

# What Is Truth?

DIETER F. UCHTDORF

**M**y beloved brothers and sisters, my dear young friends, I am grateful for the privilege to be with you today. It always lifts my spirits to be surrounded by the young adults of the Church, and you inspire me to declare, “Let Zion in her beauty rise.” As you are living all around the world, you represent in a beautiful way the future and strength of the Church. Because of your righteous desires and your commitment to follow the Savior, the future of this Church looks bright.

I bring you the love and blessing of President Thomas S. Monson. The First Presidency prays for you often. We always ask the Lord to bless, keep, and guide you.

## **The Blind Men and the Elephant**

Well over one hundred years ago, an American poet put to rhyme an ancient parable. The first verse of the poem speaks about

*six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.*

In the poem each of the six travelers takes hold of a different part of the elephant and then describes to the others what he has discovered.

One of the men finds the elephant’s leg and describes it as being round and rough like a tree. Another feels the tusk and describes the elephant as a spear. A third grabs the tail and insists that an elephant is like a rope. A fourth discovers the trunk and insists that the elephant is like a large snake.

Each is describing truth.

And because his truth comes from personal experience, each insists that he knows what he knows.

The poem concludes:

*And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!<sup>1</sup>*

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We look at this story from a distance and smile. After all, we know what an elephant looks like. We have read about them and watched them on film, and many of us have even seen one with our own eyes. We believe we know the truth of what an elephant is. That someone could make a judgment based on one aspect of truth and apply it to the whole seems absurd or even unbelievable. On the other hand, can't we recognize ourselves in these six blind men? Have we ever been guilty of the same pattern of thought?

I suppose the reason this story has remained so popular in so many cultures and over so many years is because of its universal application. The Apostle Paul said that in this world the light is dim and we see only part of the truth as though we are looking "through a glass, darkly."<sup>2</sup> And yet it seems to be part of our nature as human beings to make assumptions about people, politics, and piety based on our incomplete and often misleading experience.

I am reminded of a story about a couple who had been married for sixty years. They had rarely argued during that time, and their days together passed in happiness and contentment. They shared everything and had no secrets between them—except one. The wife had a box that she kept at the top of a sideboard, and she told her husband when they were married that he should never look inside.

As the decades passed, the moment came that her husband took the box down and asked if he could finally know what it contained. The wife consented, and he opened it to discover two doilies and \$25,000. When he asked his wife what this meant, she responded, "When we were married, my mother told me that whenever I was angry with you or whenever you said or did something I didn't like, I should knit a small doily and then talk things through with you."

The husband was moved to tears by this sweet story. He marveled that during sixty

years of marriage he had only disturbed his wife enough for her to knit two doilies. Feeling extremely good about himself, he took his wife's hand and said, "That explains the doilies, but what about the \$25,000?"

His wife smiled sweetly and said, "That's the money I got from selling all the doilies I've knitted over the years."

Not only does this story teach an interesting way to deal with disagreements in marriage, but it also illustrates the folly of jumping to conclusions based on limited information.

So often the "truths" we tell ourselves are merely fragments of the truth, and sometimes they're not really the truth at all.

Today I would like to speak of truth. As I do, I invite you to ponder a few important questions.

The first question is "What is truth?"

The second, "Is it really possible to know the truth?"

And third, "How should we react to things that contradict truths which we have learned previously?"

### **What Is Truth?**

What is truth? During the closing hours of His life, the Savior was brought before Pontius Pilate. The elders of the Jews had accused Jesus of sedition and treason against Rome and insisted that He be put to death.

When Pilate came face to face with the Man of Galilee, he asked, "Are you a king?"

Jesus replied, "For this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice."<sup>3</sup>

I don't know what kind of man Pilate was, nor do I know what he was thinking. However, I suspect that he was well educated and had seen much of the known world.

I sense a certain weary cynicism in Pilate's reply. I hear in his words the voice of a man who may once have been an idealist but now—

after a great deal of life experience—seems a little hardened, even tired.

I don't believe Pilate was encouraging a dialogue when he responded with three simple words: "What is truth?"<sup>4</sup>

To amplify, I wonder if what he really was asking was "How can anyone possibly know the truth?"

And that is a question for all time and for all people.

### **Can Anyone Know the Truth?**

Now, can anyone know the truth? Some of the greatest minds that have ever lived on this earth have attempted to answer that question. The elusive nature of truth has been a favorite theme of history's great poets and storytellers. Shakespeare seemed especially intrigued with it. The next time you read one of Shakespeare's tragedies, notice how often the plot turns on a misunderstanding of an important truth.

