

# *Preserving Our Relationship with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ*

TRACY Y. BROWNING

**H**ave you ever had an experience in which you noticed a particular make, model, or color of car on the road and then it seemed like you couldn't escape seeing that kind of car all over the place? I recently learned that this is a real phenomenon. In the early 2000s, a college professor even gave it a name: "frequency illusion."<sup>1</sup> Basically, it means that something that has recently caught your attention appears to be more prevalent or frequent in your environment than it was before.

Frequency illusion has two parts:

First, the perception that an experience has increased in frequency—meaning you suddenly start to see yellow Volkswagen Beetles everywhere.

Second, the belief that this experience wasn't occurring with that same frequency

previously—you can't remember ever seeing so many yellow Volkswagen Beetles before in your life.

Now it would take a very active imagination to draw any kind of deep, meaningful interpretation from the sudden materialization of small yellow cars on the streets you travel. However, I do believe that when something like that happens in our pursuit of learning—including spiritual learning—it may be that the Lord is trying to tell us something or guide us in some way.

- First, He arouses or awakens our attention to a principle or a concept.
- We then start to notice that principle in multiple places—often where we hadn't noticed it before.

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*Tracy Y. Browning, second counselor in the Primary general presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on February 14, 2023.*

- And next, we recognize purpose, meaning, or a possible message in our experience.

In the context of spiritual learning, we wouldn't call this an *illusion*, but we might say it's an *impression*—the Lord's way of helping us notice something that was always there but to which we had been blind.

Consider Elder Richard G. Scott's teaching from general conference:

*Impressions of the Spirit can come in response to urgent prayer or unsolicited when needed. Sometimes the Lord reveals truth to you when you are not actively seeking it. . . . However, the Lord will not force you to learn. You must exercise your agency to authorize the Spirit to teach you. As you make this a practice in your life, you will be more perceptive to the feelings that come with spiritual guidance. Then, when that guidance comes, sometimes when you least expect it, you will recognize it more easily.*<sup>2</sup>

Elder Scott's observation—that at times we may receive unsolicited impressions from the Spirit—leads me to conclude that God is constantly trying to communicate with us, even more than we may recognize. And it becomes *vital* that we seek to be consistently tuned to a spiritual frequency that allows us to have our attention awakened, to notice what God wants us to notice, and to be sensitive to the spiritual significance of our experiences—in other words, to receive the message the Lord is inviting us to receive.

### Recognizing a Pattern

Not too long ago, I received an impression that followed a similar pattern. While reading the scriptures, I came across the word *preserve*, and it struck me in a way that I hadn't recognized previously. A small seed was planted in my mind. Subsequently, I felt like I was encountering this word everywhere. For instance, I saw it in other things I read and heard it in casual conversations. I even found it at the grocery store. While walking down an aisle looking for jam, a certain label on a jar caught my eye. I picked it up, and there I stood deciding between buying jam or preserves!

Each encounter helped the small seed to grow, and my attention was now focused. I recognized a pattern that continued to persuade me to ponder this word. Of course I knew that people weren't suddenly and involuntarily using the word *preserve* around me more often. But with my new heightened sensitivity to the word, I sought to understand what I should learn from this "frequency impression."

I felt the Spirit invite me to contemplate three questions:

1. What does it mean to preserve something?
2. What am I trying to preserve in my life?
3. What are the observable steps I'm taking toward that preservation?

Question 1 led me, predictably, to the dictionary to look up *preserve*. I love the language that I found there. It helped me visualize the purpose of preservation. I learned, for example, that to preserve means:

- To keep safe from injury or harm
- To protect, to keep alive or intact
- To safeguard, secure, defend, shelter, shield, and give sanctuary

As I pondered these definitions, it became easy to answer question 2: What am I trying to preserve, protect, keep alive, and defend? I'm sure if you were to consider that question for yourself, we might find that we share some answers in common—relationships with loved ones, family history and traditions, heirlooms, and things in the physical world such as the environment, to name a few.

The steps we take to preserve things are observable in our everyday lives—for example, the foods we eat, the exercises we perform, the medicines we take to preserve our physical and mental health, and the technology we use to preserve information so it can be accessed well into the future.

Ultimately, this exercise clearly highlighted a few things for me:

1. Our desire to preserve something indicates its *value* in our lives.

2. We want to preserve these precious things because we know they are susceptible to harm, decay, erosion, or even destruction.

