

The Universal Prayer

A poem by Alexander Pope

Paraphrase and commentary by Alan Steinle

Alexander Pope (1688-1744), an Englishman, wrote “The Universal Prayer” when he was about 27 years old (ca. 1715). Pope wrote the poem using 13 hymn stanzas. The hymn stanza has 8-6-8-6 syllables per line, and it rhymes abab. The similar ballad stanza only rhymes the second and fourth lines: xaxa. For each stanza of the poem, I wrote a paraphrase of the stanza in prose, and I made a few comments.



1.

**Father of all! in every age,
In every clime adored,
By saint, by savage, and by sage,
Jehovah, Jove, or Lord!**

You are the Father of everyone. You are worshiped in every age and region of the earth by saints, “uncivilized” people, and wise men. You are addressed by many names.

Although God has been worshiped throughout history, he hasn’t been worshiped by all people at any given time or in any given culture. Only some people within a population can be said to worship God. What does it mean to worship Him? We can say that in order to worship Him in truth, we have to know His character, regardless of whom we claim to worship and what name we use. Satan also has many names, including “god of this age.” If we worship fear and division, rather than love and unity, then perhaps we are not worshiping our Father, but Satan.



2.

**Thou Great First Cause, least understood:
Who all my sense confined
To know but this—that thou art good,
And that myself am blind:**

You are the Cause of all effects. I don’t understand You. You limited my knowledge to only this: You are good, and I am blind.

God is the Cause of all He has created. Although we might not currently understand all the details of how He works in the world, we can trust that He is bringing all things to a good conclusion.



3.

**Yet gave me, in this dark estate,
To see the good from ill;
And binding Nature fast in fate,
Left free the human will.**

In my blindness, in the dark, I can still tell good from evil. Although nature must follow the physical laws, humans have free will.

Is anything completely predetermined? Are the laws of nature fixed? God has given His creation free will, but we can fully experience freedom only when we join with God's will. Evil is to try to oppose His will, and goodness is to try to unite with His will.



4.

**What conscience dictates to be done,
Or warns me not to do,
This, teach me more than Hell to shun,
That, more than Heaven pursue.**

My conscience tells me what to do and what not to do, but teach me to avoid more than hell and seek more than Heaven.

Heaven is a state of oneness with God, and hell is the belief in separation from God. We are heading towards one or the other extreme, but we can change directions if we choose.



5.

**What blessings thy free bounty gives,
Let me not cast away;
For God is paid when man receives,
To enjoy is to obey.**

Don't let me throw away the blessings You freely give me, for You also benefit when we accept them, and it is Your will for us to enjoy them.

God's joy increases when we are joyful. He only wants to make our joy complete. If we reject His gifts, we miss out on His good will for us.



6.
Yet not to earth's contracted span,
Thy goodness let me bound,
Or think thee Lord alone of man,
When thousand worlds are round:

Don't let me limit Your goodness to earth or say that You are Lord only of man when there are thousands of planets.

Today, the astronomers tell us that there are innumerable planets in the universe. Could God have limited His living creation to just one planet? That doesn't seem likely to me.



7.
Let not this weak, unknowing hand
Presume thy bolts to throw,
And deal damnation round the land,
On each I judge thy foe.

Don't let me, in my weakness and ignorance, presume to take your authority and condemn those I consider to be your enemies.

If we believe that God is judgmental and wants to punish people, then we naturally will want to do the same thing. But if the God we believe in is a God of love, mercy, and reconciliation, then we need to think and act in that way to be like Him.



8.
If I am right, thy grace impart,
Still in the right to stay;
If I am wrong, oh teach my heart
To find a better way.

When I am right, give me the grace to continue doing right. When I am wrong, teach me to find a better path.

Every moment, we need to be inspired by God's Spirit to do what is best. When we don't know what is best, we need to ask the Holy Spirit in prayer.



9.

**Save me alike from foolish pride,
Or impious discontent,
At aught thy wisdom has denied,
Or aught thy goodness lent.**

Don't let me be proud of anything your goodness has given me or let me be discontent when you wisely don't let me have something.

We cannot currently see the big picture, so we don't know how everything fits together. But we can have faith that God will bring everything to a good conclusion, and we can use our free will to comply with His plan.



10.

**Teach me to feel another's woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I to others show,
That mercy show to me.**

Teach me to feel another person's sorrow and to overlook the mistakes I see. Be merciful to me in the same way that I am merciful to others.

We should feel compassion for others, but we should not join them in their sorrow any longer than necessary. Love does not keep a record of mistakes that we or others have made. Instead, it overlooks mistakes and focuses on the good in people. When we show mercy and forgive, we will receive mercy and forgiveness.



11.

**Mean though I am, not wholly so
Since quickened by thy breath;
Oh lead me wheresoe'er I go,
Through this day's life or death.**

Although I am a lowly person, Your breath gives me life. Lead me wherever I go, though it be through life or death.

Our life comes from God. We do not live by mere physical means, such as food, water, and air, but from His spiritual sustenance. If we let Him lead us, all things will work together for good.



12.

**This day, be bread and peace my lot:
All else beneath the sun,
Thou know'st if best bestowed or not,
And let thy will be done.**

Let me have bread and peace today. You know what else I need or do not need. Let Your will be done.

This stanza echoes “The Lord’s Prayer.” When Jesus’ disciples asked him how to pray, he told them to ask for their daily bread, for forgiveness, and for God’s will to be done on earth.



13.

**To thee, whose temple is all space,
Whose altar, earth, sea, skies!
One chorus let all being raise!
All Nature’s incense rise!**

To You, Whose temple is all space, and Whose altar is earth, sea, and sky, let all beings sing before You, and let nature’s incense rise to Heaven.

God is everywhere (omnipresent), and those who worship Him don’t need to go anywhere to do so. Incense is used with prayer, or as a symbol of prayer. The smoke of the incense rises in the same way that believers’ prayers “rise” to Heaven. All of nature can praise God by seeking to do His will.