

A Framework for Personal Revelation

By Elder Dale G. Renlund
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

We need to understand the framework within which the Holy Ghost functions. When we operate within the framework, the Holy Ghost can unleash astonishing insight.

Like many of you, I have been greatly influenced by Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf over the years. That explains, at least in part, what I am about to say.¹ So, with apologies to him ...

Well-trained airplane pilots fly within the capacity of their aircraft and follow directions from air traffic controllers regarding runway use and flight path. Simply stated, pilots operate within a framework. No matter how brilliant or talented they are, only by flying within this framework can pilots safely unleash the enormous potential of an airplane to accomplish its miraculous objectives.

In a similar way, we receive personal revelation within a framework. After baptism, we are given a majestic yet practical gift, the gift of the Holy Ghost.² As we strive to stay on the covenant path,³ it is “the Holy Ghost ... [that] will show [us] all things [that we] should do.”⁴ When we are unsure or uneasy, we can ask God for help.⁵ The Savior’s promise could not be clearer: “Ask, and it shall be given you; ... for every one that asketh receiveth.”⁶ With the help of the Holy Ghost, we can transform our divine nature into our eternal destiny.⁷

The promise of personal revelation through the Holy Ghost is awe-inspiring, much like an airplane in flight. And like airplane pilots, we need to understand the framework within which the Holy Ghost functions to provide personal revelation. When we operate within the framework, the Holy Ghost can unleash astonishing insight, direction, and comfort. Outside of that framework, no matter our brilliance or talent, we can be deceived and crash and burn.

The scriptures form the first element of this framework for personal revelation.⁸ Feasting on the words of Christ, as found in the scriptures, stimulates personal revelation. Elder Robert D. Hales said: “When we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we search the scriptures.”⁹

The scriptures also teach us how to receive personal revelation.¹⁰ And we ask for what is right and good¹¹ and not for what is contrary to God's will.¹² We do not "ask amiss," with improper motives to promote our own agenda or to fulfill our own pleasure.¹³ Above all, we are to ask Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ,¹⁴ believing that we will receive.¹⁵

A second element of the framework is that we receive personal revelation only within our purview and not within the prerogative of others. In other words, we take off and land in our appointed runway. The importance of well-defined runways was learned early in the history of the Restoration. Hiram Page, one of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, claimed to be receiving revelations for the entire Church. Several members were deceived and wrongly influenced.

In response, the Lord revealed that "no one shall be appointed to receive commandments and revelations in this church excepting my servant Joseph Smith ... until I shall appoint ... another in his stead."¹⁶ Doctrine, commandments, and revelations for the Church are the prerogative of the living prophet, who receives them from the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁷ That is the prophet's runway.

Years ago, I received a phone call from an individual who had been arrested for trespassing. He told me it had been revealed to him that additional scripture was buried under the ground floor of a building he tried to enter. He claimed that once he obtained the additional scripture, he knew he would receive the gift of translation, bring forth new scripture, and shape the doctrine and direction of the Church. I told him that he was mistaken, and he implored me to pray about it. I told him I would not. He became verbally abusive and ended the phone call.¹⁸

I did not need to pray about this request for one simple but profound reason: only the prophet receives revelation *for the Church*. It would be "contrary to the economy of God"¹⁹ for others to receive such revelation, which belongs on the prophet's runway.

Personal revelation rightly belongs to individuals. You can receive revelation, for example, about where to live, what career path to follow, or whom to marry.²⁰ Church leaders may teach doctrine and share inspired counsel, but the responsibility for these decisions rests with you. That is your revelation to receive; that is your runway.

A third element of the framework is that personal revelation will be in harmony with the commandments of God and the covenants we have made with Him. Consider a prayer that goes something like this: "Heavenly Father, Church services are boring. May I worship Thee on the Sabbath in the mountains or on the beach? May I be excused from

going to church and partaking of the sacrament but still have the promised blessings of keeping the Sabbath day holy?”²¹ In response to such a prayer, we can anticipate God’s response: “My child, I have already revealed my will regarding the Sabbath day.”

