

Our Life-Changing Partnership with the Spirit

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Brothers and sisters, despite my anxiety over the assignment I have been asked to fill today, I am truly pleased to be with you. I am grateful for the support I have received from colleagues and friends. I express particular gratitude to my sweet wife, Angela, who supports me today and always.

You have heard that I am an electrical engineer, and this leads me to a confession: I am a classic science geek. Shocking, I know. I am fascinated by the workings of our world, and I love to learn and to teach about them. I am guilty of soliciting opportunities to give science demonstrations to kids, even ones as young as four years old. After all, you can never start geek training too early.

One scientific discovery that has always fascinated me is the laser, which was first demonstrated in the early 1960s. To illustrate what makes this light source so interesting, let me make a quick comparison between light generated in a fluorescent bulb and light generated in a laser. In a fluorescent bulb, the gas molecules in the bulb are energized into an excited state by an electric current, and then they spontaneously and randomly release light as they transition to their original energy state. The resulting light moves in different directions and, in fact, will be different colors, which

is why most fluorescent light is white. In the case of the laser, the excited molecules release their light energy in response to other light energy hitting the molecule. Amazingly, under this circumstance the released light is identical to the incident light in direction, color, and other characteristics, and as a result the light is particularly intense. As an analogy, consider how people engaged in a tug-of-war can be most effective when they all pull at precisely the same time. The laser light source is powerful despite the fact that it does not consume a lot of electrical power.

This scientific phenomenon reminds me of the account in the Book of Mormon of the Nephites gathering together immediately before the appearance of the resurrected Savior. We read:

And it came to pass that while they were thus conversing one with another, they heard a voice as if it came out of heaven; and they cast their eyes round about, for they understood not the voice which they heard; and it was not a harsh voice, neither was it

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a loud voice; nevertheless, and notwithstanding it being a small voice it did pierce them that did hear to the center, . . . yea, it did pierce them to the very soul. [3 Nephi 11:3]

To me this voice is a lot like a laser: not loud but powerful and pointed. Of course this was the voice of the Father introducing the Savior to the Nephites, but it seems that the voice of the Holy Ghost could be described in a similar way. This scriptural story also tells us that the Nephites heard the voice twice without understanding it. The third time, they understood it only because they “did open their ears to hear it” (3 Nephi 11:5). Isn’t this often the way the promptings of the Spirit work for us? It is on this process of understanding the guidance and roles of the Spirit that I would like to speak today.

Promptings for Personal Well-Being

When I was serving as a bishop in a BYU student ward, one Sunday afternoon a young woman came into my office to tell me that she had been dating a young man for some time and that he had recently proposed to her. (That happens occasionally on this campus.) Before giving an answer to the young man’s question, she wanted to pray for assurance that marrying him was the Lord’s will. She prayed frequently and even fasted, waiting for an unmistakable witness instructing her of the choice she should make. However, she felt that clear direction never came. She was frustrated and had begun to question her own worthiness, fearing that she didn’t deserve the promised guidance associated with the gift of the Holy Ghost. Fortunately, as we discussed the situation, she was able to feel comfortable with a decision, although she left still feeling a desire to receive a clear witness.

Other similar experiences suggest to me that difficulty in recognizing clear guidance from the Spirit is a common frustration among Church members and one that is

not limited to youth or young adults. We all desire to use the great gift of the Holy Ghost that we have received in order to confidently make life’s key decisions. We seek answers to difficult questions such as “What major or career path should I pursue?” “How can our limited budget get us to the end of the month?” “How can I help my aging parents?” and, yes, “Should I marry the person I am currently dating?” We have hope that the guidance of the Spirit will help us to make choices that will lead to happiness and comfort for ourselves and those we love.

Sometimes inspiration from the Holy Ghost comes in unmistakable ways. On this topic, President Heber J. Grant said:

The Lord gives to many of us the still, small voice of revelation. It comes as vividly and strongly as though it were with a great sound. It comes to each man, according to his needs and faithfulness, for guidance in matters that pertain to his own life. [“The ‘Still Small Voice,’” *Improvement Era*, December 1938, 712; also in *GS*, 30]

My observation is that obvious and immediate guidance from the Spirit comes when there is a pressing need, such as our own safety, or if there will be a significant impact on other people. These types of promptings are great gifts from God.

Because we as Latter-day Saints have heard so many stories in which the answers come easily and vividly, we tend to expect this type of manifestation of the Spirit when making all of our important decisions, and we may feel frustrated or even unworthy when we don’t receive it. However, it is my observation that for every story of an individual receiving a clear and direct answer, there is at least one story of someone who has struggled to receive such clear direction. Sometimes, indeed, such struggling can be caused by unworthiness. But I think we need to more carefully consider the role of the Spirit in our lives and to better

recognize His influence. Let me try to illustrate my point with a personal experience.

