

The Importance of Asking Questions

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I am grateful for but also somewhat intimidated by this assignment to be with you today. The mission of Brigham Young University is unique in all the world, and I have great admiration and respect for those who really understand this mission and are absolutely committed to it. Although all members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are motivated to learn, gain knowledge, and increase in wisdom and intelligence, those who have the privilege of being associated with this remarkable institution and its sister schools are uniquely positioned and greatly blessed to acquire the attributes and understandings that lead to the advancement of “the glory of God” (D&C 93:36).

One of the key ways that we learn—not only here at BYU but throughout life—is by asking questions. I am sure that your parents can attest to the fact that you have been asking questions—some of them difficult to answer—since your first capacity to utter coherent sentences. Your questions have continued, as they should, and even your professors learn about you by asking you questions. It is about the general notion of questions that I would like to focus my comments and counsel today.

Sir John Lubbock was an English banker, statesman, naturalist, and prolific writer born

in 1834. In an essay entitled “National Education” he made a statement that has particular relevance for us in this special university environment:

There are three great questions which in life we have over and over again to answer. Is it right or wrong? Is it true or false? Is it beautiful or ugly? Our education ought to help us to answer these questions. [Sir John Lubbock, *The Use of Life* (1894; reprint, Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 102–3]

Had Sir John Lubbock known, perhaps he might have best said, “Our education at BYU *especially* ought to help us answer these questions.”

Some seem to believe that faith and questions are antithetical. Such could not be further from the truth. The Restoration itself was unfolded by the proper and necessary melding of both. The Prophet Joseph

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Smith had both faith and questions. Indeed, the passage of scripture that led Joseph to the Sacred Grove experience includes both a question and the promise of an answer based on the asker's faith.

I marvel each time I consider the wonderful way in which the Prophet Joseph Smith used proper questions not only to enhance his knowledge but also to enlarge his faith. You know of his First Vision experience. Those of you who have served as missionaries have recounted it many, many times. Even after these many years since I was a young missionary, I am moved by rereading his history frequently and commend it to you for your regular reexamination.

In his history Joseph Smith described his family circumstances and the religious environment in which he grew up as a young boy. He was exposed to significant religious fervor and difference of opinion among the various denominations, all proclaiming to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to have the truth. Let me pick up his account:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?
[Joseph Smith—History 1:10]

I would submit to you that these three questions constitute much more than Joseph's passive curiosity. They allowed him to focus on resolving his own personal dilemma and also prepared him to have that experience so critical to the lives of all of us. Let me return to Joseph's history:

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all

men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. [JS—H 1:11; emphasis in original]

While the Prophet Joseph Smith did not go on to share the following verses in his formal history, we should remember that they are vital components in receiving the answers to the questions that Joseph posed as well the ones we might ask ourselves. Let me continue with the narrative of James:

But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord.

A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. [James 1:6–8]

The operative phrase "but let him ask in faith" gives a basic secret. Faith without wavering is necessary for receiving the answers we desire. Although faith is absolutely essential in obtaining answers to the questions we ask through prayer, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and the Father's plan is also helpful in obtaining the answers to other important questions that we would ask.

Before we leave the Prophet Joseph Smith's history, it is instructive to consider other queries posed by the young prophet during these formative years of the restoration of the gospel. One of the fundamental truths about asking proper questions in faith and in the proper way is that the answer received may not be that which was expected or hoped for, and sometimes is even an answer to a more important or fundamental question than we had thought to ask. Again quoting from the experience of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

My object in going to inquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner, therefore, did I get possession of myself, so as to be able

to speak, than I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right (for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong)—and which I should join. [JS—H 1:18]

Note the pointed answer that he received: “I was answered that I must join none of them” (verse 19), followed by the explanation known to all of us in that same verse. After this clarification, Joseph reported:

He again forbade me to join with any of them; and many other things did he say unto me, which I cannot write at this time. . . . It seems as though the adversary was aware, at a very early period of my life, that I was destined to prove a disturber and an annoyer of his kingdom; else why should the powers of darkness combine against me? Why the opposition and persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy? [JS—H 1:20]

