

Receiving and Recognizing the Holy Ghost

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I am grateful and humbled by this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to speak to you today. I still remember with fondness the day in 1971 when my friend and I loaded up his Volkswagen Bug and left Concord, California, for Provo, Utah, to begin our studies at Brigham Young University. Ever since we came around the Point of the Mountain and first saw the large block Y on the mountainside, I have had an abiding love of BYU. Brigham Young University is such a unique institution. I have a research lab in the Widtsoe Building and occasionally need to check on experiments over the weekend. One Sunday I brought my young son, Caleb, with me. We ended up parking pretty far away, because so many students were parked on campus for their Sunday meetings. I explained to Caleb that, on Sunday, many of the rooms on campus are used for church. This little seven-year-old boy made the following astute observation: “So, BYU is a school, it’s where you work, and it’s a church.” Yes, BYU is all of those things.

I pray that the Spirit of the Holy Ghost will be with me and with you during our time together. I want to talk about receiving and recognizing the Holy Ghost. I will draw on my background in endocrinology to provide analogies that illustrate many of the points I want to

make. If you suffer from “biology anxiety,” let me assure you that I will make the analogies as simple as possible so as not to create undue stress. I also want to start with the disclaimer that when it comes to receiving and recognizing the Spirit, I still have many things to learn myself.

Endocrinology is the study of hormones. Hormones are chemical mediators that are delivered to the blood by endocrine glands. These hormones are then carried by the blood to distant cells, where they exert their effects. For example, growth hormone is secreted into the blood by the pituitary gland, a tiny gland at the base of your brain, and travels to distant sites, where it helps bring about growth during our developing years. Even though blood flows to virtually every cell in the body, not every cell is able to respond to a particular hormone. Only cells that have a receptor specific for the hormone will respond. A receptor is a protein on the surface of the cell that can bind to the hormone much like a key fits into a lock. Once the hormone binds to the receptor, a cascade of events is activated that leads to

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the hormone action in the target cell. However, even though the blood may be filled with a certain hormone, many cells will be unaffected by that hormone because they do not have the right receptor. The hormone passes right by these cells without exerting any effect. In a like manner, do the promptings of the Holy Ghost ever pass us by without being received?

Following baptism we were confirmed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and were given the gift of the Holy Ghost. The Melchizedek Priesthood holder who pronounced our confirmation used these well-known words: “Receive the Holy Ghost.” This exhortation makes it clear that we must do the receiving if we want to benefit from the ministration of the Holy Ghost. Much like a hormone cannot influence a cell without the appropriate receptor, the Holy Ghost cannot guide us, comfort us, and testify to us if we don’t develop our own “spiritual receptors.”

I love the story of young Samuel in the Old Testament that depicts the early stages of his acquiring spiritual receptors. You may recall that Hannah was unable to have children and made a vow that if Heavenly Father would bless her with a son, she would give him to the Lord all the days of his life. Hannah did have a son, and true to her promise she delivered him to Eli, the high priest, at the tabernacle in Shiloh. One night as this young prophet-to-be lay down to sleep, he heard a voice call his name. Thinking that it was Eli who had called him, Samuel ran to Eli’s room to ask what he wanted. Eli replied that he hadn’t called Samuel and told him to go back to bed. The author of the Book of Samuel explained, “Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him” (1 Samuel 3:7).

A second time Samuel heard a voice call his name, a second time he ran to Eli, and a second time he was told to go back to bed. When Samuel came to Eli a third time, Eli finally caught on that it was the Lord who was calling

and told Samuel to go back to his room and when he heard the voice again to say, “Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3:9). How many times have we missed a prompting from the Spirit because our spiritual receptors were still developing? Like Samuel, we too require experience and sometimes mentoring to develop our abilities to receive the Holy Ghost.

