

Spiritual Experience

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My brothers and sisters, I want to begin by telling you that I feel and know the responsibility that is mine in talking to you this day. It is always an immense responsibility to talk of the ways of the Lord, and so I pray that I may be blessed to say the things of my heart, and that you will be able to receive them as they are meant, and that the whole experience may be profitable and good and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. I pray for the Holy Spirit to be with me and with you during these few minutes that we will spend together.

Not long ago I was conversing with one of my married daughters. We were talking about a spiritual experience given to one of our forebears and she said to me, "How is it that the pioneers seemed to have so many spiritual experiences and we have so few? Shouldn't we have the same kind of experiences they had?"

Perhaps you've puzzled over the same kind of question. Most of us do at some time or another in our lives. This morning I want to bear witness to the reality, the availability, and the purpose and place of spiritual experience in our lives. I do this with the aim of strengthening others and myself, and for no other purpose.

Over the centuries, philosophers have argued how we can know things, and, indeed,

whether we can know anything at all. I can't worry with that this morning. I know that eventually I cannot go beyond my own experience. I can only tell you how it has been and is with me. I can relate to you the experiences of others, but even as I do that, I am really only telling you how it is with me as I contemplate others' experiences. I really understand Henry David Thoreau, who said that he would not talk so much about himself if there were anyone else that he knew as well. And though my experience, like Thoreau's, may be narrow, I do know that it is real. At least it is real to me. This morning I would bear testimony of that, in the belief that lives are very much alike, and that my life is like all of yours, and that the great experience of being is far deeper than we most often perceive and far beyond outward appearances. I want to bear testimony that spiritual experience is real, that it is available to us, and that it provides truth and power to affect and change our lives if we put ourselves in a position to receive it.

Richard G. Ellsworth was an English professor at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 23 July 1985.

Spiritual experience is real. There is a spiritual dimension. In fact, our mortal dimension, bounded by space and time, is but a small fragment of a much larger reality which surrounds us and contains us far beyond our knowledge. Within our bodies dwell our spirits, heavenly beings which are programmed to respond to the spiritual dimension.

Good and evil are spiritual. Perhaps because evil is more shocking to our spiritual perceptors, we notice its presence easily. I doubt there is a person in this room who has not had an experience wherein he has sensed the presence of evil, sometime, somewhere. It is given to us to be aware of evil. We can sense evil thought or evil intention in those around us. Many of you, I'm sure, have had the experience of knowing in your heart that there was evil close by you, that you should not be with someone any longer, or that you should not stay where you are. I remember when I was young and leaving home for service in the U.S. Navy. My grandmother cautioned me that the Spirit of the Lord would not go with me into places where evil was. That fact was verified for me many, many times as my duties required that I be in places where evil ruled in the hearts of men. We, that is, our spirits, recoil from evil—at least we do until we become so used to its presence that we lose our ability to be shocked by it, and, in fact, become insensitive to its presence. This is the danger which faces all of us in our present-day world so filled with selfishness, bloodshed, carnage, and terror.

Goodness is just as easy for us to sense as evil, but, because it is not shocking or traumatic, it is easier for us not to notice it. Yet goodness is powerful, much more powerful than evil. Goodness is holy. Inevitably, it eventually witnesses of Jesus Christ. Our spirits respond to the guileless love of little children and to the unstinting service of mothers. It is always comfortable to be accepted and loved. It feels so good to be honest. And do we not all

know the sweet relief which comes from being forgiven? Forgiveness is godly. When we forgive others their trespasses against us, we partake of the work of the Atonement. We assume a responsibility and release a responsibility in a relationship with others. This is what Jesus does in our relationship with him. How sweet and lovely is the release which comes with his assumption of that responsibility when he forgives us our trespasses against him. I'm sure there are those in this room who, with me, have felt that sweet release. It is spiritual and real. Thus it is that repentance is the basic primary principle of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for it cleanses and retunes our spirits to things as they really are.

The verification we receive when we pray for testimony is part of this kind of experience. Testimony is not an isolated spiritual experience; it is simply more specialized and more intensive than those other verifications of goodness and right which are going on around us all the time.