Joseph Smith, though very young, reflexively understood another important principle related to proper questions. I refer to the questions that he asked himself as he tried to understand the answers he had received from the Father and the Son. Let us again return to Joseph’s words:

It caused me serious reflection then, and often has since, how very strange it was that an obscure boy, of a little over fourteen years of age, and one, too, who was doomed to the necessity of obtaining a scanty maintenance by his daily labor, should be thought a character of sufficient importance to attract the attention of the great ones of the most popular sects of the day, and in a manner to create in them a spirit of the most bitter persecution and reviling. But strange or not, so it was, and it was often the cause of great sorrow to myself. . . .

So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying

that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation. [JS—H 1:23, 25]

These are good questions. Joseph Smith then mentions something of the challenges that were consistent in his life for the next period of years and again reports an experience derived from his proper questioning:

On the evening of the above-mentioned twenty-first of September, after I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him; for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation, as I previously had one. [JS—H 1:29]

We then know of the events with the angel Moroni that occupied that entire night as well as the next day, and the tremendous import they had—not only for Joseph Smith but for all of us with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Speaking of the translation of the Book of Mormon, we recognize that Joseph’s capacity to ask and his understanding of the importance of proper questions was honed and developed during this period of time. Let me draw your attention to his words again:

We [meaning Joseph and Oliver Cowdery] still continued the work of translation, when, in the ensuing month (May, 1829), we on a certain

day went into the woods to pray and inquire of the Lord respecting baptism for the remission of sins, that we found mentioned in the translation of the plates. While we were thus employed, praying and calling upon the Lord, a messenger from heaven descended in a cloud of light, and having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us. [JS—H 1:68]

We know that this is when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood, given instruction as to how baptism would properly be performed and how they should be baptized, and also taught and given promises about other great and significant events that were about to transpire in their lives and in the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We could spend much more time than we have allotted to us today in giving other examples where the Prophet Joseph Smith asked the appropriate questions and received the doctrinal insights and understandings that are so precious to us in our day. One need only peruse the Doctrine and Covenants and recognize that, in fact, virtually all of these revelations—both to individuals and to the Church generally—came in response to carefully reasoned and faith-laden supplications to our Father in Heaven. But even with the importance of these good questions, we must remember, as Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “There are more good answers than we have good questions” (*All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979], 9).

Do questions that do not have this same general impact or doctrinal significance still have a place in our lives? I hope that the answer is an obvious yes. Ours is a gospel of questions, and our lives in all of their spheres require thoughtful and appropriate inquiry if we are going to progress. The question is not whether we should ask questions but rather, What are the questions we should be asking?

My experience in science and medicine leads me to believe that real progress is almost always the result of asking the right questions.

If important answers to questions are to be forthcoming from our striving, then the proper questions need to be asked. Even when correct answers or valuable insights are available, they do not usually occur when wrong questions or no questions are asked. Many scientists can relate experiences when they or others made important discoveries seemingly by serendipity. When this was the case, they still concur that the welcome knowledge came as the result of carefully crafted inquiry even if the resulting answer was not to the question asked.

When we discount questions that are silly, inappropriate, tasteless, or nonsensical, we still have to acknowledge that all questions that could be construed as proper in at least some settings are not equally salient. Some questions have great proximate significance without having any lasting importance, such as: Where will I find a place to park before my next class? or What should we have for lunch? or What will I wear to the important party this coming weekend? One of the mistakes that may be made by those who pride themselves on their inquiring minds is to focus on “small questions” to the exclusion of the “great ones.” Some get so caught up in minute details that they may miss out on the big picture. Though there may be nothing wrong with many questions in themselves, it is also true that focusing on the trivial can lead us away from the significant.

I don’t know what kind of shoes the Prophet Joseph Smith wore, or even if he wore shoes when he made his trip to the Sacred Grove. I suppose that there might be historians or cultural anthropologists or even shoemakers who might be interested in that question. There is nothing wrong with asking that question, and it might even lead to a publication in a learned journal if the answer is found. What is really important, however, is that Joseph went to the grove and had his sacred experience that literally changed the world.

