

To Know and to Be Known of God

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In a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith to David Whitmer, we are told that eternal life “is the greatest of all the gifts of God” (D&C 14:7). When we understand that the entire work and glory of the Savior is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39), a most significant question for us is “How do we obtain eternal life?” The Savior provided the key in His great intercessory prayer recorded by John, the beloved apostle: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3). The key, then, to eternal life is to know God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Here at BYU, as at any university, we are engaged in the business of knowing. Our knowledge is tested in exams, papers, laboratories, and applied settings. If you are like me, some of those things we know just long enough to take a test for, and there are other things we know and retain long past any examination.

I believe that the “knowing” spoken of by the Savior is far above a knowing of facts, techniques, or theories. To know Jesus Christ requires a different kind of knowledge. To gain eternal life we cannot merely be acquainted with Him or recall some fac-

toid about His life as if we were playing a trivia game. We cannot simply read about Him. Knowing Him is more than knowing His doctrine and certainly more than professing His doctrine. The New Testament tells of many who spent time with Jesus, who heard His words and even saw His miracles, but who, sadly, never knew Him. Knowing Him in the way that He has counseled and pled with us to know Him requires everything we are and, in the end, changes our beings forever.

Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone described the transforming power of knowing Him in this way:

One who truly knows Him does not—nor cannot, nor will not—forget Him, ever. Whatever daily task, pleasure, sport, or activity we may be involved in, His desires are supreme in our lives. If we become careless in the way we wear the garment, haphazardly use the Lord’s name, or serve only socially in the Church, we clearly do not “know” the Master. We might even know the Church is true, but actually knowing Jesus Christ

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would dramatically change our conduct. We would no longer have a disposition to do evil; rather, we would feel absolutely submissive to His will and turn our lives over to Him. Knowing Him is much, much more than knowing about Him. [Vaughn J. Featherstone, *The Incomparable Christ: Our Master and Model* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 26]

We gain understanding of the power of knowing Him when we reflect on His visit to the American continent. What happened changed the way those people “knew” the Savior. His words had been available to them for their entire lifetimes. Believers among them had taught of Him and prophesied of Him. But when the people really “knew Him,” their civilization changed for nearly 200 years. This dramatic change in the Nephite society came because each individual had a thorough knowledge of the Savior. It wasn’t a group experience, although I am sure their testimonies were strengthened by each other. Rather, this was an individual experience, a very personal experience, as Jesus showed Himself to the multitude gathered at the land Bountiful and invited each to “come forth,” one by one. He said:

Thrust your hands into my side, . . . feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world. [3 Nephi 11:14]

Through this powerful testifying experience hearts were softened and converted, and agency was used to follow Him and know Him.

Sooner or later every person who has lived on this earth will be given knowledge regarding the divinity of Jesus Christ. When He comes the second time, the signs of His divinity will be so overwhelming that “every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess” (D&C 88:104) that Jesus is the Christ. But as

explained in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, that type of knowing does not result in a place in the celestial kingdom. Clearly, being acquainted with or being willing to acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ has limited value in the eternities. Brigham Young said:

The greatest and most important of all requirements of our Father in heaven and of his Son Jesus Christ, is . . . to believe in Jesus Christ, confess him, . . . cling to him, make friends with him. . . . Open and keep open a communication with . . . our Saviour. [JD 8:339]

In a recent conference address, Elder Dallin H. Oaks indicated that the ultimate priority of Latter-day Saints should be to “seek to understand our relationship to God the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, and to secure that relationship by obtaining their saving ordinances and by keeping our personal covenants” (Dallin H. Oaks, “Focus and Priorities,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 84).

One of the reasons a mere acquaintance is not enough is that it does not have the power to change us. That type of knowing leaves us as “natural” men and women. Unlocking the key to eternal life is unlocking the power to change our lives, which power comes from the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell described the process of the “mighty change”:

The more we know of Jesus, the more we will love Him. The more we know of Jesus, the more we will trust Him. The more we know of Jesus, the more we will want to be like Him and to be with Him by becoming the manner of men and women that He wishes us to be. [Neal A. Maxwell, “Plow in Hope,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 60]

How then do we come to know Him? I have received great counsel and guidance from John 10:27, where the Savior said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”

I would like to share several thoughts with you on how we can hear His voice, follow Him, and then be known of Him.

First, the Savior will be our tutor and trainer in learning to know Him and be as He is. He is there to direct each of us if we will listen to His voice through the Holy Ghost and heed His counsel. I have come to know that His direction and counsel are deeply personal and demonstrate not only the Savior's love for us but His knowledge of us.

