

Spiritual Cataracts

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It is a humbling experience to speak with you this morning and to have present friends, family, missionaries, colleagues, and many others. As I reflected on the message I wanted to share today, I was reminded of an experience my mother-in-law, Helen Thomas, had a few years ago. She noticed that her vision was deteriorating. The images she saw were becoming increasingly blurred and faint. Finally she scheduled an eye exam and was told she had cataracts. Fortunately she was able to have corrective surgery, which restored her vision. My mother-in-law was so excited after the operation, she said, "I hadn't realized how much my eyesight had changed. I have not been able to see this well for years. My vision must have changed just a little bit at a time."

There are important lessons in this experience for all of us. Thus I will first talk about cataracts and their causes, consequences, and correction. Then I will draw a parallel between the causes and prevention of cataracts with what we might refer to as the causes and prevention of spiritual cataracts.

Now let's talk about cataracts. Many cataracts begin as small spots or specks in the lens of the eye. These spots interfere with light rays that pass through the lens to be focused as an image on the retina in the back of the eye.

The greater the number of specks, the more obscure the image. These specks can become so dense that the entire lens becomes milky white, and the light rays can't pass through the lens, resulting in blindness. *But it is important to remember that the light is still there; it just can't pass through the lens of the eye.*

The effects of cataracts can be illustrated by looking at the stars. If you are high up in the mountains and look at the stars on a clear night, their images are sharp and crystal clear. In a setting like that, it is inspirational to look at the North Star and the numerous other constellations that have fascinated countless generations. However, if you try to look at the same stars from a highly populated area, the stars will appear fuzzy or may seem to disappear because of the physical pollutants in the atmosphere. Just like cataracts in the lens of the eye, the physical pollutants in the atmosphere deflect or block the light rays and obscure the image of the stars so that they appear fuzzy. Even if the light from the stars isn't visible to the naked eye, the stars are still there.

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In the early days of navigation, the North Star was used to guide ships to their desired destinations. However, this was not possible when the skies were overcast. Just as those sailors were without guidance on overcast nights, those with severe cataracts miss many things. They may not be able to see the vibrant fall colors on a drive up the canyon or see the excited smile on the face of a newly baptized member of the Church or see the radiant glow of a new bride as she kneels at the altar in the temple. Cataracts, if left uncorrected, can lead to complete blindness, and it often happens just a little bit at a time.

As I mentioned, my mother-in-law's vision had not deteriorated that far, and she was able to have corrective surgery that restored her eyesight. The operation involved removing the cloudy lens and replacing it with a clear plastic lens that would again let the light rays pass through and focus on the retina as a sharp image.

The more I thought about my mother-in-law's experience with cataracts, the more I thought about some different types of cataracts—not cataracts on our physical eyes, but something far more serious: cataracts on our spiritual eyes. Now let's consider some of the important parallels and lessons we can learn by comparing physical and spiritual cataracts.

Numerous scriptures seem to refer to spiritual cataracts. We repeatedly read of those having eyes and seeing not and of those whose eyes have been darkened (see Jeremiah 5:21; Mark 8:18; Psalm 69:23). And Nephi warned, "Wo unto the blind that *will not see*; for they shall perish" (2 Nephi 9:32; emphasis added). Whom else could these scriptures refer to, other than those with *spiritual cataracts*?

Specifically, let us remember Laman and Lemuel. They had seen an angel and had "heard his voice from time to time," but they eventually reached a point where they were

"past feeling" (1 Nephi 17:45). Their spiritual eyes had become blind, "and there was nothing save it were the power of God, which threatened them with destruction, could soften their hearts" (1 Nephi 18:20).

So what is it that those with spiritual cataracts are not seeing? Those with spiritual cataracts have lost sight of spiritual light. What is the light?

In 3 Nephi 18:16, Christ told the Nephites, "Behold I am the light; I have set an example for you." Christ is our North Star. He is the source of our light and understanding (see 2 Nephi 31:3). Just as sailors steered by the light of the North Star, so should we steer our lives by the light of Christ's example, His teachings, and His glory.

For 200 years after Christ's ministry to the people of Nephi in the Americas, members of His Church focused their eyes and their hearts on the Lord and were greatly blessed. We read in 4 Nephi:

There was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people. . . .

