

## *Evidences of the Heart*

RODGER SORENSEN

It's a privilege to be with you and among you and feel of your spirits. I pray, as my son did in the opening prayer, that the Spirit will attend us and that we can learn from each other in this conversation we will have today about the Spirit.

My wife and I have been blessed with eight grandchildren; two of them, Ashley and Brooke, are twins. Two months ago they gave the scripture and prayer in their Primary closing exercises. My son Josh helped Ashley give the scripture.

During the closing song he whispered to Brooke, "Can you do the prayer by yourself?"

"No," she said. "I need help."

"Okay. You do what you can, and I'll help you if you get stuck."

"Okay," said Brookie.

The twinnings are both capable of fine, fine prayers. In fact, some of their blessings on the food are so long that the food is cold before we get to it. They bless everything.

In the Primary closing exercises, the song ended, and up went Brooke to the podium. She climbed the three-step stool and pulled the microphone down to her mouth level. She folded her arms, bowed her head, and waited.

Josh whispered into her ear, "Okay, do what you can."

Into the microphone she said, "Okay, do what you can." And again she waited, eyes tightly closed.

Josh whispered into her ear, "No, *you* do what you can."

And, sure enough, Brooke said into the microphone, "No, *you* do what you can."

Josh looked up, and all the adults in the audience were rocking back and forth in their chairs laughing. Finally he whispered, "Heavenly Father . . ."

And Brooke said into the microphone, "Heavenly Father, thank you for this day . . .," and the prayer was on its way.

This story invites me and the rest of us to think about how, in our prayers, sometimes we say to Heavenly Father, "Okay, do what You can"—in essence asking Him to resolve our challenges. In the silence that follows, perhaps we hear the response of a loving Father speaking to His child: "No, *you* do what you can, and I'll help you if you get stuck."

My dear sisters and brothers, today I will share stories that come from my years of

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service in the Hill Cumorah Pageant. I would like to tell stories that I hope invite us to ponder together and explore in our minds and hearts ways we can discern promptings from Heavenly Father.

I love the cradle of the Restoration. I have repeatedly worked and walked on the sacred ground of the places that played key roles in bringing the gospel back to this earth. Because of the fruits of those experiences, the gospel of Christ is inextricably woven into the fibers of my soul. I am grateful to have been prompted by the Spirit to speak further of these places today.

My prayer is that we will seek to know the truths of the restored gospel by finding our own sacred places and listening to the Holy Spirit speak evidences to our hearts. Paul tells us “the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.”<sup>1</sup>

### The Seating Area

In our last April conference, Elder Carlos H. Amado spoke of service. He said:

*Those who serve with devotion, even when things don't turn out the way they would like, are not easily discouraged, fatigued, or frustrated because the promise of peace of mind and the companionship of the Holy Spirit will never abandon them.*<sup>2</sup>

There is something in service and sacrifice, especially in the face of adversity, that prepares the heart for hearing the Holy Spirit.

Seven years ago I was standing at the crest of the Hill Cumorah. It was before the sets were up and before the cast arrived, and I was visiting with a group of tourists. One of them asked where the audience would sit. I pointed to the empty field at the foot of the hill where, in two weeks, 8,000 chairs would be arranged. Looking closely, I noticed something I had not seen before: there was a pattern on the field showing where the seats go—the aisles in

between subtly imprinted in the grass. Later I talked to Brother Paine, who, year after year, was in charge of marking out the location of the chairs and supervising their setup. I asked if he had noticed that the grass in the aisles was darker and hardier than the grass where the seats were located. He told me the grass in the aisles was so distinct he could almost mark the field for the chairs without measuring.

On the day it is marked and the cast members set up the 8,000 chairs, the field is lush and green. During the run of the pageant, thousands and thousands of feet tramp down those aisles. Eleven days later, when those same chairs are placed back into their storage trailers, the field is a modified checkerboard of long green grass where the chairs have been sitting and 10-foot-wide strips of either matted, brown, seemingly dead grass in dry years or muddy bogs in wet years. It grows back stronger every year.

I believe service and sacrifice, especially when performed in the arms of adversity, strengthen our souls and soften our hearts. Mighty struggle prepares us to hear and follow promptings and enlarges our capacity to follow Christ. We experience peace of mind and the assurance that the Holy Spirit will be our constant companion.

There is a lovely little poem by Emily Dickinson that captures this principle:

*I fit for them—  
I seek the Dark  
Till I am thorough fit.  
The labor is a sober one  
With this sufficient sweet  
That abstinence of mine produce  
A purer food for them, if I succeed,  
If not I had  
The transport of the Aim—<sup>3</sup>*

What does it mean to “fit” for another? Who is “them”? What is “the Dark”? What is this person abstaining from? What is the “purer

food”? And what is the nature of this person’s “transport”?

