

RETHINKING REVELATION

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When I was about twelve, yet another retelling of the Cinderella story was released into theatres in a magic-free but nonetheless magical version called *Ever After*. One of my favorite scenes in this film involves the prince pacing along a riverbank, bemoaning the challenge of finding his true love to Leonardo da Vinci. He asks the great Renaissance man,

How can you be certain to find [the right person]? And if you find them, are they really the one for you, or do you only think they are? What if the person you're meant to be with never appears? Or she does but you're too distracted to notice? You learn to pay attention. Then, let's say God puts two people on earth, and they are lucky enough to find one another. But one of them gets hit by lightning. Well, then, what? Is that it? Or perchance you meet someone new and marry again. Is that the lady you should be with, or was it the first? When the two of them are side by side, were they both the one for you and you just met the first one first? Or is the second one supposed to be first?¹

An understandably exasperated da Vinci tells the prince that he needs to learn to pay attention and not leave everything to fate. In other words, he needs to quit worrying about making the *one right choice* and just *choose*.

Knowing how to make good decisions can be rather overwhelming and perhaps lead us to the petrified paranoia of indecision, too afraid of getting it wrong to move forward with faith. In seeking out answers on how to understand and recognize the voice of God, the scriptures and

1. Andy Tennant, Susannah Grant, Rick Parks, Mireille Soria, Tracey Trench, Drew Barrymore, Anjelica Huston, Dougray Scott, and Jeanne Moreau, *Ever After: A Cinderella Story*. (Beverly Hills, Calif.: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1998).

the prophets have offered plenty of advice. For instance, many prophets have suggested the pattern of searching the scriptures, meditating upon the answer, and praying for clarification. Simple. But how do we know that we have received an answer? In section 8 of the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith reveals to Oliver Cowdery that he will be told “in [his] mind *and* in [his] heart” what to do (D&C 8:2, emphasis added). Another revelation refers to Oliver as being enlightened in his mind alone (D&C 6:15). To complicate matters, President Harold B. Lee once said, “When your heart begins to tell you things that your mind does not, then you are getting the Spirit of the Lord,” in direct contrast to additional counsel that Oliver was given.² Should we wait to feel peace of mind? Of heart? Of both?

Other scriptures speak of hearing an internal voice—sometimes a loud one, more often still or small—or of finding insight through the written word of God. We might listen to music, experience feelings of peace, or a more intense “burning of the bosom.” Answers may come through time alone or in the company of others. In other words: there are so many possible avenues through which we can receive divine counsel that we may find that, like Prince Henry in *Ever After*, we end up stuck pacing along a riverbank trying desperately to know whether or not we have received the answer we sought for, too anxious about making the wrong decision to act at all.

We are not alone in feeling at times unsure about the promptings we receive. Consider the story of Nephi. Nephi, raised as a Jew in the same household as his father, the prophet Lehi, would have known that God had commanded his people not to kill. And yet he found himself at the feet of a drunken Laban being prompted to kill the man who stood between him and access to the records of his ancestry. Three

2. Harold B. Lee, “When Your Heart Tells You Things Your Mind Does Not Know,” *New Era*, Feb. 1971, reprinted in June 2002 and available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2002/06/when-your-heart-tells-you-things-your-mind-does-not-know?lang=eng>.

times the Spirit “constrains” Nephi with the instruction to kill Laban, leaving Nephi literally shaking at the thought. The word “constrain” is not “still” or “small.” It suggests *boldness* and urgency. Its Latin root refers to being shackled. The later French definition defines “constraining” as exerting force, physical or moral, upon another being. This is no subtle voice of instruction but a powerful and immediate contradiction to what Nephi had previously understood as immutable truth. Nephi listens to this counsel and must reconcile two conflicting instructions. The first was the commandment not to kill. The second was the immediate instruction to retrieve the record in order to perpetuate the gospel among his descendants. He follows the counsel of the Spirit in that moment and slays Laban, thus preserving important information for his family.

Another example comes from Mother Eve, also presented with conflicting instructions. She and Adam are told to multiply and replenish the earth, to take care of the garden, and to enjoy every benefit the garden had for them *except* for the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Eve eventually recognizes that in order to fulfill God’s plan, she and Adam need to leave their temporary paradise and sacrifice ignorance for knowledge and ease for labor. They cannot follow both instructions: she is able to study out these choices in her mind and make a decision, accepting the consequences of that choice, both good and bad.

We can also look to the story of Abraham and the near sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Although often portrayed as a young boy in art, religious scholars suggest instead that Isaac was a grown man by this time and as much a participant as Abraham was in climbing Mount Moriah and onto the alter that his father had built. This instruction must have been not only confusing to Abraham and Isaac but utterly devastating to both Abraham and Sarah, after so many years of living without children. Yet even when inspired to do the unthinkable, Abraham and Isaac move forward with full intent to follow through on the instruction

they receive. Abraham's knife is literally in the air above Isaac before the Spirit "called unto him out of heaven" (Genesis 22:11) to spare Isaac's life.

