

Discerning the Will of the Lord for Me

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As I have thought about what I could say during this devotional today that might be of value and use to you, my thoughts took me to this question: “What do I wish I had known or better understood when I was your age?” Upon pondering that question, many topics came to mind. However, one that stands out is that I wish I had better understood how to discern the will of the Lord for me. President Ezra Taft Benson said, “*The great task of life is to learn the will of the Lord and then do it*” (Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 4; emphasis in original).

President Benson continued by noting that our happiness in this life consists in freely and lovingly acknowledging God’s will for us and in doing it in all ways, big and small. Every action performed in accord with God’s will strengthens us spiritually and enhances our growth toward perfection. Discerning the will of the Lord has been difficult for me because intricately tied to this task are the doctrines of agency and inspiration—two doctrines that I was rather clueless about as a young adult.

In my youth I understood the doctrine of agency to mean God’s gift to us of freedom to choose. I learned early on, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell noted, that choosing is not always a picnic (see Neal A. Maxwell, “Free to Choose,”

BYU 2003–2004 Speeches [Provo: BYU, 2004], 217–21) and that sometimes the consequences of my choices could be painful. Over the years I think I developed a phobia of making “wrong” choices or “mistakes.” Thus I made decisions by default, leaving things to chance, or asking someone else what they thought I should do rather than seeking the will of the Lord and being an active participant in determining the direction of my life.

When we dwelt in the presence of our Heavenly Father, we were endowed with agency—the opportunity or the privilege to choose what we would do. A whole family of words has descended from the word *agent*, including such words as *act*, *action*, *active*, and *actor* (see Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Understanding the Power God Gives Us* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004], 11). It seems that this gift of agency endows us with the freedom to act and that God expects us to use our gifts, abilities, and judgment to develop our capacity to make wise choices.

This idea is supported by Doctrine and Covenants 58:26–28:

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For behold, it is not meet that I should command in all things; for he that is compelled in all things, the same is a slothful and not a wise servant. . . .

Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness;

For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.

In a BYU devotional address on September 15, 1981, Elder Dallin H. Oaks recounted an example of the misunderstanding of this principle:

*I once heard a young woman in testimony meeting praise the spirituality of her husband, indicating that he submitted every question to the Lord. She told how he accompanied her shopping and would not even choose between different brands of canned vegetables without making his selection a matter of prayer. That strikes me as improper. I believe the Lord expects us to use the intelligence and experience he has given us to make these kinds of choices. [Dallin H. Oaks, "Revelation," *BYU 1981–82 Fireside and Devotional Speeches* (Provo: BYU, 1982), 26; see also *New Era*, September 1982, 46]*

Okay, so those kinds of choices are easy: What brand of cereal should I buy? What color of pants should I wear? Who should I ask out this weekend? Should I watch TV or read the scriptures? Should I go to Relief Society or go shopping? But what about those more difficult choices: Where should I go to college? What should I study? What should my profession be? Should I go to graduate school? Which job offer should I take? Where should I live? Whom should I marry?

I have often asked myself, How can I make these "big" decisions when I don't know what the future holds? When it comes to big decisions, you don't want to make a mistake. Sometimes I have wondered why the Lord doesn't just tell us what to do concerning the big things. The answer is simple: If we are

going to become as God is, we will have to learn to make decisions—even decisions of great importance—on our own initiative.

The principle of agency requires that we gain experience in learning to act as independent beings and to develop our own resources. Yet in the Book of Mormon Alma exhorts us, "Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good" (Alma 37:37), implying that we are to seek the Lord's wisdom and guidance in all that we do.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie noted:

And so we're faced with two propositions. One is that we ought to be guided by the spirit of inspiration, the spirit of revelation. The other is that we're here under a direction to use our agency, to determine what we ought to do on our own; and we need to strike a fine balance between these two. . . .

*There's a fine balance between agency and inspiration. We're expected to do everything in our power and then to seek an answer from the Lord, a confirming seal that we've reached the right conclusion. [Bruce R. McConkie, "Agency or Inspiration?" *New Era*, January 1975, 39, 41]*

Even though this process seems quite clear, I have struggled with striking this balance between agency and inspiration. At one extreme, I have felt that the Lord has more important things to do than listen to my concerns. This attitude has at times fostered a spirit of pride and a propensity to not seek His input at all and to just do things my own way. On the other extreme, sometimes I have been paralyzed into inaction, unwilling to do anything without an answer from the heavens. How can we avoid relying too much on our intellectual powers while ignoring the Spirit, or expecting spiritual solutions while ignoring our own power to reason things out for ourselves?