When President Bateman was serving as the Presiding Bishop of the Church, he testified in a general conference that

the Savior, as a member of the Godhead, knows each of us personally. . . . In the garden and on the cross, Jesus saw each of us and not only bore our sins, but also experienced our deepest feelings so that he would know how to comfort and strengthen us. [Merrill J. Bateman, "The Power to Heal from Within," *Ensign*, May 1995, 14]

In this way, President Bateman explained, the Atonement is not only infinite but also very intimate (see p. 14).

One of the most profound ways to follow the Savior is through serving others. As we serve others as He served, we come to know Him with great power. The Savior has provided us with many examples of compassion and concern. We see Him with the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda and hear His words of "rise, take up thy bed, and walk" (John 5:8). On the American continent we hear Him ask, "Have ye any that are sick among you? Bring them hither. . . . I will heal them, for I have compassion upon you" (3 Nephi 17:7). As we serve, we know Jesus more, and, as Elder Maxwell has said, "To know Jesus more and more is to experience His attributes. . . . We truly accelerate knowing Him, as we become more like Him by means of our imperfect adulation" (Neal A. Maxwell, *The Promise of Discipleship* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001], 20).

Often we have so many opportunities to serve His children that we become overwhelmed at where to start, and so we do nothing. Our time feels limited. But if we will follow the counsel of Elder Eyring and pray,

"Please tell me who needs me," answers will come. A face or a name will come into our minds. Or we may have a chance meeting that we feel isn't chance. In those moments, we will feel the love of the Savior for them and for us. As you watch over His sheep, your love for Him will grow. And that will increase your confidence and your courage. [Henry B. Eyring, "Watch with Me," *Ensign*, May 2001, 40]

The very details of their needs will be revealed to us. Elder Eyring has explained it this way:

He [the Savior] watches with us. He who sees all things, whose love is endless, and who never sleeps—He watches with us. He knows what the sheep need at every moment. By the power of the Holy Ghost, He can tell us and send us to them. [Eyring, "Watch with Me," 39]

Let me illustrate the point I am trying to make. A number of years ago I read in the *Ensign* an experience of Sister Garnee Faulkner. Sister Faulkner had made the commitment to befriend a woman in her ward who had been recently widowed. The widow, named Emma, "was extremely reserved and quiet. Few knew her well. As the months went on, her sorrow did not seem to lessen. Grief and poor health found her withdrawing from activity outside her home." Sometimes Emma quickly terminated Sister Faulkner's visits. Still, Sister Faulkner "was determined to be her friend, her sister in the gospel, and not let fear or personal rejection dilute [her] concern."

One day Sister Faulkner and her husband were in San Francisco. As they walked past

the large, steaming crab vats on Fisherman’s Wharf, she felt prompted to take some crab home to Emma. Her husband suggested that a more easily transported gift might be a better souvenir. “In and out of the shops [they] went, searching in vain for just the right memento. Empty-handed and tired, [they] started for [the] car, only to pass the crab vats once more.” Again the impression came, and so they purchased the crab and a loaf of the Wharf’s famous bread.

When Sister Faulkner delivered the crab and bread, Emma received them coolly and asked, “Is this for any special occasion?”

Sister Faulkner replied, “No, I just thought you might enjoy some crab from the Wharf.”

Emma said, “Thank you very much,” and closed the door. Sister Faulkner was disheartened and wondered why she had had such a prompting. Two days later she received a letter from Emma.

Emma described how touched she was by the kind gesture and went on to explain that on that day she had been remembering her anniversary. She had wondered if her husband knew what day it was and if he remembered their marriage and their anniversary. She recalled their first trip to San Francisco and the purchase of steaming crab and a loaf of bread. From then on crab and bread from Fisherman’s Wharf symbolized the many wonderful excursions she and her husband had made to San Francisco.

“Then,” Emma said in her letter, “at the close of day when I opened the door and saw you standing there with a loaf of bread and a package of fresh crab, it was like a direct message. You denied knowing it was a special day. Therefore I felt it was Ed’s way of saying, ‘Happy anniversary. I do remember.’” (See Garnee Faulkner, “Fresh Crab and French Bread,” *Ensign*, June 1985, 38–39.)

The Savior knew the intimate details of Emma’s grief, sorrow, and loneliness. And because He knew her, He could give just

exactly the right counsel to Sister Faulkner. Sister Faulkner had to be prepared to receive the counsel, and she had demonstrated that preparation in her anxious desire to try to befriend Emma. When the counsel came, it was precisely what Emma needed, and Sister Faulkner became the instrument to do what the Savior knew needed to be done for Emma.

