

Forty-Day Poetry Journal

to accompany Brother Lawrence's *Practice of the Presence of God*

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Poems you write as a part of this journal:

Nature Poem. Name Poem. Wholeness Poem. Water Poem. Straw Poem. Mending Poem. Minute Poem. Salvation Poem. Trust Poem. Mirror Poem. Self Poem. Intimately Present. Simple Works. Outside the Box. Straw Poem II. Someone You Love. Bottom Poem. Perfection. Lights of Faith. Life as a Sermon. Weather Poem. Poem about God. Torn-Up Poem. Poem of Praise. Cleaning Poem. Stone Poem. Internal Adorations. Blindness. Ship Poem. Sight. Clock Poem. Oratory of Our Heart. Occasions of Wandering. Love and Knowledge. Glorious Employment. Healing Poem. Loyalty. Perseverance. Infinity. Heart as a Spiritual Temple. Open Door.

The edition of *Practice the Presence of God* directly quoted is a Third Edition Spire Book by Fleming H. Revell Co., pub. 1970 in Old Tappan, New Jersey. The Bible quoted is a King James translation.

Day 1. First Conversation. Nature Poem.

"That in the winter, seeing a tree stripped of its leaves, and considering that within a little time the leaves would be renewed, and after that the flowers and fruit appear, he received a high view of the providence and power of God, which has never since been effaced from his soul" (11).

It has been said that our language is innately metaphorical. Write a poem based on an observation you made in nature leading to an epiphany. Notice how Jesus uses metaphors and similes throughout his parables. Develop the metaphor on several levels of precision and meaning; if you use a tree, for instance, think about roots, bark, and leaves; photosynthesis, light, and rain.

Day 2. First Conversation. Name Poem.

"That we should feel and nourish our souls with high notions of God; which would yield us great joy in being devoted to Him" (12).

Write a poem about ways you nourish your soul: reading the Bible, spending time alone with God, taking walks, and praying for others might be a few of your favorite activities. Post your poem in your room or at work, or wherever you can see it. It will give you daily encouragement.

"Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (KJ Philippians 4:8).

Day 3. First Conversation. Wholeness Poem.

"That we ought to give ourselves up to God, with regard both to things temporal and spiritual, and seek our satisfaction only in the fulfilling of His will, whether He lead us by suffering or by consolation, for all would be equal to a soul truly resigned" (13).

Just for day -- unless you are already in this habit already -- try living as though there were no divisions between your "spiritual" life and any other life you might live "unspiritually." What occurs? Be mindful of God's grace in all areas of your life. Write about changes you experience. What rewards do we receive now for investing in the eternal?

"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ (NIV Philippians 3:7-8).

Day 4. First Conversation. Water Poem.

"That there needed fidelity in those drynesses or insensibilities and irksomenesses in prayer by which God tries our love to him; that *then* was the time for us to make good and effectual acts of resignation, whereof one alone would oftentimes very much promote our spiritual advancement" (13).

Make a list of water metaphors and miracles: living water, water to wine, water as purifier, water as sustenance, water as healing, water as rain, water as life. Write a poem focusing on the water Christ offers as medicine for ailments.

"But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (KJ John 4:14).

Day 5. Second Conversation. Straw Poem.

"That he had always been governed by love, without selfish views; and that having resolved to make the love of God the *end* of all his actions, he had found reasons to be well satisfied with his method. That he was pleased when he could take up a straw from the ground for the love of God, seeking Him only, and nothing else, not even His gifts" (14).

What does it mean to be governed by love? What are the "straws" in your life -- what straws will you pick up today -- or do you think you're *too good to pick up straw* -- uh-oh! Or are there only certain people you believe are worthy to receive your straw-picking? Where do these kinds of attitudes come from? Weave your responses together in a straw poem. What straws will you pick up today that only a Christian would pick up?

Day 6. Second Conversation. Mending Poem.

"I shall never do otherwise if you leave me to myself; it is You who must hinder my falling and mend what is amiss" (16).

What, if anything, remains amiss in your life? What needs mending? Bring your needs to Jesus in form of a poem and lay them at His feet.

"And the people, when they knew, followed him: and he received them, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God, and healed them that had need of healing" (KJ Luke 9:11).

Day 7. Second Conversation. Minute Poem.

"That with him the set times of prayer were not different from other times . . ." (17).

