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Seeing Beyond the Leaf

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The following address was delivered at the BYU Church History Symposium at the Conference Center in Salt Lake City on March 7, 2014.

When I received the invitation to participate in this symposium, I felt like it was something close to my heart. I'm not entirely sure of all the reasons why, but I do know this: history is important. And keeping ourselves anchored to the lessons learned from history will enable us to emulate the best of what it means to be human. It can also help us avoid the worst. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the German philosopher and idealist, said, "We learn from history that we do not learn from history," which is supported by George Santayana, who said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."¹

The late novelist Michael Crichton is reported to have said, "If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree."² History teaches us not only about the leaves of existence; it also teaches about the twigs, branches, trunks, and roots of life. And these lessons are important.

One of the weaknesses we have as mortals is to assume that our “leaf” is all there is—that our experience encompasses everyone else’s, that our truth is complete and universal. As I considered what I wanted to speak about today, it seemed that the metaphor of the leaf needed to be at the heart. I also ran across an old Yiddish expression that goes, “To a worm in horseradish, the world is horseradish.” I want to emphasize that the truth embraced by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints extends beyond leaves and certainly beyond horseradish. It extends beyond time and space and encompasses all truth—from the mysteries of the tiniest atoms to the vast and incomprehensible secrets that the universe holds so tantalizingly before us.

The gospel of Jesus Christ encompasses not only the truth of what was and what is but the truth of what can and will be. It is the most practical of all truths. It teaches the way of the disciple—a path that can take ordinary, flawed mortals and transform them into glorious, immortal, and limitless beings whose divine potential is beyond our meager capacity to imagine.

Now, that is practical truth. It is priceless beyond imagination. It is truth of the highest order. The pursuit, discovery, and application of truth are what we are on this earth to discover. The gospel of Jesus Christ not only encompasses all truth, but it specializes in the knowledge that will be of greatest worth to us in this life and throughout the eternities to come.

Seeing Beyond Our Leaf

As mentioned before, one of the traits we share as human beings is that we assume that our own experience is a true and proper base from which to view the rest of the world. For example, when we are healthy, we presume that those we meet are healthy and judge them by that standard. When we are sick, we are more likely to wonder if others are sick as well. We assume that the leaf of our existence defines the world.

Tolkien began his famous novel *The Hobbit* with these words: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” If you remember, Bilbo Baggins lived in a comfortable home in the Shire, a small, peaceful village that celebrated gardening, community gatherings, and a meal schedule that included breakfast, second breakfast, elevensies, lunch, afternoon tea, supper, and dinner.

Bilbo was quite content with the leaf of his life. And it was beautiful for all that. But little did he know of the twigs, branches, trunks, and roots that were all around him. Little did he know of distant towers, trolls, and talking

trees. The farther he went from the comforts of the Shire, the more remarkable and strange the world became.

While Tolkien’s world was one of fiction, it can serve as a metaphor for our own experience. I grew up in a small branch of the Church in Zwickau, East Germany. Our little meetinghouse was a beautiful building with an old air-driven organ. It was my privilege to sometimes have the assignment to work the bellows that supplied air to the pipe organ. While the congregation sang our beloved hymns of the Restoration, I pumped with all my strength so the organ would not run out of wind. The eyes of the organist unmistakably indicated whether I was doing fine or needed to increase my efforts quickly.

I loved our little meetinghouse with its stained-glass window that showed Joseph Smith kneeling in the Sacred Grove. When I was young, I supposed that this was what the Church looked like—that what I was seeing in Zwickau was what every other member of the Church saw during their Sunday experience throughout the world—that the little leaf of my experience was the same as everyone else’s.

As I grew older, our family moved to Frankfurt, where the Church was a little larger. There were more members there. The meetinghouse looked different.

The older I got, the more exposure I had to the Church in its many forms throughout the world. I have worshipped with the Saints of God in congregations throughout the world, from the most humble of homes to the great Conference Center in Salt Lake City.