3. Just wanting to preserve something isn't enough. We have to take observable steps to protect the things we value and to prevent any harmful corruption.

With this understanding, I was able to discern what the Spirit of the Lord was trying to tell me. He wanted me to assess, before all else, how I can *preserve* my faith in Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ and my relationship with Them.

This singular question called on me to apply all that I was learning about preservation to my relationship with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ and the covenants that I've made with Them. It led me to determine whether I had placed Them in the prevailing position on my personal list of values, allowing everything else in my life to flow from that most important relationship.

Speaking here at BYU in March 2022, Elder D. Todd Christofferson invited us

*to consider the majesty of the two great commandments on which "hang all the law and the prophets" and also why the first commandment is first. What is the significance of that order for us?*<sup>3</sup>

To answer that question, Elder Christofferson taught us about

*the foundational nature of [the] first commandment. . . . For purpose, direction, and meaning, we must look to the first and great commandment. . . .*

*. . . Love of God and submission to Him provide checks against our tendency to corrupt virtues by pushing them to the extreme.*<sup>4</sup>

Elder Christofferson's powerful instruction illustrates the magnitude of our personal estimation of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Their place in our lives helps us safeguard all our other relationships. Preserving our relationship

with Jesus Christ helps us know how to apply righteous virtues in our pursuit of divine kinship with all of God's children, making those values more Christ-centered. As Paul wrote to the Colossians:

*Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering;*

*Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.*

*And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.*<sup>5</sup>

Elder Christofferson further taught:

*Putting the first commandment first does not diminish or limit our ability to keep the second commandment. To the contrary, it amplifies and strengthens it. It means that we enhance our love by anchoring it in divine purpose and power. It means that we have the Holy Ghost to inspire us in ways to reach out that we would never have seen on our own. Our love of God elevates our ability to love others more fully and perfectly because we in essence partner with God in the care of His children.*<sup>6</sup>

I have also come to recognize that just as God asks us to place Him first in our lives, He does the same for me, you, and all of His children. In His own voice, Jesus said, "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."<sup>7</sup>

In this and other scriptures,<sup>8</sup> God tells us that His top priority is us, His children. He wants us to share in His glory,<sup>9</sup> to have the joy we were created to have,<sup>10</sup> and to obtain "eternal life, . . . the greatest of all the gifts of God."<sup>11</sup> In His Intercessory Prayer, Jesus said, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."<sup>12</sup>

As I consider the observable steps God takes to preserve *His* relationship with *me*, I can discern a pattern that teaches me how *I* can preserve my relationship, reciprocally, with Him.

## Four Ways God Works to Preserve His Relationship with Us

I would like to share four ways God works to preserve His relationship with us. And as I do so, I invite you to listen for any *language of preservation and value* that you find in the scriptures and in the words of prophets and apostles that I will now share.

### 1. God Sent Us His Son, Jesus Christ, to Aton for Us

A loving and wise Father sent us Jesus Christ to redeem us from the effects of sin, ensuring that we would not be left in a perpetual state of estrangement from God. Instead, through our Savior’s gift of divine mercy, we are all unconditionally granted immortality and a return to the presence of God to be judged.<sup>13</sup> In the Garden of Gethsemane and at Calvary, He used His power, given to Him by the Father,<sup>14</sup> to suffer “for all, that [we] might not suffer if [we] would repent.”<sup>15</sup> Then He hung upon that tree and laid down His life—for us.<sup>16</sup>

*What, then, would we do to preserve a relationship with Him, who so powerfully demonstrated what He was willing to do for us?*

To accept His gift “and apply the atoning blood of Christ”<sup>17</sup> in our lives:

- Will we more fully be His devoted disciples?
- Will we more fully take His name upon us?
- Will we be more accountable and repent when we fall short?
- Will we nourish our testimonies of Him, His gospel, and His Church so that they will not be subject to “wither[ing] away”?<sup>18</sup>
- And when our Savior asks us, “Do you love me?”<sup>19</sup> will our answer be reflected in a life of loyalty to His love?

