

The Candle of the Lord

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I have chosen, after much thought, to speak as though your missionaries, your elders and sisters, were here in your place, and to present thoughts more fitted to them, the beginners, the inexperienced, than to you. I hope that through you, I may share with them some things I have learned about the Spirit and how we may prepare ourselves to receive it.

We do not learn spiritual things in exactly the same way we learn other things that we know, even though such things as reading, listening, and pondering may be used. I have learned that it requires a special attitude both to teach and to learn spiritual things. There are some things you know, or may come to know, that you will find quite difficult to explain to others. I am very certain that it was meant to be that way.

What Does Salt Taste Like?

I will tell you of an experience I had before I was a General Authority which affected me profoundly. I sat on a plane next to a professed atheist who pressed his disbelief in God so urgently that I bore my testimony to him. "You are wrong," I said, "there is a God. I know He lives!"

He protested, "You don't know. Nobody knows that! You can't know it!" When I would not yield, the atheist, who was an attorney, asked perhaps the ultimate question on the subject of testimony. "All right," he said in a sneering, condescending way, "you say you know. Tell me how you know."

When I attempted to answer, even though I held advanced academic degrees, I was helpless to communicate.

Sometimes in your youth, you young missionaries are embarrassed when the cynic, the skeptic, treat you with contempt because you do not have ready answers for everything. Before such ridicule, some turn away in shame. (Remember the iron rod, the spacious building, and the mocking? See 1 Ne. 8:28.)

When I used the words Spirit and witness, the atheist responded, "I don't know what you are talking about." The words prayer, discernment, and faith, were equally meaningless to him. "You see," he said, "you don't really know. If you did, you would be able to tell me how you know."

I felt, perhaps, that I had borne my testimony to him unwisely and was at a loss as to what to do. Then came the experience! Something came into my mind. And I mention here a statement of the Prophet Joseph Smith: "A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas ... and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus." (Teachings of the

Prophet Joseph Smith, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1977, p. 151.)

Such an idea came into my mind and I said to the atheist, “Let me ask if you know what salt tastes like.”

“Of course I do,” was his reply.

“When did you taste salt last?”

“I just had dinner on the plane.”

“You just think you know what salt tastes like,” I said.

He insisted, “I know what salt tastes like as well as I know anything.”

“If I gave you a cup of salt and a cup of sugar and let you taste them both, could you tell the salt from the sugar?”

“Now you are getting juvenile,” was his reply. “Of course I could tell the difference. I know what salt tastes like. It is an everyday experience—I know it as well as I know anything.”

“Then,” I said, “assuming that I have never tasted salt, explain to me just what it tastes like.”

After some thought, he ventured, “Well-I-uh, it is not sweet and it is not sour.”

“You’ve told me what it isn’t, not what it is.”

After several attempts, of course, he could not do it. He could not convey, in words alone, so ordinary an experience as tasting salt. I bore testimony to him once again and said, “I know there is a God. You ridiculed that testimony and said that if I did know, I would be able to tell you exactly how I know. My friend, spiritually speaking, I have tasted salt. I am no more able to convey to you in words how this knowledge has come than you are to tell me what salt tastes like. But I say to you again, there is a God! He does live! And just because you don’t know, don’t try to tell me that I don’t know, for I do!”

As we parted, I heard him mutter, “I don’t need your religion for a crutch! I don’t need it.”

From that experience forward, I have never been embarrassed or ashamed that I could not explain in words alone everything I know spiritually. The Apostle Paul said it this way:

“We speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” (1 Cor. 2:13-14.)

Not in Words Alone

We cannot express spiritual knowledge in words alone. We can, however, with words show another how to prepare for the reception of the Spirit. The Spirit itself will help. “For when a man speaketh by the power of the Holy Ghost the power of the Holy Ghost carrieth it unto the hearts of the children of men.” (2 Ne. 33:1.)

Then when we have a spiritual communication, we can say within ourselves, this is it! This is what is meant by those words in the revelation. Thereafter, if they are carefully chosen, words are adequate for teaching about spiritual things.

We do not have the words (even the scriptures do not have words) which perfectly describe the Spirit. The scriptures generally use the word voice, which does not exactly fit. These delicate, refined spiritual communications are not seen with our eyes, nor heard with our ears. And even though it is described as a voice, it is a voice that one feels, more than one hears.

