

The Continuing Restoration and Gathering of Israel

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First Vision

When Joseph Smith went to the woods to pray one spring day, he was not yet a prophet. At that point, he was a boy who read his Bible and sought earnestly for the gospel. He felt eager to know God's will. Some important messages come from the first vision. One of them is that family, status, education, wealth, and maturity are not the things God takes into account when deciding whom to speak with. You know this already, but let's just think about the beauty of that for a moment. Not only does it not matter where your parents went to college it doesn't matter whether they went to college or whether they can read. And those things don't matter about you, either. Are you out of money? Not relevant. Do you share a bed with your siblings? Doesn't matter.

This is good news for those who throughout history often had less access to institutional religious authority. For many women in the world, for example, interaction with God has felt out of reach because it was associated most often with men and priestly office. But the First Vision and the Restored Gospel provide a balance to that—Joseph Smith was in his early teens when he prayed and he wasn't ordained to any priesthood. Instead, he was a person who learned from the scriptures and had enough faith to pray and ask for answers. We do that, too. Although we aren't called by God to restore the fullness of the gospel, God does call us and teach us to be more effective, wise, and loving—more like our Parents in Heaven.¹

¹ "Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them."
Dallin H. Oaks, "Apostasy and Restoration," *Ensign*, May 1995, 84.

In addition to teaching that you don't have to be important or successful in the world for God to talk to you, the First Vision teaches us that God loves Jesus, responded to a boy's prayer, and forgave that boy's sins. But there is also a lot that the First Vision does not teach us. For example, it does not teach us about Relief Society, priesthood power, baptism, or temple ordinances. It does not teach us how often God will answer prayers or in what form.

One major lesson the First Vision does teach about revelation is that it is not the same thing as an instruction manual. Revelation is more like a treasure map. My daughter drew this treasure map for me and explained that X marked the treasure, and there were mountains, an oasis, and things in the lower left and upper right corners that might be trees or they might be something scary from a children's book. Revelation can be slow, spotty, and take a while to figure out. In the words that I first heard from Sister Sharon Eubank: "Revelation is a process." I have found that when you stick with it, you can find treasure.

Joseph Smith told people about the treasure of his first vision several times during his lifetime, and I'm really grateful for that. Sometimes a historian has only one source to rely on to try to figure out what happened, but Joseph Smith gave us more than one way to understand. He described the experience differently at different times because he was in front of different audiences and wanted to emphasize what mattered for each of those audiences—just as I tell an anecdote in one way to my adult friends, another way to my children, and still another way during a Gospel Doctrine class, depending on how I understand the needs of each audience.

But I also think Joseph Smith described his sacred experience differently at different times because his understanding of what happened increased over time. The more experience he had and the more skill he acquired in receiving and interpreting revelation, the more he understood what had happened that morning in the grove.

Revelation as a Process

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints founding meeting took place 10 years after the First Vision. When it takes a long time for an initial revelation to bear actual fruit, some of us can start to doubt our interpretation of the revelation. While it's good to be prayerfully open to the possibility that we have misunderstood something, it's also important to remember that revelation is a process and takes time. My study of church history has taught me that our leaders have pursued their planning and decision making "by study and also by faith." Revelation, study, and faith all interweave in the process. It may seem as though President Nelson announced a lot of fast changes once he became our prophet, but in fact many of those changes had been under consideration for a long time, for years. Church leaders had studied what those changes would look like, and in cases such as two-hour church and the new achievements program for youth they did pilot programs to test them. In short, they had been counseling together and praying about many of these changes for years.

The 1978 revelation to restore and extend temple blessings and priesthood blessings for black church members is a particularly moving example of important revelation taking a great deal of

time, thought, and internal struggle. I don't understand why it took so long, but I do know that when it finally came the members of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve were united in their rejoicing.

I'll now share two examples from church history showing how revelation is a process and essential to the continuing restoration of the church.

Living in Farmington, Utah, 43-year-old Aurelia Spencer Rogers noticed a problem—she's the one in front in the image you can see [shows photo]—the boys were rowdy, inconsiderate, and apparently not grounded in the gospel that their elders had sacrificed security, comfort, and relationships to preserve. Remarkably, as Sister Rogers looked for solutions to this problem, God whispered to her his approval and encouragement, so she pursued her solutions which have enriched Latter-day Saint lives around the world ever since.

