

Knowing What You Believe, Believing What You Know

DENNIS B. NEUENSCHWANDER

I am grateful to be here today and ask for your faith in that which I wish to share with you.

Korihor, as we read in Alma 30, had made many untrue allegations about the Church and was brought before Alma, who listened but was not challenged by Korihor's claims. Alma recognized the allegations to be false—not only because he knew the doctrines of the Church and the history of his people, but because he had unshakable confidence in his own personal experiences with the gospel.

It is a good thing for us to know what we believe. We should know and be familiar with the doctrines, ordinances, covenants, and teachings of the Church and its modern-day prophets. It is very important that we all know and understand the basic tenets of our belief.

Equally important, however, to knowing what we believe is believing what we know. Believing what we know has to do with recognizing, trusting, and learning from our own spiritual experiences. Such experiences are an essential part of our mortal probation and spiritual education.

One of the purposes of our mortal probation is to distinguish good from evil. The prophets have warned us against confusing the two. "Wherefore," writes Mormon, "take heed

. . . that ye do not judge that which is evil to be of God, or that which is good and of God to be of the devil" (Moroni 7:14). Isaiah writes, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20). To know good from evil, Mormon teaches, we "should search diligently in the light of Christ" (Moroni 7:19).

We may at times be discouraged that we make mistakes as we learn. Roger Ascham, a 16th-century classical scholar (1515–1568), made the observation that "by experience [we] find out . . . a short way by long wandering" (*The Schoolmaster* [1570], book 1). This same frustration was expressed by Saint Augustine to God: "Thou hast counselled something better than what thou hast permitted" (*Confessions* [397–401], X, 30). Yet we understand, as Brigham Young has taught:

We cannot obtain eternal life unless we actually know and comprehend by our experience the

Dennis B. Neuenschwander was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at BYU on 19 May 1998 .

principle of good and the principle of evil, the light and the darkness, truth, virtue, and holiness,—also vice, wickedness, and corruption. [JD 7:237; emphasis added]

The Lord knows and understands our inability to be perfect and has provided a Savior for us who bears our burdens and pain on the condition of our repentance.

As we learn by our experience to distinguish the good from the evil, it is not necessary for us to experience every evil to know that it is evil. The Prophet Joseph asks the question “Why will not man learn wisdom by precept . . . and not be obliged to learn by sad experience everything we know” (*Teachings*, p. 155). Brigham Young teaches this principle also as he writes:

There is plenty of sin without your sinning. We can have all the experience we need, without sinning ourselves. . . . There is no necessity for such a course, for the world is full of transgression, and this people need not mingle up with it. [JD 3:224]

Do we really need to experience the unhappiness associated with sin before we know that sin causes unhappiness? The answer is an obvious no. We can learn a great deal about evil through our observation of the world around us and through the experience of others.

On the other hand, to know the good, we must experience it. The Prophet Joseph taught:

Could we read and comprehend all that has been written from the days of Adam, on the relation of man to God and angels in a future state, we should know very little about it. Reading the experience of others, or the revelation given to them, can never give us a comprehensive view of our condition and true relation to God. Knowledge of these things can only be obtained by experience through the ordinances of God set forth for that purpose. Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know

more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject. [Teachings, p. 324; emphasis in original]

In speaking of the elders of the Church on the importance of temple ordinances, Brigham Young said, “To know, they must experience” (*JD* 2:31).

Deeply personal spiritual experiences are granted to us for our own edification and occupy an important place in our education. However, they bring us into direct conflict with the unspiritual and skeptical world, a world that neither appreciates nor comprehends that which is holy and spiritual. It is precisely in this conflict, as Alma was able to do with Korihor, that we must recognize, believe, trust, and know our own spiritual experiences. Such experiences, I add, will always be in harmony with the doctrines of the Church and the teachings of its living prophets. I am passing through the same educational process you are. Along the way I have made a few observations about learning from the experiences the Lord has granted me. I would like to share a few of my observations with you.

1. We can know some things without knowing all things.

When Nephi desired a confirmation of his father’s vision, the angel asked him, “Knowest thou the condescension of God?”