To practice being in the presence of God -- continually -- takes a lot of mental discipline, but the rewards are great. Begin with practicing His presence when you're involved in repetitive activities such as dish-washing, walking, mending socks, mowing the lawn, or folding clothes. Even minute activities such as sharpening pencils matter much. You'll soon find yourself in deeply moored in His presence.

"Pray without ceasing" (KJ 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Day 8. Second Conversation. Salvation Poem.

"That we ought, without anxiety, to expect the pardon of our sins from the blood of Jesus Christ, only endeavoring to love Him with all our hearts" (19).

God grants us many gifts of mercy – but the crowning gift is salvation. This gift does not change in eternity; it changes us for eternity. Does your past continue to hold bondage over you? Write a poem about your salvation.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (KJ Romans 10:9).

Day 9. Third Conversation. Trust Poem.

"That the trust we put in God honors Him much and draws down great graces" (20).

Consider the phrase, *draws down great graces* – manna from heaven, the Son of God to earth, the dead raised to life. Has your hope in God drawn down great graces? Write a poem expressing your hope in God.

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding" (KJ Proverbs 3:5).

Day 10. Third Conversation. Mirror Poem.

“That he had so often experienced the ready succors of divine grace upon all occasions, that from the same experience, when he had business to do, he did not think of it beforehand; but when it was time to do it, he found in God, as in a clear mirror, all that was fit for him to do” (20).

Key phrase: *clear mirror*. Mirror metaphors are rich reservoirs of spiritual meaning. What do you see when you take a look in your mirror? What are the paths God would have you walk down? What kind of mirror do you imagine? Your mirror poem might also shift into a map poem with rivers and roads as its metaphors.

“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, [even] as by the Spirit of the Lord” (KJ 2 Corinthians 3:18).

“Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed” (KJ James 1: 22-25).

Day 11. Third Conversation. Self Poem.

“That in the beginning of the spiritual life we ought to be faithful in doing our duty and denying ourselves; but after that, unspeakable pleasures followed. That in difficulties we need only have recourse to Jesus Christ, and beg His grace; with that everything became easy” (21-2).

Sometimes we get mired “in penances and particular exercises” while neglecting the love of God (22). What are the sticky penances and particular exercises of your life? Write a poem expressing your desire to be free of ensnaring complications. Lay your anxieties and ambitions at the cross of Christ.

“And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple” (KJ Luke 14:27).

Day 12. Fourth Conversation. Intimately Present.

“That we need only to recognize God intimately present with us, to address ourselves to Him every moment, that we may beg His assistance for knowing his will in things doubtful, and for rightly performing those which we plainly see He requires of us, offering them to Him before we do them, and giving Him thanks when we have done” (23).

Key phrase: *intimately present with us*. Write a poem narrating God within the "now" as He is intimately present with you *now*. What images can you use to convey abstract concepts such as intimacy and presence – and intimate presence? Gaston Bachelard, a French philosopher, mentions the coiled precision and perfect ratio of the nautilus, the intricate intimacy of nests, and the “intimate immensity” of forests in *The Poetics of Space*.

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to [his] purpose” (KJ Romans 8:28).

Day 13. Fourth Conversation. Simple Works.

“That our sanctification did not depend upon *changing* our works, but in doing that for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own. That is was lamentable to see how many people mistook the means for the end, addicting themselves to certain works, which they performed very imperfectly, by reason of their human or selfish regards” (24).

What works do you need to give over to God? The works may be very simple, and that's quite all right. Write down your ideas in a poem.

“Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh [but] in vain” (KJ Psalm 127:1).

Day 14. Fourth Conversation. Outside the Box.

“That the most excellent method he had found of going to God was that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men [or women], and (as far we are capable) purely for the love of God” (24).

What aspects of self can you shed? Fear of other people – sometimes in the form of desiring to please -- can be quite paralyzing; can you live outside the box – outside of self, outside of fear, outside of ego, outside of ambition?

“But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts” (KJ 1 Thessalonians 2:4).

Day 15. Fourth Conversation. Straw Poem II.

“That we ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed” (25).

We return to straw picking. What straws would you pick up today that no one else would pick up? What straws would you pick up that only a Christian would pick up? Do you do this with a loving heart? Have you been picking up more straws lately, or giving excuses for not picking them up?

“And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called [unto him] his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all [they] did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, [even] all her living” (KJ Mark 12:42-44).