President Monson has counseled:

Acquire the language of the Spirit. . . . The language of the Spirit comes to him who seeks with all his heart to know God and keep His divine commandments. Proficiency in this “language” permits one to breach barriers, overcome obstacles, and touch the human heart. [Thomas S. Monson, “To the Rescue,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 50]

One of the most powerful insights I have had in my life is that hearing His voice through the Holy Ghost and acting on the promptings are spiritually synergistic. As we hear and then do, we become more capable of hearing a more refined signal than we have been able to hear before. The result of this upward spiritual spiral is increased auditory and functional capacity as we are taught how the Savior thinks, teaches, and acts. Through these kindergartens for our character we learn how to be like Him.

An incident from my own life demonstrates this principle. One day I returned home from work. It had been a particularly difficult day, and I felt the burdens of the world. I was extremely fatigued, emotionally and physically. I had not been home long when I felt impressions of the still small voice that I should go to the home of a woman that I had visit-taught for a number of years. She had been inactive for many years. Many times I would try to visit her, but I was often unsuccessful in my attempts. On the few occasions when I was able to visit her, I came to know that she had a strong belief in a Heavenly Father but had been offended many years previously and had difficulty with some of the

teachings of the Church. When I felt impressed that I should go to her home, my first response was, “Not tonight. I am so tired. It can wait until tomorrow.” But, as is often the case, the impressions continued to come more strongly. Finally I drove to her home, thinking, “Why am I doing this? She probably won’t answer the door.” I knocked on the door, and soon the door opened. I could tell she was extremely distraught. She invited me in. Her first words were, “How did you know to come?”

I responded that the promptings had been there. For the next several hours we talked about her desperate family situation, her suicidal feelings, and her sense of hopelessness. I prayed that I might know how to comfort her as the Savior would do. The words came, the promptings came, and I began to see a calm come to her. That night forever changed my relationship with her and forever changed my relationship with the Savior. Now I never have trouble getting into her home or making contact with her. I no longer question the Spirit’s promptings when they come, for I recognize them more clearly. We have had many opportunities for gospel conversation.

What did I learn about the Savior that night? I learned that He loved this dear sister regardless of her current standing in the Church. I learned how He comforted as I listened to the promptings I received as I talked with her. Did I know my Savior better after that night? Yes! I learned the Savior trusted me enough to let me participate as He met her needs. I was part of how He “succored” her (see Mosiah 4:16). It was through the listening and the acting that I was able to participate in the Savior’s plan to bless another person’s life. I knew with great assurance that the Savior loves people who are struggling—and it made it easier to believe that He loves me when I struggle as well.

We come to know the Savior as we try to emulate Him, particularly in charity. Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone described charity as

*the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the very conduct and total being of the Savior. Charity is the pure love of Christ. Those who have charity are directed by it in everything they do. It becomes the central motivation for their living and being. [Featherstone, *The Incomparable Christ*, 98]*

This trait of charity allows our eyes to be open to seeing one another as He sees us.

One of our nursing students learned that being like the Savior is more than being able to teach charity, describe charity, or even profess charity. Let me quote from her journal:

I learned the deeper meaning of charity when I cared for a wheelchair-bound HIV patient who had lesions on his hands and buttocks. He was pale as a ghost with a red, spotted rash consuming his body. He wore dark sunglasses, which made him seem even ghastlier, and his partner sat at his bedside. Initially, looking at the men made me physically ill to my stomach. I felt like I should hold my breath, toss the patient his gown, and spend as little time in the room as possible, for I feared that somehow he would inevitably sneeze and I would catch his disease and bring it home to my husband and 10-month-old baby.

However, when his mother entered the room, she went to him and kissed him on the forehead and whispered, “Sweetheart, I will never leave you.” The words “charity never faileth” came to mind, and my soul melted. I put on my gloves, picked up a bottle of lotion at his bedside, and asked him if he wanted a back rub. That day I felt like I understood the words of the Savior more than ever before: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.

I have been raised with the belief that homosexuality and IV drug abuse are immoral, unethical, and simply wrong. . . . I do believe that there comes a turning point in each person’s life. We must decide when we come to this point whether we will love others for who they are, surrendering judgment and criticism, or allow our prejudgments and the social barriers of the world to stifle another’s spiritual

growth as well as our own. [Used by permission; Lisa Flindt, N442 Journal, fall 1994]

This student learned the powerful truth that we can be taught as we open our minds and hearts to learning from others who are also trying to emulate the Savior in their behavior.

Coming to know the Savior, learning to hear His voice, and allowing Him to be our Shepherd also requires commitment. This kind of commitment requires all that we have and are. The young man in the New Testament desired to have eternal life and was committed to hearing what the Savior told him he should do to achieve it, yet he could not bring himself to act on what he had heard (see Matthew 19:16–22).