From these stories and others, we learn that while a spirit of peace or joy or comfort *may* come from following the promptings of the Spirit, that does not necessarily mean that the action we feel inspired to take will always be inherently comfortable or uncomplicated. The instruction may not even make immediate sense or could seem contradictory to what we have previously felt to be true. To follow the Spirit, we may have to be as my landlord Brother Duffin said so eloquently to me this week, a bit "crazy, cuckoo bonkers." We must do what is right and let the consequence follow, even if that consequence may be murky or unfathomable. We may not be called to mountain heights or stormy seas—but we *might* be. We must be prepared to travel waters and paths both familiar to us and unfamiliar to seemingly anyone.

How do we know, then, that we act in good faith with the Spirit when we make decisions that may seem firmly in the land of the crazy, cuckoo, and bonkers? I believe that one of the most important first steps we can take is to free ourselves of the belief that we will *ever* make a decision in our lives that is free of consequences that are both good and bad. This is part of the fabric of the human experience. We will never make decisions that do not ripple outward into the universe positively and negatively. Part of both receiving and acting upon personal revelation requires us to abandon the notion that we are in control of either the answers we receive from the divine or the consequences of following those promptings.

The great philosopher Aristotle once said that that which is created cannot be free. This means, as Fiona and Terryl Givens explain, "that agency could not exist, let alone flourish, if we were created beings. (The creator is responsible for the nature [and failures] of the created, whether cookies, a bridge, or a human soul.)" Because agency is so essential to every piece of God's plan, this suggests that we are not

simply “willing subjects of the Father’s plan but collaborators in its very inception.”³

As collaborators in this plan, we can take comfort in expecting that God will continue to collaborate along with us as we stumble along with the tasks of continuing the restoration of the gospel and in gathering Zion. God’s plan centers around us using our agency to be anxiously engaged in good causes and in doing many things of our own free will.⁴ Parley Pratt taught that our decisions and personal preferences “are the very mainsprings of life and happiness—they are the cement of all virtuous and heavenly society. . . . Aided and directed by the light of heaven . . . every affection, attribute, power and energy of your body and mind may be cultivated, increased, enlarged, perfected . . . for the glory and happiness of yourself and all of those whose good fortune it may be to be associated with you.”⁵ Our particular spheres of influence and interest will directly relate to the way in which we connect with heaven. This can lead to some beautiful and individualized ways in which we draw closer to our heavenly parents and the language through which they speak to us. For instance, I find that I am just as likely to find answers to my prayers through study of the scriptures as I am in an excellent book, in a theatre, or in a symphony.

On the other hand, there are many ways in which instruction from God can become a bit lost in translation. We can overshoot the mark, misunderstand, or misapply instructions and become inadvertent pharisees, promoting what we think to be right but instead causing harm. I’m reminded of the lessons I heard when I was younger about girls who have had sex before marriage being like a chewed piece of

3. Fiona Givens and Terryl Givens, *All Things New: Rethinking Sin, Salvation, and Everything in Between* (Meridian, Idaho: Faith Matters Publishing, 2020), 23.

4. See Doctrine and Covenants 58:27.

5. Givens and Givens, *All Things New*, 23.

gum no one wants, for instance, or the racist and false messages from years ago about Black members of the Church not receiving the priesthood because of the mark of Cain. In our desire to apply the gospel, we may make small or much more serious errors.

We can take comfort in knowing that God has prepared to assist us in making corrections. In fact, the role of our heavenly parents is, in part, to make order from our mess. Fiona and Terryl Givens also suggest that “[God’s] divine energies are spent not in precluding chaos but in reordering it, not in preventing suffering, but in alchemizing it, not in disallowing error but in transmuting it into goodness. Satan’s unhindered efforts in the garden were simply assimilated into God’s greater purpose. The malice of the biblical Joseph’s brothers became instrumental in their entire household’s salvation. . . . If God can transform cosmic entropy and malice alike into fire that purifies rather than destroys, how much more can He do with actions of well-intentioned but less-than-perfect [humans].”⁶ We can do our best knowing that the Atonement is always there to sift away the tares from our wheat.

It is not reasonable to expect ourselves or anyone else to have completely mastered the art of receiving and interpreting the communication with the Spirit any more than it is for us to assume that even perfect communication would lead to results that would benefit everyone without exception every time. Instead, we rely on the atonement of our Savior to cover what we are unable to do. As students of divine, merciful heavenly parents, we can give ourselves and others the grace of knowing that everyone is trying their best. We can, and should, be anxiously engaged in good causes, like the works of anti-racism, gender parity, and creating safer spaces for members of our eternal family that are part of the LGBTQ community. We should seek to address poverty, public health, and accessibility concerns. As we consider our own areas

6. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 78–79.

of expertise and interest and counsel with heaven on how we might do good, we can expect that opportunities will arise.

It is my testimony that when we act on our impulses to do good, whether the reality of the source of that inspiration is the result of direct divine interaction or our own impulses, our heavenly parents and beloved older brother will do their part to ensure that all comes to right. Thus, we can move forward with confidence while striving to be meek and humble enough to receive correction when it comes. In doing so, we continue our work as co-creators and partners with heaven in the work of building Zion.

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