When we ask for revelation about something for which God has already given clear direction, we open ourselves up to misinterpreting our feelings and hearing what we want to hear. A man once told me about his struggles to stabilize his family’s financial situation. He had the idea to embezzle funds as a solution, prayed about it, and felt he had received affirmative revelation to do so. I knew he had been deceived because he sought revelation contrary to a commandment of God. The Prophet Joseph Smith warned, “Nothing is a greater injury to the children of men than to be under the influence of a false spirit, when they think they have the Spirit of God.”²²

Some might point out that Nephi violated a commandment when he slew Laban. However, this exception does not negate the rule—the rule that personal revelation will be in harmony with God’s commandments. No simple explanation of this episode is completely satisfactory, but let me highlight some aspects. The episode did not begin with Nephi asking if he could slay Laban. It was not something he wanted to do. Killing Laban was not for Nephi’s personal benefit but to provide scriptures to a future nation and a covenant people. And Nephi was sure that it was revelation—in fact, in this case, it was a commandment from God.²³

The fourth element of the framework is to recognize what God has already revealed to you personally, while being open to further revelation from Him. If God has answered a question and the circumstances have not changed, why would we expect the answer to be different? Joseph Smith stumbled into this problematic scenario in 1828. The first portion of the Book of Mormon had been translated, when Martin Harris, a benefactor and early scribe, asked Joseph for permission to take the translated pages and show them to his wife. Unsure of what to do, Joseph prayed for guidance. The Lord told him not to let Martin take the pages.

Martin requested that Joseph ask God again. Joseph did so, and the answer was, not surprisingly, the same. But Martin begged Joseph to ask a third time, and Joseph did so. This time God did not say no. Instead, it was as though God said, “Joseph, you know how I feel about this, but you have your agency to choose.” Feeling himself relieved of the constraint, Joseph decided to allow Martin to take 116 manuscript pages and show them to a few family members. The translated pages were lost and never recovered. The Lord severely rebuked Joseph.²⁴

Joseph learned, as the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob taught: “Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For ... he counseleth in wisdom.”²⁵ Jacob cautioned that unfortunate things happen when we ask for things we should not. He foretold that the people in Jerusalem would seek “for things that they could not understand,” look “beyond the mark,” and completely overlook the Savior of the world.²⁶ They stumbled because they asked for things they would not and could not understand.

If we have received personal revelation for our situation and the circumstances have not changed, God has already answered our question.²⁷ For example, we sometimes ask repeatedly for reassurance that we have been forgiven. If we have repented, been filled with joy and peace of conscience, and received a remission of our sins, we do not need to ask again but can trust the answer God has already given.²⁸

Even as we trust God’s prior answers, we need to be open to further personal revelation. After all, few of life’s destinations are reached via a nonstop flight. We should recognize that personal revelation may be received “line upon line” and “precept upon precept,”²⁹ that revealed direction can be and frequently is incremental.³⁰

The elements of the framework for personal revelation are overlapping and mutually reinforcing. But within that framework, the Holy Ghost can and will reveal everything we need to soar onto and maintain momentum on the covenant path. Thus we can be blessed by the power of Jesus Christ to become what Heavenly Father wants us to be. I invite you to have the confidence to claim personal revelation for yourself, understanding what God has revealed, consistent with the scriptures and the commandments He has given through His appointed prophets and within your own purview and agency. I know that the Holy Ghost can and will show you all things that you should do.³¹ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf has consistently and effectively used analogies related to aircraft to teach important gospel principles. For example, he recently linked pilots’ preflight checklists to teaching like the Savior in “A Teacher’s Checklist” ([broadcast for teachers, June 12, 2022], broadcasts.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).
2. The Holy Ghost is the third member of the Godhead, is often referred to as the Spirit or the Spirit of God, and performs vital roles in the plan of salvation. He bears witness of the Father and the Son, reveals the truth of all things, sanctifies those who have repented and been baptized, and is the Holy Spirit of Promise (see Guide to the Scriptures, “Holy Ghost,”

scriptures.ChurchofJesusChrist.org).

