

Receiving Revelation

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This is an exciting time to be at BYU. It is the beginning of a new semester, the women's volleyball team is ranked number one, and no one of you is more than a week behind in your classes. If we keep those two things in the same order, we will be doing well this semester. It is also a time when there is much of significance happening in the world and in the Church. The inspired changes in priesthood quorums and the new emphasis on ministering announced at the April general conference provide ample evidence that revelation is thriving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and that the Lord is hastening His work.¹

President Russell M. Nelson seemed to forecast that even greater things are in store for us when, at the Sunday morning session of conference, he declared:

*Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will perform some of His mightiest works between now and when He comes again. We will see miraculous indications that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, preside over this Church in majesty and glory.*²

The fact that you are here on earth at this stage of its history is a compliment to you and your potential. As President Nelson recently observed:

*There is something undeniably special about this generation of youth. Your Heavenly Father must have great confidence in you to send you to earth at this time. You were born for greatness! The days ahead will be breathtaking. Father in Heaven must have known that you would be just the people He needs to do remarkable things in the latter days—the days leading up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.*³

A Challenge and an Invitation

But with that exciting celestial vote of confidence comes a prophetic challenge. Following his declaration that Christ will perform some of His mightiest works in our day, President Nelson added in general conference an equally thrilling warning and then later an invitation:

*In coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.*⁴

In that same Sunday morning talk, President Nelson underscored the need for us to receive revelation:

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on September 11, 2018.

*If we are to have any hope of sifting through the myriad of voices and the philosophies of men that attack truth, we must learn to receive revelation.*⁵

At the end of his remarks, he added this urgent invitation:

*My beloved brothers and sisters, I plead with you to increase your spiritual capacity to receive revelation. . . . Choose to do the spiritual work required to enjoy the gift of the Holy Ghost and hear the voice of the Spirit more frequently and more clearly.*⁶

Learning That Leads to Inspiration, or Revelation

This prophetic charge to increase our ability to learn by revelation is consistent with our recent university emphasis on inspiring learning. Over the last two years, we have used the term *inspiring learning* to summarize what we hope happens to you at BYU. *Inspiring* is a noun, or really a gerund, describing the act of motivating someone to do something and is also an adjective describing a type of learning—learning that leads to inspiration, or revelation. Thus, when we talk about inspiring learning, we are describing our hope that you will be inspired, motivated, to learn and that that learning will lead to inspiration, or revelation.

Our goal of inspiring learning, together with President Nelson’s prophetic admonition, makes it clear that your success at BYU in this year and in the coming years and, more important, your eternal destiny will depend in large part on your ability to receive, recognize, and respond to revelation.

Now I must confess that when I was about your age, admonitions about the need to receive revelation intimidated and, quite frankly, worried me more than a little bit. While some of my acquaintances would share stories about how the Spirit had given them specific directions in dramatic ways, I could not readily recall any such personal experiences. I started wondering whether I was missing something. I began to imagine that I would get up to the judgment bar, and God would say to me, “I tried to tell you what you needed to

do in life on such and such a date and again on another such date, and you just missed it.”

That feeling was compounded a bit during my mission when I had one particular companion who genuinely had a gift for knowing where to go to find people who were ready to accept the gospel. While we would be tracting, I would usually simply begin on the first street and go from one house to the next in a perfectly orderly fashion. He, on the other hand, would feel impressed to skip houses or entire streets because he felt impressed that someone way down the line had been prepared to listen to us. And more often than not, he was right. I rarely, if ever, felt such promptings. Thus, for much of my youth and young adulthood, I wondered if I had been born spiritually tone deaf.

If you have ever found yourself feeling that way, and especially if you feel that way now, I want to speak to you particularly today because, as President Nelson made clear, much of what we are to accomplish individually, as a university, and as a Church depends on our ability to refine our spiritual hearing.

Let me first assure you that none of us is spiritually tone deaf. Because all of us are literal spirit children of perfect Heavenly Parents, each of us has the innate potential to receive and recognize revelation. As Joseph Smith once observed:

*It is the privilege of the children of God to come to God and get revelation. . . . God is not a respecter of persons; we all have the same privilege.*⁷

Moreover, God does not arbitrarily give us a limited number of specific chances to receive revelation and then judge us eternally on how we did in those particular moments. There is, thankfully, no one-time, single-question, high-stakes final exam on receiving revelation. God is infinitely more patient, infinitely more loving, and infinitely more anxious for us to succeed than we can comprehend. He will give us opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to be guided by Him. His deepest desire is to help us develop our innate capacity to receive revelation.