Day 16. Fourth Conversation. Someone You Love.

“That all things are possible to him who *believes*; that they are less difficult to him who *hopes*; that they are more easy to him who *loves*, and still more easy to him who perseveres in the practice of these three virtues” (25).

Key Words: *believes – hopes -- loves*

James Applewhite wrote a poem called "Prayer for My Son" which includes the beautiful lines, ". . . Oh son, / Know that the psyche has its own / Fame, whether known or not, that / Soul can flame like feathers of a bird. / Grow into your own plumage, brightly, / So that any tree is a marvelous city." Make a list of images that occur to you when you see the words *believes – hopes – loves*. Weave the images into a poem of encouragement to someone you love: Prayer for My Mother, Prayer for My Father, Prayer for My Sister, Prayer for My Brother.

“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen” (KJ Hebrews 11:1).

Day 17. Fourth Conversation. Bottom Poem.

“That when we enter upon the spiritual life, we should consider and examine to the bottom what we are” (25).

Look inside yourself. What kind of bottom is there? The bottom of a cookie jar? The bottom of a fish vat? The bottom of a barrel of apples? The burned crust sticking to a cake pan? A lake bottom? A glass bottom? A gold or silver bottom?

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us” (KJ 2 Corinthians 4:7).

Day 18. Fourth Conversation. Perfection.

“That the greater perfection a soul aspires after, the more dependent it is upon divine grace” (26).

What natural phenomena speak to you of divine grace and its perfecting quality? What are these natural phenomena dependent upon? Write a poem.

“And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me” (KJ 2 Corinthians 12:9).

Day 19. Fourth Conversation. Lights of Faith.

“That in the beginning of his novitiate he spent the hours appointed for private prayer thinking of God, so as to convince his mind of, and to impress deeply upon his heart, the divine existence, rather by devout sentiments, and submission to the lights of faith, than by studied reasonings and elaborate meditations” (27).

Phrases: *impress deeply upon his heart, lights of faith*

Where are the lights of faith in your life – what do they look like, where do they appear, how often do you see them? Are they ephemeral or constant?

“Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (KJ 2 Corinthians 10:5).

Day 20. Fourth Conversation. Life as a Sermon.

“His example was a stronger inducement than any arguments he could propose. His very countenance was edifying, such a sweet and calm devotion appearing in it as could not but affect the beholders. And it was observed that in the greatest hurry of business in the kitchen he still preserved his recollection and heavenly-mindedness” (28).

Phrase: *recollection and heavenly-mindedness*

It has been often said that people would rather “see” a sermon than “hear” one. Whose lives are examples of sermons you have “seen?” What aspect of your life is – or you hope will become – a sermon others can see? Write a poem about seeing sermons.

Day 21. Fourth Conversation. Weather Poem.

“ ‘The time of business,’ said he, ‘does not with me differ from the time of prayer; and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in great tranquility as if I were upon my knees at the blessed sacrament ’ ” (29).

Phrase: *upon my knees at the blessed sacrament*

The weather in our souls can be unaffected by the weather in our environment if the Holy Spirit is dwelling within us – if we are abiding in Christ. In a poem, ask God to give you great tranquility in the noise and clatter of daily life. What sort of weather exists inside and outside your life? Do you seek shelter in Christ or try to weather the hurricanes yourself?

Day 22. First Letter. Poem about God.

**“I began to live as if there was none but He and I in the world”
(31).**

Write about as though the above is true for you – God and you dwelling in the same garden. How are you aware of His presence? What is His presence like? His voice, His language, His light, His fragrance?

Day 23. First Letter. Torn-Up Poem.

“At all times, every hour, every minute, even in the height of my business, I drove away from my mind everything that was capable of interrupting my thought of God” (31).

What little thought-demons plague you throughout the day? You don't have to be in bondage to those things. Make a list and tear it up. You can even stomp on the pieces for emphasis.

Day 24. First Letter. Poem of Praise.

“Give Him thanks, if you please, with me, for His great goodness toward me, which I can never sufficiently admire, for the many favors He has done to so miserable a sinner as I am” (32).

Write a poem of thanksgiving. Read Psalms.

Day 25. Second Letter. Cleaning Poem.

“And I make it my business only to persevere in His holy presence, wherein I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God, which I may call an *actual presence* of God; or, to speak better, an habitual, silent, and secret conversation of the soul with God” (36).