Nephi’s answer was, “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:16–17).

Nephi seemed satisfied to permit his knowledge of some things to expand his faith and give him confidence in areas where his knowledge was not quite as complete. We would do well to nurture this understanding. President Spencer W. Kimball taught that “faith is based on past experience. It is not blind obedience, even without total understanding, to follow a Father who has proved himself” (*TSWK*, p. 59). For example, each time

the Lord answers a prayer, my knowledge that he does answer prayer is strengthened. This knowledge expands my faith and confidence into those times when his answers do not come as quickly or when his timing is far different than my own.

In our academic lives we understand this principle of not knowing all things quite thoroughly. We are comfortable with the idea that we must take basic courses before we move on to more advanced work. The absence of complete knowledge in a discipline does not hinder us in knowing some things about that discipline. In fact, our pursuit of additional knowledge is driven by our understanding that we do not know all things. In a BYU—Hawaii commencement address, President Hinckley touched on this topic:

None of us can assume that he has learned enough. As the door closes on one phase of life, it opens on another, where we must continue to pursue knowledge.

*Ours ought to be a ceaseless quest for truth. That truth must include spiritual and religious truth as well as secular. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Continuing Pursuit of Truth," *Ensign*, April 1986, p. 2 (BYU—Hawaii commencement, 18 June 1983)]*

Brigham Young earlier stated, "Should our lives be extended to a thousand years, still we may live and learn" (*JD* 9:292). Learning takes time.

Though we understand this principle in our secular lives, we are often impatient in our spiritual development. We sometimes feel that the Lord ought to reveal more than he does in order to remove some of the discomfort we experience when we realize that we do not have a ready answer for every question. In Primary, however, we memorize the ninth article of faith, which teaches us that more is yet to come:

We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

A wonderful example of knowing some things without knowing all things is contained in the seed metaphor given to us by Alma. A seed is planted in the ground. If it is a good seed, it soon begins to grow, and we see from the shoots that it is good. In the early stages of growth, we are satisfied to know the seed is good. No one would expect to harvest the fruit from a seed planted yesterday. As the seed sprouts, we care for the plant. We nourish it, we water it, we keep the weeds away from it. In so doing we fortify it against the heat of the summer sun. If we care for it successfully, in the fall we harvest the fruit.

So it is with spiritual experience that grows into testimony. We plant the seed or the word of God in our hearts. If our heart is good, the seed begins to send forth shoots. As Alma says, we can identify that growth because "it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me" (Alma 32:28). Note Alma's repetition of the word *begin*. As we work with a garden plant, so we work with knowledge of that which is spiritual. We nourish it with great care so that it may bring forth fruit, not expecting the harvest to come immediately. We nourish it and protect it. We even need to keep it free from the weeds of this world. We care for it through the summer heat of trial and adversity. Alma teaches that such spiritual growth takes time.

If ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life.

And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it,

. . . by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious . . . ; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst. [Alma 32:41–42]

The people did not immediately understand how to plant and nourish the word in their hearts. Alma answered by giving them three basic steps: pray in all circumstances; read and understand the scriptures; and, believe in the Son of God (see Alma 33). In this progressive revelation of spiritual knowledge by virtue of our diligence, faith, and long-suffering, we can surely know some things without knowing all things.

2. Spiritual experiences are very personal and may not be understood by others.

The Lord cautions us to exercise great care in how, where, and with whom we share our spiritual experiences. To Alma, the Lord revealed:

It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. [Alma 12:9–10]

We cannot expect a basically unbelieving world to understand deeply personal and spiritual experiences.

A most interesting example of this principle is found in chapter 9 of John: “And as Jesus passed by, he saw a man which was blind from his birth” (v. 1). After a short teaching moment with his apostles, Jesus spat on the ground, made clay of the spittle, and anointed the eyes

of the blind man with the clay and then told him to go wash. “He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing” (v. 7).

What was the reaction among the people to this miracle? Did they accept it as a confirmation of their faith? First his neighbors didn’t even recognize him:

And they which before had seen him that he was blind, said, Is not this he that sat and begged?