[A video was shown playing the song “The Miracle.”<sup>20</sup>]

### 2. God Has Sent His Word Through Scriptures and Modern-Day Prophets and Apostles

Another clear sign of how much God values us is that He gives us the preserving, protecting power of His word. As Nephi promised:

*Whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, . . . would never perish; neither could the temptations . . . of the adversary overpower them . . . , to lead them away to destruction.”<sup>21</sup>*

In Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews, God’s word is said to be “quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword.”<sup>22</sup> The word *quick* means “alive, living, lively.”<sup>23</sup> God delivers His living words to us through scriptural testaments but also by the mouths of living prophets and apostles. The Church of Jesus Christ has leaders chosen by Him and given the power and authority to declare His will to His people.

President Dallin H. Oaks has taught:

*As part of their responsibilities, prophets and apostles have the prophetic duty and gift to teach the truths of the gospel and to testify as “special witnesses of the name of Christ in all the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 107:23).<sup>24</sup>*

God’s word can cut through any of our natural inclination toward worldly “culture, habits, biases, preconceptions, and doubts.”<sup>25</sup> His word can speak directly “to the innermost part” of our hearts, regardless of our level of righteousness.<sup>26</sup> “God’s word can separate truth from error” and help us recognize and eliminate from our thinking any false teachings that could cloud our reasoning and understanding “by setting them up against God’s plain and precious truths.”<sup>27</sup>

*What, then, can we do to preserve our faith in God’s words, as received through the scriptures and His chosen prophets and apostles?*

- Will we more intentionally “hearken” to their teachings, allowing them to have greater influence in our thoughts, actions, and decisions?
- Will we “hold fast” to God’s word when temptations, trials, or challenges come, so that we aren’t overpowered?
- Will we consider the following promise given to us by God’s prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, and trust that God will honor it in our lives?

*My dear brothers and sisters, I promise that as you prayerfully study the Book of Mormon every day, you will make better decisions—every day. I promise that as you ponder what you study, the windows of heaven will open, and you will receive answers to your own questions and direction for your own life. I promise that as you daily immerse yourself in the Book of Mormon, you can be immunized against the evils of the day.<sup>28</sup>*

### **3. God Has Offered a Deepened Relationship and Salvation Through Covenants with Him**

The most important promises we make with God are the ones we make through covenants. These sacred agreements are the way God has worked with His children since the beginning of time. We see God show His commitment to His covenant children very early in the scriptures—beginning in the book of Genesis<sup>29</sup>—and continuing throughout scriptural history. Making and keeping covenants can be a powerful guide in the choices we make.

With these words the apostle Peter wrote of the power promised to God’s covenant people:

*His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue:*

*Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world.<sup>30</sup>*

These “great and precious promises” are associated with ordinances and covenants we make with God the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ. And God asks us to partake in them so that He can preserve us from the corruption in the world.

*What, then, can we do to preserve our relationship with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ as we seek to honor our covenants with Them?*

- Will we seek more joy in being unified with Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ through covenants?

- Will we return each week to our meeting-houses to partake of the Lord’s sacrament in remembrance and renewal of our covenants?
- Will we prepare ourselves to enter the house of the Lord and enjoy the covenants offered there?
- Will we then return to the temple and “make an appointment regularly with the Lord—to be in His holy house—then keep that appointment with exactness and joy”?<sup>31</sup>

### **4. God Sent His Spirit to Be with Us**

The Holy Ghost is the source of personal testimony and revelation. He can guide us in our decisions and protect us from physical and spiritual danger. Through His power we are sanctified—or set apart, or made holy—as we repent,<sup>32</sup> receive saving ordinances, and keep our covenants.

Alongside those divine roles, we also know of other ways the Holy Ghost blesses God’s children. For example, He helps us remember.

The scriptures are filled with frequent invitations to remember. Often these invitations are accompanied by promises, declarations, petitions, and, at times, admonitions. Remembering the Lord allows us to see His hand more clearly in our lives, leading us away from the perils and insecurity of forgetting God.<sup>33</sup> And the Lord, in His grace, has given us the gift of the Spirit to help us remember Him.

During the Savior’s Last Supper with His apostles, as they felt concerned about their path forward,<sup>34</sup> Jesus gave them this promise:

*The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.<sup>35</sup>*

That promise is extended to you and me as well—and can emerge at any time and in any place, even down an aisle at your local grocery store.