The Savior said, “Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.”<sup>4</sup>

Somewhere in the depths of service, sacrifice, and adversity we come to know the transformative powers of the Spirit, and we are changed. We come to embrace more fully the Atonement and the Lord’s love for us.

### **The Sacred Grove**

The Savior told His disciples, “The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, . . . shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.”<sup>5</sup>

Each year that I worked on the pageant, I took along one of our children so they could personally experience the place where it all began. We went to the Sacred Grove whenever we had a chance, especially if we found times when we could be pretty much alone there. It is a truly sacred place where the Spirit witnesses and testimonies are strengthened.

In July 1984 my son Josh and I spent an hour in the grove. It was less than three weeks before his eighth birthday. We walked and talked in the shadows of the trees. We caught a frog, watched birds wing from leaf to limb, and listened to the warmth well up inside our hearts.

It was there amongst those trees that the conversation that shaped eternity took place. Embedded in the patterns of their rings and in the seasonal rebirth of their leaves is a testimony. Those trees witnessed a 14-year-old boy struggle against the dark powers of Lucifer. They felt the warm illumination of the Holy Spirit penetrate the darkness. They heard the loving tones of Elohim testify of His Only Begotten Son. They listened as our Savior taught Joseph the tenets of eternal truth. Simple sentences, words spoken to the heart, and the expression of charity and grace opened

the floodgates of a new dispensation of light and knowledge.

Our spirits were with Heavenly Father and Jehovah when this world was created. We saw our Savior’s face and heard His voice. We felt His love. We knew then of our Father’s plan for the Atonement, and we knew that the Restoration would take place in these latter days. We can know now the truthfulness of these promises as we prepare our hearts to hear the Holy Spirit whisper these things to our remembrance.

### **The Joseph Smith Home**

In his most recent conference address, Elder L. Tom Perry talked a little bit about faith. He said:

*Faith in Jesus Christ and His Atonement turns us to Him. The world teaches that seeing is believing, but our faith in our Lord leads us to believe so we can see Him and the Father’s plan for us.*<sup>6</sup>

These polarities fascinate me. At certain times, seeing is believing; at other times and places, believing is seeing.

For more than 25 years I thought the Joseph Smith home I visited looked as it did when Alvin built it. It had a white clapboard exterior with a house-wide porch on the west, stairs to the second level up the center of the home, and four bedrooms upstairs—one of which had been the room Joseph and Emma shared during the time the Prophet received the plates. Seeing was believing: I remember standing on the landing of the second floor looking out of those windows, seeing the grove, and imagining to myself that the boy Joseph stood in that very spot, looking out of those very windows at the grove, remembering what had happened there.

Well, extensive research coupled with guidance from the Holy Spirit resulted in a surprising restoration of the house. The porch, the west-facing windows on the second level, and

the four upstairs bedrooms are all gone. Now the stairs to the second level are located in the southeast corner of the house. A fireplace complex occupies the center of the home, with hearths in each of the three rooms that surround it. Upstairs there are no bedrooms, just one large room with the fireplace bricks rising through the center. In Joseph's day, it had been divided into sleeping quarters by blankets.

I am amazed. Things are not necessarily what they seem to be. When it comes to eternal truths, we must rely more upon the witness of the Holy Spirit than upon the evidence of eyes and ears and mind. Believing is seeing.

#### **Fireflies: From the Temple to the Grove and Back Again**

In April general conference of 2007, Elder Glenn L. Pace gave a talk entitled "Do You Know?" In it he told of when, as a missionary, he taught

*an extremely intelligent woman who had a hard time accepting anything until she had nailed down every intellectual loose end. However, at long last we heard her say, "I cannot deny this feeling any longer."*

*She joined the Church . . . , but she gradually [fell away].*

Fifteen years later, she visited Elder Pace and his family in Salt Lake City. They took her to Temple Square. Elder Pace reported:

*As we started up the circular ramp leading to the statue of the Savior, she paused and tearfully said, "Here comes that feeling again. My heart still yearns for what my mind won't accept!"<sup>7</sup>*

This is a dear story. It reminds me of another sacred place in the land of the Restoration. The Palmyra Temple opened in the year 2000. After the close of the pageant that year, after the cast and crew had gone, and on the day before my return home, I went to the temple. When the

session was over, I looked out the west foyer windows, through which the tops of the trees of the Sacred Grove are visible. From one of the most significant manifestations of the restored gospel, the temple, I could see in the setting sun the place where it all began: the Sacred Grove.

