

# *Listen to Find the Sweet Assurances of the Spirit*

TROY W. CARLTON

Thank you for that beautiful music and opening prayer that helps to set the tone for the devotional today. I appreciate those members of my family, members of the College of Nursing, and each of you for coming today. I am also thankful for the opportunity to reflect over the past few weeks and come before you with a humble heart to share with you some of the experiences I have had that have taught me to be a better child of God. I hope the Lord will bless me to be able to communicate to you the message that I have prepared.

Twenty-five years ago I found myself in my first nursing course at St. Benedict's Hospital in Ogden, Utah. My clinical instructor, Dr. Helen Farr, lined me and other students up against the wall to inspect our clean, white, crisp nursing uniforms early that first morning. With stethoscopes around our necks and confidence abounding, we were assigned our first patients. We could hardly wait to care for our patients—to do those skills that we had practiced so long and so hard in the nursing lab. We were excited to take our first blood pressure, give our first medication, and start our first IV.

I remember my first patient, a man in his fifties who had been diagnosed with bladder cancer—a terminal disease. I completed the technical skills with precision and, after giving what I thought was good care, walked out into

the hallway to be met by Dr. Farr. She asked how I was doing. I reported all the tasks I had completed, including giving her a report of the patient's current blood pressure and pulse.

With a worried look she asked me if I had taken the time to talk to the patient and really listen to understand his concerns and worries about his health problems. She told me to go back into the room and not come out until I had talked and then listened intently to my patient.

With my tail between my legs, I turned around and headed back into his room. I felt uncomfortable as I entered. I cannot remember what was said to break the tension, but I soon found out this patient's physician had told him of his terminal condition that morning. The man shared with me his concern and his fears about the terminal diagnosis. How was he going to be able to talk about this to his wife? He told me he was scared of being in pain. He shared his concerns about leaving his wife and told me how important she had been to him. Tears came to his eyes as he spoke about how much he wanted to be with his children and grandchildren, to go fishing and camping with

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*Troy W. Carlton was an instructor in the BYU College of Nursing when this devotional address was given on 12 July 2005.*

them. We spoke for a long time that day. At times no words were spoken, but communication occurred soul to soul.

Even though I felt I had been scolded by Dr. Farr that morning, I was taught an important and valuable lesson that day: to be still and listen. That lesson has helped me more throughout my nursing career than anything else I have learned since. Years later I relived this experience as I sat at the edge of my Grandpa Carlton's bed, watching each day bring him closer to his death. I had the great opportunity of caring for him when his health began to decline. I had lived next door to my grandpa most of my life, but it was not until this period that I actually took the time to really listen to him. I learned much more about him, his life, and his love and concern for my grandmother and other family members. Those cherished moments will be forever remembered.

In the world today listening has become more complex. In the information age in which we live we are bombarded with constant information, facts, and messages that we must continually process. E-mail, the Internet, cell phones, pagers, text messaging, instant messaging, and virtual electronic communications are all great innovations. "Communication technology will make strangers of neighbors and neighbors of strangers. We can now know more about what is going on across the globe than we do about what is going on across the street."<sup>1</sup>

In addition, if your "to-do" list is like mine, I have more "to do's" than time available to do them all. Book chapters and journal articles to read, concepts to review to help me teach the next class, literature to search, papers to write, deadlines to meet, meetings to attend, papers to grade, students to visit, individuals to contact, things to pick up at the store on my way home, next week's priesthood lesson to prepare for, and, don't forget, visiting my home teaching families—these are but a few of my "to dos." Sound familiar to you?

It seems as though time is being shortened and the list of life's "must do's" has grown longer. From our waking moments we are at a dead run, multitasking until we retire at night. No wonder innovations such as e-mail, cell phones, and the Internet have been created to ease and lighten our burdens, yet the unintended consequences of these technologies have increased the pace of our day. How could we ever survive without e-mail or leave home without our cell phones? Between our "to-do" lists, our days filled with activities and events, and the avalanche of information, do we take time to be still and listen? How does this busyness and barrage of information affect our ability to also prepare ourselves to feel heavenly promptings from the Holy Ghost to guide our lives and choices?