Even when we are trying to think clearly and ask careful questions, it is easy to become

distracted. It may be tempting sometimes to look for the question to ask that seems controversial or sensational or perhaps that no one has previously thought to pose. Likewise it is sometimes alluring to ask a question or questions that will consciously deflect one from asking the right or important or central question when it is known or suspected that the critical answer might be too hard or too compelling. It is also possible to frame a question that is so oblique or complicated—not to mention nonsensical—to make an answer virtually impossible. I remember the query of the old-time comedian who liked to ask: “What is the difference between a duck?” To puzzled listeners he would then give the answer: “Its leg is both the same.” If we are not careful, our questions and answers may not be much better.

If we can accept that questions are not only acceptable but are also essential, then we can move to determining what are ultimately the best or most vitally important questions. These would be those that deal with central or core truths or issues. There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting to know the answer to a question just because it exists, but it is almost always more productive to have a clear purpose in mind or problem to solve when asking a question.

For example, some geneticists may be willing to work for a long time on identifying the chemical sequence of a particular gene just because it is there. On the other hand, that search becomes much more compelling for most when it is known that a particular gene has a significant role in a specific characteristic, problem, or disease. Knowing chemical formulas or structures of compounds or substances will contribute to the total body of knowledge, but these facts do not usually help much in fighting cancer if one spends all his time on sequencing genes that have to do with something else. It isn't that the other thing isn't interesting or even vital, but it likely will not lead to understanding what happens in the

cells and organs that leads to cancer and eventually death, unless that other phenomenon is in some way linked to the cancer gene or mechanism. Likewise, studying a map of Scotland may be fascinating and even educational, but it will not be helpful if you are traveling to China.

Our scientific colleagues here on campus will tell us that usually they have the most success in advancing or gaining more knowledge by building on the work or the truths that have already been discovered by others. Today's geneticists who are unraveling the secrets of the genes and their role in disease do not have to duplicate the foundational genetic experiments of many years ago performed by Mendel and others, or the theoretical modeling of DNA structure suggested by Watson and Crick. Rather, they gratefully consider the work, theories, and discoveries of those who have gone before, then study them and come to know of their significance and limitations for themselves. Building on the contributions of others, they move on to solve new problems and focus on those of most relevance for our own time.

We can also benefit from those who have gone before in obtaining answers to our important questions. We don't need to have a personal First Vision experience because Joseph Smith already had it, and we have his account and his testimony, together with the confirming witness of the Holy Ghost and of countless others. We don't need to visit with Moroni and learn what he taught Joseph Smith because we have the scriptural record that has been provided. None of us attended the Sermon on the Mount in the Holy Land, but we didn't need to be there because we have the New Testament account available to us, together with the special insights added in 3 Nephi and, most important, the tools and mechanisms to know for ourselves that those teachings are true.

We are not afraid of any questions. That assertion does not mean that the answers to all

of them are available or that those that are, are of equal value. In fact, faith is such a profound principle and so necessary for us to accomplish all that we must do that details of interest or importance will always be kept in the realm of faith. Think of the responses of Book of Mormon prophets to either their own questions or questions posed to them. Do you remember honest Nephi's response when asked the question "Knowest thou the condescension of God?" He answered, "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:16–17).

Not only do we acknowledge to ourselves and to the Lord when we don't know the answers to questions that are posed, but we need to admit we don't know to others when appropriate. In teaching his son Helaman, Alma made this clear as they discussed some important doctrinal points: "Now these mysteries are not yet fully made known unto me; therefore I shall forbear" (Alma 37:11).