The witness of the truth of the Book of Mormon which came to me as a young man was that kind of experience. It was during World War II. I was a young sailor assigned to the Anacostia Naval Air Station in Washington, D.C. I was just a small insignificant cog in a vast system of cogs and wheels that turned for much larger purposes. One of my jobs was to help make training films, identifying shapes and outlines of enemy ships and airplanes. These films were made in a large, barnlike structure containing a big flat stage approximating the horizon or the sea or whatever was demanded. The building itself was filled with models and outlines and forms and staging devices to make possible the fulfillment of our assignment. Most of the time we were very busy, but there came a time toward the end of the war when we went for weeks without assignment. Eventually, all the other personnel on this job were assigned to other duties, but for some reason I was left alone in the building,

I guess to guard the equipment. At first I enjoyed my freedom. It was great to have nothing to do. All the electricity in the building was turned off with the exception of one outlet, into which was plugged a small crook-necked lamp which sat on the corner of a flat drafting table. There was a hard wooden chair where I could sit if I cared to. All the rest of the great building was in darkness. So for a few days I opened the door to the outside light and sat in the doorway on the old chair and thoroughly enjoyed myself, but before long I became immensely bored.

I had been raised in the Church by careful parents who had taught me the gospel, but I had never read the Book of Mormon completely through for myself. One day, as I sat idle, I decided this was an opportune time for me to do this. And so, that afternoon, I brought my small serviceman's Book of Mormon from my quarters and, desiring privacy, went inside the building and turned on the little light by the table and began to read, hunched over there in that great dark building. I remember how I was struck by those first words, "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents. . . ." And as the days went by I read every word, and my soul, programmed as it was to goodness and truth, began to respond to the testimonies of the prophets. I had never had such an experience! I read slowly, prayerfully, savoring every word, looking forward to what was to come, even wishing that it would never end. I had feelings in my heart that I had never been conscious of before. And when at last I read the admonition of Moroni at the end of the book, I felt a great desire in my heart to try his words, to ask for spiritual verification even greater than what I was then feeling. I remember shutting the doors of that vast building and locking myself in, then kneeling in the darkness on the cold cement floor, my forehead resting against the hard wooden seat of the old chair, and telling the Lord that I believed the words of Moroni,

and asking him to strengthen my belief into knowledge.

I shall never forget what happened; I have felt it many times since. I became aware that I was surrounded by a power beyond myself, which came over me and through me. It was all around me, calm, clear, indescribably powerful. It seemed white and delicious to me, like the fruit of the tree of life which Nephi told of. It filled me completely to the brim and over the brim, and did not leave me for days afterward. It was not shocking or disturbing in any way, as is the power of evil, but was sweet and assuring to my soul. I knew that the book was true.

Such a witness, an actual spiritual verification, is available to all of us always, no matter when or where we live. We do not need to have been a pioneer to know the Book of Mormon is true, or that the gospel is true, but we *do* need to be spiritually available, and spiritually aware. I'm sure that the Lord works through us whether we are spiritually aware or not, but what a shame it is, I think, to not hear the music, and not enjoy the orchestration. And we should not fear these things or turn from them, but should, indeed, desire to know them. They are ours by right of inheritance and performance. As Latter-day Saints, we have performed the ordinances, or at least some of them, and have received the gift of the Holy Ghost, which is the right to spiritual experience. But we must live for these things. The kind of richly textured spiritual experience we are speaking of now is not to be gotten without striving. There must be purpose and need and a great determination toward righteousness. There must be example to follow, and humility, and great desire.

Oh, how I have longed for the spirit of pure intelligence which so often filled my great father as he taught the gospel of Jesus Christ. How I have prayed for and desired the spiritual sensitivity of my great-grandfather, who saw angels and talked with God. And when I have lived best, I have felt these things, even

as they did. We are given the promise and the power to part the veil, even as the brother of Jared, or Moroni, or Nephi, or Paul, or Joseph Smith, or my father, or grandfather, or great-grandfather; and when this happens, it is a sweet and rich and unforgettable experience.