First, Aurelia Rogers shared her ideas with Eliza R. Snow and other female leaders, who liked them and described them to acting church president John Taylor. Soon, she had a mandate to gather the children in Farmington and to figure out how an organization for them should function. Looking back, she later described how she felt after accepting the calling:

“While thinking over what was to be done for the best good of the children, I seemed to be carried away in the Spirit, or at least I experienced a feeling of untold happiness which lasted three days and nights. During that time nothing could worry or irritate me; if my little ones were fretful, or the work went wrong, I had patience, could control in kindness, and manage my household affairs easily.”²

But those joyous feelings were not permanent. While planning and working for the children, she began to feel unworthy and depressed, so much that she had trouble fulfilling her responsibilities. “I went to my meetings weeping by the way, being humbled to the very earth; so much so, that whatever anyone said afterward in my praise, did not make me feel exalted, or lifted up in my own mind.”³

Nonetheless, she went on to found what we now call the Primary organization. Maybe you wonder, as I have, why she experienced this dark sadness while doing important work. Shouldn't acting on revelation and being on the Lord's errand feel endlessly blissful? Shouldn't it keep negative feelings at bay? That would only be true if Eve and Adam had not eaten that special fruit. In real life, acting on revelation is not a promise that we will feel inspired all the time. We did not come to earth for easy. Being embodied is not easy and working with other people is not easy, but these are two of the major reasons we are here, to have the experience of inhabiting a mortal body and to work with and serve other people.

² Aurelia Spencer Rogers, *Life Sketches of Orson Spencer and Others : And History of Primary Work* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons Co., 1898), 212.

³ Rogers, 214.

My middle daughter has recently learned to drive. In her drivers' education class, she drove a simulator machine before sitting behind the wheel of a real car. The real car is much harder to drive; the stakes are so much higher. On the simulator machine if you run a stop sign, it will tell you that you made a mistake and make you start a new round. In real life, if you run a stop sign you could severely injure another person. Driving a real car is dangerous, but it's also the only way to really learn. Living in a body is also dangerous. People, disease, gravity, and our own clumsiness hurt us—they can kill us or they can wound us in ways that feel even harder than death. But there are lessons that only our bodies can teach us.

Our bodies can also be sources of great joy. For me this has included the feeling of exercise, making my muscles stronger and my balance more sure. Physical joy has included the experience of cooking, which is a great source of pleasure to me, a satisfying creative art, and a way to serve others. My body also helps me to express and receive affection—hugs and kisses from loved ones, but even hugs from people who aren't in my closest circle. Maybe you, like me, feel more aware of embodiment's joys now that the COVID-19 virus has taken some of them temporarily away. We learn from the sorrows of embodiment as well as from the joys. Our mortal experience also means that a veil separates us from the presence of God. Although we can receive revelation, we also sometimes ignore or misinterpret it.

Just as for Aurelia Rogers acting on revelation did not yield uninterrupted happiness, acting on revelation does not promise that all the support we need will fall into place. Ardeth Kapp, whom you may remember as Young Women general president during the 1980s, had experience with this. Sister Kapp was well prepared when she was called as president, she had already worked as a teacher and a consultant, worked on the church youth correlation committee, and served in a Young Women general presidency. Immediately after accepting this calling, she began to receive revelation. She wrote in her journal, "It seems to me the heavens are opening and thoughts, directions, spiritual promptings are coming clear and fast."⁴ Even at that early time, she felt the organization needed a charter statement and a goal system that was based on values. But it took three years of focused effort before the Young Women theme and values were fully created and announced, and five years until the values-based Personal Progress manual came out. Collaboration, execution, and further revelation took time. So did getting approvals.

Sister Kapp was very good at counselling with others; she called capable people to her board and they worked collaboratively together. Elder Bednar has taught that different members of a council have different pieces of revelation and you need each person's input in order for the whole vision to come together. "The contributions of all of the council members add elements to the inspiration," he has taught.⁵ Former members of Sister Kapp's board have told me that she was gifted at drawing out the people on her councils. But effective collaboration takes time.

⁴ Ardeth G. Kapp and Carolyn J. Rasmus, interview by Gordon Irving, 1992, 41, Church History Library. Also p. 59?

⁵ Panel Discussion, Worldwide Leadership Training, November 2010.