President Marion G. Romney described how he found this balance:

*When confronted with a problem I prayerfully weigh in my mind alternative solutions and come to a conclusion as to which of them is best. Then in prayer I submit to the Lord my problem, tell him I desire to make the right choice, [and] what is, in my judgment, the right course. Then I ask him if I have made the right decision to give me the burning in my bosom that He promised Oliver Cowdery. When enlightenment and peace come into my mind, I know the Lord is saying yes. If I have a “stupor of thought,” I know he is saying no, and I try again, following the same procedure. When we learn to distinguish between the inspiration that comes from the Spirit of the Lord and that which comes from our own uninspired hopes and desires, we need make no mistakes. [Marion G. Romney, “Q&A: Questions and Answers,” *New Era*, October 1975, 35]*

So how do we distinguish between inspiration from the Lord and “that which comes from our own uninspired ambitions and desires”—or even from our own warm, earnest, and well-motivated desires? How do we tell the difference between inspiration and our own thoughts and ideas or from a counterfeit that Satan throws out there to confuse us? The Lord assures us that if a decision or course of action is right:

I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong. [D&C 9:8–9]

How do we discern the burning in the bosom from the stupor of thought? What is a stupor of thought? Sometimes I feel like I’m always in a stupor of thought. I looked up the word *stupor* in the dictionary and found these descriptions: a “dazed state, a . . . lack of mental alertness” (*Encarta World English Dictionary*, s.v. “stupor”). Other descriptors are

sluggish, numbness, absence of the ability to move or feel, apathy, languidness, dullness, or not feeling inspired to go forward. I was struck by the depressive mood created by all of these words. There is nothing inspiring, exciting, or comforting about any of them.

Contrast the *stupor* descriptors with words describing the Spirit: *enlightens, enlivens, quickens, enlarges, expands, purifies, inspires, fills the soul with light, peace, love, clarity, and joy* (see Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology*, 9th ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1965], 101). Other descriptors of how the Spirit confirms our course are *much assurance, peace to your mind, confidence wax strong, and feel that it is right.*

Even though we must all learn how the Spirit speaks to us individually, I found these descriptions to be helpful in making righteous choices. Growing in our ability to receive revelation is like learning a new language or learning to play a musical instrument. We must practice diligently for a long time before we feel comfortable with it. We must be patient with ourselves, recognize that we might have some setbacks, and persist until we become masters at recognizing a witness of the Spirit.

Heavenly Father loves us and wants us to succeed. When we are having difficulty getting answers and discerning His will, we may be doing something to complicate the process. Today I will focus on six barriers that might interfere with our ability to receive personal revelation.

1. We Haven’t Made a Decision

This principle is illustrated by a story told by Elder Merrill C. Oaks:

Some years ago while I was serving as a bishop of a Brigham Young University ward, a young woman came to me for counsel concerning a marriage proposal. She really liked the young man but was strongly committed to not taking a step as important as marriage without receiving inspiration that

it was right. She had been praying about whether to marry him and had received no answer. I assured her that the Lord would surely answer her prayers and that she should keep on praying.

The following Sunday she asked to see me again. She felt she was receiving no answer. I interviewed her and established that she was worthy. I again assured her that the Lord does hear and answer prayers and that she should continue praying.

The young man was really pressing her to make a decision. He loved her but felt she was stalling because she probably did not love him. He was approaching the time he might terminate the relationship. She was very concerned but felt she could not marry him without an answer from the Lord. I was very troubled by this. I knew the Lord answered prayers. I knew this young woman was worthy to receive answers to her prayers. Why was she not receiving an answer?

The key came to me in a moment of clear enlightenment. I told her she was expecting the Lord to completely make the decision for her, but He would not do that. Even a decision as important as marriage requires us to exercise our own agency. . . .

Like Oliver Cowdery, she had taken no thought except to keep asking the Lord. I told her she must exercise her own agency by studying it out in her mind, making a tentative decision, and then asking the Lord for a confirmation of her decision. . . .

[The young lady in this story eventually] received her answer. She explained, . . . “I just began to feel [more and more positive and] good about getting married, and I knew that my prayers were being answered. [Merrill C. Oaks, “How to Get an Answer,” *New Era*, August 2001, 47]

Do I expect the Lord to do all the work and reveal things to me that I haven’t bothered to study out in my own mind beforehand?

2. We Haven’t Learned How to Listen

In his book *The Lost Art of Listening*, Michael Nichols states, “True listening has become a rarity in modern life.” We live in a noisy, busy, hurried world and rarely take the time to

listen. He notes that listening is so basic that many of us take it for granted and think we’re better listeners than we really are. In reality most of us hear only what we want to hear or what we have trained our minds to hear. He notes that good listening takes effort and can be achieved only by suspending our preoccupation with ourselves and with our needs (Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening* [New York: Guilford Press, 1995]).