There is a connection between these sacred places: one is the place where Elohim and Jehovah opened the gates to the fulness of times; the other, the fulfillment of the promise, is the place where Jehovah and Elohim visit today. It is Their home: "Holiness to the Lord. The House of the Lord."

I had been told there were fireflies in the grove at night—though because my previous visits had always been during the day, I had never seen them. On that particular night, over the next 45 minutes fireflies began to flicker. Thousands of them emerged from the undergrowth. For me, it was a mystery. I was astonished. Where did such a population live? The darker the night became, the more fireflies emerged, flickering amongst the dark maples and birches. Silently they told of another world within the one I perceived. I wondered, "What else exists in this universe of ours without my knowledge?" I yearn to know those truths. An eternity exists with a just Father, a compassionate Savior, and a Holy Spirit. Yet I cannot see Them with my eyes!

The flickering fireflies were beautiful—more often dark than they were light. Their momentary brightness enthralled me. Collectively they were a pulsing, living community throbbing in the spaces between the benevolent trees, dark beyond my capacity to see, silent beyond my ability to hear, and alive in a place whose sacredness is beyond my ability to fully understand.

Nothing much more happened to the fireflies that night. They didn't stop flickering; they didn't fly away. They continued to create momentary intensities without illuminating anything other than themselves and

the awareness of silent tree trunks reaching skyward in the dark. But something more happened to my heart. I knew again there were many more truths I did not comprehend that would require greater faith than I was currently exercising to recognize.

I left the grove on a trail I hadn't seen before. The path wound around in the direction of the newly built Smith cabin through the trees. I suspected this trail might be closer to the one Joseph walked in 1820. I paused by the cabin, pondering the visit of Moroni to Joseph. While the household slept, Moroni taught Joseph through the long night of September 21, 1823. Three times he visited, repeating the same message. And no one awoke. The only way anyone but Joseph could know it happened was if they believed.

Walking back to the temple, I came full circle from 1820 to the year 2000. Today, 188 years later, a beacon radiates the night sky: a light on a hill, seen by thousands, yet comprehended by relatively few.

I returned to Cumorah's hill, climbed up its face, and stood on the crest. Somewhere near, Moroni had appeared to Joseph, teaching him the doctrines and the gospel and about a civilization long lost to the modern world. From a picture of the hill taken around the end of the 19th century, we can tell that it was basically bare. Accounts suggest that during the years Moroni visited Joseph Smith, there were few trees on the hill. Yet no one saw the visits: a restoration on Cumorah's hill, radiating truth through a young man who could see it, revealing a world of faith and light that shines amongst the dark shadows of doubt and disbelief.

### Questions

Now let's explore three questions. First: What does the voice of the Holy Spirit sound like? In Doctrine and Covenants 8:2 the Lord explained, "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." At times for me His voice is a warmth that wells up inside. I feel it. At other times it is a clear impression, a vital *déjà vu*, an "aha," or an "of course." Sometimes it is a realization in my mind that I have heard a whisper. What does His voice sound like to you?

Second question: What can we do to prepare ourselves to hear the Holy Spirit? Several weeks ago, as I was cutting the lawn, our lawn mower stopped working. I took the spark plug out and saw that it was covered with carbon. I cleaned it and put it back in. The mower started right up, and I was feeling that I should have been a small-engine repairman! However, a minute later it coughed to a standstill. Carbon had coated the plug again. So I called some real repair places and found that they each had a three-week backlog.

A few days later I decided to try fixing it again myself. I remembered from my youth that engines need a proper balance between air and gasoline in order to run. I also remembered that there is a valve somewhere that adjusts this mixture. I decided to look for it.

The first thing I did was remove the air filter. It was so dirty that no air could get through. After replacing it and cleaning the plug again, the mower worked. My potential career as a repairman was back on track.

Keeping our "filters" clean is one thing we can do to prepare ourselves to hear the Holy Spirit. Our relationship with the Spirit depends a lot upon what enters into our hearts: what we listen to, think about, read, watch, and do with our time and energy. What we choose to allow to enter into our minds and hearts will influence the way we hear, feel, and understand the promptings of the Spirit.

Another way to prepare to hear His voice is to balance the mixture between the "air" and the "source." I am quite certain that the voice of the Spirit cannot be discerned through a cacophony of sensory stimulations. We may be really good at multitasking, layering our senses



with listening to iPods, watching DVDs, using instant messaging, surfing the Net, and playing virtual games—all while doing our homework. But if we want to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we must dedicate space and time and solitude to that relationship.

Third question: How can we distinguish between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the adversary? I have felt and followed the prompting and enticing of both voices. I believe it is possible to distinguish between them by the differences in their characteristics and the differences in their works.

