

# *Recognizing and Responding to the Promptings of the Spirit*

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In the social work main office in the Joseph F. Smith Building there is a disability access door that has a self-charging mechanism that opens and closes the door. We've had this mechanism on the door for over two years. My office is located next to that door, so I am very aware of every time the door opens and closes. However, it was only very recently that, as I was sitting at my desk in a quiet, thoughtful moment, I heard the door open, and as it closed I heard a unique melodic sound. I was so taken aback that I got up from my desk, walked out of my office, opened the door, and listened again to the melodic tone as it closed. I asked myself, Why hadn't I heard that melody before? Was this the first time that the melodic sound had occurred? My guess is that the door has been making that sound since it was first installed, yet it took me over two years to recognize and respond to that small, soft, melodic sound. It wasn't until I was in tune with the sound that I actually heard it.

Brothers and sisters, in my work at BYU and in my service within the Church, I have been blessed to spend much of my time working with youth and young adults. As important topics and decisions come up during what Elder Robert D. Hales called the "decade of decision" ("To the Aaronic Priesthood:

Preparing for the Decade of Decision," *Ensign*, May 2007, 48), I often hear questions such as How can I recognize and respond to the promptings of the Spirit? and, more specifically, as stated by Elder David A. Bednar, How can I tell the difference between my emotions telling me what I want to hear and the Holy Ghost telling me what I need to hear? In fact, while he was president of BYU-Idaho, Elder Bednar said that this last question was the question most frequently asked by the students with whom he met. He said, "During the entire time we have been holding family home evenings with students, I cannot remember a single time when some version of this question was not asked" ("Receiving, Recognizing, and Responding to the Promptings of the Holy Ghost," Ricks College devotional address, 31 August 1999).

I am guessing many of you, like me, have asked this question. How can we tell if we are receiving inspiration from the Spirit or if we are getting a message from our own emotions or from an evil source or if we are receiving any spiritual prompting at all? While I don't

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have a complete or easy answer to these questions, I would like to discuss with you some of the things I have learned about recognizing and responding to the promptings of the Spirit. I pray for and invite the Holy Ghost to be with each of us today as we discuss this most important topic. Let's begin by discussing how the Lord communicates with us.

### How the Lord Communicates with Us

When we communicate with Heavenly Father, we do so through prayer. When He speaks to us, He does so through revelation. This two-way divine communication is critical to our understanding of the process of receiving personal revelation (see L. Lionel Kendrick, "Personal Revelation," BYU devotional address, 20 May 1997).

Let's look at this process in action. In sections 6 and 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants, through revelation given to Oliver Cowdery, we learn some important concepts of this two-way divine communication. In Doctrine and Covenants 6:15 the Lord said, "Thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind . . . that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth." Then, in verse 23, the Lord said: "Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" Here we see that after Oliver inquired of the Lord through prayer, his mind was enlightened by the Spirit and he was given a feeling of calmness or peace. In Doctrine and Covenants 8:2 the Lord states, "Behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart."

Elder Richard G. Scott noted, "When we receive an impression in our *heart*, we can use our *mind* either to rationalize it away or to accomplish it" ("Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayer," *Ensign*, November 1989, 31; emphasis in original). Together the verses in these two sections teach us that when

Heavenly Father speaks to us through the Spirit *in its most familiar form*, it most often comes to us through our thoughts and feelings. As President Boyd K. Packer noted:

*That sweet, quiet voice of inspiration comes more as a feeling than it does as a sound. . . . The Holy Ghost communicates with our spirits through the mind more than through the physical senses. This guidance comes as thoughts, as feelings through promptings and impressions. We may **feel** the words of spiritual communication more than **hear** them and **see** with spiritual rather than with mortal eyes.* ["Prayer and Promptings," *Ensign*, November 2009, 44; emphasis in original]

Therefore, it shouldn't be difficult for us to understand why we are counseled by our Church leaders to avoid anything that negatively impacts our ability to receive promptings through our thoughts and feelings (see Bednar, "Receiving").

In the field of social work we often work with people who are struggling with addictions, including pornography and other addictive substances and behaviors. These types of addictions negatively impact "our ability to recognize and respond to the promptings of the Holy Ghost" (Bednar, "Receiving"). Brothers and sisters, what are the influences in your life and mine that negatively impact our ability to feel the Spirit? What are ways we can better understand the Lord's pattern of communicating with us?

### Making Faulty Assumptions

All too often we make faulty assumptions and have erroneous expectations regarding recognizing the Spirit. Let me share with you what Elder Bednar said about this:

*Let me suggest that many of us typically assume we will receive **an** answer or **a** prompting to our earnest prayers and pleadings. And we also frequently expect that such **an** answer or **a** prompt-*

ing will come immediately and **all at once**. Thus we tend to believe the Lord will give us **a big answer quickly and all at one time**. However, the pattern repeatedly described in the scriptures suggests we receive “line upon line, precept upon precept,” or, in other words, **many small answers over a period of time**. Recognizing and understanding this pattern is an important key to obtaining inspiration and help from the Holy Ghost.

Elder Bednar then went on to state:

*Sister Bednar and I frequently visit with students who wonder about career choices and how to properly select a school at which to study and receive additional education. Many times a student is perplexed—having felt as though “the” answer about a career or a school was received at one particular point in time, only to feel that a different and perhaps conflicting answer was received at another point in time. The question then is often asked, “Why did the Lord give me two different answers?” In like manner, a student may sincerely seek to know if the person he or she has been dating is “the one.” A feeling of “yes” at one time may appear to be contradicted by a different feeling of “no” at another time. May I simply suggest that what we initially believe is “the” answer may be but one part of a “line upon line, precept upon precept,” ongoing, incremental, and unfolding pattern of small answers. It is clearly the case that the Lord did not change His mind; rather, you and I must learn to better recognize the Lord’s pattern as a series of related and expanding answers to our most important questions. [“‘Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept’ (2 Nephi 28:30),” BYU–Idaho devotional address, 11 September 2001; emphasis in original]*

Let me share two personal examples that illustrate Elder Bednar’s points.

Back in 2000, when I was getting ready to graduate with my doctorate and interviewing for my first faculty position, I found what I thought was the perfect job: a good school

fairly close to home, a creative joint faculty position within the school, and a very prominent company that does great work with American Indian children and families—my specialty. My meeting with the company went great. They were onboard, and I thought this appointment would lead to all kinds of research opportunities and funding. In my mind this job was made for me. I prayed, felt good about it, and was moving forward. Then, during my faculty visit to the school, things went from bad to worse. My presentation didn’t go well, the faculty members didn’t seem to like me, and there was just something that was not right. Well, I didn’t get the offer. So why is it that after praying and feeling good about this job, things didn’t work out? That was a question my wife and I were asking ourselves.

When this job didn’t work out, the other opportunity I had was to go to Washington University in St. Louis to the top social work program in the country, which obviously is a good thing. Their offer was for me to be the assistant director of the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies and a lecturer in the School of Social Work. Although this was a great opportunity, it was not a tenure-track position—something I definitely wanted. So we prayed again, moved forward, and took the job. What a blessing that position turned out to be! I got to spend three years working with Eddie Brown, the director of the Buder Center and former assistant secretary of the interior in charge of the Bureau of Indian Affairs—an appointment our own Larry Echo Hawk later filled. Eddie Brown is probably the most influential American Indian social worker in the country, and during those three years we were able to travel throughout the country working with Indian tribes and tribal organizations. Those three years provided me with the foundation I needed in order to be where I am today.

As a sidenote, I later found out that, shortly after 9/11, when the economy took a nosedive,

the first position was canceled due to lack of funding from the company for the joint appointment. While it would have started out as a great job, it would have been short lived.

Here is the lesson I learned in recognizing and responding to the promptings of the Spirit: Sometimes what we perceive to be a positive answer followed by a negative outcome is later followed by a new, unexpected, better answer (i.e., opportunity) if we will but trust in the Lord and keep moving forward. The Lord knew what I did not. That first experience prepared me to listen more closely to the Spirit the next time, to have an increased level of gratitude for how the Lord works in our lives, and to remember “that all things work together for good [in the Lord’s time frame] to them that love God” (Romans 8:28). So, in summary, sometimes the right choices or blessings come in the Lord’s time and through promptings that are often not recognized until after they are acted upon.

Example two: My wife, Erika, and I dated for nearly a year before we were married. I don’t ever recall receiving a one-time spiritual confirmation that she was “the one.” However, the more we interacted, the more we talked, and the more we learned about each other in different situations, I received many small, simple, and quiet promptings that she was a special, talented, spiritual woman. Together, all of those simple answers over a period of time helped me to receive an appropriate spiritual confirmation that I should ask her to marry me. That confirmation did not come all at once during a single heartfelt prayer of desperation. Rather, it came more in a line-upon-line and precept-upon-precept manner (see Bednar, “Line upon Line”).

Here is another key element regarding finding a spouse. Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated:

*If a revelation is outside the limits of stewardship, you know it is not from the Lord, and you are not bound by it. I have heard of cases where a young*

*man told a young woman she should marry him because he had received a revelation that she was to be his eternal companion. If this is a true revelation, it will be confirmed directly to the woman if she seeks to know. In the meantime, she is under no obligation to heed it. . . . The man can receive revelation to guide his own actions, but he cannot properly receive revelation to direct hers. She is outside his stewardship. [“Revelation,” BYU devotional address, 29 September 1981]*

Just because I received a witness to marry my wife, that was not enough. She also had to receive her witness—independently. I think it took her a little longer to know whether or not she wanted to spend the rest of eternity with this guy who was pretty average.

Now, your experiences or others’ experiences with important decisions may be different. We all know that big answers do come—and sometimes all at once—but those are more the exception than the rule. For our family, the story of the lost binoculars and how my daughter, McKenna, prayed and knew almost instantly where to find them has become legendary and is used as an example of a big answer to a single prayer. However, “we should not feel spiritually inadequate or unqualified if we do not receive a big and immediate answer to a request or plea for help the first time we ask” (Bednar, “Line upon Line”).

As we think about things we can do to increase our capacity to follow the Spirit, let me suggest a few ways I have found to better receive and respond to the promptings of the Spirit.

### **Ways to Increase Our Capacity to Receive and Respond to the Promptings of the Spirit**

First, living worthily invites the constant companionship of the Spirit. If you are not now worthy, repent and become worthy. For those who are endowed, go to the temple—the Lord’s classroom—and keep your covenants. I’ve heard students ask, “How can I tell if this

is the Spirit I'm feeling?" If you are living worthily, Paul's letter to the Galatians tells us that the fruits of the Spirit are "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22–23). These are all examples of what we feel when the Spirit is present.

In striving to live worthily I am also encouraged by the discussion in section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants about the gifts of the Spirit. Verse 9 states that "they are given for the benefit of those who love me and keep *all* my commandments" (emphasis added). Well, I love the Lord, but I don't always keep *all* of the commandments. The last part of this verse adds an additional element of hope: "and him that seeketh so to do." I am thankful that as I make mistakes and neglect to heed promptings but "seeketh so to" keep the commandments, a loving Father in Heaven and Savior are always there to help me get back on course if I will but keep repenting and keep trying.

One night recently my seven-year-old son was having a hard time and was misbehaving, so I sent him to bed a little early. My two boys share the same room, and I usually read to them before bed. That night as I went down to read to them, I was in a hurry to finish a talk I had coming up in my Church assignment—as well as being a little frustrated with my son's behavior. So I hurriedly read to them and, before leaving, gave my son one more short lecture on proper behavior. During that time I felt something—a feeling—that I should stop and give him a hug and tell him that I loved him. But in my haste and frustration I ignored the prompting, finished reading, and hurried back upstairs to finish my talk. That was a missed opportunity I regret.

Thankfully for me, Heavenly Father is patient—perfectly patient—and was patient with me on that occasion. The next morning, as I was lying in bed getting ready to get up and

start the day, I felt that same prompting: give your son a hug and tell him that you love him. This time I followed the prompting. When my son awoke, I called to him and asked if he could come to my room. When he did, I asked him to sit down on my bed.

He did so and looked at me and asked, "What?" like he was expecting to get another lecture like the night before.

I said, "Hayden, I sure love you and am grateful that you are my son." I then gave him a big hug. He got up and left, and a few minutes later I could hear my son in his happy element, making siren sounds while playing with Legos. The experience was nothing spectacular, but it was a tender mercy, and I am thankful for a second prompting from the Spirit to do what I should have done the night before.

Second, sincere prayer invites the constant companionship of the Spirit. President Gordon B. Hinckley observed:

*The trouble with most of our prayers is that we give them as if we were picking up the telephone and ordering groceries—we place our order and hang up. We need to meditate, contemplate, think of what we are praying about and for and then speak to the Lord as one man speaketh to another. [TGBH, 469]*

Another key element in sincere prayer is gratitude. When was the last time you said a prayer and only expressed gratitude? About learning to recognize answers to prayer, Elder Richard G. Scott said:

*I have saved the most important part about prayer until the end. It is gratitude! Our sincere efforts to thank our beloved Father generate wondrous feelings of peace, self-worth, and love. No matter how challenging our circumstances, honest appreciation fills our mind to overflowing with gratitude. ["Learning to Recognize Answers," 32]*

Obviously there are times we need to ask for help and guidance, but I know I can spend more time giving thanks in my prayers.

Third, immersing ourselves in the scriptures invites the constant companionship of the Spirit. “Studying the scriptures trains us to hear the Lord’s voice” and recognize His Spirit (David M. McConkie, “Gospel Learning and Teaching,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 15). Scriptural immersion provides us with a unique insight into how others have received and responded to the promptings of the Spirit. Elder Bednar gave a great CES fireside talk entitled “A Reservoir of Living Water” (4 February 2007)—that I highly encourage you to read or reread—in which he talked about feasting on the word by *searching* the scriptures for connections, patterns, and themes. In our Church callings we have a handbook of instructions that tells us how to fulfill our callings. In living the gospel, our handbooks of instruction are the scriptures and the revealed word of God through His prophets.

Fourth, service invites the constant companionship of the Spirit. Do you realize that as others are seeking the Spirit to receive answers to their prayers, often the Lord uses us to answer those prayers? We had a Relief Society president in my ward who would often pray and ask, “Father, help me to be an answer to someone else’s prayer today.” Then, as she was going into work or coming home, she would drive around the ward enlisting the Spirit’s prompting to determine if there was a sister who needed her help. Numerous times as she was driving by a sister’s home or thinking of a particular sister, the Spirit would prompt her to stop by, bring dinner, or ask to watch the sister’s children. That Relief Society president knew what it meant to follow the promptings of the Spirit and be an answer to someone else’s prayer. That is Christlike service.

Finally, taking time to pause, ponder, and listen invites the constant companionship of

the Spirit (see Caryn Esplin, “Recognizing and Increasing Personal Revelation,” BYU–Idaho devotional address, 31 July 2012). In our fast-paced, immediate-gratification world we can become so preoccupied with good things that we neglect the most important things. I have found that early in the morning, when things are quiet and my mind is focused, I am most receptive to the promptings of the Spirit.

There is a famous social science experiment (see Daniel J. Simons and Christopher F. Chabris, “Gorillas in Our Midst: Sustained Inattention Blindness for Dynamic Events,” *Perception* 28, no. 9 [1999]: 1059–74) in which participants are asked to watch a video of players in white and black passing a basketball and to count the number of passes the white team makes. However, during the middle of the experiment, as participants are counting the passes, a person in a gorilla suit walks between the players and off the other side of the screen. At the end the narrator asks how many passes the white team made. The narrator then asks, “But did you see the gorilla?”

This experiment has been done on a number of occasions, and typically about half of the participants are so focused on counting the number of passes that they do not see the obvious gorilla walking through the players. I have to admit that the first time I saw the video I did not see the gorilla. Brothers and sisters, are we so focused and so busy that we neglect the promptings of the Spirit—even when those promptings appear right in front of us like the gorilla? Or, when the promptings do come, can we tell the difference between the Spirit’s promptings and our emotions?

### Conclusion

There is a line from the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* after Joseph has been sold into Egypt and put in prison. While Joseph is feeling down and hopeless, the narrator sings:

*Hang on now Joseph, you'll make it some day.  
Don't give up Joseph, fight till you drop.  
We've read the book and you come out on top.  
["Go Go Go Joseph" (London: The Really  
Useful Group, 1991)]*

Similarly, our Heavenly Father has a plan for us—a perfect plan of happiness—and I testify that as we learn to better recognize and respond to the promptings of the Spirit, we will find answers to our prayers and have increased capacity to know how and whether those promptings are from the Holy Ghost—

especially during this “decade of decision” for many of you. Just like the door leading into the social work office, I further testify that as we learn and understand the Lord’s pattern for communicating with us, those small, melodic tones of the Spirit will

*[lead] us back into his sight,  
Where we may stay  
To share eternal life.  
["Our Savior's Love," Hymns, 2002, no. 113]*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.