When it comes to communicating with the Lord, these obstacles to listening can be difficult to surmount. After we have studied, pondered, and prayed, we must listen carefully to our Heavenly Father or we will miss His answers. Elder Boyd K. Packer noted, “The voice of the Spirit is a still, small voice—a voice that is *felt* rather than heard” (Boyd K. Packer, “The Cloven Tongues of Fire,” *Ensign*, May 2000, 8; emphasis in original). If we are not in a quiet, still place when we approach Him, we might not hear or feel His answers. That quiet, still place must extend to our state of mind. The Spirit has difficulty impressing a busy, racing, anxious mind. More often than not, whisperings of the Spirit will go unheard if we are too busy to listen.

In addition, we live in a time when many of us turn to addictive substances and behaviors such as television, shopping, eating, computer games, surfing the Internet, and busyness for comfort and avoidance from the problems and stressors of life. These habits can desensitize us and deaden our sensibilities to the promptings and feelings of the Spirit. Plus, much of our modern-day entertainment with its increase in stimulation, gratification, and indulgence is offensive to the Spirit.

We each could ask ourselves: What could I turn off, turn down, or tune out in order to hear the voice of the Spirit in my life? Am I doing anything in my life that is offensive to the Spirit and preventing the Holy Ghost from being my constant companion? Is there anything I could eliminate from my busy life so

that I would have more time to be still, to study scriptures, ponder, and pray?

3. We're Too Intent on Wanting What We Want

Sometimes answers to prayers are not recognized because we are too intent on wanting a confirmation of our own desires. We fail to see that the Lord would have us do something else. In some cases the answers require us to stretch and grow and to leave the comfort of what is familiar to us. At other times we may want to move forward or act when the answer is to wait. Often waiting can be as difficult and require as much faith as acting. When we seek the will of the Lord, we must be willing to be obedient to it.

I recall a decision I was struggling with during my college years. I fasted and prayed and wrestled with this decision for a whole semester. Looking back, I can now see the Lord was giving me my answer early on, but I didn't like the answer; it wasn't the answer I wanted. So I convinced myself that I hadn't really gotten an answer yet. I continued to fast and pray and to pester the Lord, suggesting that maybe the timing wasn't right, maybe I needed to be patient, and down the road I could have this thing I wanted. One Sunday as I was pondering about the decision, the answer came into my mind with unmistakable clarity. There was no doubt in my mind what I was to do.

However, I determined that I just wasn't going to accept this answer. Surely the Lord would forgive me someday. It wouldn't hurt to go against His guidance just this once. It's not like I was committing a huge sin. As I entertained these thoughts and determined to pursue the course of what I wanted to do, I recall with vividness the feelings of emptiness and loss. I felt a tangible withdrawal of the Spirit. Yes, I could refuse to follow the guidance of the Lord, but how could I bear the loss of His Spirit? I changed my course and now prayed for the courage and strength to accept and follow His will.

Ideally, we should go to the Lord with a humble spirit and ask Him to write His will upon our hearts, rather than go to Him determined to carry out our own will. Elder Henry B. Eyring said, "I have had prayers answered. Those answers were most clear when what I wanted was silenced by an overpowering need to know what God wanted. It is then that the answer from a loving Heavenly Father can be spoken to the mind by the still, small voice and can be written on the heart (Henry B. Eyring, "Write upon My Heart," *Ensign*, November 2000, 86).

How submissive am I to the will of the Lord in my life right now? How often do I try to counsel the Lord, rather than take counsel from Him? (see Jacob 4:10).

4. Our Hearts Are Not Prepared to Receive His Answers

H. Burke Peterson said:

*As we go through life, we oftentimes build a rock wall between ourselves and heaven. This wall is built by our unrepented sins. For example, in our wall there may be stones of many different sizes and shapes. There could be stones because we have been unkind to someone. Criticism of leaders or teachers may add another stone. A lack of forgiveness may add another. Vulgar thoughts and actions may add some rather large stones in this wall. [H. Burke Peterson, "Prayer—Try Again," *Ensign*, June 1981, 73]*

In spite of the wall we build in front of us, when we cry out, the Lord in His mercy still sends His messages from heaven; but instead of being able to penetrate our heart, they hit the wall that we have built up and bounce off. When His messages don't penetrate so easily, we say, "He doesn't hear," or "He doesn't answer." It is our challenge and responsibility to destroy this wall, to repent and cleanse ourselves so that we can be in tune with the

Spirit. Revelation is the reward of repentance, obedience, and righteousness.

Is there a sin or habit in my life for which I need to repent? Is there anyone in my life that I need to forgive?

5. We Lack Faith or Confidence in Heavenly Father

Often this lack of faith is manifested by a lack of confidence in ourselves and in our ability to get answers. We struggle with feelings of unworthiness and do not feel that we are important to the Lord. We might think that others can approach the Lord and receive instruction from Him, but we cannot. The truth is we can build our faith by knowing that God lives, that He knows us, that He loves us, and that He has a plan for us.