What noise has entered your life lately? Sweep it out of your mind and heart by writing a poem. Make a metaphor comparing a process of house-cleaning (the tub, the toilet, the kitchen sink, garage, back patio) and spiritual cleaning. Our word *stanza*, by the way, derives from the Italian word for room.

Day 26. Second Letter. Stone Poem.

“Sometimes I consider myself there as a stone before a carver, whereof he is to make a statue; presenting myself thus before God, I desire Him to form His perfect image in my soul, and make me entirely like Himself” (38).

Asked about his sculpture technique, Michelangelo once replied, “You chisel away what doesn’t belong.” What doesn’t belong in your life? Write down what doesn’t belong and allow God to use His chisel on you.

“But now, O LORD, thou [art] our father; we [are] the clay, and thou our potter; and we all [are] the work of thy hand” (KJ Isaiah 64:8).

Day 27. Third Letter. Internal Adorations.

“A little lifting up of the heart suffices. A little remembrance of God, one act of inward worship, though upon a march, and a sword in hand, are prayers, which however short, are nevertheless very acceptable to God; and far from lessening a soldier’s courage in occasions of danger, they best serve to fortify it” (40).

Write short poems of adoration to God. They can be little; they don’t have to be long. Tape the poems to your bathroom mirror, in the tub, over the desk, inside the front door, on the coffee table.

Day 28. Fourth Letter. Blindness.

“Blind as we are, we hinder God and stop the current of His graces. But when He finds a soul penetrated with a lively faith, He pours into it His graces and favors plentifully; there they flower like a torrent which, after being forcibly stopped against its ordinary course, when it has found a passage, spreads itself with impetuosity and abundance” (42).

Everyone – even a normally-sighted person -- has a natural blind spot where the optic nerve meets the retina. Where are the blind spots in your life? Write a poem. Ask God for wisdom.

“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart . . . “ (KJ Ephesians 4:17-18).

Day 29. Fourth Letter. Ship Poem.

“But those who have the gale of the Holy Spirit go forward even in sleep. If the vessel of our soul is still tossed with winds and storms, let us awake the Lord, who reposes in it, and He will quickly calm the sea” (43).

Ships are natural metaphors. Write a ship poem. How far has the Lord carried you in the past decade? How far will He carry you today? Tomorrow? What’s the weather been like?

“And when he was entered into a ship, his disciples followed him. And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea, insomuch that the ship was covered with the waves: but he was asleep. And his disciples came to [him], and awoke him, saying, Lord, save us: we perish” (KJ Mathew 8:25).

Day 30. Fifth Letter. Sight.

“Ah! Knew we but the want we have of the grace and assistance of God, we should never lose sight of Him – no, not for a moment. Believe me; make immediately a holy and firm resolution nevermore willfully to forget Him, and to spend the rest of your days in His sacred presence, deprived, for the love of Him, if He thinks fit, of all consolations” (45).

Write a poem about things in nature that vanish. Contrast them to the eternal grace and assistance of God. Include imagery about eyes and sight. Key phrase: *never lose sight of Him*

“But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. Blessed [is] the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him” (KJ James 1:10-12).

Day 31. Sixth Letter. Clock Poem.

“At the first one often thinks it lost time, but you must go on, and resolve to persevere in it to death, notwithstanding all the difficulties that may occur” (47).

Phrase: *one often thinks it lost time*. A sojourner may travel many days at sea without seeing land and imagine, by the lack of changing scenery, that miles of ocean waste indicate lost time – you know, however, that time has indeed passed, and the journey will draw to an end. Write a poem about time you have invested in God. Was any of the time you invested in God – a waste? How much patience and perseverance did you have as you abided in Him? God may not choose to give “instant” fruit; did you stick around long enough?

For your clock poem, you might include common symbols of time such as clocks, hourglasses, and photographs as well as uncommon symbols of time that occur to you. Is your journey drawing to an end? No one knows the day or hour of his or her departure. Wislawa Szymborska wrote a poem called "Four in the Morning;" it's a fourteen-line poem in which the first seven lines begin with "the hour," as in "the hour from night to day. / The hour from side to side." Your poem might take shape in a similar form.

“I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me” (KJ Proverbs 8:17).

Day 32. Seventh Letter. Oratory of Our Heart.

“We may make an oratory of our heart wherein to retire from time to time to converse with Him in meekness, humility, and love” (48).