And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. [4 Nephi 1:15–16; emphasis added]

This wonderful state lasted for about 200 years, until spiritual cataracts began to cloud the people's spiritual lenses. And you know what happened after that. As they *lost sight* of Christ, they fell into paths of iniquity, and the Nephite nation was eventually destroyed.

When our spiritual vision is clear, we are happy. How then are spiritual cataracts developed and what happens when we lose that vision? King Benjamin told us specifically what happens when we lose sight of the Savior by falling into transgression. He said:

And now, I say unto you, my brethren, that after ye have known and have been taught all these things, if ye should transgress and go contrary to that which has been spoken, that ye do withdraw yourselves from the Spirit of the Lord, that it may have no place in you to guide you in wisdom's paths that ye may be blessed, prospered, and preserved.
[Mosiah 2:36]

Thus we see that transgression is a serious spiritual pollutant that will cloud our spiritual lenses, blur our image of the Savior, and weaken our resolve to live as He would have us live. Let me discuss four of the spiritual pollutants or transgressions that are mentioned in the verses from 4 Nephi.

The first pollutant mentioned by Nephi is envy. Do you ever find yourself being envious of others? Someone from the BYU counseling office recently told me that one of the major issues worrying students is their educational progress. This concern often involves interpersonal comparisons. Why is it that we so often compare ourselves with someone who maybe does better in a class or seems to have more friends, better clothes, or perhaps a nicer car? These interpersonal comparisons are often spiritually destructive.

The scriptures help us keep interpersonal comparisons in a proper perspective. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord told William Phelps to “stand in the office” to which he was appointed and to repent, “for he seeketh to excel” and he was not “sufficiently meek” (D&C 58:40–41).

We might ask ourselves the question “Well, what is wrong with excelling? Are we not supposed to excel?” In discussing this with John Tanner from the English Department, John mentioned that the Greek root of the word *excel* refers to being better than everyone else. Maybe the objective should not be to be better than others but merely to do our best.

John mentioned that additional understanding of this issue can be found in the life of

Oliver Granger. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read that Oliver Granger’s name “shall be had in sacred remembrance from generation to generation, forever and ever” (D&C 117:12).

What did Oliver Granger do to earn such a powerful promise? Oliver Granger was not an apostle. He did not accumulate great personal wealth. So what did he do? Well, Oliver Granger was sent back to Kirtland to help dispose of Church property after the Saints left. These were difficult times for the Church. But Oliver did as he was asked and performed his assignment in such a manner that he received compliments from members and nonmembers alike.

Greater insight into what matters to the Lord is found in verse 13 of section 117. Speaking of Oliver Granger, the Lord said: “His sacrifice shall be more sacred unto me than his increase.” (See Susan Easton Black, *Who’s Who in the Doctrine and Covenants* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 107–9.)

Thus it appears that the Lord cares more about sacrifice and having a willing heart and mind than He does about whether we win, lose, or accumulate material possessions.

Dishonesty and lying are other pollutants or transgressions that will cloud our spiritual vision. The Duke University Center for Academic Integrity conducted a survey of 22 universities in the United States. The purpose of the survey was to assess the level of honesty among students. BYU was included in the survey. BYU students set a high standard with 92 percent of the students reporting they had never seen another student cheat during their time at the university. This compares with a national norm of 55 percent. (See *Academic Integrity Study: Fall 1999, A Report of BYU Responses Compared to Normative Group*, administered by the Center for Academic Integrity at Duke University and prepared by the BYU Office of Assessment, April 2000.)

After we have congratulated ourselves, we might step back and just take a more detailed

inventory. One example we might consider is writing term papers. The cut-and-paste computer technology makes it relatively simple to splice together other people's ideas into our own papers. However, in finalizing our term papers we must give appropriate credit for other people's ideas or it is plagiarism. Now let us examine our actions in other areas that might easily be overlooked. Do we make unauthorized copies of music or movies? Do we only use computer software we have purchased or that is available as shareware in the public domain? Are we honest in these important areas as well?

