

The Pursuit of Truth

JOHN H. VANDENBERG

Thank you, President Oaks. I am pleased to be here this morning, my brothers and sisters. I have great regard and respect for Brigham Young University. My two daughters were graduates of this great institution. Now, to look upon and be in the presence of this gathering this morning enlivens my soul. For to behold such gives me a feeling of stability of the present and a promise of the future because you have declared your position by enrolling in this institution after knowing what high standards are expected of you.

Only man seeks truth

This University seems to have a motto, “The world is our campus,” which gives the impression that its scope in the field of education is limitless and visionary. When we ponder that statement, we contemplate a spiritual thrust in a great big world. The term *big*, of course is only relative. Someone has observed and asked this thoughtful question: “If the galaxy is but a speck in the universe, and the sun but a speck in the galaxy, what then is the earth, and what is man?” we are crushed by our insignificance. I suppose of all God’s creations, only man, with his high degree of intelligence, is capable of making that observation.

Man alone wonders what he is and what his place and purpose are on earth. He wonders how he fits into the scheme of things. He searches and researches but only goes so far, and then he arrives at the point of mystery and discovers that beyond that there lie other mysteries. I think of the words of John Milton in *Paradise Lost*:

*To ask or search I blame thee not; for Heav’n
Is as the book of God before thee set,
Wherein to read his wondrous works, and learn
His seasons, hours, or days, or months, or years.
This to attain, whether Heav’n move or Earth,
Imports not, if thou reckon right: the rest
From Man or Angel the Great Architect,
Did wisely to conceal, and not divulge
His secrets, to be scann’d by them who ought
Rather admire: or if they list to try
Conjecture, he his fabric of the Heav’ns
Hath left to their disputes, perhaps to move
His laughter at their quaint opinions wide*

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*Hereafter, when they come to model Heav'n
And calculate the stars. [Book 8:66–80]*

There seems to be an independence in the nature of man, as conveyed in this thought of Gottfried Emerson Lessing: “If the Lord held out to me in his right hand the whole truth, and in his left hand only the urge to seek truth, I would reach for his left hand.” Perhaps that is as it should be if man in his urge to seek truth would not shut out God; for when he does, he stands alone. Man standing alone looks upon himself, and through his own research of his makeup, he has defined himself as an organized set of 100 trillion cells, each of which has an individual program integrated into a coordinated program of the whole. Or, as another has said, “I am a little world made cunningly of the elements.”

But where does man’s research go from there? He seems to analyze the physical nature very well, but he is lost as to his ultimate destiny. There is, of course, danger in such a course, researched wholly from a scientific or biological viewpoint. And I say danger advisedly, to the extent that the real purpose of man’s creation and his identity as an external being is lost. I say this because I once heard a professor say to me that he had difficulty in maintaining his testimony because he knew too much, indicating that he had some conflict between his intellectual genius and his spiritual nature. Perhaps this is what J. Golden Kimball referred to when he said, “They are educated beyond their intelligence.”

Fortunately, I know that that professor weathered the storm in his soul. He is now a patriarch and could not function in that office without a strong spiritual conviction. But we must always remember the possibility of being caught up so much in the academic to the point where it might obliterate the reality of God. We have a charge from our Heavenly Father, which is, “And as all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of

–wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

You can well understand why God inspired Brigham Young when Karl G. Maeser came to him and said, “I am about to leave for Provo, Brother Young, to start my work in the Academy. Have you any instructions to give me?”

The President looked ahead steadily for a few moments as though in deep thought and then said, “Brother Maeser, I want you to remember that you ought not to teach even the alphabet or the multiplication tables without the Spirit of God. That is all. God bless you.”

Fortunately, that basic instruction has been maintained at all Church educational facilities. For to teach the whole world of knowledge and to cause one to lose the true meaning of life would defeat the whole purpose of our educational program.

Temporal and Spiritual Truth Must Be Related

In the urge of seeking truth we need to recognize that we must relate the temporal with the spiritual. Man can make his conjectures, he can make his calculations, he can form opinions about who he is and his origin, but he will never learn the truth of the matter until he recognizes his Creator. Moses received a significant lesson about the nature of man when he was introduced to a visionary experience as he was called of the Lord. The Lord spoke to him and said:

I have a work for thee, Moses, my son; and thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten; and mine Only Begotten is and shall be the Savior, for he is full of grace and truth; but there is no God beside me, and all things are present with me, for I know them all.

