

Quick to Observe

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In October 1987 Elder Marvin J. Ashton, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, spoke in general conference about spiritual gifts. I recall with fondness the impact his message had upon me at that time, and the things he taught then continue to influence me today. In his message Elder Ashton detailed and described a number of less conspicuous spiritual gifts—attributes and abilities that many of us might not have considered being spiritual gifts. For example, Elder Ashton highlighted the gifts of asking; of listening; of hearing and using a still, small voice; of being able to weep; of avoiding contention; of being agreeable; of avoiding vain repetition; of seeking that which is righteous; of looking to God for guidance; of being a disciple; of caring for others; of being able to ponder; of bearing mighty testimony; and of receiving the Holy Ghost (see “There Are Many Gifts,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 20).

Another seemingly simple and perhaps underappreciated spiritual gift—the capacity of being “quick to observe” (Mormon 1:2)—is vitally important for you and for me in the world in which we do now and will yet live.

The Spiritual Gift of Being Quick to Observe

All of us have learned important lessons from the central characters in the Book of Mormon. As we read about and study the lives of Nephi, Laman, Alma, King Noah, Moroni, and many others, we discover things we should and should not do, and we realize more completely the kinds of people we should and should not become.

In my study of the Book of Mormon I have been especially impressed with a particular description of Mormon, the principal compiler of the Nephite record. The specific depiction of this noble prophet to which I would direct our attention is contained in the first five verses of the first chapter of Mormon:

“And now I, Mormon, make a record of the things which I have both seen and heard, and call it the Book of Mormon.

“And about the time that Ammaron hid up the records unto the Lord, he came unto me, (I being about ten years of age ...) and Ammaron said unto me: I perceive that thou art a sober child, and art *quick to observe*;

“Therefore, when ye are about twenty and four years old I would that ye should remember the things that ye have observed concerning this people; ...

“And behold, ... ye shall engrave on the plates of Nephi all the things that ye have observed concerning this people.

“And I, Mormon, ... remembered the things which Ammaron commanded me” (Mormon 1:1–5; emphasis added).

Please note that the root word *observe* is used three times in these verses. And Mormon, even in his youth, is described as being “quick to observe.” As you study and learn and grow, I hope you also are learning about and becoming quick to observe. Your future success and happiness will in large measure be determined by this spiritual capacity.

Please consider the significance of this important spiritual gift. As used in the scriptures, the word *observe* has two primary uses. One use denotes “to look” or “to see” or “to notice”—as we learn in Isaiah 42:20: “Seeing many things, but thou *observest* not; opening the ears, but he heareth not” (emphasis added).

The second use of the word *observe* suggests “to obey” or “to keep”—as is evident in the Doctrine and Covenants: “But blessed are they who have kept the covenant and *observed* the commandment, for they shall obtain mercy” (D&C 54:6; emphasis added).

Thus when we are quick to observe, we promptly look or notice and obey. Both of these fundamental elements—looking and obeying—are essential to being quick to observe. And the prophet Mormon is an impressive example of this gift in action.

I now want to present several examples of the lessons that can be learned when you and I are blessed to be quick to observe.

I have a dear friend who served as a stake president. The patriarch in the stake over which he presided had experienced some health challenges and was unable to perform in his calling. The ailing patriarch had difficulty moving about and dressing and caring for himself, and his strength was limited. One Sabbath afternoon this good stake president visited the home of the patriarch to encourage him and check on his well-being. As the stake president entered the

home, he found the patriarch dressed in his suit and white shirt and tie, sitting in a recliner in the front room. The stake president greeted the dear patriarch and, knowing how hard it must have been to dress himself, graciously suggested to the patriarch that it was not necessary for him to get dressed up on the Sabbath or to meet visitors. In a kind but firm voice, the patriarch reproved the stake president and said, "Don't you know that this is the only way I have left to show the Lord how much I love Him?"

The stake president was quick to observe. He both heard and felt the lesson, and he applied it. Reverence for the Sabbath day and the importance of respect and appropriate demeanor and dress took on added importance in the ministry of the stake president. The spiritual ability to see, hear, remember, and act upon that lesson was a great blessing in his life—and in the lives of many others.