One evening, years ago, my wife and I sat alone together in the playroom of our house. The children were all asleep in their beds, and we were awaiting the birth of a new little baby. My wife, big with child, was sitting in the rocking chair a few feet from me, and I was sitting by the table. We were talking softly together, knowing that the baby would arrive that night. The lights were low and there was a feeling of spiritual presence in the room, soft and comfortable. We were filled with love for each other and for the baby that was to come. I remember looking at her—she was rocking quietly, her eyes closed, her pale white hands spread across her full waist. The sweet feeling in the room grew and persisted. It was very powerful.

I said to her, “Do you feel this all around us?” and she replied, “Yes.” It was lovely being with her there then. It was a sweet closeness, a unity I can hardly describe.

“Can you tell?” I said. “We shall have a son.”

“I know,” she replied. “It will be a boy.”

And then for me the veil parted, and I saw our son—standing, waiting, a few feet from the chair my wife was rocking in. He was tall and well-formed—taller and larger, it seemed to me, than the room allowed. There was power about his person, great power and goodness and patience and love. I said, “Do you see him standing there beside you?” Again there swelled that sweet feeling of closeness and unity. She looked at me, confident, a small smile playing about her lips. “I don’t need to,” she said, “I know he is there.”

Joseph Smith said that our loved ones are around us all the time. I believe that. I believe it with all my heart. And I’m sure that our loved

ones loved us even before we or they were born. One day I helped one of my little grandsons in the bathroom with his needs. Perhaps feeling a bit embarrassed at my invasion of his three-and-a-half-year-old privacy, I hugged him up to me and said, “You know, it is good for me to help you because I’m big and you are little.” He looked up at me with his big brown eyes and said, very seriously, “I helped you when you were little.” I remembered my training in childhood education and I replied with confidence, “Yes, I know. You were big when I was little, and I am big when you are little.” But he shook his little head and looked up at me again; there was seriousness and wisdom in his eyes. He paused a moment, and then said sweetly and clearly, “No, Grandpa. I mean before I was born, when you were little, I helped you.” And he added, “I liked to help you.” Then he turned and ran off to his playthings and I remembered how Jesus opened the mouths of the little Nephite children and they told their parents things of the spiritual dimension which were unspeakably beautiful and impossible to write.

I remember, as a young elders president, being baffled by serious problems and, feeling lonely and unable, praying for assurance and for help. One evening, as I walked home from the university along the darkening, empty, evening streets, praying in my heart in my loneliness, I became aware of the presence of my grandfather walking close beside me. I could not see him, but I knew he was there and I knew who he was and I felt the warmth of his love and his strength. In his life he had sat in the councils of the Church, and had known these problems and known this loneliness. He stayed with me for days. He was close beside me while I settled into the harness of my new presidency and learned how to do the job I’d been called to do.

My brothers and sisters, spiritual experience is real—it is available to us to provide knowledge and power to affect, to control, and to change our situations. For instance, prayer is,

or ought to be, a spiritual experience. We are promised revelation through prayer, and, oh, how we need help from beyond the veil in our everyday lives, in our comings and goings, in our decisions and associations, in our courtships, our marriages, our fatherhood and motherhood. These are eternal things and have bearing upon our eternal achievement and our eternal exaltation.

How often my wife and I have knelt in prayer seeking information and confirmation in the needs and decisions of our parenthood. And how often the answers have come, sometimes as changes in our feelings, sometimes as gentle suggestions and insights, and sometimes as vision—showing us the very lives of our children, even the very events and circumstances which faced them and which needed to be dealt with. We have known the need for comfort and assurance, and we have received it, not once, but time and time again.