Our understanding of endocrinology was slowed for many years because we didn’t have a way to measure blood levels of these chemical messengers. The problem is that the concentration of hormones in the blood is very low. It wasn’t until 1977 that Rosalyn Yalow received the Nobel Prize for her discovery of a method to assay hormones in the blood. If the concentration of hormones in the blood is so low, how is it that target cells can respond at all? The answer is that their receptors have what we call “high affinity” for the hormones that they bind. High-affinity binding means that there are strong intermolecular forces that readily bring the hormone and receptor together. What about spiritual receptors? Do they need high affinity?

While the Holy Ghost can sometimes communicate in strong, unmistakable language, more often He communicates through quiet promptings. It was Elijah the prophet who found this out while on a mountaintop:

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake:

And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.
[1 Kings 19:11–12]

Yes, because the Holy Ghost whispers instead of shouting, our spiritual receptors must also have high affinity. Elder David A.

Bednar gave some important counsel about how we can keep ourselves ready and worthy to receive the Holy Ghost. He said:

The Spirit of the Lord can be our guide and will bless us with direction, instruction, and spiritual protection during our mortal journey. We invite the Holy Ghost into our lives through meaningful personal and family prayer, feasting upon the words of Christ, diligent and exacting obedience, faithfulness and honoring of covenants, and through virtue, humility, and service. And we steadfastly should avoid things that are immodest, coarse, crude, sinful, or evil that cause us to withdraw ourselves from the Holy Ghost. [“That We May Always Have His Spirit to Be with Us,” Ensign, May 2006, 31]

By doing the good things mentioned by Elder Bednar and by avoiding the bad, we can ensure that our spiritual receptors have high affinity. In some circumstances we may need our spiritual receptors to have even higher affinity. At those times we can increase our ability to receive the Spirit by fasting, seeking a blessing, attending the temple, or finding a private place where we can pour out our heart to Heavenly Father.

Sometimes, even when we are righteous and eligible to be guided by the Holy Ghost, we may miss His promptings and leave them unrecognized. This may happen, in part, because of the quiet nature of the promptings. It might also be because we lack experience in recognizing the whisperings. Or perhaps we lack confidence in our ability to be guided by the Spirit. We may wonder, Did that prompting come from the Holy Ghost—or did we make it up? How can we better recognize the Spirit in our life?

I am now going to stretch this analogy about hormone receptors about as far as possible. As I already mentioned, only certain parts of the body will respond to a given hormone depending on which cells have the appropriate hormone receptor. What parts of our body have

spiritual receptors? I want to mention two in particular: the brain—or mind—and the heart.

In the early days of the Church, Oliver Cowdery was personally tutored by the Lord about recognizing the Spirit. We find those revelations in sections 6, 8, and 9 of the Doctrine and Covenants.

In section 6 we learn that Oliver had already received a divine manifestation of the truth of Joseph’s testimony about the plates but was seeking further assurance from the Lord. In verses 22 and 23, the Lord gave His answer:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things.

Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?

This answer helped Oliver and helps us to understand that sometimes the Spirit is received in our mind in the form of peaceful thoughts. This idea was reiterated in section 8 when the Lord granted Oliver’s request to help with the translating of the plates. In verse 2 the Lord said:

Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

Not only does the Spirit speak to us in our mind in the form of thoughts, He also speaks to us in our heart in the form of feelings. If we seek to better recognize the promptings of the Spirit, we should pay more attention to our thoughts and feelings. But usually it is not our random thoughts and feelings that are important. Oliver learned another important lesson when he tried to translate the plates but failed. In section 9, verses 7–9, the Lord told him:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it 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.

It is usually when we are working on our part to understand a principle, to receive an answer to a prayer, to make a decision, or to choose a course of action, and so forth, that those thoughts come to our mind or feelings come to our heart from the Spirit.

One of my earliest recollections of a personal experience with recognizing the Spirit came when I was a missionary in Korea. I had the responsibility to present a lesson about something to the missionaries at an upcoming zone conference. I felt strongly the desire to teach something that would motivate, uplift, and help the missionaries in our zone. I remember the weight I felt on my shoulders as I pondered, prayed, and prepared for that lesson. It wasn't a pleasant weight. It was a heavy weight that burdened me as I struggled to find the right idea for the lesson. Then one day I had a burst of inspiration. Thoughts came into my mind and almost instantly I knew what to teach. I knew it was right because the heavy burden that had weighed me down was lifted. Instead, I felt exhilarated. I guess you could say I felt peace. I remember thinking, "This must be what it feels like to be prompted by the Holy Ghost."