At the end of my undergraduate education, I made a relatively simple decision to extend my education for another year here at BYU to complete a master's degree. Then, as I considered opportunities for doctoral studies, I found the decisions to be very difficult: How would this degree influence my career? Was it the correct path for my eventual family? Would I enjoy the education and resulting career? What school should I choose?

I sought the guidance of the Spirit and hoped for a clear answer to my prayers. As part of this process, I educated myself regarding the different options and solicited advice from the faculty here. But obvious guidance from the Spirit never came. I wondered if I had failed to seek guidance with sincerity or if I had somehow offended the Spirit and was not deserving of the answers I sought. Armed, however, with information and advice, I made the best decision I could.

Now, the benefit of time passed allows me to see that I made the correct decision so many years ago. I have no doubt that I received the promised guidance of the Spirit without even recognizing it. Life has taught me that in these types of decisions, as we collect and evaluate information, the Spirit works right by our side, helping us to sift and prioritize the information that is critical in making the appropriate decision. He helps us realize which factors and considerations are most important. He quickens our minds and enhances our own reasoning. While we often don't recognize this enhancement we enjoy, it is clear that we are, in fact, partners with the Spirit in this decision-making process.

Remember that the Lord told Oliver Cowdery that he must first "study it out in [his] mind" (D&C 9:8) and that the Lord would "tell [him] in [his] mind and in [his] heart, by the Holy Ghost" (D&C 8:2). Sometimes, our inclination is to think that we do all the

up-front work and then seek the Spirit to confirm our decision. This is consistent with the message we give to those investigating the Church that they should first study the Book of Mormon and then pray to know of its truthfulness. However, we all know that the Spirit will testify of the truth *while* they are reading the Book of Mormon, that they can gain a testimony *while* listening to truth, and that subsequent prayer only confirms that witness. Why then do we dismiss the quickening of the mind and reasoning enabled by the Holy Ghost that occurs *while* we are making life's important decisions?

This important partnership with the Spirit is part of the great plan of God. The Lord tells us in the Doctrine and Covenants:

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. [D&C 58:27–28]

This agency, this power within us, is something that we must exercise. In our zeal to return to live with our Father in Heaven, I fear that we sometimes lose sight of the fact that our ultimate goal is higher: we are to become like Him. We are expected to use our intellects and our abilities to their fullest extent, for that is how in this life we develop as much as possible our Godlike attributes. The Spirit's job is to make up the vast difference between our abilities and the abilities we need to make correct decisions. But were the Spirit to dictate all of our actions by providing direct answers to all of our questions, He would rob us of the practice we so desperately need if we are to develop as the plan of salvation requires.

My advice, and my encouragement, is that you live worthily and seek the guidance of the Spirit while working hard to make life's decisions after careful consideration of the relevant issues. Then be confident that the Spirit is

working in partnership with you, even if the final result is not as dramatic as you had originally hoped. Often the final witness comes only as a quiet understanding that you have deliberated to the best of your abilities and are ready to move forward with faith. Then, give glory and thanks to God both for the opportunity to develop your Godlike attributes and for the partnership with the Spirit that compensates for your shortcomings imposed by mortality and imperfection.

Promptings for Spiritual Progression

Our understanding and recognition of this partnership we have with the Spirit can be enhanced and perfected if we pay stricter attention to a more important function of the Spirit. I love section 21 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It documents a revelation received by the Prophet Joseph Smith during the meeting called to organize the Church. In this revelation, the Lord said regarding the Prophet:

For his word ye shall receive, as if from mine own mouth, in all patience and faith.

For by doing these things the gates of hell shall not prevail against you; yea, and the Lord God will disperse the powers of darkness from before you, and cause the heavens to shake for your good, and his name's glory. [D&C 21:5–6]

For me, the imagery of this verse is that of a ship moving along its course with the bow dispersing the water to help the ship pass smoothly along its way. I can imagine the powers of darkness trying to impede our path of spiritual progression and the guidance of the Spirit helping us to follow the prophet's words such that these powers of darkness are dispersed from before us. And consider that following the prophet's words is equivalent to following the Savior, for He has said that His words "shall all be fulfilled, whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same" (D&C 1:38).

How is it that the Spirit helps us in following the words of the prophet and thereby in following the Savior? Consider the teachings of the Savior to the Nephites as He visited them after His resurrection: "Now this is the commandment: Repent, all ye ends of the earth, and come unto me and be baptized in my name, that ye may be sanctified by the reception of the Holy Ghost, that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day" (3 Nephi 27:20).

