

The Simpleness of the Way

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I am definitely humbled by this opportunity to speak to you today. As you can imagine, I have lost a lot of sleep over this responsibility, and I'm guessing that when I am done you will probably say, "He should have slept!"

To begin with, I feel it is important to explain that for most of my life I grew up without a father's influence in the home, so I turned to the leaders of the Church for guidance. I have read over and over the talks given by the General Authorities and other leaders at general conference and other occasions. Their counsel and instruction have guided me throughout my life as a father would, so I will be using many of their quotes today.

Years ago, when I was a young father, I went downstairs one day to our oldest son's bedroom. He was very upset and had been crying. I was there to try to comfort him and find out what was wrong. As he and I talked, he confessed that he had told a fib to his mother. He said, "Dad, it's so hard to be righteous." This caused me to turn my head and smile, because he was young, but then he continued to say, "Dad, life is like climbing over a wall, isn't it?" For a moment I was completely stunned. How could he have such insight?

We continued to talk, but the rest of the conversation is a blur. I hope my part of that

conversation included teaching him how the Savior made it possible for him to repent of the fib he had told his mother and any other mistakes he had made. I also hope I taught him how very important it is to listen to and follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost each day of his life.

In March 1979 President Marion G. Romney, then second counselor in the First Presidency, gave a BYU devotional titled "Guidance of the Holy Spirit." He stated:

As conditions worsen, it becomes more apparent every day that we are on a collision course with disaster. I am persuaded that nothing short of the guidance of the Holy Spirit can bring us through safely.

He then explained some profound truths. "If you want to obtain and keep the guidance of the Spirit, you can do so by following this simple four-point program":

1. Pray
2. Study and learn the gospel
3. Live righteously
4. Give service in the Church

Stanley A. Johnson was a BYU professor of ancient scripture when this devotional was given on 5 June 2012.

President Romney continued: “If you will do these things, you will get the guidance of the Holy Spirit and you will go through this world successfully, regardless of what the people of the world say or do.”¹ What a wonderful promise that is!

As I read these words, I recall King Benjamin’s address to the Nephites and their subsequent conversion:

And they all cried with one voice, saying: Yea, we believe all the words which thou hast spoken unto us; and also, we know of their surety and truth, because of the Spirit of the Lord Omnipotent, which has wrought a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually. [Mosiah 5:2]

Before we continue, I must share a favorite quote by President Ezra Taft Benson, given here at a BYU devotional. President Howard W. Hunter felt it was so important that he later included it in a general conference talk. President Benson said:

That man is greatest and most blessed and joyful whose life most closely fits the pattern of the Christ. This has nothing to do with earthly wealth, power, or prestige. The only true test of greatness, blessedness, joyfulness is how close a life can come to being like the Master, Jesus Christ. He is the right way, the full truth, and the abundant life.²

It is because of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Ghost that we can change, that we can change completely, and that we can stay changed. We do not need to be a part of this world that is on a collision course with disaster. The key is to obtain and keep the Spirit of the Lord with us continually.

“That’s Too Simple”

While working on my doctoral degree in 1984, I took a course in education. One day my professor broke from the lecture and asked the

class how one obtains the Spirit of the Lord in his own life. Many members of the class made comments, and finally I shared what President Romney had stated in 1979. I recited the four-point program for obtaining the Spirit. When I had finished, the professor leaned against the chalkboard, looked down at the ground, and said, “No, that’s too simple—that’s too simple.”

I have reflected on his comment over and over again, and I keep thinking about the story of Moses in the wilderness when he raised the brazen serpent. The rebellious Israelites had been bitten by serpents, and the Lord told Moses to fashion a fiery serpent out of brass and place it upon a pole. All who would look upon the serpent would live. (See Numbers 21:6–9.)

The Book of Mormon carries on the narrative and explains what happened:

He sent fiery flying serpents among them; and after they were bitten he prepared a way that they might be healed; and the labor which they had to perform was to look; and because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished. [1 Nephi 17:41]

There you have it—it was too simple, therefore many perished. Remember, President Romney too spoke of the simpleness of the way when he said, “If you want to obtain and keep the guidance of the Spirit, you can do so by following this *simple* four-point program” (emphasis added).

Pray

The first point is to pray. Even though the idea is simple, the process requires our whole being. President Henry B. Eyring once stated:

[The Lord] offers us the covenant to always remember Him and the warning to pray always so that we will place our reliance on Him, our only safety. It is not hard to know what to do. The very difficulty

*of remembering **always** and praying **always** is a needed spur to **try harder**. The danger lies in delay or drift.*³

Remember, it is not difficult to know what to do; the difficulty lies in actually doing it.

