

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

Plain and precious truths

In case you hadn't noticed it, in the last days, discipleship is to be lived *in crescendo*. Our adversities and extremities will merely bring out the strong simplicities and the reassuring realities of the gospel. Likewise, brisk challenges to basic beliefs, and some afflictions, will aid in the development of even greater convictions concerning these basic beliefs. Though it will be the key doctrines which are assailed, after the dust of this dispensation has settled it will be the key doctrines which will have prevailed.

Early in the Restoration, by translation and revelation, numerous plain and precious truths appeared in fairly rapid succession. This occurred through Joseph Smith, the "choice seer" (2 Nephi 3:6). As when dinner guests arrive nearly all at once, Joseph, as host, received, welcomed, and duly noted each truth. Only later was there time and matured perceptivity to see their relationships and the antiquity of their credentials.

Doctrine of premortal existence

Among these plain and precious truths was the doctrine of the premortal existence of mankind. (See 1 Nephi 13:39-40.) Early on, Joseph received much concerning this truth, but just as the revelations concerning it came incrementally, so did Joseph's understanding.

One of the "plain and precious things" long ago "kept back" or "taken away" (1 Nephi 13:34, 40), this enormously important truth did not reach the Holy Bible in an abundant degree, though it is surely there. (See Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 1:4-5; 2 Timothy 1:9.) It was briefly extant after the original Apostles. Alas, however, just as Paul foresaw, the time soon came when Church members did not "endure sound

doctrine," including this one. (See 2 Timothy 4:3.)

With the later disapprovals of councils, the doctrine of premortal existence demonstrably was not a doctrine which could have been reestablished by research. The doctrine does not abuse logic, for "truth is reason," especially "truth eternal," but is more than logic alone can fully support. (See *Hymns*, 1985, no. 292.) It could only come from restoration by modern revelation. It was certainly not abroad in the land of America until Joseph Smith's articulations.

Furthermore, so much had happened in human history to make the restoration of this key truth necessary. It was needed to confound the false doctrine of a mankind created *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. (See 2 Nephi 3:12.) The "ex nihilo" view, said the Prophet Joseph "lessens man in my estimation" (*Words of Joseph Smith*, Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, comps. [Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980], p. 359).

Without this truth, existential lamentations prevail about how man spends his entire life trying to prove to himself that his existence is not absurd. Even believers, in Paul's words, if malnourished as to doctrine, can become "wearied and faint in [their] minds" and surrender to circumstance. (See Hebrews 12:3.)

The reality of premortality responds to puzzlings which suggest we are strangers here. It is a curative for the yearnings expressed in music and poetry and literature. There are wonderings such as in these lines:

Not dulled, nor lulled, supined,
secure, replete does Man create;
But out of stern challenge, in
sharp excitement, with a burning
joy;
Man is the hunter still,
Though his quarry be a hope, a
mystery, a dream . . .

From what immortal desire, what sudden sight of the unknown,
Surges that desire?

What flint of fact, what kindling light of art or far horizon,
Ignites that spark?

(Nancy Newhall, in Thomas F. Horbein, *Everest, the West Ridge* [San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1965], pp. 28, 30.)

There are ponderings, like this one:

"Everything in our life happens as though we entered upon it with a load of obligations contracted in a previous existence . . . obligations whose sanction is not of this present life, [which] seem to belong to a different world, founded on kindness, scruples, sacrifice, a world entirely different from this one, a world whence we emerge to be born on this earth, before returning thither" (Marcel Proust, in Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator* [New York: Harper and Row, 1963], p. 8).

And finally, there are these more familiar lines:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: . . .
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.
(William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," lines 58, 64–65.)

Vastness of God's love

So far as we know, brothers and sisters, the restoration of this responsive doctrine began with the translation by Joseph Smith of a few verses in the book of Alma, late 1829 or early 1830. (See Alma 13:3–5.) By themselves, however, these verses would not have been adequate. Elder Orson Pratt said: "This same doctrine [premortal existence] is inculcated in some small degree in the Book of Mormon. However, I do not think that I should have ever discerned it in that book had it not been for the new translation of the Scriptures

[Bible]" (*Journal of Discourses*, 15:249).