The idea that the Holy Ghost sanctifies us is a familiar teaching, something that we learn early in our study of the gospel. The gift of the Holy Ghost is the baptism by fire (see 2 Nephi 31:13–14) that we understand to be a cleansing process. But what is it that is cleansed? How does this cleansing manifest itself in our daily lives? How does it relate to the remission of sins promised as a result of repentance and our satisfaction of baptismal covenants?

This is not a complicated doctrine, but it is one that is crucial to understand as we pursue our goal to become like our Father. Let me address this by means of a familiar scriptural story. Recall that after their own miraculous conversion, Ammon and the other sons of King Mosiah left home to minister among the Lamanites. Ammon traveled to the land of Ishmael, representing a part of the Lamanite kingdom ruled by King Lamoni, whose father was the king over all the Lamanites. After some pretty impressive missionary work, Ammon had the opportunity to teach Lamoni and his household the gospel, and everyone (except for a woman who had already secretly been converted) received a miraculous conversion experience. These converted individuals later testified to the people in the land (see Alma 17–19). A scripture tells us that "they did all declare unto the people the selfsame thing—that their hearts had been changed; that they had no more desire to do evil" (Alma 19:33).

Does this sound like sanctification to you? As we previously discussed, we all have agency, which is the power to change our

behavior. We have the ability to cease committing sin. However, simply abandoning sin is inadequate, as we still have the desire to continue our former behavior. The influence of the Spirit is able to change our very hearts so that we no longer even *desire* to commit sin. The purging by the refiner's fire often used to describe the cleansing process enabled by the Spirit is the purging of the unrighteous desires from our heart. Neil A. Maxwell taught:

Fortunately for us, our loving Lord will work with us, "even if [we] can [do] no more than desire to believe," providing we will "let this desire work in [us]" (Alma 32:27). Therefore, declared President Joseph F. Smith, "the education then of our desires is one of far-reaching importance to our happiness in life" (Gospel Doctrine, 5th ed. [1939], 297). Such education can lead to sanctification until, said President Brigham Young, "holy desires produce corresponding outward works" (in Journal of Discourses, 6:170). Only by educating and training our desires can they become our allies instead of our enemies! ["According to the Desire of [Our] Hearts," Ensign, November 1996, 22]

I love this imagery of "the education . . . of our desires" as something that leads to sanctification until holy desires produce good works. This is the single most important function of the Holy Ghost, as this is what enables us to return to God's presence and become like Him.

The Role of Sacrifice

What is our role in enabling the Spirit to work this miracle in our lives? Remember our discussion revealing that following the prophet and therefore following the Savior disperses the powers of darkness from before us? There is a simple scriptural story that brings this concept to life.

A young man came to Jesus during His mortal ministry and asked Him what he needed to do to obtain eternal life. Jesus quoted several basic commandments, and the young man

simply answered that he had kept these commandments since he was a child. Perhaps he therefore felt confident when he asked Jesus the question "What lack I yet?" (Matthew 19:20). He obviously was not prepared for the answer that Jesus gave him: "Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Matthew 19:21).

Unfortunately, the young man could not comply. It is easy for us to condemn the young man as being too attached to his material possessions. But this story is not about the love of money and things. This story is about loving something so much that it keeps us from following the Savior. In this context, we all have great possessions, and many of us are guilty of the behavior displayed by this young man. Even Peter, who returned to his fishing after the Savior's crucifixion, was asked about those fish by the resurrected Lord: "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?" (John 21:15).

Consider again our story about the sons of Mosiah. Lamoni's father, king over all the Lamanites, had the opportunity to observe Ammon with his son, and as a result he desired to learn the gospel. As Aaron, Ammon's brother, taught the king about the gospel, the king indicated that he would give away his entire kingdom to "have this eternal life," "be born of God," and have "this wicked spirit rooted out of [his] breast, and receive [the] Spirit" (Alma 22:15). But giving up his kingdom was not required. Rather, the king soon realized a different sacrifice was warranted, and as he prayed he said to God: "Wilt thou make thyself known unto me, and I will give away all my sins to know thee" (Alma 22:18).

One summer during my own college years, I worked at a job that required me to commute about 15 miles each way. To economize, I carpooled with a young man who was a devout born-again Christian. I came to love this man's

devotion in the cause of Christ, and in time he revealed to me that he had once been a very accomplished figure skater. When I asked him why he no longer engaged in the sport, he told me that he felt he was doing it for his own glory rather than for the glory of God. I could not help but be impressed by his willingness to give up what he loved because he felt it was keeping him from following the Savior.