President Nelson shared that good news with us in his April conference message, quoting in part from Doctrine and Covenants 121:33:

Does God really want to speak to you? Yes! “As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course . . . as to hinder the Almighty from pouring down knowledge from heaven upon the heads of the Latter-day Saints.”⁸

But there is even more good news for those who question their ability to receive and recognize revelation despite their sincere but often seemingly ineffective efforts to do so. It is that you are likely doing better at receiving revelation than you think. The scriptures make clear that it is possible to be influenced by the Holy Ghost and not fully recognize it.

Speaking of the Lamanites who had embraced the gospel prior to the resurrected Christ’s visit to ancient America, the Lord said, “Because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion, [they] were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and *they knew it not.*”⁹ These Saints received the Holy Ghost, which the Prophet Joseph said is always accompanied by revelation,¹⁰ but they did not realize it. They had received and been influenced by revelation, but they knew it not.

A similar thing happened to Oliver Cowdery, who received a witness before he met Joseph Smith that Joseph’s message was true. However, he later questioned whether that was the case and sought another revelation. As Elder David A. Bednar once explained, the Lord’s reassuring response—found in section 6 of the Doctrine and Covenants¹¹—was

*a revelation . . . informing [Oliver] that he had been receiving revelation. Apparently Oliver had not recognized how and when he had been receiving direction from God and needed this instruction to increase his understanding about the spirit of revelation.*¹²

Thus we can receive and be influenced by revelation without fully recognizing it. I believe that happens more often than we think and that,

therefore, we are better at the process than we might initially suppose.

Elder Bednar has provided one explanation of why this can happen. He likened the experience of receiving revelation to two different ways that we have experienced the physical transition from dark to light:

The first experience occurred as we entered a dark room and turned on a light switch. . . . In an instant a bright flood of illumination filled the room and caused the darkness to disappear. . . .

*The second experience took place as we watched night turn into morning. . . . In contrast to turning on a light in a dark room, the light from the rising sun did not immediately burst forth. Rather, gradually and steadily the intensity of the light increased, and the darkness of night was replaced by the radiance of morning. Eventually, the sun did dawn over the skyline.*¹³

Elder Bednar then explained how these two experiences relate to the receipt of revelation:

*A light turned on in a dark room is like receiving a message from God quickly, completely, and all at once. . . . Descriptions of such immediate and intense manifestations are found in the scriptures, recounted in Church history, and evidenced in our own lives. . . . However, **this pattern of revelation tends to be more rare than common.***¹⁴

By contrast, Elder Bednar explained:

*The gradual increase of light radiating from the rising sun is like receiving a message from God “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30). . . . Such communications from Heavenly Father gradually and gently “distil upon [our souls] as the dews from heaven” (D&C 121:45). **This pattern of revelation tends to be more common than rare.***¹⁵

My experience has been similar to that of Elder Bednar in that the latter, more subtle line-upon-line revelation is more common than the more dramatic and immediate kind of revelation and that this causes us to unnecessarily question our

ability to receive revelation. As Elder Bednar explained:

I have talked with many individuals who question the strength of their personal testimony and underestimate their spiritual capacity because they do not receive frequent, miraculous, or strong impressions. Perhaps as we consider the experiences of Joseph in the Sacred Grove, of Saul on the road to Damascus, and of Alma the Younger, we come to believe something is wrong with or lacking in us if we fall short in our lives of these well-known and spiritually striking examples. If you have had similar thoughts or doubts, please know that you are quite normal. Just keep pressing forward obediently and with faith in the Savior. As you do so, you “cannot go amiss” (D&C 80:3).¹⁶

The effects of this more common type of line-by-line revelation, though less obvious, are nonetheless equally powerful. President Joseph F. Smith once stated:

As a boy . . . I would frequently . . . ask the Lord to show me some marvelous thing, in order that I might receive a testimony. But the Lord withheld marvels from me, and showed me the truth, line upon line, . . . until he made me to know the truth from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, and until doubt and fear had been absolutely purged from me.¹⁷

So take heart. You are likely doing better than you think. I urge you in that regard to take some time in the coming weeks to ponder and reflect on times when you may have received revelation and on times when you were influenced by the Holy Ghost and you may not have fully recognized it. Then I would urge you to record those events. This will not only make you more aware of inspired messages that you have received but will increase your confidence that you can receive further revelation.

Still, even if we are doing better than we think, President Nelson’s challenge—and our goal of inspiring learning—is to *improve* our ability to receive and recognize revelation: in President

Nelson’s words, it is “to *increase* [our] spiritual capacity to receive revelation” and “to do the spiritual work required to enjoy the gift of the Holy Ghost and hear the voice of the Spirit *more frequently and more clearly*.”¹⁸ Thus, if it is true that many of us are doing better than we think, it is equally true that all of us need to do better—regardless of our current level of performance.

An Experience Involving Both Heart and Mind

There are a number of things we can do to meet President Nelson’s charge to increase our ability to receive revelation. Let me suggest just a few.