Now it is approaching seven decades since that small child sat behind the organ pumping wildly, trying to force enough air through its pipes so that the congregation could hear the beautiful music. I have seen the Church—leaf, twig, branch, trunk, and root. And though outwardly the Church appears different in the various areas of the world, I can affirm that it is of the same spirit and the same essence wherever you go. It rests upon the foundation of the blessed Redeemer, and it is guided by the rock of revelation. No matter how different the Church may appear in its outer form, wherever you travel the inner Spirit of Christ is the same in every congregation, and that is how it should be.

I stand in awe of how the Holy Spirit transforms the lives of individuals, regardless of their cultural, economic, or social background, and leads all mankind to forsake the natural man and cleave to the light, to feel the mighty change that comes to those who seek God’s truth. I have met men, women,

and children on every continent who have experienced this transformative rebirth in their hearts, causing them to “have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.”³

Humility Leads to Spiritual Knowledge

Often, it is not the wise nor the great who respond to the words of the prophets, but the poor in heart, the humble, and those who suffer. Frequently, these are they who approach their own Hill Onidah, open their hearts to the word of God, and arouse their faculties to “exercise a particle of faith”—even if they can only muster “no more than [a] desire to believe.”⁴ Sometimes all it takes is the smallest seed—merely a desire to believe—for faith to sprout, blossom, and become good.⁵ Sometimes we must go to the Father in earnest prayer, tears wetting our cheeks, as we repeat the words the distraught father offered to the gentle Christ, “Lord, I [do] believe; help thou mine unbelief.”⁶

From small seeds, great trees grow.

From small beginnings, the Lord can work miracles in our lives.

From Humble Beginnings

Our Heavenly Father is able to make great things come from small beginnings. In fact, this is often His preferred strategy.

Case in point, I invite you to consider the small Galilean town of Nazareth. Why do you suppose our Heavenly Father chose to have His Only Begotten Son raised in this relatively insignificant town in Galilee? Why Nazareth? Why not Jerusalem? Or Rome, for that matter?

The Jewish convert to Christianity Alfred Edersheim wrote of this area that “there was a general contempt in Rabbinic circles for all that was Galilean.” And that “Galilean—Fool!” was a common expression.⁷

The town of Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament, nor does Josephus speak of it. I understand that the Talmud lists sixty-three Galilean towns but does not mention the city of Christ’s youth. When Nathanael first heard of Jesus, he voiced a question that must have been on many an inquirer’s lips: “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?”⁸ And yet from this small, out-of-the-way town came the Light of the World, the Savior of mankind, the Redeemer.

Eighteen centuries later, in another small, out-of-the-way town, lived a young man who walked into a grove of trees near his home with a question in his heart. He knelt in prayer to ask God for direction in his life. Palmyra

was nestled in upstate New York, far from the intellectual and cultural centers of the United States (let alone the world). Why would our Heavenly Father choose such an out-of-the-way place to reveal Himself to man?

From these two unlikely and disregarded places—Nazareth and Palmyra—emerged two figures who would change the world.

“The Foolishness of God”

Throughout the record of sacred history, we find that our Heavenly Father teaches His children over and again not to place their trust in the wisdom of the world—not to overvalue what the world holds in high regard. He teaches us that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”⁹ And yet we have an almost irresistible desire to assume that the leaf of information we have in our possession is a representation of all there is to know. We assume that the horseradish that we see all around us is proof that the world is made of the substance.

We do the best we can with the information at our disposal to make assumptions and increase the body of knowledge—and this is a noble pursuit. However, when we assume that what we know is all there is to know, we miss the mark and our philosophies and theories fall short of the rich truths that populate heaven and earth.

In the words of Orson F. Whitney, an early Apostle of the Church, the gospel “embraces all truth, whether known or unknown. It incorporates all intelligence, both past and prospective. No righteous principle will ever be revealed, no truth can possibly be discovered, either in time or in eternity, that does not in some manner, directly or indirectly, pertain to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

Our Heavenly Father teaches this lesson to His children over and again—He warns against setting aside the knowledge of God or dismissing its importance. He teaches us that we should not assume that what we know—what we can prove and test and verify—is all that there is. “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.”¹¹

God sees infinitely more than we do. His perspective is infinitely more complete and profound than ours, “for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are [His] ways higher than [ours], and [His] thoughts than [ours].”¹² He has more information than we do. And a little more information can make all the difference in the world.