By using our agency to change our behavior, we empower the Spirit to change our hearts. We must truthfully identify those things currently keeping us from following the Savior as fully as we should and, unlike the young rich man, be willing to put those things on the altar of sacrifice. Then the Spirit can educate our desires, making it so that we no longer desire to do evil, which is the sanctification we seek.

My mission president was a man who knew the scriptures and used them to powerfully teach. I can still recall his words as he would use scriptures to clearly and simply explain doctrines that I had previously thought to be complicated and confusing. Recently I attended a reunion for missionaries who had served under this man. As he took the podium at the end of the evening, he delivered a sermon that demonstrated that his power and ability had only increased in his life. I was struck by his words, which went something like, “There are many of you in this room who are living in such a way that you do not enjoy the companionship of the Spirit. Whatever you are doing that is not in harmony with the commandments, stop it now.”

This message is powerful. Sometimes we rationalize our continuation of inappropriate thoughts, words, and deeds, saying that we are not ready to change now but will certainly improve in the future. My plea is, to use the words of my mission president, that you “stop it now.” My invitation is that you leave today with a resolve in your heart to identify some sinful behaviors that you can—today—sacrifice and come follow the Savior.

The Impact of Action

There is a remarkable outcome of this process working in our lives. Do you remember the story of Enos in the Book of Mormon? Enos tells us that while he was hunting in the forest, he remembered the teachings of his father, Jacob, about eternal life, and therefore his soul “hungered” (Enos 1:4). What a great word to describe his desire to change or, to connect with my remarks today, to give up those things keeping him from following the Savior. He knelt down and prayed all day and into the night. The culmination of this process was a voice coming to him, telling him that his sins had been forgiven (see Enos 1:2–5). Clearly Enos underwent the change of heart we have been discussing today.

I am struck, however, by what happened next. After Enos received a witness of the principles of the Atonement through this interchange with the voice of the Lord, the scripture tells us that he “began to feel a desire for the welfare of [his] brethren” (Enos 1:9), and therefore he started to pray for them. After receiving additional guidance from the voice of the Lord, Enos then tells us that he started to pray for the Lamanites (see Enos 1:11).

No longer desiring to do evil, which is a key indicator of the change of heart wrought by the Spirit, goes hand in hand with having a concern for the welfare of others. Enos is not alone in undergoing this type of transformation. Alma the Elder, Alma the Younger, the sons of Mosiah, Peter and Paul of the New Testament, and many other scriptural figures demonstrate the same change in their lives. Our modern prophets, apostles, and general Church leaders, all of whom clearly have experienced a change of heart in their lives, spend their time in our service, saddened by the thought that any of us should be lost due to wickedness.

More generally, the scriptures are full of stories of prophets and other examples of faith receiving clear and distinct guidance from the Spirit as those individuals strove to be

instruments in God's hands to bless the lives of others. If you would like more frequent and more impactful direct encounters with the Spirit, focus on how you can serve those around you. Pray each day that the Spirit will guide you to those who need your help. As you study sacred words, ponder on ways in which you can apply the principles you learn to serve those around you. This simple formula will bring the Spirit into your lives in new, direct, and powerful ways.

I encourage you to ask yourself these questions: Are you the one trying to beat everyone else to the front of the long line at the grocery store, or are you instead the one helping the mother with small children who is struggling to balance her cart and her kids? Are you too busy with your own problems to listen to a roommate's or spouse's challenges, or are you the trusted confidant and counselor? Do you home or visit teach to satisfy a requirement, or are you finding meaningful ways to serve the families or individuals you visit? Do you seek Church callings that give high visibility, or are you striving to bless others' lives no matter where you are called to serve?

Brothers and sisters, we have covered a lot of ground today. Remember these words:

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. [D&C 58:27–28]

This is the path we must pursue if we are to become like our Father in Heaven. If there are things keeping you from following the Savior, stop them now, and seek to bless the lives of those around you. Through this process you will find the Spirit working a great change in your heart, and your desires will center on serving God by serving your fellowman. Your familiarity with the Spirit will become so exercised that when you need His help in making decisions for your own well-being, you will immediately recognize those thoughts and promptings—that partnership—that will assist you through your decision-making process. Indeed, you will find that the promptings are increasingly clear and unmistakable, even if the nature of these promptings is not dramatic.

On this path of progression, never forget the beautiful promise of the Master given in D&C 121: "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" (D&C 121:45).

This confidence before God is what I hope for myself, my family, and each of you. I hope that you will seek these blessings of the Spirit more fully in your lives, and I testify of the power it will bring.