We can increase our ability to receive and recognize revelation by understanding the principles and implications of the revelatory process set forth in section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants. We are all familiar with the key verses in which the Lord described this process to Oliver Cowdery:

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.

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation.¹⁹

There are several key principles contained in this brief description. Among them is the fact that revelation is an experience that involves both our heart and our mind, which I believe symbolically represent our spirit and our body. We can improve our ability to receive revelation if we better prepare both our spirits and our bodies for such experiences.

Spiritual Preparation

Spiritual preparation includes daily scripture study, daily prayer, keeping the commandments, sacrament meeting attendance, Sabbath-day observance, and regular temple worship. These are all familiar tasks that we are regularly counseled to attend to. I hope, however, that repetition does not cause us to undervalue the significance of these actions. We repeatedly emphasize such spiritually enhancing activities because they are so important.

As President Nelson explained:

*Nothing opens the heavens quite like the combination of increased purity, exact obedience, earnest seeking, daily feasting on the words of Christ in the Book of Mormon, and regular time committed to temple and family history work.*²⁰

Spiritual preparation facilitates revelation.

Physical Preparation

We talk less about physical preparation to receive revelation, but it is also important. As President Boyd K. Packer once observed:

*What you learn spiritually depends, to a degree, on how you treat your body. That is why the Word of Wisdom is so important.*²¹

We hear stories about how adherence to the Word of Wisdom leads to the promised physical blessing that we will “run and not be weary, and . . . walk and not faint.”²² However, I believe we do not often enough focus on the at least equally important spiritual blessing promised to those who adhere to its precepts: that they will “find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures,”²³ many of which are accessed by revelation.²⁴ Discovery of such hidden treasures through revelation is exactly the kind of inspiring learning we hope each of you frequently experience at BYU.

In addition to adhering to the principles of physical health outlined in section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, we can increase our capacity to receive and recognize revelation by following the admonition the Lord provided in the immediately preceding section: “Retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.”²⁵

I know, you are saying, “Really?” Candor requires that I admit that when I was in college, I did not consider myself a “morning person.” I never took a class earlier than nine in the morning because any time before that seemed way too

early. But over time I have come to find that early-morning time is sacred, a time when few people interrupt and, more important, my mind is more open and “invigorated”—or alive—to new ideas and spiritual impressions. I have learned to keep a notepad by my bedside—as thoughts and ideas often come early in the morning—and to make scripture study and prayer my first order of morning business. I urge you to consider the same.

Feelings That Come into Minds and Hearts

In addition to clarifying the spiritual and physical aspects of revelation, the description in section 8 also highlights that, as Elder Bednar explained, “the spirit of revelation typically functions as thoughts and feelings that come into our minds and hearts by the power of the Holy Ghost.”²⁶

President Packer similarly observed:

*Perhaps the single greatest thing I learned from reading the Book of Mormon is that the voice of the Spirit comes as a **feeling** rather than a sound. You will learn, as I have learned, to “listen” for that voice that is **felt** rather than **heard**.*²⁷

Set aside time and space when you can focus on being open to those thoughts and feelings. Turn off the music; pause Netflix; take out your earbuds. Find time to listen to your feelings.

You may wonder how to adequately discern whether such feelings are from God or are merely your own internal thoughts and wishes. That is a topic worthy of greater time than we have today, but let me make two observations.

First, as in so many aspects of our mortal existence, we can learn from our own experience how to make such distinctions, if we pay attention. The Prophet Joseph Smith once stated:

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, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon; (i.e.) those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of

*God, will come to pass; 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.*²⁸

Part of the purpose of our mortal life is to help us learn from our own experiences. This principle applies to our ability to receive and recognize revelation.

Second, when we feel impressed to do something good for someone else, there is little need to deliberate about the source of the feeling. The ancient prophet Mormon made clear that such promptings are always from the Lord:

*That which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God.*²⁹

Never suppress a feeling to help others. It is among the clearest forms of revelation. Moreover, such generous acts often facilitate further revelation. As President Henry B. Eyring recently observed, “We receive the Holy Spirit best when we are focused on serving others.”³⁰

Revelation in God’s Time and in God’s Way

There are other things that we can do to enhance our ability to receive revelation, including expanding our understanding of the truth that revelation comes in the manner and timing that God determines. We need to recognize that His goal is not just to give us instruction but to help us become like Him. At times this perfecting process requires that we work harder, study things out more, and even act when we are not 100 percent sure that we are right. As President Nelson once observed, “Revelation comes at the frontier of knowledge and experience.”³¹

We will often need to stretch our souls beyond what we think is possible before revelation comes. As Oliver Cowdery learned, it is not merely a matter of asking.³² Answers may be slow in coming, not because we are doing something wrong but because Heavenly Father is leaving it up to

our agency³³ or because He has already given us the answer and wants us to learn how that prior answer came³⁴ or because we need to learn something more before the answer makes sense to us.