*What, then, can we do to preserve the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost, the third member of the Godhead, so that we can receive the promised physical and spiritual protection?*

- Will we try, as covenant makers and keepers, to “always remember [the Savior], and keep his commandments . . . , that [we] may always have his Spirit to be with [us]”?<sup>36</sup>
- Will we pray for the inspiration to know what God wants us to do and for the power and capacity to do it?<sup>37</sup>
- Will we “put [our] trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously”?<sup>38</sup>
- Will we better follow the spiritual promptings we receive in a way that will allow God’s voice to prevail in our lives?
- Will we, with increasing sincerity and intention, seek the Spirit’s confirming witness of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, of the truths of the gospel, and of the saving ordinances found only in the Savior’s Church?

My friends, I testify to you today that God is always trying to talk to you—even when you are unable to perceive it. Most often He is trying to tell you that He loves you and that you are His priority. He *has* provided and *will continue* to provide many countless ways to demonstrate *our* value and priority. Let us joyfully return His love by making Him the prevailing priority in *our* lives. And then let us preserve that relationship by following Him faithfully as His disciples: holding fast to His word, making and keeping covenants with Him, and seeking the constant companionship of His Spirit.

I testify that Jesus Christ is the living Son of God and that He willingly laid down His life to save ours and to offer us God’s greatest gift: eternal life. *You* are His work and His glory. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Frequency illusion is also known as the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon or frequency bias; see Wikipedia, s.v. “frequency illusion.”

2. Richard G. Scott, “To Acquire Spiritual Guidance,” *Ensign*, November 2009.

3. D. Todd Christofferson, “The First Commandment First,” BYU devotional address, 22 March 2022; quoting Matthew 22:40.

4. Christofferson, “The First Commandment First.”

5. Colossians 3:12–14.

6. Christofferson, “The First Commandment First.”

7. Moses 1:39. In this passage, Jesus Christ is speaking on behalf of the Father by divine investiture of authority. See First Presidency statement dated June 30, 1916, in “Editors’ Table: The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Twelve,” *Improvement Era*, August 1916, 934–42; reprinted as “Gospel Classics: The Father and the Son: A Doctrinal Exposition by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,” *Ensign*, April 2002; capitalization, punctuation, paragraphing, and spelling standardized.

8. See 2 Nephi 29:9.

9. Joseph Smith taught:

*God himself, finding he was in the midst of spirits and glory, because he was more intelligent, saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself. . . . He has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences, that they may be exalted with Himself, so that they might have one glory upon another. [HC 6:312, discourse at a conference of the Church, Nauvoo, Illinois, 7 April 1844; also “Classics in Mormon Thought: The King Follett Sermon,” conclusion, *Ensign*, May 1971; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2007), 210]*

10. See 2 Nephi 2:25.

11. Doctrine and Covenants 14:7.

12. John 17:3.

13. See 2 Nephi 2:5–10; Helaman 14:15–17.

14. See Helaman 5:11.

15. Doctrine and Covenants 19:16.

16. See 1 Peter 2:24.

17. Mosiah 4:2.

18. Alma 32:38.

19. See Jeffrey R. Holland, “The First Great Commandment,” *Ensign*, November 2012; see also John 21:15–17.

20. See Shawna Belt Edwards, words and music, “The Miracle,” *Friend*, June 2018; “The Miracle”

video version, Sing-Along, Church of Jesus Christ, [churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2018-03-0050-the-miracle](http://churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2018-03-0050-the-miracle).

21. 1 Nephi 15:24.
22. Hebrews 4:12.
23. "A Two-Edged Sword," *Ensign*, February 2017.
24. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Lord Leads His Church Through Prophets and Apostles," *Ensign*, March 2020.
25. "A Two-Edged Sword."
26. "A Two-Edged Sword."
27. "A Two-Edged Sword."
28. Russell M. Nelson, "The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like Without It?" *Ensign*, November 2017; emphasis in original. See also Thomas S. Monson, "The Power of the Book of Mormon," *Ensign*, May 2017.

29. See Genesis 6:18.

30. 2 Peter 1:3–4. See also David A. Bednar, "Exceeding Great and Precious Promises," *Ensign*, November 2017.

31. Russell M. Nelson, "Becoming Exemplary Latter-day Saints," *Ensign*, November 2018.

32. See 3 Nephi 27:20.

33. See Deuteronomy 6:12.

34. See John 14:5.

35. John 14:26. See also Henry B. Eyring, "O Remember, Remember," *Ensign*, November 2007.

36. Moroni 4:3; see also Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79.

37. See Scott, "To Acquire Spiritual Guidance."

38. Doctrine and Covenants 11:12.