Once I came to understand this, one verse in the Book of Mormon took on a profound meaning, and my testimony of the book increased immeasurably. It had to do with Laman and Lemuel, who rebelled against Nephi. Nephi rebuked them and said, “Ye have seen an angel, and he spake unto you; yea, ye have heard his voice from time to time; and he hath spoken unto you in a still small voice, but ye were past feeling, that ye could not feel his words.” (1 Ne. 17:45; italics added.)

The Voice of Angels

Nephi, in a great, profound sermon of instruction, explained that “angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost; wherefore, they speak the words of Christ. Wherefore, I said unto you, feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.” (2 Ne. 32:3.)

Should an angel appear and converse with you, neither you nor he would be confined to corporeal sight or sound in order to communicate. For there is that spiritual process, described by the Prophet Joseph Smith, by which pure intelligence can flow into our minds and we can know what we need to know without either the drudgery of study or the passage of time, for it is revelation.

And the Prophet said further:

“All things whatsoever God in his infinite wisdom has seen fit and proper to reveal to us, while we are dwelling in mortality, in regard to our mortal bodies, are revealed to us in the abstract ... revealed to our spirits precisely as though we had no bodies at all; and those revelations which will save our spirits will save our bodies.” (Teachings, p. 355.)

The Still, Small Voice

The voice of the Spirit is described in the scripture as being neither “loud” nor “harsh.” It is “not a voice of thunder, neither ... voice of a great tumultuous noise.” But rather, “a still voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper,” and it can “pierce even to the very soul” and “cause [the heart] to burn.” (3 Ne. 11:3; Hel. 5:30; D&C 85:6-7.) Remember, Elijah found the voice of the Lord was not in the wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire, but was a “still small voice.” (1 Kgs. 19:12.)

The Spirit does not get our attention by shouting or shaking us with a heavy hand. Rather it whispers. It caresses so gently that if we are preoccupied we may not feel it at all. (No wonder

that the Word of Wisdom was revealed to us, for how could the drunkard or the addict feel such a voice?)

Occasionally it will press just firmly enough for us to pay heed. But most of the time, if we do not heed the gentle feeling, the Spirit will withdraw and wait until we come seeking and listening and say in our manner and expression, like Samuel of ancient times, “Speak [Lord], for thy servant heareth.” (1 Sam. 3:10.)

Strong Spiritual Experiences Do Not Come Frequently

I have learned that strong, impressive spiritual experiences do not come to us very frequently. And when they do, they are generally for our own edification, instruction, or correction. Unless we are called by proper authority to do so, they do not position us to counsel or to correct others.

Don't Talk Lightly of Experiences

I have come to believe also that it is not wise to continually talk of unusual spiritual experiences. They are to be guarded with care and shared only when the Spirit itself prompts you to use them to the blessing of others. I am ever mindful of Alma's words:

“It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.” (Alma 12:9.)

I heard President Marion G. Romney once counsel mission presidents and their wives in Geneva, “I do not tell all I know; I have never told my wife all I know, for I found out that if I talked too lightly of sacred things, thereafter the Lord would not trust me.”

We are, I believe, to keep these things and ponder them in our hearts, as Luke said Mary did of the supernal events that surrounded the birth of Jesus. (See Luke 2:19.)

You Cannot Force Spiritual Things

There is something else to learn. A testimony is not thrust upon you; a testimony grows. We become taller in testimony like we grow taller in physical stature; we hardly know it happens because it comes by growth.

It is not wise to wrestle with the revelations with such insistence as to demand immediate answers or blessings to your liking. You cannot force spiritual things. Such words as compel, coerce, constrain, pressure, demand, do not describe our privileges with the Spirit. You can no more force the Spirit to respond than you can force a bean to sprout, or an egg to hatch before it's time. You can create a climate to foster growth, nourish, and protect; but you cannot force or compel: you must await the growth.

Do not be impatient to gain great spiritual knowledge. Let it grow, help it grow, but do not force it or you will open the way to be misled.

Use All Your Resources

We are expected to use the light and knowledge we already possess to work out our lives. We should not need a revelation to instruct us to be up and about our duty, for we have been told to do that already in the scriptures; nor should we expect revelation to replace the spiritual or temporal intelligence which we have already received—only to extend it. We must go about our life in an ordinary, workaday way, following the routines and rules and regulations that govern life.

Rules and regulations and commandments are valuable protection. Should we stand in need of revealed instruction to alter our course, it will be waiting along the way as we arrive at the point of need. The counsel to be “anxiously engaged” is wise counsel indeed. (See D&C 58:27.)

A Nathaniel or a Thomas

There is a wide difference in the spirituality of individuals. When Philip told Nathaniel that he had “found him, of whom Moses ... and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,” his response was, “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?”