But please know that even in those times when the heavens seem silent, there are explanations that will become clear over time if we will but trust God. As Elder Richard G. Scott once explained:

*What do you do when you have prepared carefully, have prayed fervently, waited a reasonable time for a response, and still do not feel an answer? . . . When . . . you need to act, proceed with trust. As you are sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit, one of two things will certainly occur at the appropriate time: either the stupor of thought will come, indicating an improper choice, or the peace or the burning in the bosom will be felt, confirming that your choice was correct. When you are living righteously and are acting with trust, God will not let you proceed too far without a warning impression if you have made the wrong decision.*³⁵

In the end, the one thing we can do to increase our ability to receive revelation is to trust God more—to increase our faith in Him. As President Nelson observed, “The most important truth the Holy Ghost will ever witness to you is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.”³⁶ Revelation will increase as we focus more on Christ as we follow His direction to look unto Him “in every thought.”³⁷ As we do so, He will—in His own time and in His own way—bless us with revelation that will lead to not only inspiring learning but also to eternal exaltation. I witness that He lives and that this promise is sure, and I do so in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See D&C 88:73.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018.
3. Russell M. Nelson, in Charlotte Larcabal, “President and Sister Nelson Will Speak to You!” (announcement of the worldwide youth

devotional scheduled for June 3, 2018), Youth, LDS.org, 12 April 2018, lds.org/youth/article/president-and-sister-nelson-will-speak-to-you?lang=eng.

4. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church."

5. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church."

6. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church."

7. Joseph Smith, in a discourse given about July 1839 in Commerce, Illinois; reported by Willard Richards, in Willard Richards Pocket Companion, "Before 8 August 1839 (3)," in *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph*, comp. and ed. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Company, 1991), 13, 15; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 132.

8. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church"; emphasis in original.

9. 3 Nephi 9:20; emphasis added.

10. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught, "No man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations. The Holy Ghost is a revelator" (HC 6:58 [15 October 1843]; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 132).

11. In D&C 6:22–23, the Lord told Oliver Cowdery:

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?

12. David A. Bednar, "The Spirit of Revelation," *Ensign*, May 2011.

13. Bednar, "Spirit of Revelation."

14. Bednar, "Spirit of Revelation"; emphasis added.

15. Bednar, "Spirit of Revelation"; emphasis added.

16. Bednar, "Spirit of Revelation."

17. Joseph F. Smith, *CR*, April 1900, 40–41.

18. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church"; emphasis added.

19. D&C 8:2–3.

20. Nelson, "Revelation for the Church."

21. Boyd K. Packer, "Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise," *Ensign*, November 1994.

22. D&C 89:20.

23. D&C 89:19.

24. As President Boyd K. Packer admonished:

The habit-forming substances prohibited by that revelation—tea, coffee, liquor, tobacco—interfere with the delicate feelings of spiritual communication, just as other addictive drugs will do.

Do not ignore the Word of Wisdom, for that may cost you the "great treasures of knowledge, even hidden treasures" promised to those who keep it. [Packer, "Personal Revelation"; quoting D&C 89:19]

25. D&C 88:124.

26. Bednar, "Spirit of Revelation."

27. Boyd K. Packer, "Counsel to Youth," *Ensign*, November 2011; emphasis in original.

28. Joseph Smith, HC 3:381 (27 June 1839); quoted in *Teachings of Presidents: Joseph Smith*, 132.

29. Moroni 7:13.

30. Henry B. Eyring, "Inspired Ministering," *Ensign*, May 2018.

31. Russell M. Nelson, General Authority training, April 2016.

32. See D&C 9:7–8.

33. See, e.g., D&C 60:5 (emphasis added):

*But, verily, I will speak unto you concerning your journey unto the land from whence you came. Let there be a craft made, or bought, as seemeth you good, **it mattereth not unto me**, and take your journey speedily for the place which is called St. Louis.*

34. During the fall of my freshman year in college, I prayed mightily to know if I should serve a mission without receiving a clear response. One day, as I was thinking on the matter, I noticed a copy of the *Ensign* magazine sitting on a table in

our home. I knew instantly that my prayer had already been answered when I read President Spencer W. Kimball’s statement:

The question is frequently asked: Should every young man fill a mission? And the answer has been given by the Lord. It is “Yes.” Every young man should fill a mission. [“When the World Will Be Converted,” Ensign, October 1974]

I learned then the truth of which Elder Richard G. Scott later testified:

*If you feel that God has not answered **your** prayers, ponder these scriptures—then carefully look for evidence in your own life of His having already answered you. [“Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayer,” Ensign, November 1989; emphasis in original]*

35. Richard G. Scott, “Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 2007.

36. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church”; emphasis in original.

37. D&C 6:36.