Since English is not my native language, I enjoy looking into the meaning of individual words—even plain ones. Take the word *plane* and another word *plane* spelled exactly the same way. Both words have the same amount of letters, and they sound just the same. Nevertheless, there are huge differences between them. One is a handy tool for smoothing planks of uneven wood. The other is an infinitely better choice for transoceanic travel.

A small amount of additional information—and perhaps a bit of context—makes a wondrous difference in our capacity to understand the meaning of words and the meaning of life’s circumstances.

God Chooses the “Foolish Things of the World”

In our world today, we seek out the wise, wealthy, and well-known. We honor their opinions and follow their research. Compare that with how our Heavenly Father operates. He often chooses “the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.”¹³

“And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

“Behold, I will show unto the Gentiles their weakness, and I will show unto them that faith, hope and charity bringeth unto me—the fountain of all righteousness.”¹⁴

He uses the weak and insignificant to bring to pass His work. He gently reminds us that the “things which are despised, hath God chosen, . . . that no flesh should glory in his presence.”¹⁵

His knowledge of truth is so infinitely greater than ours that He looks upon the wisdom of the world as perhaps we might look upon the dogmatic assertions of a pedantic fool. Though the fool may speak words with passion and conviction, he may lack essential information.

The Need for Faith

We must not abandon God’s revealed truth—which comes from the roots and source of all righteousness and truth. For what we see, in contrast, is the truth of our leaf.

Frederick the Great, the eighteenth-century king of Prussia, was one of the most innovative and successful military strategists in history. But he was

not always successful. After his defeat at Kunersdorf, many of his soldiers widely scattered in confusion. The story is told that “one [soldier] was brought before the king, who asked him why he had run away. ‘Because things were going badly for Your Majesty.’

“Frederick reflected for a moment, then said mildly, ‘I suggest that you wait a week. Then, if things are still going badly, we will quit together.’”¹⁶

There will be times when it may appear that things are going badly for the truth of God—that the evidence of the world contradicts God’s utterances. For my part, I have learned to be patient, knowing that in the end things will work out. God’s kingdom will continue to grow. The truth will continue to flourish and spread throughout the earth. Sometimes all it takes is a little faith and a little patience. Things that may appear impossible now may become matter-of-fact in years to come.

The Freiberg Temple

May I offer you a personal experience that illustrates this? You are all well aware that in 1961, the Soviet Union began building a wall that would cut off the city of West Berlin from the surrounding area. This wall was a symbol of the Cold War and served as a metaphor for the separation and division of the communist world and the democratic Western world. One of the resulting side effects of this increased isolation was that it became increasingly difficult for members of the Church in East Germany to visit the Swiss Temple—the only temple in Europe at that time.

Seven years later, in 1968, Elder Thomas S. Monson, an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, visited the Saints in the German Democratic Republic (DDR). President Monson said of that visit:

On a cloudy and rain-filled day I journeyed to the city of Görlitz, situated deep in the [DDR] near the Polish and Czech borders. I attended my first meeting with the Saints. We assembled in a small and ancient building. As the members sang the hymns of Zion, they literally filled the hall with their faith and devotion.

My heart was filled with sorrow when I realized the members had no patriarch, no wards or stakes—just branches. They could not receive temple blessings—either endowment or sealing. No official visitor had come from Church headquarters in a long time. The members could not leave their country. Yet they trusted in the Lord with all their hearts.

