge of God; wherefore also by it virtue is so preserved as to be incapable of being lost. And he who knows God is holy and pious. The Gnostic has consequently been demonstrated by us to be the only pious man.

He rejoices in good things present, and is glad on account of those promised, as if they were already present. For they do not elude his notice, as if they were still absent, because he knows by anticipation what sort they are. Being then persuaded by knowledge how each future thing shall be, he possesses it. For want and defect are measured with reference to what appertains to one. If, then, he possesses wisdom, and wisdom is a divine thing, he who partakes of what has no want will himself have no want. For the imparting of wisdom does not take place by activity and

¹⁵ The goal of the Gnostic (Christian) is to stop sinning and continually practice virtue. John 8:11 – “Jesus said, ‘Go and sin no more.’” 1 Corinthians 15:34 – “Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God.” 1 John 3:6, 9 – “Who abides in [God] does not sin (or, keep on sinning). Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him...Who has been born of God does not sin (or, keep on sinning), for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin (or, keep on sinning), because he has been born of God.” The phrase “keep on sinning” expresses the sense of the present tense Greek verbs.

receptivity moving and stopping each other, or by aught being abstracted or becoming defective.

Activity is therefore shown to be undiminished in the act of communication.

So, then, our Gnostic possesses all good things, as far as possible; but not likewise in number; since otherwise he would be incapable of changing his place through the due inspired stages of advancement and acts of administration.

Him God helps, by honoring him with closer oversight. For were not all things made for the sake of good men, for their possession and advantage, or rather salvation? He will not then deprive, of the things which exist for the sake of virtue, those for whose sake they were created. For, evidently in honor of their excellent nature and their holy choice, he inspires those who have made choice of a good life with strength for the rest of their salvation; exhorting some, and helping others, who of themselves have become worthy.

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For all good is capable of being produced in the Gnostic; if indeed it is his aim to know and do everything intelligently. And as the physician ministers health to those who co-operate with him in order to health, so also God ministers eternal salvation to those who co-operate for the attainment of knowledge and good

conduct; and since what the commandments enjoin are in our own power, along with the performance of them, the promise is accomplished.

And what follows seems to me to be excellently said by the Greeks. An athlete of no mean reputation among those of old, having for a long time subjected his body to thorough training in order to the attainment of manly strength, on going up to the Olympic games, cast his eye on the statue of the Pisaeon Zeus, and said: "O Zeus, if all the requisite preparations for the contest have been made by me, come, give me the victory, as is right."

For so, in the case of the Gnostic, who has unblameably and with a good conscience fulfilled all that depends on him, in the direction of learning, and training, and well-doing, and pleasing God, the whole contributes to carry salvation on to perfection. From us, then, are demanded the things which are in our own power, and of the things which pertain to us, both present and absent, the choice, and desire, and possession, and use, and permanence.

Wherefore also he who holds converse with God must have his soul immaculate and stainlessly pure, it being essential to have made himself perfectly good.

But also it becomes him to make all his prayers gently with the good. For it is a dangerous thing to take part in others' sins. Accordingly the Gnostic will pray along with those who have more

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recently believed, for those things in respect of which it is their duty to act together. And his whole life is a holy festival. His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir, from continual recollection, engaged in contemplation which has everlasting remembrance.

And what? Does he not also know the other kind of sacrifice, which consists in the giving both of doctrines and of money to those who need? Assuredly. But he does not use wordy prayer by his mouth; having learned to ask of the Lord what is requisite. In every place, therefore, but not ostensibly and visibly to the multitude, he will pray. But while engaged in walking, in conversation, while in silence, while engaged in reading and in works according to reason, he in every mood prays. If he but form the thought in the secret chamber of his soul, and call on the Father *with unspoken groanings* (Romans 8:26), He is near, and is at his side, while yet speaking. Inasmuch as there are but three ends of all action, he does everything for its excellence and utility; but doing aught for the sake of pleasure, he leaves to those who pursue the common life.