Before attending her sacrament meetings, Sister Bednar frequently prays for the spiritual eyes to see those who have a need. Often as she observes the brothers and sisters and children in the congregation, she will feel a spiritual nudge to visit with or make a phone call to a particular person. And when Sister Bednar receives such an impression, she promptly responds and obeys. It often is the case that as soon as the "amen" is spoken in the benediction, she will talk with a teenager or hug a sister or, upon returning home, immediately pick up the phone and make a call. As long as I have known Sister Bednar, people have marveled at her capacity to discern and respond to their needs. Often they will ask her, "How did you know?" The spiritual gift of being quick to observe has enabled her to see and to act promptly and has been a great blessing in the lives of many people.

Sister Bednar and I are acquainted with a returned missionary who had dated a special young woman for a period of time. He cared for her very much, and he was desirous of making his relationship with her more serious. He was considering and hoping for engagement and marriage. This relationship was developing during the time that President Hinckley counseled the Relief Society sisters and young women of the Church to wear only one earring in each ear.

The young man waited patiently over a period of time for the young woman to remove her extra earrings, but she did not take them out. This was a valuable piece of information for this young man, and he felt unsettled about her nonresponsiveness to a prophet's pleading. For this and other reasons, he ultimately stopped dating the young woman, because he was looking for an eternal companion who had the courage to promptly and quietly obey the counsel of the prophet in all things and at all times. The young man was quick to observe that the young woman was not quick to observe.

I presume that some of you might have difficulty with my last example. You may

believe the young man was too judgmental or that basing an eternally important decision, even in part, upon such a supposedly minor issue is silly or fanatical. Perhaps you are bothered because the example focuses upon a young woman who failed to respond to prophetic counsel instead of upon a young man. I simply invite you to consider and ponder the power of being quick to observe and what was actually observed in the case I just described. The issue was not earrings!

One final example. I have long been fascinated by the nature of the interaction between the Spirit of the Lord and Nephi found in chapters 11 through 14 of 1 Nephi. Nephi desired to see and hear and know the things his father, Lehi, had seen in the vision of the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 8). In chapters 11 through 14 the Holy Ghost assisted Nephi in learning about the nature and meaning of his father's vision. Interestingly, 13 times in these chapters the Spirit of the Lord directed Nephi to "look" as a fundamental feature of the learning process. Nephi repeatedly was counseled to look, and because he was quick to observe, he beheld the tree of life (see 1 Nephi 11:8), the mother of the Savior (see 1 Nephi 11:20), the rod of iron (see 1 Nephi 11:25), and the Lamb of God, the Son of the Eternal Father (see 1 Nephi 11:21).

I have described only a few of the spiritually significant things Nephi saw. You may want to study these chapters in greater depth and learn from and about Nephi's learning. As you study and ponder, please keep in mind that Nephi would not have seen what he desired to see, would not have known what he needed to know, and could not have done what he ultimately needed to do if he had not been quick to observe. That same truth applies to you and to me!

Quick to observe. Prompt to watch and to obey. A simple gift that blesses us individually and in our families and extends blessings to so many other people. Each of us can and should strive to be worthy of this significant spiritual gift—even the capacity of being quick to observe.

The Importance of Being Quick to Observe

Let me now address the question of why the spiritual gift of being quick to observe is so vital for us in the world in which we do now and will yet live. Simply stated, being quick to observe is an antecedent to and is linked with the spiritual gift of discernment. And for you and for me, discernment is a light of protection and direction in a world that grows increasingly dark.

Much like faith precedes the miracle, much like baptism by water comes before the baptism by fire, much like gospel milk should be digested before gospel meat, much like clean hands can lead to a pure heart, and much like the ordinances of the Aaronic Priesthood are necessary before a person can receive the higher ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood, so being quick to observe

is a prerequisite to and a preparation for the gift of discernment. We can hope to obtain that supernal gift of discernment and its light of protection and direction only if we are quick to observe—if we both look and obey.

President George Q. Cannon (1827–1901), who served as a counselor to four Presidents of the Church, taught powerfully about the gift of discernment:

“One of the gifts of the Gospel which the Lord has promised to those who enter into covenant with Him is the gift of discerning of spirits—a gift which is not much thought of by many and probably seldom prayed for; yet it is a gift that is of exceeding value and one that should be enjoyed by every Latter-day Saint. ...