I bear witness that the Lord seeks to be in our lives. He has so arranged our mortal situation that we can have and know truth beyond the limits of our mortality. We are *not* left alone. How thankful we should be for covenants and ordinances, and priesthood power. Ordinances and covenants are means whereby we link ourselves beyond the veil and lay hold upon blessings in this life and beyond this life. When we keep our covenants and obey the ordinances, eternal consequences inevitably follow. The Lord says he is bound when we do what he says, and the Lord does not lie (see D&C 82:10). As the great example, and as a loving father, he trusts us with spiritual power far beyond our comprehension. Priesthood is the authority to use the power of God in all things for the welfare of mankind. Priesthood is judgment. Correctly used, it is always decisive and conclusive. It contains great redemptive power. To *redeem* is to rejudge, to reassess. The redemptive power of the priesthood is that power which allows a reassessment, a rejudgment

of a situation, and a consequent change in accordance with that judgment.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith healed Sister Johnson's arm back in Ohio, there were those who questioned how long her arm would remain well. They felt that somehow the healing was a deceptive facade and could not last because the arm was really sick underneath. Joseph Smith told them that the healed arm was as well now as the other one and equally subject again to all the trials and vicissitudes of life. What he was saying was that through the redemptive power of the priesthood, a reassessment had been made, and the arm which had begun to stiffen and shrivel and become useless had been returned to its former health and strength. (See Hyrum and Helen May Andrus, *They Knew the Prophet* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1974], pp. 60–61.) This, after all, is what happens, or ought to happen, with every priesthood blessing. But we need to have the courage to use that priesthood power; we ought not step aside and merely pray over the person seeking the blessing. Priesthood power is real; it is meant to redeem, restore, and strengthen. The process is the same, the power, always available and there. Often I have felt that power—power outside myself—moving through me to the person being blessed.

I remember blessing a young mother who came seeking renewed strength to endure a difficult pregnancy with her third or fourth child. She had great faith, and as I blessed her, as her bishop, I felt power streaming down my arms and through my fingers into the crown of her head. I felt it course through her body, even to the tips of her toes. It was a powerful, cleansing, rejuvenating force, almost electric in its energy, yet calm and soft and assuring. After the blessing she arose and, with tears in her eyes, said, "I felt that all the way to the tips of my toes." Priesthood power is power from Jesus Christ, the Redeemer, and is a great trust and a great responsibility.

But we must understand that in order to be alive to these things, to know them and experience them and use them in our lives, we must put ourselves in position to receive them. And indeed, we do position ourselves, every day, in every moment, for good or for evil. There is no neutral moment or neutral ground. The depths and the intensities of the spiritual dimension are all around us. Within them, we live and move and have our being. Each day we choose again and again between good and evil. We place ourselves where we want to be, whether we mean to do it or not. Spiritual progress is a negative option. If we do not choose to grow toward the good, we have chosen to grow toward the bad. We do not and cannot stand still. That is why the Lord said that those who are not for him are against him.

And so, when my daughter questioned whether we, in our time, should not have the same kind of spiritual experiences as the pioneers, she really was making an observation about our spiritual position. The gospel is the road map. It contains all the information and all the instruction. It tells us how to put ourselves in a proper position to have the awareness and the experience, the knowledge and the redemptive power which we have a right to have in this life. “In other words,” the Lord says, “I give unto you directions how you may act before me, that it may turn to you for your salvation” (D&C 82:9).

All commandments of the Lord are directions for achieving spiritual progress. All require obedience, and to the extent that we obey is the consequent blessing. Giving, serving, loving, understanding, being unselfish, charitable, being honest and chaste—all have spiritual consequence. Keeping the word of wisdom, paying tithing, keeping the law of the fast, praying always—these actions ease us into a position where the things of the spirit flow unto us and nourish us without compulsory means. When we attend our meetings with a right heart, we give strength and receive strength from others. When we prayerfully study the scriptures, we reach beyond time and space and learn from the testimonies and experiences of those who have gone before. And when we qualify and receive our ordinances and make our covenants in the holy temples of the Lord, we place ourselves in a direct line of spiritual assurance, power, and strength. But we must will to do these things; they cannot be done for us. Our pioneer forefathers lived in the spirit and recorded their experiences. We, too, may do the same.

I bear testimony to the reality of the things of the spirit and to their constant availability to us to provide us with truth and power to affect and change our lives as we put ourselves in position to do so, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.