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/worldwide-leadership-training/2010/11/panel-discussion?lang=eng>

The program changes Sister Kapp oversaw were complicated and getting the details right was slow. There were delays, repetitive extra labor, and other frustrations. For the new Personal Progress program, she called a committee of women and men, most of them married to each other, and they worked together for two years. Furthermore, Sister Kapp was president during a time when female officers of the church no longer interacted much with the First Presidency, as they previously had, and they did not serve on high church committees, such as the Priesthood and Family Executive Committee, as they do now. The resulting communication gaps also required extra time and work. But the result was programs that effectively nurtured the young women of the church for over 30 years. Not only were the programs good, but all of the people with whom she had counseled understood them well and could help to explain, implement, and in other ways support the new changes. Sister Kapp's example motivates me because even when discouraged she continued to counsel with others, exercise faith, fast, pray, and work hard. When I read about her experiences, I feel the spirit testify that she acted on revelation and that God magnified her considerable native talents through collaboration with other people. If we don't continue to pursue the Lord's guidance, particularly when we encounter difficulties or frustrations, then we might overlook inspired solutions and fail to fix problems. We and others may not learn what the Lord invites us to learn.

Our Revelations—receiving and recording

Now I'm going to shift from talking about others' revelations to talking about our own, especially how our revelations can help us be better at helping others. I have a quotation near my desk to remind me that good thinking and good work take time and careful study. The words are from Simone Weil, a French philosopher who thought a lot about right and wrong and who went to great personal sacrifice to live in the ways she thought were morally right.

Weil taught, "All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style and all faulty connection of ideas...all such things are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to truth."⁶

To make ourselves feel less vulnerable, we humans like to define things. We often grab onto a definition quickly, because having the definition makes us feel comfortable and safe. As Weil suggests, the problem with the speed is that we can reach a wrong conclusion. I believe this too-quickly finding and holding tight to a potentially false definition is what leads to some of our greatest sins against one another such as bigotry, which rears its ugly head in every nation and every political party as we misunderstand each other's intentions and lash out in response. Excessive speed can also mean we teach a false principle in a lesson or argue on social media in a way that treats someone unfairly.

On the other hand, not everything needs to take a long time. Perfectionism can keep us from ever getting anything done. Bearing a simple testimony; studying the scriptures with another person; reaching out in ministry—these can be part of our process instead of a perfect end.

⁶ Simone Weil, *Waiting on God (Routledge Revivals)* (Routledge, 2009), 35.

They can be imperfect. Prayers can be imperfect. We can be imperfect. In fact, in this life we try to improve, but we can't help but make mistakes. We will not be perfect in receiving revelation, either, because it is a process. When perfectionism threatens to halt progress, my husband quotes those wise words attributed to Voltaire: "the perfect is the enemy of the good." What he means to say is that perfectionism can paralyze us and prevent us from accomplishing the good that can simply result from trying.

I'd like to acknowledge how painful it can feel when you don't feel adept at receiving and understanding revelation. There are valiant souls among us who obey and seek—who strive to do everything right—yet struggle with this. That situation can be upsetting. They can feel unworthy, although they are not, isolated from God and from other members of the church. I have mourned that even Mother Teresa, a devout and tremendous example of service and spiritual wisdom, felt for long periods that God was distant. In one case, she asked someone she trusted to pray for her, that she would do God's will when she herself couldn't hear God's will: "the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see—Listen and do not hear. . . I want you to pray for me—that I let Him have [a] free hand."⁷

So what do we do if we don't feel we receive answers to our prayers? Some people I admire deeply fall into this category, and I have learned from observing them.

First, they recognize that some of us have an easier time receiving and understanding revelation than others. Other gifts come more naturally to them, and the gifts they do have they use to serve others.

Next, they acknowledge all the goodness that comes from church participation. They see the beautiful lives and relationships it fosters. They trust in its goodness. They continue to serve, pray, fast, and read their scriptures, even when they do not have strong spiritual feelings.

Finally, they are humble. They remember the moments when they have felt the influence of divine power, however slight. Instead of stomping their feet that they don't have more, they appreciate what they do have.

I also want to add a note of hope here. When they served in their respective Relief Society general presidencies, both Sheri Dew and Julie Beck taught that revelation is a skill we can develop. I believe that is true. I have watched a friend who doesn't believe that he has the gift of personal revelation, but generously serves anyway. I see thoughts come to him with increasing frequency to act in a particular way. He has learned to trust those thoughts, even if he can't be sure that they are personal revelation. He acts in faith and comes closer to God as a result. His life and those of many others have been enriched by his willingness to try.