This last fall, at the end of her first term in seventh grade, my 13-year-old daughter, Makell, arrived home after school concerned that she had lost her green notebook for her science class. This notebook had all her notes and assignments in it, and it was due to be handed in to her teacher the following week. As she had been working hard to get a good grade, she was very concerned that she was not able to find it.

Wanting to look one more time in her locker at the school, she asked if I would take her back to school and help her look for it. Finding no green notebook in her locker, she suggested that we check in each of her classrooms. Because it was late on a Friday afternoon and many teachers had left for the day, we were able to get into only a couple of classrooms. As we drove home together, Makell became more concerned. I tried to help her backtrack her steps of that day, identify the place where she had last seen the notebook, and devise plan B—just in case she should not be able to find it. Maybe she could call one of her friends to see if she could borrow their notebook over the weekend and copy the notes into a new notebook.

When we arrived home she tried to call a few of her friends. Unable to reach them, she began to look everywhere in our house. Later that night, after she had looked in every possible place, she came to talk to her mother and me. After reviewing all the places she had looked, my wife suggested that she say a prayer and ask Heavenly Father to help her with her lost notebook. As a family we included Makell's problem in our family prayer that evening.

The weekend passed, and Makell, still not able to find her green notebook, came to me Sunday evening to ask if I would be willing to drive her to school the next morning. She wanted to look in the classrooms that we were not able to get into the previous Friday. She especially wanted to look in the science classroom to see if her notebook was there. If it was not, she was hoping that my presence would help her negotiate an extension of the due date or find another option with the teacher.

When we arrived at the school, Makell first wanted to look in her science classroom. Meeting her science teacher at the door, she became more nervous and asked in a trembling voice if he had seen her green notebook. He told her that there were a few notebooks on the back table. Makell went to the table and recognized her lost green notebook! With huge relief showing on her face, she returned to where we were standing. The teacher commented to her that he had almost thrown away the notebooks that morning but had suddenly decided he'd better keep them.

Tears welled up in Makell's eyes when she thanked her teacher, and they began to stream down her face as we walked out into the hallway. She needed a few minutes to pull herself together before her first class, so we went out to the car. As we sat for a few minutes, I asked her how she knew where to look for her green notebook. Her sweet, simple response reminded me of an important concept. She replied, "Dad, I just listened after I prayed."

Before we can discuss how to be still and listen in a chaotic world, let's take a few minutes to review who the Holy Ghost is, how the Holy Ghost works, and how the Holy Ghost is available to each of us to bless our lives. Speaking of the Spirit, the prophet Brigham Young stated:

*This [spirit] is the privilege of the Latter-day Saints, but they do not enjoy it as much as they might; consequently it is right to talk about these matters, and to instruct the people.<sup>2</sup>*

One of the differences between the teachings of our church and other Christian denominations is that we believe the Holy Ghost to be a separate and distinct personage who is literally the third member of the Godhead. How wonderful it is to know that if we are faithful, we can be blessed to actually have the companionship of this member of the Godhead with us at all times and places. Section 93:36 of the Doctrine and Covenants states: "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth." With the Holy Ghost as the third member of the Godhead whose primary responsibility it is to provide each of us the surge of pure intelligence, He is indeed our contact to the glory of our Heavenly Father.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie described the Father and the Son as having tangible bodies of flesh and bones, but the Holy Ghost is a "personage of spirit" because

*he is to dwell, figuratively, in the faithful, and he is to speak to their spirits in a special and particular way, which he can do because he himself is a spirit. . . .*

*. . . His voice is heard; his influence is felt; his presence is manifest—but his person is kept hidden from view in all but rare instances.<sup>3</sup>*

The Savior's final days and hours were spent teaching and preparing His disciples for the time when He would no longer dwell among them in mortality. Perhaps His most

important instructions regarding the Holy Ghost are found in chapters 14, 15, and 16 in the Gospel of John in the New Testament:

*But 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. . . .*

*But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me. . . .*

*Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.<sup>4</sup>*

Parley P. Pratt described the mission of the Holy Ghost as one that

*quickens all the intellectual faculties, increases, enlarges, expands and purifies all the natural passions and affections, and adapts them, by the gift of wisdom, to their lawful use. It inspires, develops, cultivates and matures all the fine toned sympathies, joys, tastes, kindred feelings and affections of our nature. It inspires virtue, kindness, goodness, tenderness, gentleness and charity. . . . It develops and invigorates all the faculties of the physical and intellectual man. It strengthens, invigorates and gives tone to the nerves. In short, it is, as it were, marrow to the bone, joy to the heart, light to the eyes, music to the ears, and life to the whole being.<sup>5</sup>*

I do not know of anyone here at Brigham Young University—student, faculty member, or staff, or anyone else within the sound of my voice—who would not like to have their intellectual faculties quickened, increased, enlarged, or expanded.

Each of us who has been baptized and confirmed a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has also received the gift of the Holy Ghost. This gift allows the Holy Ghost to be our constant companion as long

as we remain worthy and our ability to listen to His promptings is not diminished. Those who have not yet been baptized and confirmed a member of the Church can receive spiritual promptings, but these are from the Light or Spirit of Christ.

Moroni spoke of that Spirit when he said:

*For behold, the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil; wherefore, I show unto you the way to judge; for every thing which inviteth to do good, and to persuade to believe in Christ, is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ; wherefore ye may know with a perfect knowledge it is of God.<sup>6</sup>*

Promptings of the Holy Ghost can come to each of us through a variety of means. The scriptures refer to the Spirit as a still small voice. You might remember the story in the Old Testament about the prophet Elijah when he learned that the voice of the Lord is not in the wind, nor in an earthquake, nor in a fire but is a “still small voice.”<sup>7</sup> Other scriptural accounts describe the voice of the Spirit as being neither loud nor harsh. It is “not a voice of thunder,” neither “a voice of a great tumultuous noise,” but rather “a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it [were] a whisper”; yet it can pierce even “to the very soul” and cause the heart to burn.<sup>8</sup>

In a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to Oliver Cowdery regarding his role in assisting the Prophet with translating, Oliver learned that sometimes promptings of the Holy Ghost can cause a feeling: “If it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.”<sup>9</sup>

Elder Boyd K. Packer stated:

*The Holy Ghost speaks with a voice that you feel more than you hear. It is described as a “still small voice.” And while we speak of “listening” to the whisperings of the Spirit, most often one*

*describes a spiritual prompting by saying, "I had a feeling . . ."*<sup>10</sup>

In another talk Elder Packer said:

*I have come to know that inspiration comes more as a feeling than as a sound. . . .*

*The Lord has a way of pouring pure intelligence into our minds to prompt us, to guide us, to teach us, to warn us.*<sup>11</sup>

Another way the Holy Ghost can prompt us is through a feeling of assurance. The Apostle Paul taught in the first chapter of his Second Epistle to the Corinthians that the Saints are sealed and given assurance by the Spirit in their hearts.<sup>12</sup> He further listed the specific feelings the Holy Ghost puts in our hearts; namely, "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, [and] temperance."<sup>13</sup>

For me the feeling of assurance by the Spirit as described by Paul has led me to personally respond to promptings from the Holy Ghost throughout my life.

Upon coming to BYU four years ago to teach, I was given the challenge of returning to school to obtain a PhD. Since the only university in the state of Utah to offer a PhD in nursing is the University of Utah—and already a number of faculty in the College of Nursing were graduates from that program—I was highly encouraged to look outside the state. Although moving does not seem like a big deal to most people, moving out of state would have been a major sacrifice for my family. We had settled in a new home and had three teenagers, and my wife had just begun her teaching career. And that wasn't even considering my actual schooling.

As my wife and I spoke about the opinions, we prayed that I would find a program that would make it possible for us to remain in Utah while I furthered my education. I identified my research interests and looked for

programs that matched these interests. I spoke to a number of individuals who gave me direction and advice. Included in this advice was the aforementioned assurance by the Spirit described by the Apostle Paul.

