

Going Home

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Finding Our Way Back

I want to talk with you about going home. This is the time of year when all of us feel a tug at our hearts. Many of you will be thinking about being home for the holidays. But all of us know, perhaps more than at any other time of year, that happiness in some way centers on a family—both in this world and the next.

Only as I've grown older have I come to understand what my parents did for me. Of all the influences they had on me perhaps the most powerful was the desire to somehow be worthy to be home again with my Heavenly Father, forever. And by their example, and a little preaching, they taught me how I can find my way back to my Heavenly Father. Since I learned this by using scripture to understand experience, I'll share it with you that way. But let me first tell you the lesson so it won't take you so long to recognize it. It's this simple chain:

1. We will find our way home to our Heavenly Father only if we win the companionship of the Holy Ghost so we can recognize truth.
2. The companionship of the Holy Ghost requires our being clean.
3. Being clean requires exercising faith in the Lord Jesus Christ unto repentance.

That sounds so simple, but it is so hard because there is a Satan, the father of lies, who also knows that simple chain which will give us the companionship of the Spirit of Truth. His determination to keep you from following this chain explains the blunt language Brigham Young used to describe our challenge:

The men and women, who desire to obtain seats in the celestial kingdom, will find that they must battle every day. [DBY, p. 392]

The nature of that battle, and its difficulty, came clear to me in an airplane not long ago. It was a long flight, so I wrote and read and thought. As I'd rushed out of the door from home, I'd taken one of my son's worn and inexpensive editions of the Book of Mormon. As I read it on the plane, I saw that his seminary teacher had led him through it. I began to move through the book to see what passages were marked and annotated in red ink, wondering what that teacher had taught him

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was important. I went along and then my eyes fell on these words of the prophet Nephi:

Wherefore, if ye have sought to do wickedly in the days of your probation, then ye are found unclean before the judgment-seat of God; and no unclean thing can dwell with God; wherefore, ye must be cast off forever. [1 Nephi 10:21]

Those words made my heart burn, and my eyes too. I thought for a minute of what our Heavenly Father might feel as he had to send children he loved away, forever, because they could not be with him.

And then a few minutes later, after having lunch and visiting with the person next to me, I picked up a national news magazine from the pocket in the seat in front of me and began to leaf through it. I came to the movie reviews. Only three movies were reviewed. I began to read the first, stopped part way through, went to the second, and then to the third. The three films were reported to portray real people committing acts of immorality, some fortunately beyond my powers of imagination. The reviewers warned me about only one of them, on the grounds that it would be boring, and urged me to see the other two.

Just minutes later I moved a few chapters through the book of 1 Nephi where these words seemed to appear in bold print:

But behold, I say unto you, the kingdom of God is not filthy, and there cannot any unclean thing enter into the kingdom of God; wherefore there must needs be a place of filthiness prepared for that which is filthy. [1 Nephi 15:34]

That set me to pondering. I thought of you and of me. We have a problem. We live in a world where there are voices competing for our belief. They claim the authority of truth. Some are clearly lying and some are not. And you and I need to know what is true and what

is not, out of far more than curiosity. We need to know. And we need to be sure.

Some of those voices—some of the loudest—tell you that the questions which matter will yield to reason. And they even warn you that those who purport to answer questions without using their rules of rational analysis are to be distrusted and even despised.

Your common sense and experience tell you something else. So does mine. Let me illustrate for you what I know about the questions that matter and how they are answered by telling you about the last conversations I had with my father.

He was suffering through the end of a long struggle with bone cancer. He still weighed enough and was in such pain that it was hard work to move him from a chair to his bed. Others far more heroic than I spent the months and the days caring for him. But I took some turns on the midnight to dawn shift.

The effects of disease had removed the powers of reason he'd used to make a mark that is still visible in science. He seemed to me almost like a child as we talked through the night. Most of his memories were of riding across the range together with his father in Old Mexico. But sometimes even those happy pictures could not crowd from his mind the terrible pain.

One night when I was not with him and the pain seemed more than he could bear, he somehow got out of bed and on his knees beside it—I know not how. He pled with God to know why he was suffering so. And the next morning he said, with quiet firmness, "I know why now. God needs brave sons."