What are the consequences of envy, lying, or pride? We read in section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants that "when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise . . . unrighteous dominion . . . ; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved" and is withdrawn (D&C 121:37). *This is when our spiritual vision becomes blurred.*

Tumults and contention are other pollutants mentioned in 4 Nephi. Do you find yourself being contentious or argumentative? Do you find yourself picking fights with roommates or with a spouse? Do you find yourself criticizing Church leaders? What are the consequences of contention? Nephi answered that question, teaching us that Satan "is the father of contention" (3 Nephi 11:29), and we know the Spirit withdraws from those who become subject to the spirit of Satan (see Alma 34:35). *The result of contention is that our spiritual vision becomes obscured.*

We can illustrate the importance of harmony to the presence of the Spirit with a story from the life of Joseph and Emma Smith. David Whitmer recorded the following:

One morning when he [Joseph Smith] was getting ready to continue the translation, something went wrong about the house and he [Joseph] was put out about it. Something that Emma, his wife, had done. Oliver and I went upstairs and Joseph came

*up soon after to continue the translation but he could not do anything. He could not translate a single syllable. He went downstairs, out into the orchard, and made supplication to the Lord; was gone about an hour—came back to the house, and asked Emma's forgiveness and then came upstairs where we were and then the translation went on all right. [In B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 1:131]*

Joseph Smith lost his spiritual vision because of contention. He was told to resolve the conflict, and then his "vision" was restored. Thus we see the spiritual impact of contention and how its resolution leads to a restoration of our spiritual sight.

A fourth spiritual pollutant mentioned by Nephi is lasciviousness, which includes lust and pornography. This problem is real, it is addictive, and, unfortunately, it is too common. Various Church leaders have warned it is more addictive than drugs. This was echoed by a letter I recently received from someone pleading for help with this problem. Visual images are difficult to forget. We all know the tragic story of David of old, whose fascination with the bathing Bathsheba led to adultery, deceit, and murder (see 2 Samuel 11). The accessibility of movies, magazines, and the Internet brings the problem right into our homes. This is a deadly practice. Don't be deceived. It can creep up on you a little bit at a time. Don't take chances. Avoid it as you would the plague, staying as far from it as you can. If you even have the beginning of a problem, please visit with your bishop.

What are the consequences of lasciviousness? We read in section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants that "he that looketh upon a woman to lust after her . . . shall not have the Spirit" (D&C 42:23). *And his spiritual vision becomes darkened.*

There are, of course, many additional spiritual pollutants. King Benjamin told us

that they are so numerous that they cannot be numbered and that we need to watch our thoughts, words, and deeds and observe the commandments of God (see Mosiah 4:29–30).

As we allow pollutants of any kind to affect our spiritual lenses or to remain unchecked, each additional pollutant causes increased blurring of our spiritual vision and causes us to withdraw from the Spirit of the Lord. However, in spite of our spiritual cataracts, *the Lord is still there. We have just let what matters less get in the way of what matters most.*

Fortunately, just as with physical cataracts, where corrective surgery holds the promise of a restoration of our physical sight, repentance holds the hope for a restoration of our spiritual sight and being able to return to our Father in Heaven.

The Lord has told us that if we will repent of our sins, He will remember them no more (see D&C 58:42) and that as often as we repent and seek forgiveness with real intent, we will be forgiven (see Moroni 6:8).

My mother-in-law was ecstatic about the restoration of her physical vision. Similarly, how great is the joy of those who fully repent and return to the Lord. Christ changes our hearts, awakens us out of a deep sleep, and illuminates our souls by the light of His everlasting word (see Alma 5:7). A repentant Alma the Younger described his feelings by saying, “There can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy” (Alma 36:21). The choicest blessings in the world are those of a spiritual nature. Spiritual blessings endure and leave a love and a peace in our hearts. They come from having a spiritual vision unobstructed by spiritual cataracts.

However, just as there may be dangers in delaying cataract surgery too long, there are dangers in delaying repentance. Our spiritual cataracts can build up, a little bit at a time, until we become spiritually blind. The Lord told Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants, “He that repents not, from him

shall be taken even the *light* which he has received” (D&C 1:33; emphasis added).