Some said, This is he: others said, He is like him: but he said, I am he.

Therefore said they unto him, How were thine eyes opened? [vv. 8–10]

He answered their question very simply, surely anticipating that they would accept his response and take joy in his good fortune:

“A man that is called Jesus made clay, and anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go to the pool of Siloam, and wash: and I went and washed, and I received sight” (v. 11).

His was a very simple explanation and testimony of a deeply personal spiritual experience. The neighbors, however, could or would not understand, so they brought him to the Pharisees, who also asked him how he had received his sight. He said to them, “He put clay upon mine eyes, and I washed, and do see” (v. 15).

The reaction of the Pharisees is also very insightful. As the miracle was performed on the Sabbath, some said, “This man,” speaking of Jesus, “is not of God, because he keepeth not the sabbath day. Others said, How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them” (v. 16).

Didn’t the Pharisees completely miss the point? They pressed the blind man again, not to gain some understanding and appreciation of the miracle, but to determine his opinion of him who had performed the miracle: “What sayest thou of him, that he hath opened thine eyes?”

Again, a simple answer: “He is a prophet” (v. 17).

But the Jews did not believe concerning him, that he had been blind, and received his sight, until they called the parents of him that had received his sight.

And they asked them, saying, Is this your son, who ye say was born blind? how then doth he now see?

His parents answered them and said, We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind:

But by what means he now seeth, we know not. [vv. 18–21]

Even his parents failed to appreciate the miracle in their son’s life. Because they feared the Jews, the parents simply said, “He is of age; ask him” (v. 23).

Again they called the man who was blind and again pressed him about Jesus, saying, “Give God the praise: we know that this man is a sinner” (v. 24).

I suppose by now, after several explanations, the former blind man was growing increasingly impatient, which is felt in the terseness of his reply: “Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see” (v. 25).

Again a simple, straightforward testimony of what had happened in his life, but no amount of explanation, however simple and straightforward, would help others to understand and accept what he himself had experienced. The experience of this blind man was beyond their comprehension.

After all the explanation and testimony, they reviled the recipient of the miracle and said, “Thou art his disciple; but we are Moses’ disciples” (v. 28).

The man answered them again, “Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, and yet he hath opened mine eyes” (v. 30).

They answered, “Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out” (v. 34).

In the end, not one accepted the miracle, the doer of the miracle, or the recipient of the miracle. No one even seemed happy that the blind man could see.

The spiritual experiences the Lord grants to us are extremely personal. We should share them only selectively or not at all. If we do choose to share them, it should only be with those who can understand and appreciate such things and will hold them as sacredly as we do, as a confirmation of their own faith.

This leads me to a third observation regarding spiritual experiences.

3. Spiritual experiences not understood by others will often be rejected, but their rejection does not change the experiences.

Joseph Smith wrote in his history that he shared his experience of the First Vision among the professors of religion, which caused great persecution toward him. In his reflection, the Prophet compared himself to the apostle Paul in his defense before King Agrippa:

[Paul] related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise; and though they should persecute him unto death, yet he knew, and would know to his latest breath, that he had both seen a light and heard a voice speaking unto him, and all the world could not make him think or believe otherwise. [JS—H 1:24; emphasis added]

The Prophet continued:

So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages,

and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it. [JS—H 1:25]

Heber J. Grant provided a wonderful example of this principle:

*Men have said to me: “If you know that you are engaged in the work of God explain it, so that we can know it as clearly as we know that two and two are four.” Now I may tell such my experience and of the influence of the Holy Ghost. . . . But this may not bring conviction to them. I may tell a man that I have the toothache, and he may say he does not believe it, but he cannot change my experience. So no man’s denial can change my conviction that I have heard tongues spoken and interpretations of the gift of God and that I have seen the sick raised. [Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1969), p. 31]*

So it is with our own spiritual experiences. If others do not enjoy them, it does not mean that we do not. I am reminded of an experience with this in New York as a graduate student. I was serving as a seventies stake missionary. The bishop called one evening and told me that some members were involved in a religious discussion with a group of what we would now call “born-again Christians.” The members were challenged by the conversation and had called him for some help. He asked me if I would be available to enter the discussion, which I did. Through that wonderful evening, it became clear that my new friends rejected

the idea that Joseph Smith could have had a vision. My response was a question: “What is the highest and most sacred personal experience you could have?”