In subsequent personal experiences with the Spirit I have noticed something. The peace that comes from the Spirit is often more recognizable when it comes in juxtaposition to a period of struggle and uncertainty. Perhaps the work and struggle on our part to study and ponder before receiving an answer is neces-

sary because it makes the difference between our feelings of uncertainty and the feelings of peace offered by the Spirit distinct enough to be recognizable.

Another personal example of this happens in my calling as a high counselor. I am assigned most months to speak in a sacrament meeting. The stake president assigns a topic, usually an address from general conference, and we are expected to seek the guidance of the Spirit in preparing our talks. I have noticed as I read the conference address, ponder its significance, and consider the ward members to whom I will be speaking that the Spirit is always there to guide my preparation. Recently we were assigned to use Elder Donald L. Hallstrom's talk from April conference, "Turn to the Lord." One Saturday I was out for a morning run and noticed a large stand of daffodils in full bloom. I noticed how most of the flower heads were facing the same direction and suddenly remembered (and I believe this was a prompting from the Holy Ghost) about a principle of plant physiology that I had learned years ago called heliotropism. Heliotropism is the phenomenon whereby some plants and flowers turn toward the sun—S-U-N. As the sun moves across the sky, the plants gradually turn so that they are always facing it. I was able to use analogies of heliotropism in my talk to speak about "turning toward the Son—S-O-N."

I give one last personal example of how the whisperings of the Spirit can come in the form of thoughts. Report card day for our oldest son, Ben, was never that great for him or for me. Though he was clearly smart and talented, his grades in math and science were never that good. This was difficult for me to understand because I had always loved math and science and had done well in those areas. It would be safe to say that more than once the Spirit was driven from our home because of contention over grades. One day when Ben was high-school age, I was pondering this issue of his grades and our contention when a

thought came to me as clear as if it had been a voice: “You should be encouraging Ben in his strengths and worrying less about his weaknesses.” As I mentioned, Ben is extremely talented and creative. We decided to encourage him to take a photography class that he was interested in, art classes, and other classes that would allow him to show his strengths. He did well in those classes, and his grades got better. Interestingly, his grades in math and science also got better. Ben eventually made his way to BYU and graduated with a bachelor of fine arts degree in animation. He currently works at Pixar Animation Studio in Emeryville, California.

At other times, I have been able to recognize the Spirit in the form of scriptural phrases brought to my remembrance. Jesus taught His Apostles:

The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you. [John 14:26]

One time when I was a bishop, I was struggling with knowing whom to recommend to the stake president as a new elders quorum president. I had narrowed the list to two very capable brethren. As I sat in the temple pondering this issue, the words of Doctrine and Covenants 121:41 came to my mind:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.

I immediately knew which brother to recommend, because one was the epitome of the virtues mentioned in that verse.

Another time years ago I was feeling some personal despair after my wife, Kathy, was diagnosed with breast cancer at age 44. You can imagine the uncertainty I felt as I consid-

ered the possibility of losing Kathy and what that would mean for me and for our seven children, who ranged in age from 21 to two years. I remember one day in sacrament meeting when I was thinking about this, the words “I, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days” (D&C 24:8) came to my mind. I didn’t even remember chapter and verse, but I knew Heavenly Father was sending me the comfort I needed by reminding me of a scripture passage. I later found the scripture in Doctrine and Covenants, section 24. I am so grateful for that comfort and that Kathy survived.