Key phrase: *oratory of our heart*

How has your life changed since you decided to break down your spiritual-temporal divisions in your life? Have the divisions grown back again?

Day 33. Eighth Letter. Occasions of Wandering.

“I believe one remedy for this is to confess our faults and to humble ourselves before God. I do not advise you to use multiplicity of words in prayer, many words and long discourses being often the occasions of wandering” (50).

Prayers and poems don't have to be long and impressive – God is not impressed by high-flung language, and people usually prefer brief sincerity to bombastic pomposity. On the subject of wandering, what are your favorite paths for wandering from God? Does your ego lead you astray? Are your emotions a factor? Why do you head down these paths? What happens when you go too far? How many times have you had to suffer the consequences of wandering too far? Understanding where these tendencies come from may help you to stop.

The lines in a poem may be compared to the layout of a city. Kevin Lynch, an urban planner, points out the role of city layout in shaping inhabitants' lives (*Image of a City*). Write a poem about your occasions of wandering. How have your spiritual wanderings shaped your life?

“But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him (KJ Matthew 6:7-8).

Day 34. Ninth Letter. Love and Knowledge.

“We must know before we can love. In order to know God, we must often think of Him” (43).

What do you know about God? Write a poem including all the things you know about God. In the course of keeping this journal, have you experienced or learned anything new about Him? Every bit of growth matters, even if only seems a little.

Day 35. Tenth Letter. Glorious Employment.

“Do not, then, forget Him, but think on Him often, adore Him continually, live and die with Him; this is the glorious employment of a Christian” (54).

Imagine yourself living and dying solely for Christ – and this as your sole profession, your sole identity. Write a poem about your glorious employment.

Day 36. Eleventh Letter. Healing Poem.

“Comfort yourself with the sovereign Physician both of the soul and body” (56).

In what ways has He spoken to us in our times of trial? What scriptures are the best medicine for you right now? Weave them into a poem of healing.

“Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy my with good, that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s (KJ Psalm 103:2-5).

Day 37. Twelfth Letter. Loyalty.

“And yet I know not how He can leave me alone, because faith gives me as strong a conviction as sense can do that He never forsakes us until we have first forsaken Him” (58).

God will never leave us or forsake us – unless, as the Bible says, we are ashamed of Him – then He will be ashamed of us on the last day. Write a poem pledging your loyalty to Jesus.

“I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (KJ Joshua 1:5).

Day 38. Thirteenth Letter. Perseverance.

“Love sweetens pains; and when one loves God, one suffers for His sake with joy and courage” (60).

Phrase: *love sweetens pains.*

Write a poem about sweetness arising from bitter things.

Day 39. Thirteenth Letter. Infinity.

“He loves us infinitely, more than we imagine. Love Him, then, and seek no consolation elsewhere” (60).

Jesus on the cross, the grace of God – what is infinite love?

“Hast thou entered into the springs of the sea? Or hast thou walked in the search of the depth?” (KJ Job 38:16)

“For since the beginning of the world [men] have not heard, not perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, [what] he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him” (KJ Isaiah 64:4).

Day 40. Fourteenth Letter. Heart as a Spiritual Temple

“We must hinder our spirits’ wandering from Him upon any occasion. We must make our heart a spiritual temple, wherein to adore Him incessantly” (61).

Metaphors of shelter and worship such as rooms, houses, temples, and mansions hold deep reservoirs of Christian meaning. Use a few of these metaphors in a poem about the heart as a spiritual temple.

“Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (KJ 1 Corinthians 6:19)

Additional Day. Fourteenth Letter. Open Door.

“Knock, persevere in knocking, and I answer for it that He will open to you in His due time, and grant you all at once what He has deferred during many years. Adieu. Pray to Him for me as I pray to Him for you. I hope to see Him quickly” (61).

Use the metaphor of a door to write your last poem. Anna Kamienska has written wonderful poem called, "A Prayer that Will Be Answered." It contains the following whimsical lines about a window: “And let my poem stand clear as a windowpane / bumped by a bumblebee’s head.” Write an open-door poem describing a prayer you know will be answered.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (KJ Matthew 7:7).

Parting Thoughts

“O my God, since Thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, I beseech Thee to grant me the grace to continue in Thy presence; and to this end do Thou prosper me with Thy assistance, receive all my works, and possess all my affections” (27).