“Now, the gift of discerning of spirits not only gives men and women who have it the power to discern the spirit with which others may be possessed or influenced, but it gives them the power to discern the spirit which influences themselves. They are able to detect a false spirit and also to know when the Spirit of God reigns within them. In private life this gift is of great importance to the Latter-day Saints. Possessing and exercising this gift they will not allow any evil influence to enter into their hearts or to prompt them in their thoughts, their words or their acts. They will repel it; and if perchance such a spirit should get possession of them, as soon as they witness its effects they will expel it or, in other words, refuse to be led or prompted by it.”¹

Can we recognize how crucial this spiritual gift is in our lives today and how being quick to observe is a powerful invitation for the blessings of discernment?

President Stephen L. Richards (1879–1959), who served as a counselor to President David O. McKay, has provided additional instruction about the nature and blessings of discernment:

“First, I mention the gift of discernment, embodying the power to discriminate ... between right and wrong. I believe that this gift when highly developed arises largely out of an acute sensitivity to impressions—spiritual impressions, if you will—to read under the surface as it were, to detect hidden evil, and more importantly to find the good that may be concealed. The highest type of discernment is that which perceives in others and uncovers for them their better natures, the good inherent within them. ...

“... *Every member in the restored Church of Christ could have this gift if he willed to do so.* He could not be deceived with the sophistries of the world. He could not be led astray by pseudo-prophets and subversive cults. Even the inexperienced would recognize false teachings, in a measure at least. ... We ought to be grateful every day of our lives for this sense which keeps alive a conscience which constantly alerts us to the dangers inherent in wrongdoers and sin.”²

As we integrate the teachings of Presidents Cannon and Richards, we learn that the gift of discernment operates basically in four major ways.

First, as we “read under the surface,” discernment helps us detect hidden error and evil in others.

Second, and more important, it helps us detect hidden errors and evil in ourselves. Thus the spiritual gift of discernment is not exclusively about discerning other people and situations, but, as President Cannon taught, it is also about discerning things as they really are within us.

Third, it helps us find and bring forth the good that may be concealed in others.

And fourth, it helps us find and bring forth the good that may be concealed in us. Oh, what a blessing and a source of protection and direction is the spiritual gift of discernment!

The teachings of Presidents Cannon and Richards concerning the power of discernment to detect hidden evil and to identify good that may be concealed become even more important to you and to me in light of a specific element of Lehi’s vision. In the vision various groups of individuals were pressing forward that they might obtain the path which led unto the tree of life. The strait and narrow path came along by the rod of iron, even to the tree. The mist of darkness described in the vision represents the temptations of the devil that blind the eyes of the children of men and lead them into broad roads so that they are lost (see 1 Nephi 12:17).

Now please pay particular attention to verse 23 in 1 Nephi 8, and let us liken this scripture to our day and the challenges we face in an increasingly wicked world:

“And it came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost.”

I repeat again for emphasis the truth that discernment is a light of protection and direction in a world that grows increasingly dark. You and I can press forward safely and successfully through the mist of darkness and have a clear sense of spiritual direction. Discernment is so much more than recognizing right from wrong. It helps us distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, the important from the unimportant, and the necessary from that which is merely nice.

The gift of discernment opens to us vistas that stretch far beyond what can be seen with natural eyes or heard with natural ears. Discerning is seeing with spiritual eyes and feeling with the heart—seeing and feeling the falsehood of an idea or the goodness in another person. Discerning is hearing with spiritual ears

and feeling with the heart—hearing and feeling the unspoken concern in a statement or the truthfulness of a testimony or doctrine.

I frequently have heard President Boyd K. Packer, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, counsel members and priesthood leaders, “If all you know is what you see with your natural eyes and hear with your natural ears, then you will not know very much.” His observation should help all of us to appropriately desire and seek these spiritual gifts.

Observing and discerning also enable us to assist others who are seeking to obtain the path and who desire to press forward with steadfastness in Christ. Blessed with these spiritual gifts, we will not lose our way; we will not wander off; we will not be lost. And we can hope to obtain the supernal gift of discernment and its light of protection and direction only if we are quick to observe. As Alma taught his son Helaman, “See that ye take care of these sacred things, yea, see that ye look to God and live” (Alma 37:47).

I declare my special witness that Jesus is the Christ, our Redeemer and our Savior. I know that He lives. I invoke His blessing upon each of you—that you may desire to be and become quick to observe and truly discerning.

[illustration] *Mormon Abridging the Plates*, by Tom Lovell

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[illustration] *Scripture Study*, by Del Parson, may not be copied

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Notes

1. *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of George Q. Cannon*, comp. Jerreld L. Newquist (1987), 156–57.
2. In Conference Report, Apr. 1950, 162–63; emphasis added.

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