Their answer was, “A revelation of Jesus.”

I answered, “Why then would you deny another that same blessing?”

This leads to a closely related fourth observation regarding our spiritual experiences.

4. As others may reject our spiritual experiences, they will often try to dissuade us from believing them.

Moses recorded in the Pearl of Great Price:

Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and they made all things known unto their sons and their daughters.

And Satan came among them, saying: I am also a son of God; and he commanded them, saying: Believe it not; and they believed it not. [Moses 5:12–13]

There will always be those who are not content to simply reject your spiritual experiences but will do all they can to convince you to deny what you yourself have experienced. One of the most interesting examples I could find in the scriptures relating to this principle is the reaction of the Nephites toward the signs given at the birth of the Savior. Samuel the Lamanite had come among them only a few years before the signs were to be given. He made clear predictions of the signs they would witness. These would not be simple things. The sun was to go down, but there would be no darkness through the whole night. A new star would appear, and there would be “many signs and wonders in heaven” (see Helaman 14:3–6). Such would be their amazement that they would all “fall to the earth” (v. 7). It seems to me that such occurrences would be hard to miss. Yet when all happened according to the prophecy, many people found them hard to believe.

And it came to pass that from this time forth there began to be lyings sent forth among the people, by Satan, to harden their hearts, to the intent that they might not believe in those signs and wonders which they had seen. [3 Nephi 1:22]

Surely we have undergone spiritual experiences in our lives that have amazed us. We ponder them and wonder about them. Satan will always be there to whisper in our ears that they either did not happen as we remember them, or he will try to persuade us to deny them altogether.

Speaking of pondering and reflection leads me to a fifth observation.

5. Sometimes only upon reflection or when someone else points it out do we recognize what we have experienced.

The experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus on the day of the Lord's resurrection exemplifies this (see Luke 24:13–32). He appeared to them and questioned their sadness as he spoke with them along the road. They rehearsed the events of the last few days. The Savior took the opportunity to teach them from the scriptures concerning the prophets and himself. When they came into the village, they invited him to stay with them. It was evening and the day was far spent, and he went in to tarry with them. He ate with them, took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them, and at that point their eyes were opened and they knew him, but he vanished out of their sight. Only upon reflection did the disciples understand what had occurred: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (v. 32).

This is a common experience for all of us. It seems to me that we often do not immediately recognize the importance of what is happening to us. Many of us have served full-time missions. Every successful missionary teaches the investigator to feel and recognize the Spirit. At

the height of a wonderful gospel discussion, a missionary will ask the question "What do you feel right now?" It is a difficult feeling for the investigator to describe. Usually phrases like "I feel warmth" or "I feel peace and comfort" are heard. What they feel is something they have never experienced in quite the same way. It is then that the missionary explains what is happening and what it means. So it is often with us. Only with good teachers may we sometimes really know or begin to understand that which has or is occurring in our lives. Knowing this, the Lord has told us continually to ponder his word in order that we may understand.

6. Trusting our spiritual experiences will keep us from deception.

A most revealing experience regarding this principle is that which occurred to Moses (see Moses 1:1–13). Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain, where he saw God face to face and talked with him. The glory of God was upon Moses so that he could endure his presence. God showed Moses some of the workings of this earth. When this marvelous vision was complete, the presence of God withdrew from Moses and God's glory was no longer with him. Moses was left to himself. After a period of time he understood that he had seen God, not with his natural but rather with his spiritual eyes.