In our humility about what we don't know, however, we must never equivocate about the inescapable data that have been made available to each of us as the basis for our faith. Of the many examples that we might advance, perhaps the most compelling is the Book of Mormon itself. Whatever is thought of its origin, the fact is that we have it. We can lift it, we can read it, we can test it and examine it. If we are honest, we must reach definite conclusions about it. In brief, it is either true or it is the product of a fraud. Either it is the word of God or it is an imposter of the foulest rank. It is neither intellectually honest nor rationally plausible that its contents would be found to be good and its testimonies true and yet its origins fraudulent. Whatever others may think of the the explanation of the origins of the Book of Mormon as given by Joseph Smith, think carefully of the probabilities of the truth of any of the alternate explanations that have been advanced. Remember, we have had more than 170 years of multiple theories advanced by the Prophet's

detractors, and each alternative has been discredited by careful and honest evaluators. You, of course, will want to examine this issue carefully yourself—if you haven't already done so. But you have the advantage of all the work that has gone before and all of the questions that have been asked by others. There will always be, however, those who will criticize the scholarship of others who disagree as being uncritical in their thinking but will then ask that you accept as intuitively obvious their own spurious conclusions. Be sure you are always asking the right questions.

Whenever you are attempting to find the answer to a question of great importance, you should, when possible, go to the primary source. For example, you should feel free to read any commentaries about the Book of Mormon that you wish, but be sure that you spend adequate time reading the Book of Mormon itself directly and then ask the important question it asks you:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things. [Moroni 10:4–5]

This is a good place to start asking important questions because when you have the answer that the Book of Mormon is true, then of necessity some other important things are true. For example, since the Book of Mormon is true, Joseph Smith is then very clearly a prophet of God. Because Joseph is a prophet, then his other revelations are true. Because Joseph saw the Father and Jesus Christ, then many of our other questions about their nature and roles are answered. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the true church, and Joseph's successors in the presidency are also prophets of God. The Book of Mormon won't

tell you much about the shoes that any of the great ones in their dispensation wore or the color of their hair—if they had any. It only tells you of the things that are most important and really true. Knowing the answer to the question of its truthfulness provides answers also to other subsidiary questions.

There will always still be questions we have, of course, and things we don't understand fully—and even some things we may not like very much. We will still have some fundamental things we will need to accept on faith. Even some of the details of the Book of Mormon itself will always be in this realm. Though we continue to learn more about why it is increasingly impossible that one such as Joseph Smith could have written this scripture on his own and why the alternative explanations advanced for the book's origins are not credible, it is highly likely that the Lord will insist that this great witness of His hand in the affairs of His children will need to remain in the realm of faith so that we can demonstrate our faithfulness.

With all of the good questions that might be asked, which are the most significant? When we are considering proximate things like what to eat or wear, the answers, for good reason, may change often. When we ask the questions of ultimate significance like those pertaining to doctrine, however, the answers are stable and unchanging. I refer in this sense to questions more important even than what should be my major or my career. The world continues to soften its position on moral laws, but the seventh commandment and its associated principles will always stand, even if cures for AIDS and all venereal diseases were to become readily available. This is true of all the fundamental doctrines and the questions of most importance to you now and also through the eternities. Some questions and answers will be unique to you alone, and some are common to everyone. Let me refer

to the scriptures for examples that apply to all of us.

Amulek was a wonderful, exemplary missionary and gospel teacher in his later life, but in his younger years this was not so. By his own admission, early in his life his priorities may not have been where they should have been. To his great credit, however, with some very significant help from Alma, he became what God expected him to become (see Alma 8 and 10). Coming from the perspective of his own trials and experiences, as well as being tutored by the Holy Ghost, he was able to understand “that the great question” in the minds of the people he was teaching was “whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (Alma 34:5). Jesus Himself got to this core question when He asked the Pharisees, “What think ye of Christ?” (Matthew 22:42).

Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul, had his dramatic experience on the road to Damascus. Prior to that time, Saul, although apparently completely committed to the things that he believed, may not have asked the proper questions. It took a rather dramatic intervention to command his attention. Let me refer to the account in Acts 9:

And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven:

And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? [Note again the role of questions in the way Jesus teaches.]

And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.