Now, never in the history of the world have we had easier access to more information—some of it true, some of it false, and much of it partially true.

Consequently, never in the history of the world has it been more important to learn how to correctly discern between truth and error.

Part of our problem in the quest for truth is that human wisdom has disappointed us so often. We have so many examples of things that mankind once "knew" were true but have since been proven false.

For example, in spite of one-time overwhelming consensus, the earth isn't flat. The stars don't revolve around the earth. Eating a tomato will not cause instant death. And, of course, man actually can fly—even break the sound barrier.

The scriptures are filled with stories of men and women who misinterpreted "truth."

In the Old Testament, Balaam could not resist "the wages of unrighteousness"<sup>5</sup> offered him by the Moabites. So he convinced himself to believe a new truth and helped the Moabites

get the Israelites to curse themselves through immorality and disobedience.<sup>6</sup>

The apostate Korihor, after leading many away from the truth, confessed that the devil had deceived him to the point where he actually believed that what he was saying was the truth.<sup>7</sup>

In the Book of Mormon, both the Nephites as well as the Lamanites created their own "truths" about each other. The Nephites' "truth" about the Lamanites was that they "were a wild, and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people,"<sup>8</sup> never able to accept the gospel. The Lamanites' "truth" about the Nephites was that Nephi had stolen his brother's birthright and that Nephi's descendants were liars who continued to rob the Lamanites of what was rightfully theirs.<sup>9</sup> These "truths" fed their hatred for one another until it finally consumed them all.

Needless to say, there are many examples in the Book of Mormon that contradict both of these stereotypes. Nevertheless, the Nephites and Lamanites believed these "truths" that shaped the destiny of this once-mighty and beautiful people.

### **Human Nature and Truth**

In some way we are all susceptible to such strange thinking.

The "truths" we cling to shape the quality of our societies as well as our individual characters. All too often these "truths" are based on incomplete and inaccurate evidence, and at times they serve very selfish motives.

Part of the reason for poor judgment comes from the tendency of mankind to blur the line between belief and truth. We too often confuse belief with truth, thinking that because something makes sense or is convenient, it must be true. Conversely, we sometimes don't believe truth or reject it—because it would require us to change or admit that we were wrong. Often, truth is rejected because it doesn't appear to be consistent with previous experiences.

When the opinions or “truths” of others contradict our own, instead of considering the possibility that there could be information that might be helpful and augment or complement what we know, we often jump to conclusions or make assumptions that the other person is misinformed, mentally challenged, or even intentionally trying to deceive.

Unfortunately, this tendency can spread to all areas of our lives—from sports to family relationships and from religion to politics.

### **Ignaz Semmelweis**

A tragic example of this tendency is the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian physician who practiced medicine during the mid-nineteenth century. Early in his career, Dr. Semmelweis learned that 10 percent of the women who came to his clinic died of childbed fever, while the death rate at a nearby clinic was less than 4 percent. He was determined to find out why.

After investigating the two clinics, Dr. Semmelweis concluded that the only significant difference was that his was a teaching clinic where corpses were examined. He observed doctors who went directly from performing autopsies to delivering babies. He concluded that somehow the corpses had contaminated their hands and caused the deadly fevers.

When he began to recommend that doctors scrub their hands with a chlorinated lime solution, he was met with indifference and even scorn. His conclusions contradicted the “truths” of other doctors. Some of his colleagues even believed that it was absurd to think that a doctor’s hand could be impure or cause sickness.

But Semmelweis insisted, and he made it a policy for doctors in his clinic to wash their hands before delivering babies. As a consequence, the death rate promptly dropped by 90 percent. Semmelweis felt vindicated and was certain that this practice would now be

adopted throughout the medical community. But he was wrong. Even his dramatic results were not enough to change the minds of many doctors of the day.

### **Is It Possible to Know the Truth?**

The thing about truth is that it exists beyond belief. It is true even if nobody believes it.

We can say west is north and north is west all day long and even believe it with all our heart, but if, for example, we want to fly from Quito, Ecuador, to New York City in the United States, there is only one direction that will lead us there, and that is north—west just won’t do.

Of course, this is just a simple aviation analogy. However, there is indeed such a thing as absolute truth—unassailable, unchangeable truth.

This truth is different from belief. It is different from hope. Absolute truth is not dependent upon public opinion or popularity. Polls cannot sway it. Not even the inexhaustible authority of celebrity endorsement can change it.

So how can we find truth?