⁷ David Van Biema, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," *Time*, Aug. 23, 2007. <https://time.com/4126238/mother-teresas-crisis-of-faith/>

Another friend wrote to me,

“I do not experience revelations as feelings of comfort or certainty,” she said, “and only rarely as insights or answers that come to my mind. However, I have had vivid experiences upon meeting particular individuals, in which a strong impression is conveyed to my heart that I am responsible for offering them love, care, and fellowship. Those moments are powerful and the impressions persistent, and I have come to recognize them as revelations.”⁸

These paths I’ve just described are not my own. One of the great treasures of my life is the gift of personal revelation. Even so, this gift waxes and wanes. Some weeks I receive insights to remember and act on during several of my prayers. Some weeks I do not. Sometimes I receive less because I ask vague questions or I fail to listen. Other times I don’t ask or listen well, and I receive direction anyway. And then there are periods when God needs me to work things out on my own. In all of these stages, I know that where I fall short, I can repent and God will forgive and also compensate others for my blunders. I trust that God is the architect of the final picture. As my friend Daryl Hoole says, “These are only battles. God’s already won the war.”

By virtue of our membership in Relief Society, we are called to instruct, inspire, and heal. How could God not want to communicate with us when God needs us to do this work? Not all of us have the skills to easily understand revelation, but I believe even those of us who struggle with personal revelation can grow closer to God in the process of doing good work.

Revelation and the Gathering of Israel.

Now let’s spend some time on the relationship of revelation to the gathering of Israel. President Nelson has been encouraging the youth, and us, to participate in the gathering of Israel.⁹ To my mind, the gathering of Israel means a blessing for the whole world as well as for church members and potential church members. Early members of Relief Society believed that when, in the name of God, Joseph Smith turned the key to women, he made possible things like the Seneca Falls convention, which was the first women’s rights convention in the United States. They believed when he turned that key and promised, “and this Society shall rejoice and knowledge and intelligence shall flow down from this time—this is the beginning of better days,” that conditions would improve for women throughout the world, not only for themselves. When I first learned they believed that, I thought it was quaint and sweet. But as I’ve grown in understanding, I’ve come to agree with them. In a similar way, I believe that the

⁸ Email to Kate Holbrook, April 17, 2020.

⁹ “I’m extending a prophetic plea to you, the women of the Church, to shape the future by helping to gather scattered Israel,” Russell M. Nelson, “Sisters’ Participation in the Gathering of Israel,” General Conference October 2018; “My dear extraordinary youth, you were sent to earth at this precise time, the most crucial time in the history of the world, to help gather Israel,” the prophet said,” Charlotte Larcabal, “A Call to Enlist and Gather Israel,” *New Era* March 2019; “We gather pedigree charts, create family group sheets, and do temple work vicariously to gather individuals unto the Lord and into their families,” Russell M. Nelson, “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” General Conference October 2006.

better we become as Saints, the more we can bless people outside of our church as well as those within. And we can be open to things, the good things people outside of the church have to teach us.

Passages written by the Book of Mormon prophet Nephi have helped me to imagine more about what the gathering of Israel looks like. Nephi describes this time from the perspective of mortals: “he gathereth his children from the four quarters of the earth; and he numbereth his sheep, and they know him; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd; and he shall feed his sheep, and in him they shall find pasture” (1 Nephi 22:24–25). I love the image here of all of us, from every part of the earth, finding pasture together, under one perfect, all-loving shepherd. There is a pasture I love which I visit every summer. Horses and cows graze there, and deer. The sky, mountains, meadow, trees, and streams are beautiful. The air is clear. The animals have all that they need and they are safe there. To have all of us in a safe and beautiful place where we are known, seen, and cared for—I want to be in that place and I want to help others find it.

Revelation is crucial to the gathering of Israel. Seeking God’s will both as it comes through our leaders and to us individually—is the way we can find pasture and help others to do so as well. Building bridges with people from countries outside the one I was born in—especially but not exclusively when I was a missionary in Russia—has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. Watching God’s love through the Holy Ghost transcend linguistic and cultural barriers fills me with hope. That miracle makes me think that every good thing is possible. It strengthens my faith in Nephi’s words that come just a few verses later than those I already read, where he foresees that for those people who repent: “all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people shall dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel” (1 Nephi 22:28). I long to see all of us dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel, and that promise motivates me to pursue revelation so I can contribute to this process and help more of us to the pasture of Jesus.