The Holy Spirit is warm, gentle, quiet, and penetrating. Helaman records how Nephi and Lehi were freed from prison by an earthquake and a fire, after which

*they heard this voice, and beheld that it was not a voice of thunder, neither was it a voice of a great tumultuous noise, but behold, it was a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper, and it did pierce even to the very soul.*<sup>8</sup>

The Holy Spirit invites, entices, and persuades us to do good works. In Doctrine and Covenants 11:12, the Lord encourages us to “put [our] trust in that Spirit which leadeth to do good—yea, to do justly, to walk humbly, to judge righteously.”

Conversely, following the promptings of the adversary results in a cold loneliness. His enticing leads to the depths of despair rather than to the depths of faith. His encouragement leads to pride and self-absorption rather than to service and self-worth. He advocates arrogance rather than meekness. He persuades us to indulge in appetites that result in addictions. The Holy Spirit invites the development of virtues such as endurance, faith, kindness, long-suffering, and patience—all behaviors that preserve agency. While the Holy Ghost testifies of Heavenly Father, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Atonement, the adversary denies them all and seeks the glory for himself.

The adversary wants us to have every worldly thing, that he may own us. The Holy Spirit wants us to lose our lives in service that we may gain all our Father has, that we may be free.

Elder Scott explained:

*When we seek inspiration . . . , the Lord gives gentle promptings. These require us to think, to exercise faith, to work, to struggle at times, and to act.*<sup>9</sup>

**My Testimony: Back to Our Sacred Groves**

Let’s come full circle another way. In a book called *Here We Stand*, Joseph Fielding McConkie wrote:

*Everyone is required to do what Joseph Smith did, and that is to receive the personal revelation that the wisdom that brings salvation comes only by the Spirit of revelation, and then each must find his own equivalent of the Sacred Grove and obtain his own answer.*<sup>10</sup>

Through the warmth of the Holy Spirit speaking to my heart, and out of the hallowed ground of sacred places, I bear this testimony:

1. I testify that Joseph Smith experienced the presence of Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost in the Sacred Grove. He saw Elohim and Jehovah. He heard Their teachings.

2. I testify that Jesus Christ is our Redeemer. He atoned for our sins, weaknesses, shortcomings, heartaches, and sorrows. He sacrificed His life that we might repent and live again. Because of His Atonement, all broken souls can be healed and all splintered relationships can be repaired if we will but open our hearts, not judge, and exercise faith.

3. I testify that the Book of Mormon contains the fulness of the everlasting gospel. It stands as another witness for Christ in the world today.

4. I testify that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God. Through him the gospel and The

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were restored to the earth in these latter days. President Monson is a living prophet and the president of the Church today.

We do not have to physically be in the Sacred Grove to receive guidance and instruction from our Heavenly Father. Nevertheless, we must learn the language of the Spirit for ourselves and find our own sacred places in which we personally come to know the things of God by the Spirit of God. As we daily kneel in prayer, speak to a loving Father, and listen to His answers, we come to recognize the sound of His voice and feel His love for us. Fasting tunes our hearts to the language of the Spirit and opens doors to deeper conversations with our Father. The Primary song says:

*I love to see the temple.  
I'm going there someday  
To feel the Holy Spirit,  
To listen and to pray.*<sup>11</sup>

The temple is a place where the language of the heart is spoken freely, where “the substance of things hoped for [and] the evidence of things not seen”<sup>12</sup> are manifest to the heart and soul, and where our minds are quickened. As we become fluent in that language, we will receive further knowledge of the truthfulness of the work of God. We will come to know who we are and why we are here. We will

receive evidence that God knows us and cares about us, that we are His children, and that the Holy Spirit can be our guide and companion throughout life.

I pray we will seek our own sacred places where we can come to know the truths of the restored gospel by listening to the Holy Spirit speak evidences to our yearning hearts. I also pray that as we leave this devotional today, the words of a loving father to his precious child will echo in our hearts: “You do what you can, and I’ll help you if you get stuck.” In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. 1 Corinthians 2:11.
2. Carlos H. Amado, “Service, a Divine Quality,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 37.
3. Emily Dickinson, No. 82/1109 (c. 1867).
4. John 12:24.
5. John 14:26.
6. L. Tom Perry, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 45.
7. Glenn L. Pace, “Do You Know?” *Ensign*, May 2007, 78.
8. Helaman 5:30.
9. Richard G. Scott, “Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayer,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 32.
10. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Here We Stand* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 196.
11. “I Love to See the Temple,” *Songbook*, 95.
12. Hebrews 11:1.