And now, behold, this one thing I show thee, Moses, my son; for thou art in the world. . . .

. . . Moses looked, and beheld the world upon which he was created; and Moses beheld the world and the ends thereof, and all the children of men

which are, and which were created; of the same he greatly marveled and wondered. . . .

. . . Moses cast his eyes and beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the spirit of God.

And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and . . . their numbers were great, even numberless as the sand upon the sea shore. . . .

. . . Moses called upon God, saying: Tell me, I pray thee, why these things are so, and by what thou madest them?

. . . And the Lord God said unto Moses, For mine own purpose have I made these things. Here is wisdom and it remaineth in me.

And by the word of my power, have I created them, which is mine Only Begotten Son, who is full of grace and truth.

And worlds without number have I created. . . .

But only an account of this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, give I unto you. [Moses 1:6–8, 27–28, 30–33, 35]

The Lord then followed by stating his purpose, which was, “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

Moses, no doubt, was overwhelmed from this experience of witnessing the majesty of God and his creations. Moses saw God in all his glory and yet heard him say, “I have a work for thee, Moses, my son; and thou art in the similitude of mine Only Begotten” (Moses 1:6). Moses, knowing all this, said, “I know that man is nothing” (Moses 1:10). This statement would not have come from lack of self-esteem, for it was revealed to Moses that man was the center and purpose of all.

While man standing alone may get the feeling of insignificance by the magnitude of the physical aspects of his surroundings, he must never consider himself being crushed into a nobody. He is a creation of God, in the similitude of the Only Begotten. We need to read his words. We need to study the scriptures, for all

scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man or woman of God may be perfect and thoroughly furnished unto all good works (see 2 Timothy 3:14–17). We need to hear the word of God. We need to learn to believe.

Someone has said the world is dying from want, not of good preaching, but of good hearing. I presume the author of that thought did not mean to discredit preaching, but rather to emphasize the need to listen to the ideas and instructions given that we might believe to the extent that such ideas would germinate within us and move us to proper action.

Knowledge Must Be Followed by Obedience

The apostle Paul said this:

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?

And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! [Romans 10:13–15]

But even after they have heard, they have not all obeyed the gospel. Isaiah said to the Lord, “Who hath believed our report?” (Isaiah 53:1). So then faith comes by hearing the word of God, but it must be followed by obedience.

As to preaching, I know of no people who receive better-quality preaching than that which is given to us by the prophets. This type of preaching is called for in Paul’s epistle to Timothy:

Preach the word . . . exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts

shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. [2 Timothy 4:2–4]

There has been no change in the need of this instruction. We need the same instruction today because of the same conditions prevailing in the modern world. I would like to suggest that you read the messages of the prophets as given during the general conference of this current month. The soundness of the doctrine is unquestionable and, if followed by those who hear, will do much to stem the tide of dwindling in unbelief so apparent in the world. May we be reminded. The object of preaching is to constantly remind mankind of what they are constantly forgetting. Preaching is not to supply the defects of human intelligence, but to fortify the feebleness of human resolution and to recall mankind from the bypath where they turn and to bring them into that narrow path of salvation which all know but few tread.

Paul called attention to the need of preaching and, more importantly, to the result of believing. Belief is a key to salvation. We declare in the fourth Article of Faith: “We believe that the first principles of the gospel are: first, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second, repentance; third, baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and fourth, laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.” I take the view that faith and belief are synonymous because in some foreign languages, one with which I am familiar, the two terms are used in only one form.

An event in the life of Jesus supports the power and importance of belief. This event happened sometime after the Savior had conferred the power upon his apostles:

And when they were come to the multitude, there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying,

Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is lunatick, and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.

And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.

Then Jesus answered and said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him hither to me.

And Jesus rebuked the devil; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour.

Then came the disciples to Jesus apart, and said, Why could we not cast him out?

And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.

Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting. [Matthew 17:14–21]

If we are hearing what the above scripture is telling us, it is unfolding to our minds the power, the confidence, and assurance that nothing that we desire in righteousness shall be impossible unto us if we are willing to pay the price and believe. Belief requires desire, an open heart, with an attitude of acceptance of truth. It requires prayer and fasting. It requires repentance. It requires a willing spirit. It also requires a purpose. Belief cannot be met by passively saying, “I believe,” as some might be led to think. Belief requires a willing spirit. It also requires a purpose. As I have been taught and have studied the scriptures I have arrived at the following thoughts:

The spiritual entity of man is the eternal part of man’s soul. It is the offspring of our eternal God but does not have the glorified body that God possesses. Man’s spirit is subject to passing through stages in order to become as God the Father. Its first estate was in the preexistence. In this stage it was in the presence of God. It had its agency; it functioned and was

subject to certain requirements for keeping or preserving its first estate. Its second stage was to join with a mortal body. I do not think it amiss to say that the conditions and place of entrance into mortality are commensurate with what each spirit had prepared itself for in the preexistence. During mortality the spirit has the opportunity to prepare itself to become an immortal, glorified personage. However, in its mortal stage it is not in God's presence, but it has access to him through the Spirit. The mortal body is made up of senses which generally are referred to as sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, each connected to bodily organs. These senses have a purpose necessary to the development of the soul, to prove to God the keeping of his commandments. When the senses are gratified in contradiction to the commandments, the soul becomes sensual, carnal, and devilish.

The achieving of the true purpose of mortality requires a cooperation between the spirit and the body. The spirit is the disciplinarian; therefore, the spirit needs to be the stronger of the two. If the spirit becomes weak, the urges of the senses take over and sin or violation results. The weak spirit, however, can become strong through a process called worship, or adhering to all the principles as set forth in the gospel. The stronger the spirit becomes, the better the discipline of the body. As the spirit becomes strong, it prepares the soul to maintain, or keep, the second estate so that it may receive its right place in immortality.

True Believers Worship in Spirit and Truth

Jesus, in his conversation with the woman of Samaria as he rested on Jacob's well, brought into their conversation the principle of worshipping the Father, dismissing the necessity of where one should worship, but injecting the truth: "True worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a spirit; and they that worship him must worship him

in spirit and in truth" (Jon 4:23–24). In this scripture Jesus defines God as a spirit. We believe that his spirit dwells in his celestial body of flesh and bones. We also know that it has been revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith that man is a spirit which dwells in a mortal body and the two together constitute his soul.

The medium of communication is through the spirit of man with the Spirit of God. In hearing truth with a desire to know and receive the truth, the Spirit confirms our belief. It has been said that the spirit of man cannot be satisfied but with truth. There are occasions granted, for special reasons, to help mankind receive the truth when the spirit of special individuals leaves the mortal body, without causing death, to be in the presence of God.

Let us review the great spiritual event under such a circumstance which occurred in the life of Nephi. It happened after Lehi, Nephi's father, had had a vision of the tree of life, the river, and the rod of iron, and he spake the vision to his family. Nephi, having heard his words and no doubt touched by the Spirit, wrote:

After I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceeding high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot.

And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou?

And I said: I desire to behold the things which my father saw.

And the Spirit said unto me: Believest thou [note the key question] that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?

And I said: Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father.

And when I had spoken these words, the Spirit cried with a loud voice, saying: Hosanna to the Lord, the most high God; for he is God over all the

earth, yea, even above all. And blessed art thou, Nephi, because thou believest in the Son of the most high God; wherefore, thou shalt behold the things which thou hast desired.

And behold this thing shall be given unto thee for a sign, that after thou hast beheld the tree which bore the fruit which thy father tasted, thou shalt also behold a man descending out of heaven . . . and after ye have witnessed him ye shall bear record that it is the Son of God. [1 Nephi 11:1–7]

Because of the belief of Nephi there was before him a series of events which may be considered as one of the great visions recorded in scripture. He said, “For I spake unto him as a man speaketh; for I beheld that he was in the form of a man; yet nevertheless I knew that it was the Spirit of the Lord; and he spake unto me as a man speaketh with another” (1 Nephi 11). The Spirit said unto him, “Look,” and there came an array of visions giving full interpretation of Lehi’s dream and the future events of the gospel—beginning with the vision of the virgin bearing a child, the Son of God, in her arms—and it went down through the stream of time, previewing the events, which were yet to be recorded in the scriptures, of Christ’s ministry, his crucifixion and resurrection, the land of promise relating to Lehi’s posterity, their righteousness for almost four generations, their unrighteousness, and their ultimate downfall. Then they went beyond, into the latter days, into the nations of the gentiles, America’s history was foreshadowed, and Nephi saw the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the Bible and the restoration of the true church. How great is the power of belief and how sweet the results thereof! Nephi recorded this event, and we have it in its pure form as he wrote his testimony. How important it is to us that while it is almost twenty-six hundred years after the occurrence thereof, we can rejoice with him, receive his testimony, gain an enlargement of our souls, and witness the truth through our own belief.