And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. [Acts 9:3–6]

Saul asked two very good questions in response to the inquiry of the Lord. In a sense his first question—“Who art thou, Lord?”—is the same question described by Amulek as “the great question.” Saul’s second query was the appropriate response to the Savior—who did not have to ask Saul directly, as He had the Pharisees, “What think ye of Christ?” Saul asked, “What wilt thou have me to do?” This was the immediate answer of one prepared “before the foundation of the world.” Apparently, in an instant, an understanding or memory became very clear to Saul of the central truth described by the Prophet Joseph Smith:

The fundamental principles of our religion are the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, concerning Jesus Christ, that He died, was buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven; and all other things which pertain to our religion are only appendages to it. [Teachings, 121]

We know with great appreciation what Paul became and did when his questions were answered. We might likewise consider that all of our questions—beyond the great one and its associated queries surrounding the Savior: the plan of salvation and our fundamental responsibilities in the kingdom of God—should be only appendages to these central truths. Some of these secondary or appendage questions might be very important to us for perfectly good reasons but might also not have much significance for others or even the Lord. The phrase “it mattereth not” is found more than once in both the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. We need to be prepared when that is the answer to our petitions to the Lord and not be deflected from our responsibility to move forward and act on the answers we have already received.

Although the answer to some of our questions may be “it mattereth not,” sometimes not only the answers but the questions themselves are pivotal and matter a great deal. It

is vital for scientists to ask the right questions, but it is also important for us to do the same in all phases of our lives. A great temptation for even faithful Latter-day Saints is to occasionally consider the self-posed proposition that since I am unique or find myself in special extenuating circumstances, then a particular commandment or standard (meaning a previous answer from the Lord) does not really apply in my case—at least at this time. Over the years I have heard this rationalization often from those in various kinds of financial difficulty with respect to their tithes and offerings, but it is also a consideration for some with issues of honesty, the moral code, the Word of Wisdom, and so forth. The questions we ask ourselves in these circumstances are among the most important we will ever pose to anyone.

Asking how I may avoid or get around this or that commandment or principle is the wrong question. The much more appropriate question would be something like this: “I find myself in a difficult situation. Why has the Lord (or the Brethren or my parents or the university administration) given the counsel that has been given in these circumstances?”

Saul’s response, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” is not only the safe question, it is the right one. As appropriate as this question is, however, it is not always easy to ask. In fact, the best answers often come when our challenges are the greatest.

Think of the tremendous suffering of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his associates in Liberty Jail during the cold, miserable winter of 1838–1839. Try to imagine the pathos of the suffering prophet and his pleas and almost desperate questions to the Lord:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?
[D&C 121:1–3]

Out of this almost unthinkable misery, the Lord comforted Joseph both generally and with great specificity in answering his questions, including some that he didn't ask. The Lord was kind enough and clear enough, as He will be with each of us, to acknowledge His understanding of the circumstances (see D&C 121–123). But He then gave this stunning summary answer, in part with a key question: "The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?" (D&C 122:8).

Or think of the apparent rebuke felt by Peter, James, and John when they accompanied the Savior to the Garden of Gethsemane as the Atonement was unfolding. In the midst of His agony and profound prayer, those He might have expected to have the most empathy and to understand best were found asleep. Said Jesus, "Couldst not thou watch one hour?" (Mark 14:37).

These are the kinds of questions that we might ask ourselves so that the Lord will not need to do so.

Careful and thoughtful questions both from us and to us are essential parts of life. How we frame those we ask and how we respond to those that come to us will in large

measure determine the outcomes in our striving and progression to keep our "second estate" (Abraham 3:26), or, in other words, achieve happiness in this life and qualify for eternal life in the world to come. In Rudyard Kipling's "The Elephant's Child," we find this good advice:

*I keep six honest serving men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.*
[*The Just-So Stories* (1902)]

With our unique perspective about the best source of answers to our most important questions, let us remind ourselves of the counsel of John:

And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:

And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. [1 John 5:14–15]

May we be thoughtful and wise in framing the questions we ask and, as we ask, always express appropriate gratitude for the privilege of not only asking questions both great and small but also receiving necessary and wonderful answers from Him who knows all that we really need to know. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.