Years ago Elder Gene R. Cook of the Seventy presided at our stake conference when I was stake president. In the Saturday adult session, he challenged everyone to prayerfully select someone who would not normally attend stake conference and invite them to come to stake conference the following day. He then asked for a raise of hands as a commitment and counseled the congregation to pray themselves through the experience. Then he said something I will always remember: "We should learn to pray ourselves through each day." This has had a lasting impact on me.

Elder Cook also turned to me and asked me to prayerfully select someone whom I could bring to stake conference the following day. I would like to share that experience, with permission from the individual involved. As you can imagine, I immediately started to pray myself through that experience. During the process, the name of one of our neighbors came into my mind. She had been through some challenges, so I thought this would be a good time to challenge her. Elder Cook and I walked across the street, and I asked her if we could visit.

"President," she said, "do you know how many people have already been here?"

"No," I replied.

"Five!" she said, holding up her hand with outstretched fingers.

I remember thinking, "Well, so much for my inspiration!"

Elder Cook didn't miss a beat. He grabbed me by the arm, pulled me in close, and said, "Ask her if we can talk to her." I did, and she invited us downstairs.

As we descended the stairs, Elder Cook turned to me and asked, "Are you praying yourself through this?"

I thought to myself, "What do you think?"

When we were settled on the couch, he started to talk to her, looking her in the eye. He asked her what her maiden name was, and she told him. He then said, calling her by name, "I know your parents really well. Are you from . . . ?" and he named the location.

"Yes," she said.

"I know your dad. He's a stake president."

"Yes," she said.

Elder Cook then proceeded to chasten her firmly, calling her by name again and saying, "You know better."

Tears flowed, and soon commitments followed. At the beginning of that experience I thought I had made a mistake, but the Spirit had guided us there, and by praying through that experience, doors and hearts were opened.

Amulek stated the idea of continual prayer this way: "Yea, and when you do not cry unto the Lord, let your hearts be full, drawn out in prayer unto him continually for your welfare, and also for the welfare of those who are around you" (Alma 34:27).

The Savior said, "Behold, verily, verily, I say unto you, ye must watch and pray always lest ye enter into temptation; for Satan desireth to have you, that he may sift you as wheat" (3 Nephi 18:18).

Recently our youngest daughter was sealed to a fine young man in the temple, and at that time they were admonished to pray next to each other, with their arms and hands intertwined. "Begin and end your day," the temple sealer said, "by giving thanks for another day together." As many of you are at this same stage in life, how important it is to pray for the Spirit of the Lord to protect and guide your little kingdom.

Prayer should be an important part of each and every day. Elder David A. Bednar has said:

Meaningful morning prayer is an important element in the spiritual creation of each day—and precedes the temporal creation or the actual

*execution of the day. Just as the temporal creation was linked to and a continuation of the spiritual creation [see Moses 3:4–5], so meaningful morning and evening prayers are linked to and are a continuation of each other.*⁴

Let me tell you, brothers and sisters, that my morning prayers have changed because of this counsel, and it has had quite an effect upon me.

Years ago President Spencer W. Kimball stated: “Prayer is such a privilege—to speak to our Father in Heaven. It was a prayer, a very special prayer, which opened this whole dispensation! It began with a young man’s first vocal prayer.”

Then he said this: “I hope that not too many of our prayers are silent, even though when we cannot pray vocally, it is good to offer a silent prayer in our hearts and in our minds.”⁵

This little bit of advice really has helped me to commune with our Father in Heaven. It has enabled me to concentrate better and speak “with” instead of “to” our Father in Heaven (see 1 Nephi 3:1). In the same message, President Kimball also suggested that we “do some intense listening”⁶ at the end of our prayers.

Study and Learn the Gospel

The second point in this formula is to study and learn the gospel. As our young family was growing up, like many of your families we would have scripture study early in the morning, and that usually meant our children were not very alert. We sometimes wondered if anyone was listening, let alone learning. My wife and I felt a little relieved when Elder Bednar shared the following statement in general conference about his family:

If you could ask our adult sons what they remember about family prayer, scripture study, and family home evening, I believe I know how they would answer. They likely would not identify a particular prayer or a specific instance of scripture study or an especially meaningful family home evening lesson

as the defining moment in their spiritual development. What they would say they remember is that as a family we were consistent.

*Sister Bednar and I thought helping our sons understand the content of a particular lesson or a specific scripture was the ultimate outcome. But such a result does not occur each time we study or pray or learn together. The consistency of our intent and work was perhaps the greatest lesson—a lesson we did not fully appreciate at the time.*⁷

One day our second son came home from his early years in seminary and gave me a drawing of the plan of salvation. It was well done. He had drawn the premortal existence, mortality, and life beyond the grave, including the celestial, terrestrial, and telestial kingdoms. It was all there. He even had drawn himself holding hands with the Redeemer in the celestial kingdom.

I then asked him how he knew the plan so well, and he said, “I don’t know, Dad, but I won a candy bar!” He then said he was the only student in the class who could do it. Hopefully he had learned it in family scripture study or in family home evening, even though we weren’t sure they were learning anything at the time.

President Benson once said:

*When **individual members** and families immerse themselves in the scriptures regularly and consistently, . . . other areas of activity will automatically come. Testimonies will increase. Commitment will be strengthened. Families will be fortified. Personal revelation will flow.*⁸

I know this promise is real, and I testify that it works.

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:16 that the “outward man [perisheth], yet the inward man is renewed day by day.” I love that scripture.

Elder Jay E. Jensen and I were once traveling together when he shared that scripture with me. He said, “That is of late my favorite

scripture.” I think it has become one of mine. How important it is to renew ourselves day by day. My experience has been that personal scripture study is a powerful way to renew ourselves day by day. I would encourage you not to miss a day.

Bishop Keith B. McMullin once shared something in our stake conference that I’ve not forgotten. He said, “You read your scriptures every day, and some days there just isn’t time. Simply open the scriptures on those days and read a verse—you can do that. Just read a verse. That way you’ll keep the scriptural habit going.” I bear witness to that.

President Boyd K. Packer once stated, “When you feel weak, discouraged, depressed, or afraid, open the Book of Mormon and read. Do not let too much time pass before reading a verse, a thought, or a chapter.”⁹

Brothers and sisters, make yourselves familiar with the scriptures; apply them to your own lives. They should feel as comfortable in your hands as a well-worn pair of tennis shoes does on your feet. I feel it a real blessing in my life to be able to teach from the scriptures at this university. I know without a doubt they are true. There is power in the scriptures, and they will help us feel the guidance of the Spirit in our lives on a daily basis—of that I am sure.

Live Righteously

How can we live righteously? President Romney answered, “Repent of your sins by confessing them and forsaking them.”¹⁰ Living righteously, it seems to me, really could be summarized in one word: *repent!*

Nephi taught his posterity that we are saved by grace “after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). What is all we can do? The king of the Anti-Nephi-Lehis gave us some insight in a sermon he delivered to his people:

And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins . . . which we have

*committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was **all we could do to repent sufficiently** before God that he would take away our stain. [Alma 24:11; emphasis added]*

Repenting really is all that we can do.

President Eyring gave a devotional talk here at Brigham Young University that had a powerful effect on me. He told of a young man who needed to repent and had come to him when President Eyring was a bishop. After a lengthy time, Bishop Eyring interviewed him and found him worthy to hold a temple recommend. But the young man was going to be married in the temple to a young lady who was sweet and clean, and he needed to know if his sins had been remitted—if he had forgiveness from the Lord. How could he get that revelation?

Bishop Eyring said it was a good question and that he needed some time, so the young man gave him a deadline—less than two weeks.

During those two weeks Bishop Eyring went to a social function that then Elder Spencer W. Kimball also attended. Elder Kimball found Bishop Eyring and said, “Hal, I understand that you are now a bishop. Do you have anything you would like to ask me?”

President Eyring continued:

I said that I did, but I didn’t think that was the place to talk about it. He thought it was. It was an outdoor party. My memory is that we went behind a shrub and there had our interview. Without breaking confidences . . . , I outlined the concerns and the question of this young man. . . . Then I asked Elder Kimball, “How can he get that revelation? How can he know whether his sins are remitted?”

I thought Elder Kimball would talk to me about fasting or prayer or listening for the still small voice. But he surprised me. Instead he said, “Tell me something about the young man.”

I said, “What would you like to know?”

And then he began a series of the most simple questions. Some of the ones I remember were:
“Does he come to his priesthood meetings?”
I said, after a moment of thought, “Yes.”
“Does he come early?”
“Yes.”
“Does he sit down front?”
I thought for a moment and then realized, to my amazement, that he did.
“Does he home teach?”
“Yes.”
“Does he go early in the month?”
“Yes, he does.”
“Does he go more than once?”
“Yes.”

I can't remember the other questions. But they were all like that—little things, *simple* acts of obedience, of submission. And for each question I was surprised that my answer was always yes. Yes, he wasn't just at all his meetings: he was early; he was smiling; he was there not only with his whole heart, but with the broken heart of a little child, as he was every time the Lord asked anything of him. And after I had said yes to each of his questions, Elder Kimball looked at me, paused, and then very quietly said, “There is your revelation.”¹¹

This is repentance: the mighty change of heart. Again, what is all that we can do? It is to repent, as this young man did, not only with our whole hearts but also with a broken heart and a contrite spirit (see 3 Nephi 9:20). The scriptures remind us of the Savior's words:

*Repent, and I will receive you. . . .
. . . Come unto me and ye shall partake of the fruit of the tree of life; yea, ye shall eat and drink of the bread and the waters of life freely;
Yea, come unto me and bring forth works of righteousness. [Alma 5:33–35]*

By repenting we are living lives of righteousness and allowing the Spirit to help us change.

Service in the Church

The fourth point in obtaining the Spirit is service in the Church. The question is, does service bring forth the Spirit or does the Spirit cause one to serve? The answer is yes!

One day in my office at seminary I was speaking with a student when I started to go numb down one side of my body and then the other. For some time I was in a semiconscious state. When I finally regained full consciousness, one of the aftereffects was persistent headaches that nothing seemed to help. I was the bishop of our ward at the time, and the headaches were so intense that I decided to sit down and have a talk with my stake president, William A. Cox.

I explained to him that I was experiencing extreme headaches, and even though I did not ask to be released, he knew why I was there. Finally he leaned over the desk and said, “I'm not going to release you, Bishop.” He then continued, “A loaded train doesn't jump the track.”

Well, that certainly made no sense to me! Fortunately, President Cox explained what he meant. He had long worked at Geneva Steel, controlling the trains that transported the steel. He said that when a train is loaded down with freight, it will not jump the track. Only when the boxcars are empty is the train liable to leave the track. He then reinforced his statement that he would not release me. I did not fully understand the principle until later. As I went to Church to conduct interviews—still with headaches—I found myself so involved in the work that I soon didn't even notice them. It wasn't long before they lessened in intensity, and I have now all but forgotten about them.

The principle in this for me is that serving others brings the Spirit into our lives and helps us to remain on the straight and narrow way, especially during times of challenge and stress.

Moroni lived during some very challenging times, and Mormon gave him some advice

that is helpful for all of us to remember. Let us consider this scripture and how it applies in our lives. Mormon said:

And now, my beloved son, notwithstanding their hardness, let us labor diligently; for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation; for we have a labor to perform whilst in this tabernacle of clay, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God. [Moroni 9:6]

Note that his advice was much like President Cox's advice: No matter how difficult it gets, just keep working and serving. Why? The blessings will come!

Conclusion

Well, there you have it—four ways to obtain and keep the Spirit in our lives: prayer, gospel study, living righteously, and giving service.

So are we on a collision course with disaster? Yes.

Must we live in fear? No.

Jesus told us, "Be not afraid, only believe" (Mark 5:36) and "see that ye be not troubled" (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:23). As a watchman on the tower, President Romney told us that if we have the Spirit of the Lord, we can go through this world successfully, regardless of what the people of the world say or do. That is quite a promise, and it is true.

We can learn a lesson from the Israelites in the wilderness. If a prophet of God tells us we can look upon the brazen serpent and be healed, then we can look upon the brazen serpent and be healed. If an apostle of God tells us we can obtain and keep the Spirit of the Lord by following four simple points, then we should believe it! Remember, Alma taught his son Helaman that "by small and simple

things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6).

Brothers and sisters, I know these principles are true. I am so grateful that I have had the opportunity to share them with you, and I leave this testimony with you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Marion G. Romney, "Guidance of the Holy Spirit," BYU devotional address, 20 March 1979; see also Marion G. Romney, "First Presidency Message: Guidance of the Holy Spirit," *Ensign*, January 1980, 2, 5.

2. Ezra Taft Benson, "Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations," BYU devotional address, 10 December 1974; see Howard W. Hunter, "Come unto Me," *Ensign*, November 1990, 18.

3. Henry B. Eyring, "Always," CES fireside at BYU, 3 January 1999, emphasis in original; see also Henry B. Eyring, "Always," *Ensign*, October 1999, 9.

4. David A. Bednar, "Pray Always," *Ensign*, November 2008, 41.

5. Spencer W. Kimball, "We Need a Listening Ear," *Ensign*, November 1979, 4.

6. Kimball, "A Listening Ear," 4.

7. David A. Bednar, "More Diligent and Concerned at Home," *Ensign*, November 2009, 19.

8. Ezra Taft Benson, "The Power of the Word," *Ensign*, May 1986, 81; emphasis added.

9. Boyd K. Packer, "The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ—Plain and Precious Things," *Ensign*, May 2005, 8.

10. Romney, "Guidance," BYU devotional; see also Romney, "Guidance," *Ensign*, 5.

11. Henry B. Eyring, "Come unto Christ," BYU devotional address, 29 October 1989; emphasis added.