Let me share one such example from Church history. On February 14, 1835, Lyman Johnson was the first person in this dispensation to be called as an apostle to the Prophet Joseph Smith. The years of 1836 to 1838 were difficult times for the Saints in Kirtland, and many members faltered. Lyman Johnson was one of those who faltered, and in April 1838 he was excommunicated from the Church. (See Black, *Who’s Who*, 158–59.)

Lyman remained friendly to the Saints, but it is clear that his spiritual vision was obscured by cataracts. To some of the brethren, Lyman later stated:

“I would give anything, I would suffer my right hand to be cut off, if I could believe it [Mormonism] again. Then I was full of joy and gladness. My dreams were pleasant. When I awoke in the morning my spirit was cheerful. I was happy by day and by night, full of peace and joy and thanksgiving. But now it is darkness, pain, sorrow, misery in the extreme. I have never since seen a happy moment.”
[Quoted by Brigham Young, *JD* 19:41]

What a terrible tragedy. Although you may feel secure in the faith and immune from temptation or spiritual pollutants, it is important to remember that Lyman Johnson was a member of the Twelve. Yet he apostatized and denied the faith. Lyman Johnson suffered from spiritual cataracts. He did not wake up one morning and say, “Today I’m going to apostatize from the Church.” Nor did David, one chosen of God, wake up one morning and decide to commit adultery and murder; but he did happen to see a woman bathing, and he did not look away, and the scriptures tell us that he “enquired” after her (2 Samuel 11:3).

Do we ever enquire after things that obscure our vision of the Lord? The specks on David’s spiritual lenses caused by

lasciviousness continued to grow and cloud his spiritual vision until he lost both the Spirit and the eternal perspective he once had. Generally, others who have fallen do not decide in an instant, after living a clean and virtuous life, to commit grievous sins. Rather, it usually begins with a small transgression that continues to grow unchecked. It generally happens just a little bit at a time, and so, unless we are careful, it will with us as well.

We have talked about the causes, consequences, and correction of cataracts. Now let us turn to the question about the prevention of cataracts and explore further the important parallel between physical and spiritual cataracts. First, concerning physical cataracts, there is medical evidence that certain vitamins and medications—often referred to as antioxidants—if taken daily, or at least regularly, can actually help prevent the growth of cataracts.

How about preventive measures for spiritual cataracts? Are there such things as spiritual antioxidants? Since the specks on our spiritual lenses are transgressions, the role of spiritual antioxidants is to prevent transgression. Thus, in the most general sense, the universal spiritual antioxidant is obedience to the commandments of God. We have been promised that as we draw near unto the Lord, He will draw near unto us; that as we seek Him, we shall find Him (see D&C 88:63). And, ultimately, the Lord has told us

that every soul who forsaketh his sins and cometh unto me, and calleth on my name, and obeyeth my voice, and keepeth my commandments, shall see my face and know that I am;

And that I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. [D&C 93:1–2; emphasis added]

What a wonderful promise! When we repent and keep the commandments, we will retain our spiritual vision and know that Christ

is the Light of the World. Now, specifically, how do we do that?

The scriptures prescribe some marvelous spiritual antioxidants that, if taken daily or at least regularly, will help prevent spiritual cataracts. Let me mention three of these spiritual antioxidants and the associated scriptural promises or guarantees. These spiritual antioxidants are not complicated. In fact, they are so basic that you may be tired of hearing about them—for we hear of them often. Nevertheless, the promises associated with them are real. Let us not falter because of the easiness of the way. They may be easy, but let us be certain to take them daily as they have been prescribed.

The first spiritual antioxidant is prayer. It is interesting that in three of the four Gospels, the disciples record Jesus' admonition given them in the Garden of Gethsemane to "watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation" (Matthew 26:41; see also Mark 14:38; Luke 22:40, 46).

Thus we learn that prayer helps us avoid temptation—and therefore avoid sin—keeping our spiritual lenses clear. Now, how often should we pray so that we may conquer temptation?

Variations of this counsel are found in both the Book of Mormon and in the Doctrine and Covenants (see 3 Nephi 18:15; D&C 31:12). These variations nearly always contain the phrase "pray always." Specifically, Joseph Smith was told to "pray always, that you may come off conqueror; yea, that you may conquer Satan" (D&C 10:5) Therefore, the prescription of prayer is one that should be taken at least daily.