The result was that I was able to find an excellent doctoral program at the University of Colorado, which is ranked as one of the top 10 nursing programs in the country. Although there were issues of whether or not I would be accepted to that program, where we would live in the Denver area each summer, whether we would be able to find a loving ward that would accept summer "nomadic" visitors, and a few other minor inconveniences, everything fell right into place. It was amazing.

For the last three summers my family has packed up their belongings and placed their summer plans with friends on hold. Two of my teenagers delayed obtaining their driver's licenses until we arrived back home in the fall. Precious summer vacation time was used so that everyone could go with me to Denver as I attended school. Yes, we did find housing and a great ward—the Summit View Ward in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, which made us feel welcome each summer.

We now can laugh at some of the minor inconveniences we experienced. We know that it was only through the calmness and assurance of the Spirit that we were able to move forward even when we did not have all the answers. I have been able to complete my course work, and my family and I were able to meet many individuals and have experiences we will never forget.

Each of us must find and know the way the Lord chooses to communicate with us through the Holy Ghost. This process is extremely personal. The Lord will not use methods to communicate with each of us different from those He has used in the past. Elder Packer has said, "As an Apostle I listen now to the same inspiration, coming from the same source, in the



same way I listened to [it] as a boy. The signal is much clearer now.”<sup>14</sup>

If you are unfamiliar with the way the Lord chooses to communicate with you, do not worry. The Prophet Joseph Smith told the Twelve Apostles that receiving promptings from the Spirit is a principle that one must “grow into.”<sup>15</sup> It comes after much effort and repetition.

So what can we do to ensure we are prepared to receive the promptings from the Holy Ghost? After careful study I have found five important factors each of us must consider and strive to do every day of our life.

### **1. Live and Obey the Commandments**

To receive the promptings from the Holy Ghost, Elder Richard G. Scott encouraged us to live the Lord’s basic commandments. He likened trying to receive promptings from the Holy Ghost when we are not being obedient to pouring contaminated fluid into a glass of pure water and expecting the contaminated fluid to only remain in half of the glass. The Spirit will not communicate with us when there is impurity.<sup>16</sup> President Harold B. Lee taught that we will receive answers from the source of power that we choose to obey.<sup>17</sup> In addition, in the Doctrine and Covenants we are promised, “If ye are purified and cleansed from all sin, ye shall ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus and it shall be done.”<sup>18</sup>

### **2. Search the Scriptures**

Elder Bruce R. McConkie taught that one of the best-kept secrets of the kingdom is prayerful study and pondering of the holy scriptures. He stated that this will do as much or more than any other single thing to bring the spirit of revelation into our lives.<sup>19</sup> We have been counseled:

*Feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.*<sup>20</sup>

### **3. Pray Often, Asking in Faith**

We may be worthy to receive the promptings of the Spirit and may be searching our scriptures, but if we do not ask, nothing will happen. Many times in the scriptures we are told, “Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”<sup>21</sup> It is important that each of us has a communication line open with our Heavenly Father so that He will recognize us and we will come to understand Him.

### **4. Write Down the Promptings You Receive and Act Quickly upon Them**

Elder Richard G. Scott remarked that when the Lord gives gentle promptings in answer to our prayers, they often “require us to think, to exercise faith, to work, to struggle at times, and to act.”<sup>22</sup> The whole answer to an important matter or complex problem rarely comes all at once. Usually it comes piece by piece “without the end in sight.”<sup>23</sup> The more you act upon the promptings you receive, the more you will receive promptings in the future. Elder Scott has also said:

*We often leave precious personal direction of the Spirit unheard because we do not record and respond to the first promptings that come to us when we are in need or when impressions come in response to urgent prayer.*<sup>24</sup>

### **5. Be Still and Listen**

In our scriptures we find the passage “Be still, and know that I am God” in both the Old Testament and in the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>25</sup> Do you think the Lord is trying to tell us something? To get stillness in our lives, we need to come to a complete stop and listen. My wife pointed out that stillness does not mean idleness; stillness has a purpose. And that purpose is for us to know God and feel the promptings from the Holy Ghost. Stillness is pausing with a purpose. Is it any wonder that we are drawn to the stillness of the temple, the purpose of which is to come to know our

Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and Their plan for us?