In June of 1830, while rewording some of Genesis under inspiration, the "choice seer" received revelation now included in the book of Moses. Of that special revelatory moment Joseph wrote, "I will say . . . that amid all the trials and tribulations we had to wade through, the Lord, who well knew our infantile and delicate situation, vouchsafed for us a supply of strength, and granted us 'line upon line of knowledge—here a little and there a little,' of which the following was a precious morsel" (*History of the Church*, 1:98).

Included in that "precious morsel" were words of Moses, further enlarging Joseph's view, about how God's work involves other planets: "But only an account of this earth, and the inhabitants thereof, give I unto you. For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power" (Moses 1:35).

The plans and purposes of God were also made more plain: "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). Thus, the vastness of space reflects the vastness of God's love for all of His children.

Other revelations to Joseph Smith

Other expanding revelations soon followed. In May 1833, the stunning communication, now known as section 93, declared: "Man was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be. . . .

"For man is spirit. The elements are eternal, and spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy" (D&C 93:29, 33).

Several years passed, years of apparent ripening and readying, before the record indicates the Prophet began to communicate this precious doctrine publicly. In 1839, pondering and contemplating in Liberty Jail, Joseph, by

epistle, urged Church members to better behavior, behavior befitting Church members who had been "called . . . from before the foundation of the world" (*The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, Dean C. Jessee, comp. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1984], p. 397).

Joseph also received revelation about what was ordained in "the midst of the Council of the Eternal God . . . before this world was" (D&C 121:32). Imprisoned, Joseph was reassuringly told his own days were known, and his years would "not be numbered less" (D&C 122:9).

Scriptural references on premortal existence

Joseph's first recorded public speech on this powerful doctrine occurred shortly after his release from soul-stretching bondage in Missouri. (See *The Words of Joseph Smith*, p. 9.) Other speeches followed, capped finally by the soaring sermon at King Follet's funeral in the spring of 1844.

This declaration to Jeremiah: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5) was paralleled in the 1842 book of Abraham:

"Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;

"And God . . . said: These I will make my rulers; . . . and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born" (Abraham 3:22-23).

The book of Abraham, in corroborating section 93, used words whose full measure you and I have scarcely begun to take: "If there be two spirits, . . . notwithstanding one is more intelligent than the other, [they] have no beginning; they existed before, they shall have no end . . . for they are . . . eternal" (Abraham 3:18).

Conjoined with the truths of the resplendent Restoration, biblical references to this precious doctrine took on enhanced meaning and gave increased illumination. (See John 9:2; see also Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:4; Jude 1:6; Job 38:7.)

Indeed, a very major stumbling block was thus removed by revelation. Just as prophesied, Jesus also manifested Himself "in word" in the latter days. (See 1 Nephi 14:1.)

Brevity of mortal life

In Moses' day, a generous God let his doctrine "drop as the rain" (Deuteronomy 32:2). In Eli's day, however, "there was no open vision" (1 Samuel 3:1). In Joseph Smith's day, there was a "pouring down" of "knowledge from heaven" (D&C 121:33), a cascade of "plain and precious" truths, including the pivotal doctrine of the premortal existence of man. (See 1 Nephi 13:39-40.)

A few ancient writings, unavailable to Joseph Smith or anyone else at that time, have since appeared. Apocryphal writings may contain truths to be discerned, for "whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom" (D&C 91:5). This is an example from the Nag Hammadi Library. In the Apocryphon of James, Jesus reportedly told an afflicted Peter and James, "If you consider how long the world existed before you, and how long it will exist after you, you will find that your life is one single day and your sufferings one single hour" ("The Apocryphon of James," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978], p. 31).

How like what the Lord told suffering Joseph in jail: "My son, . . . thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment" (D&C 121:7).

One's life, therefore, is brevity compared to eternity—like being

dropped off by a parent for a day at school. But what a day!

Even now, however, many still "stumble at the word" (1 Peter 2:8). Yet, as Paul prescribed, if we blend "longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:2), some who "murmur" about the human predicament "shall learn doctrine" (Isaiah 29:24; 2 Nephi 27:35), by letting this doctrine, "as the dew from heav'n distilling," revive them, "thus fulfilling What thy providence intends" (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 149).

Not a relaxing doctrine

Meanwhile, the adversary relentlessly uses the absence or disbelief of this doctrine to shrink man's perspective. One-dimensional man with only a one-dimensional view of the world will surely focus upon the cares of the world, yielding to the things of the moment.