3. See 2 Nephi 31:19–21; Mosiah 4:8. There is no other way whereby we “can be saved in the kingdom of God.” Wishing otherwise will not create an alternative path.
4. 2 Nephi 32:5; see also Doctrine and Covenants 84:43–44.
5. See 2 Nephi 32:4; Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 93–96.
6. Matthew 7:7–8.
7. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World”; “Young Women Theme”; *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 27.0; 27.2, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
8. See 2 Nephi 32:3.
9. Robert D. Hales, “Holy Scriptures: The Power of God unto Our Salvation,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2006, 26–27.
10. The scriptures teach that the voice of the Holy Ghost is mild and still, like a whisper—not loud or noisy; it is simple, quiet, and plain; it can be piercing and burning; it affects both mind and heart; it brings peace, joy, and hope—not fear, anxiety, and worry; it invites us to do good—not evil; and it is enlightening and delicious—not mystifying. See 1 Kings 19:11–12; Omni 1:25; Alma 32:28; Helaman 5:30–33; 3 Nephi 11:3; Moroni 7:16–17; Doctrine and Covenants 6:22–24; 8:2–3; 9:8–9; 11:12–14; 85:6; Boyd K. Packer, “The Candle of the Lord,” *Ensign*, Jan. 1983, 51–56; Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2020, 88–92; Russell M. Nelson, “Embrace the Future with Faith,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2020, 73–76; Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” 93–96.
11. See 3 Nephi 18:20; Moroni 7:26; Doctrine and Covenants 88:64–65.
12. See Helaman 10:5; Doctrine and Covenants 46:30.
13. James 4:3; see James 4:3, New International Version; 2 Nephi 4:35; Doctrine and Covenants 8:10; 46:7; 88:64–65.
14. See Doctrine and Covenants 88:64–65; Guide to the Scriptures, “Prayer,” scriptures.ChurchofJesusChrist.org.
15. See 3 Nephi 18:20; Moroni 7:26.
16. Doctrine and Covenants 88:9–7

10. DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS 20:2, 1.
17. See Doctrine and Covenants 21:4–5.
18. Fortunately, arrangements were made for him to receive the help and treatment he really needed.
19. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 197.
20. See Thomas S. Monson, “Whom Shall I Marry?,” *New Era*, Oct. 2004, 4.
21. See Doctrine and Covenants 59:9–16.
22. Joseph Smith, in *Times and Seasons*, Apr. 1, 1842, 744, josephsmithpapers.org.
23. The Lord often does change, amend, or make exceptions to His revealed commandments, but these are made through *prophetic* revelation and not *personal* revelation. *Prophetic* revelation comes through God’s duly appointed prophet according to God’s wisdom and understanding. These exceptions include the Lord’s revelation to Moses and Joshua to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan despite His commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13). The Lord, through His prophet, can and will revise *His* commandments for *His* purposes. We are not free, however, through *personal* revelation to alter or ignore established commandments that God has revealed to His Church through the prophet.

See 1 Nephi 4:12–18; for a fuller discussion, see Joseph Spencer, *1st Nephi: A Brief Theological Introduction* (2020), 66–80.
24. For the full account of the 116 manuscript pages, see *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*, vol. 1, *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (2018), 44–53; see also Doctrine and Covenants 3:5–15; 10:1–5.
25. Jacob 4:10.
26. See Jacob 4:14–16.
27. Joseph Smith taught, “We never enquire at the hand of God for special revelation only in the case of there being no previous revelation to suit the case” (in *History, 1838–1856* [Manuscript History of the Church], volume A-1, 286–87, josephsmithpapers.org).
28. See Mosiah 4:3. When we continue to feel guilt and regret after sincere and intentional repentance, it is usually because

of a lack of faith in Jesus Christ and in His ability to completely forgive and heal us. Sometimes we believe forgiveness is for others but does not completely apply to us. That is simply a lack of faith in what the Savior can accomplish because of His infinite Atonement.

29. See Isaiah 28:10; 2 Nephi 28:30; David A. Bednar, “Line upon Line, Precept upon Precept,” *New Era*, Sept. 2010, 3–7.
30. But if God has not given you revelation, keep asking. As Elder Richard G. Scott taught: “Proceed with trust. ... 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” (“Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2007, 10).
31. See 2 Nephi 32:5.