The same applies to all scriptures as we read them. Nephi learned early in life the importance of the principles of faith. It was his guide throughout his life. He never wavered for one moment in the things he was directed to do. We too should let this principle be a motivating factor in our lives. True, some may not come to believe as readily as others, but we can all believe and increase in faith.

To understand the principle, Alma gave some sound instruction. He said, speaking of the words he had spoken to his people:

Ye cannot know of their surety at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge.

But behold if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to the experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed . . . it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding. [Alma 32:26–28]

Alma well understood the principle of motivating the individual to believe: Plant the seed, the idea, the thought within the individual, cause him to ponder and think, and germination begins to take place. As the seed grows within the soul, it causes one to act. It is an eternal truth.

Studies and Research Should Be Enriched with the Spirit of God

Now, my brothers and sisters, I have called a good deal of scripture to our attention this morning that it may bring to mind the great truths that are so basic to our lives. I often

think of the troubles that many thinking people are worried about today with the tremendous scientific progress being made and the technical discoveries springing forth daily. Yet there is great concern about man's inability to cope with the ethical and moral problems. I hope there has been progress made since Benjamin Franklin wrote in a letter to Joseph Priestley the following:

The rapid progress that true science now makes, occasions my regretting that I was born too soon. It is impossible to imagine the heights to which man may be carried in a thousand years. The power of man over matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large masses of their gravity and give them absolute levity for the sake of easy transportation. Agriculture may diminish its labor and double its produce. All disease may by sure means be prevented or cured, not excepting that of old age, and our lives lengthened at pleasure even beyond the antediluvian standard. Oh, that moral science were in so fair way of improvement that men would cease to be wolves to one another, and that human beings would at length learn what they improperly call humanity.

Benjamin Franklin would stand amazed at the scientific and technical advances that have occurred since his demise approximately two hundred years ago. Large masses are now moved by air transports with absolute levity. There are great strides in the field of health, and agricultural labor is diminished to a sense of ease, with mechanical equipment preparing the earth, planting, harvesting, and yielding a harvest many times greater than in Franklin's day.

I read only the other day that in 1790 hardly anybody died of cancer because most people died of something else, such as scarlet fever, diphtheria, tuberculosis, and other diseases. At that time the chance of living to the age of ten was one in five. How true that is I don't know. Today, however, about 99 or 100 percent of us live to age ten. As to the lengthening of our

lives at pleasure beyond the antediluvian standards, I think God may have something to say about that. I do not believe our average longevity level has yet reached the scriptural three score and ten, but the moral struggle continues. I do not know of any comparison in that area, but it seems that statistics indicate a worsening situation. The only way that situation can be corrected is through augmenting the spiritual life. This does not mean to lessen the endeavors of science. Every time I board an aircraft, enter a shopping center, hospital, or my automobile, or see a computer work, I am grateful for science, which has made the present facilities possible. The pursuit of education in all fields is essential to our society.

Theodore Roosevelt, in giving his thoughts on the function of a great university, said:

A great university . . . has two special functions. The first is to produce a small number of men who in science and literature or in art will do productive work of the first class. The second is to send out into the world a very large number of men who could never achieve and who ought not to try to achieve such a position in the field of scholarship, but whose energies are to be felt in every other form of activity, and who should go out from our doors with a balanced development of body, of mind, and above all, of character, which shall fit them to do the work both honorable and efficient.

As I have thought about that statement, I have asked myself, "Where is a better place than here to qualify such men and women?" I am certain that those who have gone from these doors during the last century, in the great majority, have leavened the areas to which they have gone, not only by doing a work both honorable and efficient, but also with maintaining character and a great measure of spirituality. The world is beset with numerous problems to solve, and with the educational programs of our institution slanted towards God's purposes, we will help solve those problems.

Whatever the problem is that needs attention, let our studies and research be enriched with the Spirit of God to lift the human family. Let us teach people the blessings of discipline by

our own example in keeping the commandments of God. Let us be worthy stewards for the Lord, I humbly pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.