The Nephites also benefited from the power of frequent prayer. Helaman recorded that as his people prayed often, their hearts were purified and sanctified (see Helaman 3:35). In other words, their spiritual lenses were kept clean as they prayed and yielded their hearts unto God.

Helaman also taught us:

Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—

And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven.

[Helaman 3:29–30]

This brings us to our second spiritual antioxidant for clear spiritual vision—studying the word of God. From Helaman’s words we learn that similar to frequent prayer, using the scriptures will help us cut through the snares of the devil to conquer Satan and therefore resist temptation. This is a powerful promise—one that we all desperately need.

Again, scripture study is a prescription. How often should it be taken? The Lord commanded Joshua, “Thou shalt meditate [on the scriptures] day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein” (Joshua 1:8). He also promised us that “whoso treasureth up my word, shall not be deceived” (JS—M 1:37).

I would like to share with you the experience of a friend of mine from the mission field that illustrates the power of scripture. Terry Barrett was sent to fight in Vietnam in 1966. He returned home in 1967 with a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star Medal for valor and heroism. To deaden the emotional pains associated with the atrocities of the war, Terry turned to alcohol and soon became addicted. Then, in 1998 he faced a major surgical procedure. Not being LDS, he was hesitant to receive a priesthood blessing from an LDS friend. Finally, however, Terry consented and received the blessing. Concerning that blessing, he says, “I felt a peace I had never felt before, and a voice said, ‘It will be all right, Terry.’”

As a result of the blessing, his hunger and thirst for alcohol was instantaneously

and miraculously transformed into a hunger and thirst for the scriptures. He says, “To this day I cannot get enough of the scriptures and the Spirit.” He attends institute three days a week. Terry, his wife, and his daughter were baptized and have been to the temple. He is eternally grateful for the scriptures and the relationship that he now has with the Lord.

Just as the word of God acted as a compass in Terry’s life—giving him an eternal perspective—we have been promised that it can do so for us, steering us clear of the deception and temptation of Satan. In Alma’s parting words to his son Helaman (Alma 37:38–47), Alma likened the word of God to a personal Liahona, which will point us in a straight course to a far better land of promise. He said, “The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever.” He then pleaded, “And now, my son, see that ye take care of these sacred things [the scriptures], yea, see that ye look to God and live” (Alma 37:46–47).

The third and final spiritual antioxidant I will discuss is service. In King Benjamin’s famous address from his tower, he instructed his people that “for the sake of retaining a remission of your sins from day to day, . . . I would that ye should impart of your substance to the poor” (Mosiah 4:26). Translated to our vernacular, that means: To maintain spiritual vision unclouded by sin, on a daily basis we need to serve others.

Daily Christlike service is an important spiritual antioxidant that helps rinse spiritual pollutants from our eyes and also allows us to maintain our focus on the Savior.

Again, drawing on the words of King Benjamin, we learn that we cannot know our Savior unless we have served Him. And we best serve Him by serving our fellowmen (see Mosiah 2:17; 5:13).

Thus daily prayer, daily scripture study, and daily service are three important spiritual antioxidants that help guarantee we will retain

our spiritual vision and have the Spirit to guide us in our day-to-day activities. Are we taking our daily doses regularly?

The Lord gave us a beautiful promise for having 20/20 spiritual vision:

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.

Therefore, sanctify [or cleanse] yourselves that your minds become single to God, and the days will come that you shall see him; for he will unveil his face unto you. [D&C 88:67–68]

Let me invite each of you to perform a spiritual eye exam. Let us evaluate how

clear our vision of the Savior is right now. Next, if necessary, schedule the restorative surgery of repentance. And, finally, remember to diligently and deliberately take our daily doses of prayer, scripture study, and service and obey the commandments of God.

I pray that we will so sanctify ourselves that we may be found among the pure in heart and share in the promise given in the Beatitudes that we will see God.

I want to share my testimony that Jesus Christ is the Savior and the Redeemer of the World, that He loves us. He is my North Star. He points the way. Through daily prayer and daily scripture study, I know of His will. Through daily service I feel of His love. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.