These two experiences illustrate the importance of regular scripture reading and study in opening up avenues for the Holy Ghost to commune with us in ways that we can recognize. Elder Robert D. Hales elaborated on this notion when he said:

*What a glorious blessing! For when we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we search the scriptures; for His words are spoken through His prophets. He will then teach us as we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. [“Holy Scriptures: The Power of God unto Our Salvation,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 26]*

Sometimes spiritual promptings are given to us even when we are not seeking them. According to Elder Dallin H. Oaks, these promptings are given to *impel* us to some action that we are not even considering. He wrote, “This type of revelation is less common than other types, but its rarity makes it all the more significant” (*The Lord’s Way* [Salt Lake City, Deseret Book Company, 1991], 30).

Kathy is a graduate from BYU’s College of Nursing and is a registered nurse. Years ago our daughter Sarah was a little under the weather and had a bit of a fever. There was really nothing to cause more than usual concern. But as Kathy walked past our bookshelf and saw her nursing books, she had a distinct thought, “I ought to read up on what to do if

someone has a fever seizure.” Thankfully, she responded to the prompting and pulled out the book and reviewed the proper care for fever seizures. Not too long after Kathy finished the review, Sarah’s fever spiked and she started having seizures. Kathy was able to render the appropriate care until we could get Sarah to the hospital. Joseph Smith said:

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. [Teachings, 151]

Now back to hormone receptors. Sometimes hormone receptors do not function properly, and disease results. Type 2 diabetes is a good example of this sort of problem. In this disorder the receptor for the hormone, insulin, fails to carry out its normal function. Without this normal effect of insulin, blood glucose concentrations get very high and cause problems. This is known as a hormone receptor insensitivity disease. In a similar way, if our spiritual receptors fail to function properly, spiritual disease can result. Remember the description in the Book of Mormon of Laman and Lemuel who were “past feeling” and “could not feel” the word of the Lord? (1 Nephi 17:45)

How can we lose the ability to receive the Spirit in our lives? Look at Laman and Lemuel. We learn from Nephi’s account that they were prideful (see 1 Nephi 2:11) and unbelieving (see 1 Nephi 2:13). They were unwilling to follow the commands of the Lord (see 1 Nephi 3:5). They physically and verbally abused their younger brothers (see 1 Nephi 3:28). They were rebellious (see 1 Nephi 7:6). They also murmured a lot. As a result, “they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them” (1 Nephi 2:12). In essence, they had a spiritual receptor insensitivity disease.

People with Type 2 diabetes can benefit from several treatments that improve the function of insulin receptors. For example, exercise and

diet help. There are also some medications that make insulin receptors work better.

What treatment is available for those with spiritual receptor insensitivity? Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught that a dose of repentance could help. He said:

I invite you to ponder individually in a humble and prayerful manner and ask yourself: “Do I have the Spirit in my life? Am I happy? Am I doing anything in my life that is offensive to the Spirit and preventing the Holy Ghost from being my constant companion?” Have the courage to repent, if needed, and again enjoy the companionship of the Holy Ghost. [“The Unspeakable Gift,” Ensign, May 2003, 28]

As we repent and partake of the sacrament each week, we not only renew our baptismal covenants to be obedient and always remember the Savior, but Heavenly Father also renews His promise that we will always have His Spirit to be with us. How can we ever pass up this opportunity to weekly attend sacrament meeting and weekly receive this great promise?

Brothers and sisters, Heavenly Father did not send us to this earth without also sending the Holy Ghost to guide and protect us. One of the most important skills we must learn in this life is to receive and recognize the quiet whisperings of the Spirit. It is so crucial that our spiritual receptors have high affinity. We ensure this high affinity by being obedient, humble, and Christlike and by avoiding situations and practices that dull our senses. In order to better recognize the Spirit, we should pay more attention to our thoughts and feelings and make sure that we read the scriptures regularly. We should also attend our sacrament meetings and regularly partake of the sacrament. If we find ourselves “past feeling” because our spiritual receptors are insensitive, we need to repent and rely on the power of Christ’s Atonement to restore us to a condition

in which we can again receive those promptings. I am amazed at how quickly the Spirit returns when I sincerely repent. May God bless

us to continually improve our ability to receive and recognize the Holy Ghost, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.