Now, when someone tells you the questions that matter yield only to some rational analysis, remember that the stunning achievements of reason over the past three hundred years have sprung from what is called the "scientific method." I hope you'll also remember, as I always will, the scientist Henry Eyring on his knees, when the questions that really mattered

yielded to the method for finding truth he'd learned as a little boy at his mother's knee in Old Mexico. This was long before he took the train to Tucson, and Berkeley, and Madison, and then on to Berlin and Princeton to use the scientific method to create theories that changed the scientific world. What he learned on his knees brought him peace and changed my life.

It changed my life, but hearing this story today will change yours only if you know that the answer to his prayer was true. And you can only know that the way he did, and the way I do—by the gentle voice of the Holy Ghost speaking to your heart.

Searching for the Truth

God has blessed us with sure guides to truth. Some of us have been blessed with parents who knew where to find truth. All of us can listen to the voice of a living prophet to whom God speaks the truth and asks that he tell us. The words of the prophet, and the words of scripture, are the rod which Lehi saw would lead us to the tree of life.

But many have heard those words, and read them, and still have not known that they are true. The method of knowing truth requires that both he who speaks and he who hears be guided by the Holy Ghost. You and I can only know it is the truth if we can hear the Holy Spirit confirm and expand it in our own hearts. Of all the methods of searching for the truth, that is the one you and I need most.

The key is in the words of Nephi I was reading on the plane that day. It might surprise you that in a passage on being clean would be the key to gaining the Holy Ghost as your constant companion. It shouldn't surprise you though, because in all but the most casual references to the Holy Spirit in the scriptures, the cry to be clean is close by. The pairing of spiritual cleanliness and the gifts of the Spirit, the power to know and speak truth, becomes plain in the words of Nephi.

Nephi wanted to know for himself that what his father said he had seen in a vision was true. His father had reported seeing the fearsome landscape we move across in life, either toward eternal life or toward forever being shut out from our Father. Nephi knew he had to know for himself, and so listen to how he pursued the truth:

And it came to pass after I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God—and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come—I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him, as well in times of old as in the time that he should manifest himself unto the children of men.

For he is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him. [1 Nephi 10:17–18]

Now you can see why President Benson, a living prophet of God, has repeatedly said, "Read the Book of Mormon." The Book of Mormon is the most powerful written testimony we have that Jesus is the Christ. What did Nephi say was the basis for receiving the Holy Ghost? Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Will reading the Book of Mormon now and then ensure faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? You wouldn't count on it if you read Nephi carefully. He said this "is the gift . . . to all those who diligently seek him." Diligently surely means regularly. And it surely means pondering and praying. And the praying will surely include the fervent pleading to know the truth. Anything less would hardly be diligent. And anything less will not be enough for you and for me.

That diligence will allow faith to grow, and then will come a desire to repent and a confidence that forgiveness is possible. Real repentance requires as diligent a pursuit as real faith. The forgiveness you seek is only possible through the ordinance of baptism, performed by God's authorized servants, and by then keeping the covenants you make with God.

If you are not yet a member of the Church, you are required to seek baptism by those who hold the priesthood of God. If you have been baptized, it means diligently keeping the covenants.

Each week you can hear in the sacramental prayer the promise you and I so much need to see fulfilled.

And always remember him and keep his commandments which he has given them; that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. [D&C 20:77]

That might well raise a question in your mind. You may now be reading the Book of Mormon diligently, daily. You may be praying often and with real intent. That may have led to such faith in Jesus Christ that you remember him with love. And that surely will have both led you to a broken heart and to seeking forgiveness for past sins and a determination to keep every commandment. But you may still say, "With all that, I don't seem to get the promptings of what is true as easily as I think I should if I really have his Spirit, the Holy Ghost, to be with me."

The great Prophet Joseph Smith once had a test of patience beyond what most of us have endured. He was locked in Liberty Jail and the Saints were suffering. He pled in prayer for action, now. God granted him, in answer to his prayer, something more than he asked. He told him how he would pour out knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Saints. He talked about the priceless knowledge of knowing how to act so that we may be servants of God, wor-

thy of his power. And then he told him, and he told you and me, how it will feel as knowledge of the truth comes. Here it is, at the end of section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. [D&C 121:45–46]

You and I need to be patient, and for a reason. A quick reading of the Book of Mormon, a few prayers, a shallow attempt at repentance, a casual regard for the covenants we've made—of course that is not enough. The scriptures use over and over again the word "steadiness" to describe faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. When faith and repentance and diligent efforts to live the commandments have gone on long enough that virtue garnishes our thoughts unceasingly, then the doctrine of the priesthood, the truthful answers to the questions that really matter, will distill upon us as the dews from heaven.