Latter-day Saints do not, of course, ask others to accept this or any gospel truth against their wills. We ask only for tolerance, and expect such doctrines to be scrutinized and even criticized by others. We reserve the same freedom regarding others' beliefs—but all in mutual good will, however.

Premortality is not a relaxing doctrine. For each of us, there are choices to be made, incessant and difficult chores to be done, ironies and adversities to be experienced, time to be well spent, talents and gifts to be well employed. Just because we were chosen "there and then," surely does not mean we can be indifferent "here and now." Whether foreordination for men, or foredesignation for women, those called and prepared must also prove "chosen, and faithful." (See Revelation 17:14; D&C 121:34–36.)

Identity but accountability

In fact, adequacy in the first estate may merely have ensured a stern, second estate with more duties and no

immunities! Additional tutoring and suffering appears to be the pattern for the Lord's most apt pupils. (See Mosiah 3:19; 1 Peter 4:19.) Our existence, therefore, is a continuum matched by God's stretching curriculum.

This doctrine brings unarguable identity but also severe accountability to our lives. It uniquely underscores the actuality of the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

It also reminds us that we do not have all of the data. There are many times when we must withhold judgment and trust God, even in the midst of "all these things." Only with the help of this doctrine can we begin to understand things as they really were, are, and will become. (See Jacob 4:13; D&C 93:24.)

Agreeing to enter this second estate, therefore, was like agreeing in advance to anesthetic—the anesthetic of forgetfulness. Doctors do not de-anesthetize a patient, in the midst of what was previously authorized, to ask him, again, if it should be continued. We agreed to come here and to undergo certain experiences under certain conditions.

Flash of memory

Elder Orson Hyde said, "We have forgotten! . . . But our forgetfulness cannot alter the facts" (*Journal of Discourses*, 7:315). Yet, on occasions, there are inklings. President Joseph F. Smith observed how "we often catch a spark from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former home" (*Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939], p. 14.)

There can be sudden surges of *deja vu*. A flash from the mirror of memory can beckon us forward to that far pavilion, filled with "everlasting splendours" and resurrected beings. C. S. Lewis wrote, "We cannot mingle with the splendours we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rus-

ting with the rumour that it will not always be so" (*C. S. Lewis at the Breakfast Table and Other Reminiscences*, ed. James T. Como [New York: Collier Books, 1985], p. 34). Thanks to the Prophet Joseph Smith, hundreds more leaves of scripture are rustling, rustling resoundingly for all who have ears to hear.

"I know—again!"

Thus, when we now say "I know," that realization is rediscovery; we are actually saying "I know—again!"

From long experience, His sheep know His voice and His doctrine. Meanwhile, the soul weaving in process for such a long time goes on as described in these anonymous lines:

My life is but a weaving
Between my Lord and me;
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.

Ofttimes He weaveth sorrow
And I in foolish pride,
Forget that He seeth the upper,
And I the under side.

Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly,
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver's skillful hand,
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

(In *Sourcebook of Poetry*, comp. Al Bryant [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1968], p. 664.)

May we so believe, so trust, so submit, and so behave, I pray in the name of Him who is the "Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye" (C.S. Lewis, *At the Breakfast Table*, p. xxv), even Jesus Christ, amen.

President Hinckley

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Council of the Twelve Apostles has been our concluding speaker.

We express appreciation to the managers and operators of the many television and radio stations and cable systems for offering their facilities as a public service to bring the proceedings of this conference to a large audience throughout many areas of the world.

The choir will now sing "When Faith Endures." The benediction will then be given by Elder John H. Groberg of the First Quorum of the Seventy, after which this conference will be adjourned until two o'clock this afternoon.

The choir sang "When Faith Endures."

Elder John Groberg offered the benediction.

FIRST DAY AFTERNOON MEETING

SECOND SESSION

The second general session of the 155th Semiannual General Conference began at 2:00 P.M. on Saturday, October 5, 1985. President Ezra Taft Benson, President of the Council of the Twelve, conducted.

Music for this session was provided by combined ward choirs from the Granite, Olympus, and Salt Lake Central regions, under the direction of Orman R. Weight with Clay Christiansen at the organ.

At the beginning of the meeting, President Benson made the following remarks: