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Finding Answers

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Finding Answers

JOSEPH FIELDING McCONKIE

Addressing the Saints in Nauvoo on the subject of revelation, the Prophet Joseph Smith said:

I am going to take up this subject by virtue of the knowledge of God in me, which I have received from heaven. The opinions of men, so far as I am concerned, are to me as the crackling of thorns under the pot, or the whistling of the wind. I break the ground; I lead the way like Columbus when he was invited to a banquet, where he was assigned the most honorable place at the table, and served with the ceremonials which were observed towards sovereigns. A shallow courtier present, who was meanly jealous of him, abruptly asked him whether he thought that in case he had not discovered the Indies, there were not other men in Spain who would have been capable of the enterprise? Columbus made no reply, but took an egg and invited the company to make it stand on end. They all attempted it, but in vain; whereupon he struck it upon the table so as to break one end, and left it standing on the broken part, illustrating that when he had once shown the way to the new world nothing was easier than to follow it.¹

Having been privileged to have had some rather remarkable mentors—men who have clearly marked the way—and having had a

few experiences that might be worth sharing, I will take the occasion this morning to make some suggestions relative to the matter of finding answers.

Like making an egg stand on end, the principles are quite simple. If I can articulate them well enough, it will be as though you always knew them.

Learning to Solve Your Own Problems

It was not long after my graduation from this institution that I found myself in Vietnam. I had been commissioned an officer in the Army of the United States and was serving as an LDS chaplain.

Throughout the country our LDS servicemen were organized into groups that functioned like quorums and moved with their military units. These groups were placed in one of three districts, each of which acted under the direction of a district presidency.

My military unit was base-camped in the southern part of the country. Our district president was an air force chaplain by the name of

Joseph Fielding McConkie was a BYU emeritus professor of ancient scripture when this devotional address was delivered on 12 December 2006.

Farrell Smith. I served as his first counselor. As chaplains we were responsible for meeting the spiritual needs of the military units to which we were assigned and also had the general assignment of looking after our LDS servicemen wherever we might find them.

Time will not permit me to describe the nature of the problems we faced. Suffice it to say, they reached far beyond our experience.

We were extremely pleased when we received word that Victor L. Brown of the Presiding Bishopric was on his way to visit with us. We were to travel with him from one end of the country to the other, meeting with as many of our servicemen's groups as possible.

We quickly made the arrangements; I cite but one example. We needed a pilot who could commandeer either a chopper or fixed-wing craft and be able to fly at a moment's notice.

For such arrangements we bypassed the military chain of command and dealt with a higher authority. The Lord always saw that the right man was in the right place.

Chaplain Smith and I then sat in council together. We made a list of the questions we wanted to ask our visiting authority. We divided them up and committed them to memory.

When the times and places of our meetings were announced, our servicemen came from all over the country. We held meetings on the sides of runways, in bunkers and ditches. We held meetings with the ground rumbling beneath our feet and the sound of large guns thundering around us. In some instances we were even able to meet in small military chapels.

Between meetings, as soon as we were airborne, Chaplain Smith and I would take turns asking Bishop Brown questions. His counsel was wise, but it became more than evident what we were doing, and he called a sharp halt to our question asking.

He said, "Brethren, I am going to tell you a story. You won't like it, but it is a great story."

He then proceeded with his story, and, as he had anticipated, we did not like it.

The story centered around a young man who had a very difficult problem. He did not know what to do, so he visited with his bishop.

The bishop listened carefully and thoughtfully. He asked a few questions to assure that he understood all that was involved. He then confessed that he had no idea what counsel to give but told the young man that he would be meeting with the stake president the next evening and that he would present the matter to him.

The next evening the bishop met with the stake president. He explained the young man's problem. The stake president listened attentively and asked a few questions to assure he understood all that was involved. He then said, "Bishop, I have no idea what to tell you, but tomorrow I will be meeting with a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. I will present the matter to him."

The next day, as he met with the member of the Quorum of the Twelve, the stake president raised the matter. The Apostle listened attentively and asked a few questions to assure that he fully understood what was involved. He then said, "President, I have no idea what to tell you, but this afternoon I will be meeting with President McKay. I will ask him."

That afternoon he met with President McKay and carefully explained the problem. President McKay listened attentively and asked a few questions to assure that he understood all that was involved and then said, "Well, that's his (meaning the young man's) problem, isn't it."

Such was the story. We thought the ending a little abrupt. We had expected a great line, something we could chisel in stone; instead, we got one of those drab old truths that build character but can't get the hair on your arms to stand up.

The story brought an end to our question session and with it the realization that our

problems were ours and it was for us to solve them. That is why the Lord placed us there.

The lesson is one that we are generally reluctant to learn. I had a father and two grandfathers who shared a great love of the gospel and who had devoted their lives to its study. They were a marvelous source of understanding.

I have, however, a very distinct memory of the occasion that I went to my father with some gospel questions only to receive the following response: "Look, Junior, you have the same sources available to you as I have to me."

More important than any answers these men gave to my questions was their teaching me how to get answers for myself. They are now gone. Questions continue, as does the confidence that the same sources that were available to them are available to me.

All of you know that we believe in the ministering of angels. You also know that angels will not do for us what we can do for ourselves. For them to do so would be contrary to the order of heaven.

There is a measurable difference between a student coming to my office to seek clarification on something they have read or that was taught in class and the student that comes asking to be taught what they missed because they chose not to come to class or complete the reading assignment.

Would not the same difference exist between those who keep their covenants and those who choose to miss meetings, skip their reading, and ignore assignments while asking God to overlook their neglect in the dispensing of His blessings?

We are generally familiar with the process of revelation announced in section 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants where we are directed to study the matter out in our minds, draw the best conclusion we can, and then bring our best offering to the Lord, asking for His approval while yet being ready to accept His counsel otherwise. The very nature of this process is

designed to balance our experience and agency with the wisdom of heaven.

Seeking the Companionship of the Holy Ghost

Now let us couple the wise use of agency with the gift of the Holy Ghost. To enhance our understanding of this gift, let us first distinguish it from the Light of Christ, which is given to every soul born into this world.² This Light, often referred to as "conscience," enables people to distinguish between right and wrong and entices them to do things that are edifying, enlightening, and uplifting.

Possession of the Light of Christ does not require faith in God or the testimony that Jesus is the Christ. Its purpose, however, is to lead all men to that end.³

Revelations from the Holy Ghost are of a higher order, or reach beyond the light and knowledge that is had by the generality of humankind.⁴

Membership in the Church is not requisite to receiving a revelation from the Holy Ghost. Were this the case, no one could obtain the spiritual witness necessary to join the Church.⁵

In fact, such a spiritual confirmation is required of those we refer to as converts before they are baptized and before we lay hands upon their heads and give them the promise of the gift of the Holy Ghost.⁶

We frequently speak of our right to the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. We are generally left without any explanation as to what this means.

We know that the intent is not to suggest that we stand in a constant deluge of revelation. It is the slothful and unwise servant who has to be commanded in all things.⁷

Perhaps an analogy, one taught me by my father, will help in distinguishing between having received a revelation from the Holy Ghost and our having the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Imagine yourself traveling in the dark of night through very rugged and difficult terrain

carefully seeking your way to a place of safety where you will be reunited with your family. Let us also suppose that a flash of lightning momentarily marks the path of safety before you.

The momentary flash of light pointing you in the direction of safety and shelter in our analogy represents a manifestation through the Holy Ghost.

If you then follow the path it marked out, it will lead you to the waters of baptism at the hands of a legal administrator who will, as he confirms you a member of the Church, say, “Receive the Holy Ghost,” which means “the gift of the Holy Ghost.”

The light by which you now walk embraces the companionship of the Holy Ghost. It is the light of the gospel—or, for some, the gospel in a new light. In either case, it enables you to see that which you could not see before.

It now becomes your privilege to walk, as it were, by the light of day. The light is constant, and, in most instances, the path you are called on to travel is clearly marked. In those instances in which it is not, you are entitled to the necessary vision, impression, or prodding necessary to assure your arrival at the place of safety.

To enjoy the “constant companionship of the Holy Ghost” means, for instance, that, as you fill your assignments as a teacher in the Church (if you are prepared properly), you will be taught things from on high as you teach others.

Such an experience will require more of you than the kind of presentation in which you simply repeat or rearrange the thoughts of others. The fact that every member of the Church is given the gift of the Holy Ghost is the evidence that the Lord wants to reveal things to you and through you.⁸

I have heard my father observe that he learned the gospel by listening to what he was directed to say when he preached the gospel. That experience should be universal among Latter-day Saints.

As you young men lay your hands on the heads of your wives to bless them before they give birth to your children or as you take those children in your arms to give them a father’s blessing, if you hold yourself open to them, thoughts and promises will flow into your mind and you will become an instrument for the Lord in conveying or giving His blessing.

As you serve in positions of leadership or trust and seek direction as to who should be called or what should be done, that same Spirit will lead you far beyond your own thought process and mark a course that reaches beyond that which you can see even by the light of day. This is the companionship of which we speak.

When No Sure Answer Comes

There will be some instances in which no sure answer comes. We have a series of revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants in which the Lord tells the early missionaries of this dispensation that there were some matters that were to be left to their discretion. The phrase that is constantly repeated is “it mattereth not unto me.”⁹

Brigham Young explained this doctrine:

*If I do not know the will of my Father, and what He requires of me in a certain transaction, if I ask Him to give me wisdom concerning any requirement in life, or in regard to my own course, or that of my friends, my family, my children, or those that I pre-
side over, and get no answer from Him, and then do the very best that my judgment will teach me, He is bound to own and honor that transaction, and He will do so to all intents and purposes.*¹⁰

Asking the Right Question

So it is that in finding answers we must find the balance between agency and inspiration. Building upon this foundation, let me teach you a very fundamental but often overlooked principle relative to getting answers to prayers and to questions that trouble you.

Few things facilitate getting the right answer like asking the right question. Let me illustrate.

A young woman came up to me after a meeting at which I had spoken a few weeks ago. She asked if I could help her with a question dealing with the Old Testament. I told her that I would be willing to try.

She asked the question, and I did not have an idea in the world how to answer it. I told her so and then asked why the answer to such a question was important to her.

She indicated that her husband had raised the issue along with other like questions. Each question he was asking carried with it the spirit of doubt. His questions were intended to challenge, not to build faith.

The real question here is: If I had been able to answer each of the questions with which this man was challenging his wife, would it have accomplished anything more than require him to come up with more questions?

The real question needing answering is: Why was he so anxious to discredit God and show the foolishness of scripture? Perhaps he ought be asked "What commandment is it that you don't want to keep?" or "What blessings would you like to quit receiving?"

I recently received a note from a former student. He requested help in answering questions common to anti-Mormon literature.

I know the answers to these questions, but I also know that my answering them will make no difference whatsoever unless there is a change in the purpose and spirit of those asking them.

My questions are these: Is there really a shortage of evidence that Joseph Smith is a prophet? Are the unanswered questions in the Old Testament the real lion in our path?

I have a letter on my desk from a mother who told me a tragic story about the behavior of a man who had been called as a priesthood leader. "How," she asked, "can I explain to my daughter that callings in this Church

are inspired and at the same time explain the behavior of this man?"

While I share her hurt and embarrassment over what took place, I cannot help but wonder if she is not asking the wrong question. Surely her faith and that of her daughter cannot be so fragile that the misdeeds of one man would call the truthfulness of the whole gospel plan into question.

At issue is if our faith should rest in the infallibility of priesthood leaders or on the assurance that if we keep our covenants the Spirit of the Lord will always be our companion.

Again, often what stands between us and answers to our prayers is our failure to ask the right questions. The role of the Holy Ghost is as important in determining what we pray about as it is in bringing the answers we seek.

In the book of James we find the promise that we may ask wisdom of God, but it requires that we do so "in faith, nothing wavering."¹¹ Of those who "waver," James said, "Let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord."¹²

Perhaps the greatest revelation of this dispensation was the one Joseph Smith received prompting him to go into the woods and find a place to pray. Having read the injunction in James, he said:

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did.¹³

Do you see what is taking place here? Joseph was getting a revelation telling him to go get a revelation. The Spirit was directing him in what he asked, and, because the Spirit was his companion in the asking of the question, he could do it with complete faith.

In 3 Nephi, Christ is recorded as saying, “And whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, which is right, believing that ye shall receive, behold it shall be given unto you.”¹⁴

Think of that! We have the sure promise that if we pray in the manner prescribed by Christ and ask for that “which is right,” our prayers will be answered.

Our instruction is to pray to the Father in the name of Christ. To pray in Christ’s name obligates us to pray as He would pray or to pray in His Spirit. This is true of all that we do in His name.

This principle is affirmed in revelation both ancient and modern. To those of our day, the Lord said: “And if ye are purified and cleansed from all sin, ye shall ask whatsoever you will in the name of Jesus and it shall be done. *But know this, it shall be given you what you shall ask.*”¹⁵

Again we read, “He that asketh in the Spirit asketh according to the will of God; wherefore it is done even as he asketh.”¹⁶

To those of his day, John the Beloved wrote, “And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us.”¹⁷

Returning to Vietnam

I return to where we began, with two young chaplains in Vietnam. Upon examination, my story is most common—indeed, it is a universal story.

For all of us, growing up includes leaving the security of home and the protective care of loving parents to enter a world full of problems and challenges that reach far beyond the experience that is ours.

In doing so, we would like to have a ready source to tell us how to handle difficult situations. Such is not the Lord’s system.

If angels will not do for you what you can do for yourself, be assured that the Holy Ghost will not do it either. It is not the design of heaven that we be rescued from all difficult situations. Rather, it is the system that we grow up and learn to handle them.

The sense of being overwhelmed is very much a part of the journey. The power with which God clothes us in His holy temples does not suppose that the journey we have been called to make will be an easy one.

Nevertheless, the path we seek will always be clearly marked by the covenants we have made and the callings we have received.

It is in the accepting of our lot and moving forward with what the Lord has asked of us that we discover that the Holy Ghost enjoys our company, angels feel constrained to join us, and the heavens open to our vision.

Of such I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *HC* 5:402.
2. See Moroni 7:16; D&C 93:2.
3. See D&C 84:46–48.
4. See 1 Nephi 10:17–19.
5. See Moroni 10:4–5.
6. See D&C 20:37–41.
7. See D&C 58:26–29.
8. Joseph Smith said, “No man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations. The Holy Ghost is a revelator” (*HC* 6:58).
9. D&C 61:22; 62:5.
10. *JD* 3:205.
11. James 1:5–6.
12. James 1:7.
13. JS—H 1:12.
14. 3 Nephi 18:20.
15. D&C 50:29–30; emphasis added.
16. D&C 46:30.
17. 1 John 5:14.