That's been my experience with seeking the confirmation of truth by the Spirit of God. I have at times sought it by singular effort, in times of great need, and it has come. Investigators have that experience when they reach the point where they must know if the Book of Mormon is true.

But far more often for me, I notice its presence in quiet confirmations at times when all I seem to have done is to plod on in diligence, doing the simple things—searching the scriptures with a prayer in my heart and with more concern for others and therefore less time for

pursuits that let Satan, the father of lies, entice me. It's in periods of that steadiness that I notice, almost in the way you are surprised at your wet shoes from the dew formed on the grass overnight, and look up and realize the Holy Ghost has been enlightening my mind and enlarging my heart.

"I Know All Their Works"

Perhaps the most difficult part of the whole process is not to keep going but to begin. That's true with many projects you face. It may be hard to start writing a paper, or to work a set of math problems. But there is an added difficulty in this most important project. It is that you have a skilled adversary who both lies and urges you to lie.

Of all his falsehoods, perhaps none is so commonly used and so frequently successful as this: "No one knows, so wait to repent."

It's not true. First of all, *you* know. That almost invariably means that the price you must pay to procrastinate repentance is to lie. That lie may be that you take the sacrament when you know you are unworthy. Or it may be to live the lie of accepting the blessings of this university when you know that you have broken the pledge you made to it.

You may be perfectly content to accept that deception on top of the effects of the sin itself, but you pay a price. Even a man who looked with the eyes of science could see that pain. Lewis Thomas seemed almost surprised when he wrote this about lie detectors and their implications. Here is what he said:

As I understand it, a human being cannot tell a lie, even a small one, without setting off a kind of smoke alarm somewhere deep in a dark lobule of the brain, resulting in the sudden discharge of nerve impulses, or the sudden outpouring of neurohormones of some sort, or both. The outcome, recorded by the lie-detector gadgetry, is a highly reproducible cascade of changes in the electrical conductivity of the skin, the heart rate, and the manner of

breathing, similar to the responses to various kinds of stress.

Lying, then, is stressful, even when we do it for protection, or relief, or escape, or profit, or just for the pure pleasure of lying and getting away with it. It is a strain, distressing enough to cause the emission of signals to and from the central nervous system warning that something has gone wrong. It is, in a pure physiological sense, an unnatural act.

[Lewis Thomas, *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), p. 128]

It is unnatural in far more than a physiological sense. It is contrary to the nature of our spirits. You are a spirit child of God, a god of truth. Whatever stress your body feels from your choosing to lie, your spirit must be torn far more. The relief of that load by confessing and moving forward to full repentance will more than compensate for whatever unpleasant consequences being honest brings upon you.

Perhaps even more important than recognizing that you know what you have done is knowing that God knows. You and I can't be fooled into believing anything is hidden. The Savior taught us in 2 Nephi,

And wo unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord! And their works are in the dark; and they say: Who seeth us, and who knoweth us? . . . Behold, I will show unto them, saith the Lord of Hosts, that I know all their works. For shall the work say of him that made it, he made me not? Or shall the thing framed say of him that framed it, he had no understanding? [2 Nephi 27:27]

And not only does our Heavenly Father see all we do, but he sees us with such eyes of love that Enoch, who saw God's reaction to sin in the time of Noah in vision, asked of God in surprise,

How is it that thou canst weep, seeing thou art holy, and from all eternity to all eternity? [Moses 7:29]

And God explained that he saw the terrible, inescapable consequences of unrepented and unforgiven sins. He said this to Enoch:

And the whole heavens shall weep over them, even all the workmanship of mine hands; wherefore should not the heavens weep, seeing these shall suffer? [Moses 7:37]

God knows all we have done. And while he cannot look on sin with the least degree of allowance, he looks on us with compassion beyond our capacity to measure. When the scripture speaks of the whole heavens weeping, I think of another picture, given to us by the Prophet Joseph Smith. This is what he said:

The spirits of the just are . . . blessed in their departure to the world of spirits. Enveloped in flaming fire, they are not far from us, and know and understand our thoughts, feelings, and motions, and are often pained therewith. [HC 6:52]

These words pain me when I think of those I have loved and who loved me who are surely now among the spirits of the just. The realization that they feel pain for us and that the God of Heaven weeps because of our unrepented sin is surely enough to soften our hearts and move us to action. And it is surely reason enough to avoid even the approaches, the very thought, of committing serious sin.