President Benson stated, “Nothing is going to startle us more when we pass through the veil to the other side than to realize how well we know our Father and how familiar his face is to us” (Ezra Taft Benson, “Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations,” *Speeches of the Year* [Provo: BYU, 1974], 313). Perhaps when we pray, we can picture Him as a loving, kind, wise, understanding Father who wants us to succeed. The Savior teaches of the pure love our Heavenly Father has for us: “If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?” (Luke 11:11).

Elder Scott teaches that “when answers . . . don’t seem to come” or they don’t come in the way we expect, we can remember that

when we explain a problem and a proposed solution [or come to Him with a decision we have made], sometimes He answers yes, sometimes no. Often He withholds an answer, not for lack of concern, but because He loves us—perfectly. He wants us to apply truths He has given us. For us to grow, we need to trust in our ability to make correct decisions. We need to do what we feel is right. In time, He will answer. He will not fail us. [Richard

G. Scott, “Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayer,” *Ensign*, November 1989, 30–31; emphasis in original]

When was the last time I received revelation from the Lord? How can I feel the love of the Lord more consistently in my life?

6. We Don’t Recognize Answers When They Come

Referring to the Holy Ghost, Joseph Smith said, “If you will listen to the first promptings you will get it right nine times out of ten” (in diary of Charles L. Walker, 902; quoted in Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989], 103). How often have you had an impression and rationalized it away as your own thought? For instance, when faced with a particular challenge or problem, an impression might come as to what to do about it. Instead of acting on that prompting, many of us second- and third-guess the prompting and begin to doubt that it actually came from the Spirit.

One of our problems is we do not pay attention to the Lord when He whispers to us on seemingly insignificant things. Then when something big comes along and we really want inspiration, we’re out of practice and don’t know how to receive it. President Harold B. Lee counseled, “All of us should try to . . . give heed to the sudden ideas that come to us, and if we’ll give heed to them and cultivate an ear to hear these promptings we too—each of us—can grow in the spirit of revelation” (*Stand Ye in Holy Places* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974], 142).

Sometimes we’ve already received the answer, and we don’t realize it. In section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord had to remind Oliver Cowdery that he had already received many answers concerning the veracity of the Church and the course he was to take. To teach Oliver, the Lord said:

Behold, thou knowest that thou has inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth. . . .

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? [D&C 6:15, 23]

If we feel that our prayers are not being answered, we, like Oliver, may need to review the scriptures about how God speaks to us.

Ask yourself: Is there evidence in my life that Heavenly Father has already answered me concerning a given issue or problem? Do I pay attention to the Lord when He whispers to me on seemingly insignificant things? Do I write down and act on impressions and promptings from the Lord?

Listen to Your Heart

Over the years as I have struggled with decisions, I am frequently asked the question “What does your heart tell you?” Or I’ve been advised, “Follow your heart.” I would often walk away wondering to myself, “What does that mean?” The scriptures tell us that revelation speaks to both the heart and mind (see D&C 8:2). I fear I have been guilty of leaning too heavily on the mind, thinking and analyzing, trying to be very rational and logical. President Harold B. Lee frequently said, “When your heart begins to tell you things that your mind does not, then you are getting the Spirit of the Lord” (Harold B. Lee, “The Message: When Your Heart Tells You Things Your Mind Does Not Know,” *New Era*, February 1971, 3).

As we journey through mortality, sometimes painful or disappointing life experiences cause us to build walls around our hearts. Feelings of inadequacy or unworthiness might cause us to turn our hearts away from God to seek acceptance and approval from other sources. Sometimes our “hearts are set [too] much upon the things of this world” and “aspire to the honors of men” (D&C 121:35). Disobedience can cause our hearts to harden and stiffen and sometimes even turn to stone. Hearts in these conditions have difficulty choosing in accordance with God’s will.

We, like Nephi, can pray that our hearts will be softened (see 1 Nephi 2:16) and be made pliable to the teachings of the Lord. We can pray as Ezekiel suggests for a “new spirit” or that our hearts will be transformed from a heart of stone to a “heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 11:19). We can ask Him to heal our broken hearts (see Psalms 147:3). We can turn our hearts back to the Lord and learn to trust in Him with all our heart (see Proverbs 3:5).

As our hearts become softer and more pliable toward God, we will be more inclined to be obedient to His commandments and compliant with His will. I testify that the joy associated with God’s gift of freedom to choose is in learning to choose rightly, to choose in accordance with His will. I testify that Heavenly Father loves us, that He is mindful of us, and that He is patient with us as we strive to discern His will for us. I know that it is in freely, lovingly, and joyfully acknowledging His will for us that we find true happiness. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.