Satan now came, tempting and commanding Moses to worship him, Satan. Moses queried him, asking, "Who art thou? For behold, I am a son of God, in the similitude of his Only Begotten; and where is thy glory, that I should worship thee?" (v. 13). Moses, because of his previous experience with God, understood the deception that was being offered to him. "For behold, I could not look upon God, except his glory should come upon me, and I were transfigured before him. But I can look upon thee in the natural man. Is it not so, surely?" (v. 14). Moses then commanded Satan to depart. Moses again beheld the glory of

God. His knowledge and trust in his first experience most assuredly kept Moses from the deception of his second experience.

Speaking more personally, over the last weeks I have read quite a bit of material from those who oppose the Church and its teachings. As I read through the various allegations and accounts, I continually asked myself, “Is this my experience with the gospel?” It was not. My experiences within the gospel framework kept me safe from believing what was not true. A second, more penetrating question that I presented to myself was, “I have devoted my life to this work. Are they right or am I?”

On August 2, 1913, the First Presidency published a statement that bears the title “A Warning Voice.” Their statement embodies a basic principle that, if followed, will keep us from deception.

All faithful members are entitled to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for themselves, their families, and for those over whom they are appointed and ordained to preside. But anything at discord with that which comes from God through the head of the Church is not to be received as authoritative or reliable. In secular as well as spiritual affairs, Saints may receive Divine guidance and revelation affecting themselves, but this does not convey authority to direct others, and is not to be accepted when contrary to Church covenants, doctrine or discipline, or to known facts, demonstrated truths, or good common sense. [Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, Charles W. Penrose, First Presidency, “A Warning Voice,” in James R. Clark, comp., Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1970), 4:285–86]

Those who fall away from the Church generally struggle with this principle.

Recognizing, understanding, and appreciating our own spiritual experiences within the gospel framework keep us safe from deception.

7. Spiritual experiences confirm our testimonies and help us to endure moments of doubt and uncertainty.

President Kimball has said that “faith grows through spiritual experience” (TSWK, p. 76). As missionaries left the mission field, I asked them to identify and write down for their final missionary interview with me the major lessons they had learned through the course of their mission. What I heard most often was, “I learned the importance of prayer,” “I learned that God answers prayer,” “I learned the importance of regular scripture study,” or “I learned to appreciate hard, disciplined work.” Never did I hear anything that related to the goals of the mission, the number of baptisms, or the number of hours worked. After reviewing what they had learned, I returned their written accounts to them with the counsel that they keep them in a safe place. I told them that a time would come in their lives when matters would not be so clear to them as they had been in the mission field. It was then that they were to retrieve and read what they themselves had written about their own spiritual experiences.

You may know that before one is considered for employment at BYU, or at any other Church institution, an interview with a General Authority is required. Not long ago I interviewed a very brilliant individual for a position at BYU. His training was in a discipline that could possibly pose some challenge to his testimony. I asked him whether he had ever wavered in his faith or whether he had, in the course of his study, ever lost his testimony. He answered the question very candidly and told me, yes, he had. His integrity was impressive. I asked him how he had overcome the challenge. The answer was very simple. He said, “I went back to my missionary journals and read them in order to rediscover what I once knew to be true.”

Brothers and sisters, spiritual experiences are granted to us by a loving Heavenly Father.

They are meant to strengthen us and educate us in his ways. We need to ponder our lives that we may comprehend our spiritual experiences, learn from them, and be strengthened by them. So, in review, my seven observations regarding spiritual experiences are these:

1. We can know some things without knowing all things.

2. Spiritual experiences are very personal and may not be understood by others.

3. Spiritual experiences not understood by others will often be rejected, but their rejection does not change the experiences.

4. As others may reject our spiritual experiences, they will often try to dissuade us from believing them.

5. Sometimes only upon reflection or when someone else points it out do we recognize what we have experienced.

6. Trusting our spiritual experiences will keep us from deception.

7. Spiritual experiences confirm our testimonies and help us to endure moments of doubt and uncertainty.

May we continue to be worthy of spiritual experiences in our lives. I bear witness that Heavenly Father lives and loves us and sent his Son to be our Redeemer and advocate with him. I bear witness of the Savior, of his redeeming work, of his atonement, and of his resurrection. I bear witness that he appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith, thus ushering in this the dispensation of fullness of times, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.