Philip said, “Come and see.” Come he did, and he did see. What Nathaniel must have felt! For with no further convincing, he exclaimed, “Rabbi, thou art the Son of God.”

The Lord blessed him for his belief and said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.” (John 1:45-51.)

Thomas is another story; the combined testimony of ten of the Apostles could not convince him that the Lord had risen. He required tangible evidence. “Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

Eight days later the Lord appeared. “Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.” After he had seen and felt for himself, Thomas responded, “My Lord and my God.”

Then the Lord taught a profound lesson. “Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.” (John 20:25-29; italics added.)

And so the title “Doubting Thomas”; different indeed than Nathaniel, whom the Lord described as being “without guile.” (See John 1:47.) With Thomas, it was “seeing is believing”; with Nathaniel, it was the other way around—believing, then seeing “heaven open and angels of God descending and ascending upon the Son of Man.” (John 1:51.)

More Powerful Than You Know

Now, do not feel hesitant or ashamed if you do not know everything. Nephi said, “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.” (1 Ne. 11:17.)

There may be more power in your testimony than even you realize. The Lord said to the Nephites:

“Whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost, even as the Lamanites, because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion, were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not.” (3 Ne. 9:20; italics added.)

Several years ago I met one of our sons in the mission field in a distant part of the world. He had been there for a year. His first question was this: “Dad, what can I do to grow spiritually? I have tried so hard to grow spiritually and I just haven’t made any progress.”

That was his perception: to me it was otherwise. I could hardly believe the maturity, the spiritual growth that he had gained in just one year. He “knew it not” for it had come as growth, not as a startling spiritual experience.

Where to Start

It is not unusual to have a missionary say, “How can I bear testimony until I get one? How can I testify that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that the gospel is true? If I do not have such a testimony, would that not be dishonest?”

Oh, if I could teach you this one principle. A testimony is to be found in the bearing of it! Somewhere in your quest for spiritual knowledge, there is that “leap of faith,” as the philosophers call it. It is the moment when you have gone to the edge of the light and stepped into the darkness to discover that the way is lighted ahead for just a footstep or two. “The spirit of man,” is as the scripture says, indeed the candle of the Lord.” (Prov. 20:27.)

It is one thing to receive a witness from what you have read or what another has said; and that is a necessary beginning. It is quite another to have the Spirit confirm to you in your bosom that what you have testified is true. Can you not see that it will be supplied as you share it? As you give that which you have, there is a replacement, with increase!

The prophet Ether “did prophecy great and marvelous things unto the people, which they did not believe, because they saw them not.

“And now, I, Moroni, ... would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.” (Ether 12:5-6.)

To speak out is the test of your faith.

He Will Sustain You

If you will speak with humility and honest intent, the Lord will not leave you alone. The scriptures promise that. Consider this one:

“Therefore, verily I say unto you, lift up your voices unto this people; speak the thoughts that I shall [note that it is future tense] put into your hearts, and you shall not be confounded before men;

“For it shall [again note the future tense] be given you in the very hour, yea, in the very moment, what ye shall say.

“But a commandment I give unto you, that ye shall declare whatsoever thing ye declare in my name, in solemnity of heart, in the spirit of meekness, in all things.

“And I give unto you this promise, that inasmuch as ye do this the Holy Ghost shall be shed forth in bearing record unto all things whatsoever ye shall say.” (D&C 100:5-8.)

The skeptic will say that to bear testimony when you may not know you possess one is to condition yourself; that the response is manufactured. Well, one thing for sure, the skeptic will never know, for he will not meet the requirement of faith, humility, and obedience to qualify him for the visitation of the Spirit.

Can you not see that that is where testimony is hidden, protected perfectly from the insincere, from the intellectual, from the mere experimenter, the arrogant, the faithless, the proud? It will not come to them.

Bear testimony of the things that you hope are true, as an act of faith. It is something of an experiment, akin to the experiment that the prophet Alma proposed to his followers. We begin with faith—not with a perfect knowledge of things. That sermon in the thirty-second chapter of Alma is one of the greatest messages in holy writ, for it is addressed to the beginner, to the novice, to the humble seeker. And it holds a key to a witness of the truth.

The Spirit and testimony of Christ will come to you for the most part when, and remain with you only if, you share it. In that process is the very essence of the gospel.

Is not this a perfect demonstration of Christianity? You cannot find it, nor keep it, nor enlarge it unless and until you are willing to share it. It is by giving it away freely that it becomes yours.