My great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth Taylor Reynolds, made such a commitment. She heard the gospel taught in England and listened to the Spirit and was baptized. She and her mother acted on what the Spirit taught them after their baptism and made the commitment to journey to Zion. The summer of 1856 found her with approximately 500 other English Saints camped in Nebraska. They heard many reasons why they should not attempt the handcart trek to the Great Salt Lake at that time of year. Elizabeth and her mother voted with the company to move forward and leaned on their trust of God. They survived the terrible snowy ordeal in Martin’s Cove, but their uncle who accompanied them did not. They were rescued by young men who had listened and acted on the counsel of a prophet. She could never look at another handcart after that. But then, the handcart wasn’t the important part of her experience. Elizabeth learned that hearing the Shepherd’s voice and following it may not be easy and may be highly inconvenient, uncomfortable, and potentially life-threatening. To come to know the Lord does require sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of our time, our talents, and everything with which we have been blessed.

Elizabeth came through the sacrifice with a deep abiding knowledge of the Lord and His purposes, and so will we.

Last summer I made a visit to Martin’s Cove, a place made hallowed by the Saints’ ultimate sacrifice. Because of Elizabeth’s sacrifice I have had the opportunity of having the gospel in my life and of coming to know the Shepherd.

Through the process of our listening and doing, the Lord comes to know us. It is true that He knows everything there is to know about us, and He still loves us. Nothing we do or fail to do will ever diminish His love for us. But through our active listening and faithful doing we demonstrate to Him that He can trust us, and we are known of Him in an entirely different way. We are known by Him in friendship and in trust. We are His (see D&C 84:77).

Mary Ellen Edmunds described it this way in her book *Love Is a Verb*: While in the post office, she noticed a man who looked as if he might have come from Mexico. He was trying to buy stamps from the stamp machine with a very worn five-dollar bill. The stamp machine repeatedly rejected the bill. Mary Ellen was struck with a deep feeling that she wanted to help the man get his stamps. She found new, crisp bills in her purse, and she and the man were able to buy the stamps he needed. Mary Ellen wrote:

I had another thought that added even more meaning to the experience. I imagined Them Up There somewhere in a meeting. . . .

. . . I could imagine someone interrupting the meeting with an important message: “Excuse me. I hate to interrupt, but there’s a man down there in the Springville Post Office, and he’s trying to get some stamps and can’t make the machine work.”

Wouldn’t it be something if someone in the meeting had said, “It’s okay. Edmunds is on her way. She’ll help him. We can go back to the agenda.” Wouldn’t it be a wonderful thing if God could count

on MEE? [Mary Ellen Edmunds, *Love Is a Verb* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 34–36]

Yes, it is a wonderful thing when God can count on us to do His work, to be His instruments in bringing to pass much good in the world. That is how I want my Heavenly Father and my Savior to think of me. I want Them to know me as a friend, as a participant, as a disciple, and as a believer. I want Them to think of me as someone who is trying hard each day to get to know Them better; as someone who is praying and studying and listening and acting, trying to learn to put off the natural man or woman and become a true Saint.

Brothers and sisters, I testify that the Savior meant it when He said, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). And I also testify that we come to know Him as we hear His voice and follow Him: “For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?” (Mosiah 5:13). My grandfather left his wife and eight children to serve a mission when my father was a baby. My grandfather’s mission president was the apostle Melvin J. Ballard. Because Elder Ballard was held in such high esteem by our family, I have often read his writings. He, as one who knew God and His Son Jesus Christ, described what it was like to come into the presence of the Savior. “One evening in the dreams of the night” he found himself in the temple. He was informed that he would “have the privilege of entering into one

of [the] rooms, to meet a glorious Personage.” He described it this way:

*As I entered the door, I saw, seated on a raised platform, the most glorious Being my eyes have ever beheld or that I ever conceived existed in all the eternal worlds. As I approached to be introduced, he arose and stepped towards me with extended arms, and he smiled as he softly spoke my name. If I shall live to be a million years old, I shall never forget that smile. He took me into his arms and kissed me, pressed me to his bosom, and blessed me, until the marrow of my bones seemed to melt! When he had finished, I fell at his feet, and, as I bathed them with my tears and kisses, I saw the prints of the nails in the feet of the Redeemer of the world. The feeling that I had in the presence of him who hath all things in his hands, to have his love, his affection, and his blessing was such that if I ever can receive that of which I had but a foretaste, I would give all that I am, all that I ever hope to be, to feel what I then felt! [In Bryant S. Hinckley, *Sermons and Missionary Services of Melvin Joseph Ballard* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949), 156]*

My prayer is that we may all know the Savior and be known of Him; that we might engage in the powerful process of hearing the Shepherd’s voice and following Him and in the process become like Him; that we might be counted among His friends and enjoy a life like His—eternal life, the greatest of all the gifts of God. I so testify of Him, my Savior and Redeemer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.