If you could take one picture with you in your mind today, let it be of a son, Nephi. His father told him of his vision about how to get back home again to Heavenly Father and to the Savior. But for Nephi it wasn't enough to hear his father's words. He had to know the truth for himself, to be sure he would know the way.

You've heard some words today—words about your needing the companionship of the Holy Spirit, of needing to be clean to have it, of

needing to have the faith to repent to be clean, and of the deceit which will be used to keep you from repentance and so from the gift.

You might find a moment sometime before the end of this day to ask God if these words are true. You won't have a record of what I have said, so you might read them in verses 18 through 21 of the tenth chapter of 1 Nephi. You might even have a prayer in your heart now to know for yourself they are true as I read them. Here's what Nephi taught you about the loving God who has provided a way for you to come home:

For he is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him.

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round.

Therefore remember, O man, for all thy doings thou shalt be brought into judgment.

Wherefore, if ye have sought to do wickedly in the days of your probation, then ye are found unclean before the judgment-seat of God; and no unclean thing can dwell with God; wherefore, ye must be cast off forever.

And the Holy Ghost giveth authority that I should speak these things, and deny them not. [1 Nephi 10:18–21]

The Companionship of the Holy Ghost

Could I now give two bits of practical advice? In my promptings from the Holy Spirit, I have a sense that you really are trying and you really want the gift of the Holy Ghost. I would give you these suggestions.

First of all, the Holy Ghost is and must be very sensitive. He can be easily offended. I worried as I came here today, hoping I might do nothing that would offend him. Let me give

you a little advice the Prophet Joseph Smith gave to the leaders of the Church.

Here is another important item. If you assemble from time to time, and proceed to discuss important questions, and pass decisions upon the same, and fail to note them down, by and by you will be driven to straits from which you will not be able to extricate yourselves, because you may be in a situation not to bring your faith to bear with sufficient perfection or power to obtain the desired information; or, perhaps, for neglecting to write these things when God had revealed them, not esteeming them of sufficient worth, the Spirit may withdraw, and God may be angry; and there is, or was, a vast knowledge, of infinite importance, which is now lost. [Teachings, p. 73]

And there is or was a vast knowledge of infinite importance that is now lost. I'm not sure that means you should have been taking notes, but it means that in your heart, at least, the attitude of writing down even the simplest things that may come from the Spirit would invite the Spirit back again.

One other bit of advice. We have been talking together about ourselves, how much we need, how much we must do, how we would be blessed if we had the companionship of the Holy Ghost. My own experience is this: Of all the times I have felt the promptings of the Spirit, they have come most forcefully and most surely when I was asking Heavenly Father, "I love someone, I know they have a need, tell me what you would have me do for them."

Let me remind you of a great man. His name was Mormon. He wrote this when he was putting together what we now find in the Book of Mormon and he didn't know why he

was told to put in certain things and not to put in others.

And I do this [speaking of this arranging of the book] for a wise purpose; for thus it whispereth me, according to the workings of the Spirit of the Lord which is in me. And now I do not know all things; but the Lord knoweth all things which are to come; wherefore, he worketh in me to do according to his will. [Words of Mormon 1:7]

And then, in the very next verse, it's almost as if Mormon is telling us why God is able to take him like a little child and lead him to do things God does not explain the reasons for. Listen to what he writes:

And my prayer to God is concerning my brethren, that they may once again come to the knowledge of God, yea, the redemption of Christ; that they may once again be a delightful people. [Words of Mormon 1:8]

Years ago a wise father got a letter from a son in the mission field who wrote, "I can't get the feeling for this work. I'm discouraged." The father wrote back what you would think would be too simple a suggestion. He wrote back and said, "Forget yourself and go to work." My prayer is that in the desire to have the companionship of the Holy Spirit we might forget ourselves and go to work and that we might truly seek the good of our Father's children. If with all our hearts we try to take his children home again, we'll be there too.

I pray that we might live so we might have the companionship of the Holy Spirit, that we might all go home again, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.