I believe that our Father in Heaven is pleased with His children when they use their talents and mental faculties to earnestly discover truth. Over the centuries many wise men and women—through logic, reason, scientific inquiry, and, yes, through inspiration—have discovered truth. These discoveries have enriched mankind, improved our lives, and inspired joy, wonder, and awe.

Even so, the things we once thought we knew are continually being enhanced, modified, or even contradicted by enterprising scholars who seek to understand truth.

As we all know, it is difficult enough to sort out the truth from our own experiences. To make matters worse, we have an adversary, “the devil, [who] as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”<sup>10</sup>

Satan is the great deceiver, “the accuser of [the] brethren,”<sup>11</sup> the father of all lies,<sup>12</sup> who

continually seeks to deceive that he might overthrow us.<sup>13</sup>

The adversary has many cunning strategies for keeping mortals from the truth. He offers the belief that truth is relative; appealing to our sense of tolerance and fairness, he keeps the real truth hidden by claiming that one person's "truth" is as valid as any other.

Some he entices to believe that there is an absolute truth out there somewhere but that it is impossible for anyone to know it.

For those who already embrace the truth, his primary strategy is to spread the seeds of doubt. For example, he has caused many members of the Church to stumble when they discover information about the Church that seems to contradict what they had learned previously.

If you experience such a moment, remember that in this age of information there are many who create doubt about anything and everything, at any time and every place.

You will find even those who still claim that they have evidence that the earth is flat, that the moon is a hologram, and that certain movie stars are really aliens from another planet. And it is always good to keep in mind that just because something is printed on paper, appears on the Internet, is frequently repeated, or has a powerful group of followers doesn't make it true.

Sometimes untrue claims or information are presented in such a way that they appear quite credible. However, when you are confronted with information that is in conflict with the revealed word of God, remember that the blind men in the parable of the elephant would never be able to accurately describe the full truth.

We simply don't know all things—we can't see everything. What may seem contradictory now may be perfectly understandable as we search for and receive more trustworthy information. Because we see through a glass darkly, we have to trust the Lord, who sees all things clearly.

Yes, our world is full of confusion. But eventually all of our questions will be answered. All of our doubts will be replaced by certainty. And that is because there is one source of truth that is complete, correct, and incorruptible. That source is our infinitely wise and all-knowing Heavenly Father. He knows truth as it was, as it is, and as it yet will be.<sup>14</sup> "He comprehendeth all things, . . . and he is above all things, . . . and all things are by him, and of him."<sup>15</sup>

Our loving Heavenly Father offers His truth to us, His mortal children.

Now, what is this truth?

It is His gospel. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life."<sup>16</sup>

If we will only have enough courage and faith to walk in His path, it will lead us to peace of heart and mind, to lasting meaning in life, to happiness in this world, and to joy in the world to come. The Savior is "not far from every one of us."<sup>17</sup> We have His promise that if we seek Him diligently, we will find Him.<sup>18</sup>

### **Our Obligation to Seek for Truth**

But how can we know that this "truth" is different from any other? How can we trust this "truth"?

The invitation to trust the Lord does not relieve us from the responsibility to know for ourselves. This is more than an opportunity; it is an obligation—and it is one of the reasons we were sent to this earth.

Latter-day Saints are not asked to blindly accept everything they hear. We are encouraged to think and discover truth for ourselves. We are expected to ponder, to search, to evaluate, and thereby to come to a personal knowledge of the truth.

Brigham Young said:

*I am . . . afraid that this people have so much confidence in their leaders that they will not inquire for themselves of God whether they are led by him.*

*I am fearful they settle down in a state of blind self-security. . . . Let every man and woman know, by the whispering of the Spirit of God to themselves, whether their leaders are walking in the path the Lord dictates.*<sup>19</sup>

We seek for truth wherever we may find it. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that

*Mormonism is truth. . . . The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion is, that we believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or . . . being . . . prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men.*<sup>20</sup>

Yes, we do have the fulness of the everlasting gospel, but that does not mean that we know everything. In fact, one principle of the restored gospel is our belief that God “will yet reveal many great and important things.”<sup>21</sup>

The Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ came about because of a young man with a humble heart and a keen mind seeking for truth. Joseph studied and then acted accordingly. He discovered that if a man lacks wisdom, he can ask of God and the truth really will be given unto him.<sup>22</sup>

The great miracle of the Restoration was not just that it corrected false ideas and corrupt doctrines—though it certainly did that—but that it flung open the curtains of heaven and initiated a steady downpour of new light and knowledge that has continued to this day.