The Spirit Will Not Always Strive with Us

Now, once you receive it, be obedient to the promptings you receive. I learned a sobering lesson as a mission president. I was also a General Authority. I had been prompted several times, for the good of the work, to release one of my counselors. Besides praying about it, I had reasoned that it was the right thing to do. But I did not do it. I feared that it would injure a man who had given long service to the Church.

The Spirit withdrew from me. I could get no promptings on who should be called as a counselor should I release him. It lasted for several weeks. My prayers seemed to be contained within the room where I offered them. I tried a number of alternate ways to arrange the work, but to no avail. Finally, I did as I was bidden to do by the Spirit. Immediately, the gift returned! Oh, the exquisite sweetness to have that gift again. You know it, for you have it, the gift of the Holy Ghost. And the brother was not injured, indeed he was greatly blessed and immediately thereafter the work prospered.

We Can Be Deceived

Be ever on guard lest you be deceived by inspiration from an unworthy source. You can be given false spiritual messages. There are counterfeit spirits just as there are counterfeit angels. (See Moro. 7:17.) Be careful lest you be deceived, for the devil may come disguised as an angel of light.

The spiritual part of us and the emotional part of us are so closely linked that it is possible to mistake an emotional impulse for something spiritual. We occasionally find people who receive what they assume to be spiritual promptings from God, when those promptings are either centered in the emotions or are from the adversary.

Avoid like a plague those who claim that some great spiritual experience authorizes them to challenge the constituted priesthood authority in the Church. Do not be unsettled if you cannot explain every insinuation of the apostate or every challenge from the enemies who attack the Lord's church. And we now face a tidal wave of that. In due time you will be able to confound the wicked and inspire the honest in heart.

The Benefits of a Mission

Now, as a missionary, you will mature, develop a confidence, learn to speak up, to organize, to set goals. You will learn about people and places, you will learn to learn, and many other things. These are lasting benefits that come as something of a reward for your dedicated service.

But these things do not compare with the most lasting reward. The choicest pearl, the one of great price, is to learn at an early age how one is guided by the Spirit of the Lord—a supernal gift. Indeed, it is a guide and a protection.

“The Spirit shall be given unto you by the prayer of faith; and if ye receive not the Spirit, ye shall not teach.” (D&C 42:14.)

You Can Do the Lord's Work

There is great power in this work, spiritual power. The ordinary member of the Church, like you, having received the gift of the Holy Ghost by confirmation, can do the work of the Lord.

Years ago a friend, who long since is gone, told this experience. He was seventeen-years-old and with his companion stopped at a cottage in the southern states. It was his first day in the mission field and was his first door. A gray-haired woman stood inside the screen and asked what they wanted. His companion nudged him to proceed. Frightened and somewhat tongue-tied, he finally blurted out, “As man is God once was, and as God is man may become.”

Strangely enough, she was interested and asked where he got that. He answered, “It's in the Bible.” She left the door for a moment, returned with her Bible. Commenting that she was a minister of a congregation, she handed it to him and said, “Here, show me.”

He took the Bible and nervously thumbed back and forth through it. Finally he handed it back saying, “Here, I can’t find it. I’m not even sure that it’s in there, and even if it is, I couldn’t find it. I’m just a poor farm boy from out in Cache Valley in Utah. I haven’t had much training. But I come from a family where we live the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it’s done so much for our family that I’ve accepted a call to come on a mission for two years, at my own expense, to tell people how I feel about it.”

After half a century, he could not hold back the tears as he told me how she pushed open the door and said, “Come in, my boy, I’d like to hear what you have to say.”

There is great power in this work, and the ordinary member of the Church, sustained by the Spirit, can do the work of the Lord.

There is so much more to say. I could speak of prayer, of fasting, of priesthood and authority, of worthiness—all essential to revelation. When they are understood, it all fits together—perfectly. But some things one must learn individually, and alone, taught by the Spirit.

Nephi interrupted that great sermon on the Holy Ghost and on angels saying, “I ... cannot say more; the Spirit stoppeth mine utterance.” (2 Ne. 32:7.) I have done the best I could with the words I have. Perchance the Spirit has opened the veil a little or confirmed to you a sacred principle of revelation, of spiritual communication.

I know by experience too sacred to touch upon that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, that the Gift of the Holy Ghost conferred upon us at our confirmation is a supernal gift.

The Book of Mormon is true!

This is the Lord’s Church! Jesus is the Christ! There presides over us a prophet of God! The day of miracles has not ceased, neither have angels ceased to appear and minister unto man! The spiritual gifts are with the Church. Choice among them is the gift of the Holy Ghost!

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