Histories about Revelation

In some ways, the way we tell history has misled us about how revelation works. There was a long period in American History where we came to think of useful history as that history that gave us people to venerate. We learned to tell histories that only included the admirable. This affected the way we often told church histories as well—we made it tidier, the people simpler and easier to understand, than they really were. The records themselves can be untidy. We at the Church History Department are trying to tell stories of real people in all their complexity and acknowledge the moments when things did not go perfectly. In doing so, we are recovering a more whole understanding of past events. Some people welcome this shift. For others, it creates painful challenges. Despite the pain of this transition, which I feel sorry about, I believe it is the right thing to do. Only a few hours after the church was organized, God commanded us to keep a record. God didn’t tell church leaders only to record the easy times or members’ actions that were clearly 100 percent correct. Since humans are involved in history, that would have made for a short record.

I find Church History inspiring because I see the love of God in it—over and over—and I also see people who have the love of God in them, and people who are resourceful. Church history puts real stories in my heart. Like the story of my great-great-great-great grandmother, whose husband left her repeatedly, and then, finally, for good, but who raised children, crossed the plains, and served as chair of the female council of health in early Utah history, where she shared a recipe for medicine that had come to her through a vision. Church history includes the story of her descendant, my dad, who made good choices and bad choices. Instead of giving in entirely to bad choices at times when they were adding up, part of him kept trying to make good choices. He made awkward phone calls to me once or twice a year. His priesthood and temple privileges were restored around the time of his death. The flame of my own courage is strengthened when I think of the courage it took for him to pursue those reinstatements and to place those phone calls to the daughter he had abandoned when she was six weeks old. For all of the mistakes he made, I feel to honor him for the hard things that he did right. His is not a tidy story, but in addition to forewarning me, it does also inspire me.

Conclusion

Adopting a view of revelation as a process requires patience and hope. By definition, hope is something we have despite negative past experience or evidence that points to the contrary. Hope is something we choose. When you feel acutely one of the world's problems, you can spend all of your energy in anger and criticism, or you can study, pray, and choose to hope in the solution that comes, your role as part of the solution. Criticism is vital to good thinking, but I believe we must balance it with hope and with positive action. We can hold that hope out in front of us to light our way and to light the way of others.

This image has been meaningful to me for a long time. [Shows James Christensen painting "The Responsible Woman"] When I was in the Missionary Training Center, my friend Laura cut it out of a catalogue, mounted it on foam core, and mailed it to me. I took it with me everywhere. A year or two after I returned, my friend Emilee found a larger version and asked her artist husband to frame it for me for Christmas. I have displayed it in my home ever since.

Note all of the things strapped to her body, so that she doesn't drop them. One of them is a baby. One of them is a rope. One of them is a musical instrument. I wonder whether that candle is the reason she can fly. Imagine yourselves as this woman. What is strapped to your body? To mine is strapped three daughters and a husband, but they also help me, so maybe we're all attached to each other by ropes extending out. I carry along a pen and paper. Books. A salad to deliver. A garden shovel. Someone else's baby because I like to help younger moms. A list of people to pray for. A vacuum cleaner. A folder of writing to edit. Esther Ackerberg's recipe for Swedish Pancakes. What, for you, would the flame be that you hold? For me, that candle is hope and all the things that make up that hope: the gospel of Jesus Christ as restored by Joseph Smith and woven into our church institution by every prophet since; Latter-day Saint women's experiences from the past two hundred years; my ancestors; my friends; and you. Fire is contagious, and others' flames keep mine burning.

We can do substantial good in this world not because doing so is simple, but because we are strong enough to do things that are hard. Our Heavenly Father is waiting to help us, to make us stronger. He needs us to follow through on answers to the questions He is waiting for us to ask.¹⁰ He needs us to follow through on answers to the questions He is waiting for us to ask. Sisters, we are endowed with godly power. Let's exercise that power to light this world with God's love. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

¹⁰ "I do not think that God is insulted when we forget Him. Rather, I think He is deeply disappointed. He knows that we have deprived ourselves of the opportunity to draw closer to Him by remembering Him and His goodness. We then miss out on Him drawing nearer to us and the specific blessings He has promised." Dale G. Rendlund, "Consider the Goodness and Greatness of God," General Conference April 2020.