I would like to end with a story that illustrates this concept a bit more through one of my favorite scripture passages in the New Testament, found in verses 13 through 32 of Luke 24.

Now, for a moment, imagine with me the busyness and crowded city streets of Jerusalem, the bustle of the ending of the Sabbath day, and what must have been the predominant conversation on the crowded streets concerning the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Two men, one by the name of Cleopas, were walking to a village called Emmaus, which is about threescore furlongs—or about five to seven miles—from Jerusalem. During their walk to Emmaus, they talked about what had transpired over the past few days. Let me read, starting with verse 15:

*And it came to pass, that, while they communed together and reasoned, Jesus himself drew near, and went with them.*

*But their eyes were holden that they should not know him.*

*And he said unto them, What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?*

Cleopas commented to Jesus, who was unrecognizable to him, that He must be a stranger in Jerusalem because He did not know the happenings that had occurred over the past few days. Jesus desired to know more, and Cleopas proceeded to tell Him about the Savior, who was “mighty in deed and word before God,” and how He was condemned to death by the chief priests and rulers. He continued to give an account that after Jesus’ Crucifixion, His body was laid in a sepulchre, and when “certain women” visited the sepulchre and found not His body, they were told by an angel that Jesus had risen.

Continuing on their journey toward Emmaus, the two men approached the village and said to Jesus:

*Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent. . . .*

*And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread, and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them.*

*And their eyes were opened, and they knew him; and he vanished out of their sight.*

*And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?*

I have often wondered why these two men’s eyes were “holden,” as the scriptures report. Were they so focused on their journey to Emmaus and the miraculous happenings of the day that when the Lord Himself approached and journeyed with them, they did not recognize the Lord until just before He had gone?

I hope as you and I have journeyed and will journey on our “roads to Emmaus,” we will listen and be still in order to recognize the Holy Spirit in our lives—the teachings and promptings. It is my prayer that we will create stillness in our lives and that the fruits of listening will become the sweet assurance of the Spirit for each of us, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Tim Porter-O’Grady and Cathleen Krueger Wilson, *The Leadership Revolution in Health Care: Altering Systems, Changing Behaviors* (Gaithersburg, Maryland: Aspen Publishers, 1995), 4.

2. JD 2:300.

3. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 70, 254.

4. John 14:26; John 15:26; John 16:7.

5. Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon and Sons, 1891), 101–2.

6. Moroni 7:16.
7. 1 Kings 19:11–12.
8. Helaman 5:30; 3 Nephi 11:3; see also D&C 85:6.
9. D&C 9:8.
10. Boyd K. Packer, “Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise,” *Ensign*, November 1994, 60.
11. Boyd K. Packer, “Prayers and Answers,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 20.
12. See 2 Corinthians 1:22.
13. Galatians 5:22–23.
14. Boyd K. Packer, “*That All May Be Edified*” (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 14.
15. *Teachings*, 151.
16. See Richard G. Scott, “Spiritual Communication,” *Principles of the Gospel in Practice*, 1985 Sidney B. Sperry Symposium (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 15–16.
17. See Harold B. Lee, *Stand Ye in Holy Places* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 138.
18. D&C 50:29.
19. See Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrines of the Restoration*, ed. Mark L. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 243–44.
20. 2 Nephi 32:3.
21. D&C 4:7; see also Matthew 7:7.
22. Richard G. Scott, “Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayer,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 32.
23. Scott, “Learning,” 32.
24. Richard G. Scott, in Marvin K. Gardner, “Elder Richard G. Scott: ‘The Real Power Comes from the Lord,’” *Ensign*, January 1989, 10.
25. Psalm 46:10; D&C 101:16.