So we continually seek truth from all good books and other wholesome sources. “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things.”<sup>23</sup> In this manner we can resist the deceit of the evil one. In this manner we learn the truth “precept upon precept; line upon line.”<sup>24</sup> And we will learn that intelligence cleaves unto intelligence, and wisdom receives wisdom, and truth embraces truth.<sup>25</sup>

My young friends, as you accept the responsibility to seek after truth with an open

mind and a humble heart, you will become more tolerant of others, more open to listen, more prepared to understand, more inclined to build up instead of tearing down, and more willing to go where the Lord wants you to go.

### **The Holy Ghost—Our Guide to All Truth**

Just think about it. You actually have a powerful companion and trustworthy guide in this ongoing search for truth. Who is it? It is the Holy Ghost. Our Heavenly Father knew how difficult it would be for us to sift through all the competing noise and discover truth during our mortality. He knew we would see only a portion of the truth, and He knew that Satan would try to deceive us. So He gave us the heavenly gift of the Holy Ghost to illuminate our minds, teach us, and testify to us of the truth.

The Holy Ghost is a revelator. He is the Comforter, who teaches us “the truth of all things; [who] knoweth all things, and hath all power according to wisdom, mercy, truth, justice, and judgment.”<sup>26</sup>

The Holy Ghost is a certain and safe guide to assist all mortals who seek God as they navigate the often troubling waters of confusion and contradiction.

The *Witness* of truth from the Holy Ghost is available to all, everywhere, all around the globe. All who seek to know the truth, who study it out in their minds,<sup>27</sup> and who “ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, [will know] the truth . . . by the power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>28</sup>

And there is the additional, unspeakable *Gift* of the Holy Ghost available to all who qualify themselves through baptism and by living worthy of His constant companionship.

Yes, your loving Father in Heaven would never leave you alone in this mortality to wander in the dark. You need not be deceived. You can overcome the darkness of this world and discover divine truth.

Some, however, do not seek for truth so much as they strive for contention. They do not sincerely seek to learn; rather, they desire to dispute, to show off their supposed learning and thus cause contention. They ignore or reject the counsel of the Apostle Paul to Timothy: “Foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do [generate contention].”<sup>29</sup>

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we know that such contention is completely inconsistent with the Spirit upon whom we depend in our search for truth. As the Savior warned the Nephites, “For verily . . . I say unto you, he that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil, who is the father of contention.”<sup>30</sup>

If you follow the Spirit, your personal search for the truth inevitably leads you to the Lord and Savior, even Jesus Christ, for He is “the way, the truth, and the life.”<sup>31</sup> This may not be the most convenient way; it will probably also be the road less traveled, and it will be the path with mountains to climb, swift rivers to cross, but it will be His way—the Savior’s redeeming way.

I add my witness as an Apostle of the Lord, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. I know this with all my heart and mind. I know this by the witness and power of the Holy Ghost.

I ask you to spare no efforts in your search to know this truth for yourself—because this truth will make you free.<sup>32</sup>

My dear young friends, you are the hope of Israel. We love you. The Lord knows you; He loves you. The Lord has great confidence in you. He knows your successes, and He is mindful of your challenges and questions in life.

It is my prayer that you will seek the truth earnestly and unceasingly, that you will yearn to drink from the fount of all truth, whose waters are pure and sweet, “a well of water springing up into everlasting life.”<sup>33</sup>

I bless you with confidence in the Lord and a deep-rooted desire to rightfully discern

truth from error—now and throughout your life. This is my prayer and my blessing, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. John Godfrey Saxe, *The Poems of John Godfrey Saxe* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1873), 135–36, books.google.com.

2. 1 Corinthians 13:12.

3. John 18:37.

4. See John 18:33–38.

5. 2 Peter 2:15.

6. For Balaam’s story, see Numbers 22–24; see also Numbers 31:16; Revelation 2:14.

7. See Alma 30:52–53.

8. Mosiah 10:12.

9. See Mosiah 10:12; Alma 20:13.

10. 1 Peter 5:8.

11. Revelation 12:10.

12. See John 8:44.

13. See D&C 50:3.

14. See D&C 93:24.

15. D&C 88:41.

16. John 14:6.

17. Acts 17:27.

18. See Deuteronomy 4:29; Proverbs 8:17; Acts 17:27; D&C 88:63.

19. *DBY*, 135.

20. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 264.

21. Articles of Faith 1:9.

22. See James 1:5.

23. Articles of Faith 1:13.

24. Isaiah 28:10.

25. See D&C 88:40.

26. Moses 6:61.

27. See D&C 9:8.

28. Moroni 10:4.

29. 2 Timothy 2:23.

30. 3 Nephi 11:29.

31. John 14:6.

32. See John 8:32.

33. John 4:14.