I stood at the pulpit, and with tear-filled eyes and a voice choked with emotion, I made a promise to the people: “If you will remain true and faithful to the commandments of God, every blessing any member of the Church enjoys in any other country will be yours.” Then I realized what I had said. That night, I dropped

to my knees and pleaded with my Heavenly Father, “Father, I’m on Thy errand; this is Thy Church. I have spoken words that came not from me but from Thee and Thy Son. Wilt Thou fulfill the promise in the lives of this noble people.”¹⁷

In 1975, six years after President Monson’s first visit to the German Democratic Republic, he came again, went to a beautiful place high above the Elbe River near Dresden and Meissen, and rededicated the East German Mission for the advancement of God’s work. I quote from his prayer:

Grant, Heavenly Father, that the membership here may receive their patriarchal blessings and live in such a way as to bring the promises to fulfillment.

Heavenly Father, wilt Thou open up the way that the faithful may be accorded the privilege of going to Thy holy temple, there to receive their holy endowments and to be sealed as families for time and all eternity.

The dedicatory prayer continues with the most wondrous pronouncements. If you haven’t read it yet, I recommend it warmly. President Monson concludes:

Amidst the ringing of Church bells this morning, and the singing of birds in this, the forest which Thou hast created, music fills our souls and gratitude fills our hearts as we humbly acknowledge before Thee that Thou art our Father, that with Thee all things are possible, and that Thy Gospel has been restored upon the earth. . . .

Grant that the way may be cleared for the program of the Church in its fulness to come to this people, for they, through their faith, have merited such blessings.

As Thy humble servant, acknowledging the divine revelation and inspiration of this day, I therefore invoke Thy holy blessings upon Thy work and upon Thy people in the Dresden Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.¹⁸

When I first learned about these wonderful promises by a prophet of God, my heart filled with gratitude to the Lord but at the same time with an encroaching feeling of uncertainty, almost unbelief. There seemed no possible way that these beautiful promises to our people could happen in their lifetime, if ever. How could a temple be built and operated in East Germany? I had faith in the Lord, and I loved and acknowledged President Monson as a prophet, seer, and revelator. I wanted the Saints in that country to have the full blessings of the gospel, but at the moment I just couldn’t see a way in which this could be accomplished.

I grew up in East Germany; that’s where my family joined the Church. Harriet’s ancestors came from the same part of Germany. We wished these promises to be fulfilled. But we knew firsthand of the challenges in our country. Was it possible to receive these promised blessings at a time of great political and societal division and isolation, at the time of the Cold War? I



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felt somehow like the man who cried out, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” It was clear to me that the evidence of the world contradicted the word of an Apostle of the Lord.

Almost a decade later, Harriet and I had all but forgotten this prophetic promise. We were attending the Swiss Temple one day when Harriet overheard a conversation between two elderly sisters from East Germany. The elderly at the time were the only ones in the DDR who were allowed to travel to the Swiss Temple, as the regime felt sure that they were not a flight risk.

One of these elderly sisters was talking to her friend about a very strange message she had received the same morning. Her son had informed her that soon a temple would be built in the DDR, the German Democratic Republic!

Harriet told me that this poor sister must have been very confused or lost her mind over the continuous wishful thinking to have a temple in East Germany. We felt sorry for these sisters but also a little amused at the same time when we shared the episode with our friends. There wasn’t even a temple in West Germany. How could the Church build one in the DDR?

A few days later, the Freiberg Temple was announced.

In June of 1985, President Gordon B. Hinckley dedicated in East Germany the Freiberg Germany Temple as a house of the Lord. It was the first temple behind the Iron Curtain. A temple in a communist land that almost everyone (including me) had said would never be possible in our lifetime.

The construction of the Freiberg Temple is one of the great miracles in the history of the Church in Europe. It is a wonderful example of how God can make the impossible possible in any part of the world.

The lesson here is an important one: God knows what we do not. What may seem impossible for us is not impossible to Him. What we mortals may write off as foolishness may be entered into the book of heaven as fact.

God is good and faithful, and He performs His work in ways that sometimes are not comprehensible to our mortal minds. He asks that we have a little faith, a little patience, that we believe. He asks us to seek after Him and believe in His word.

It is my conviction that those who disregard the reality of heaven will ultimately find themselves on the wrong side of history.

The Importance of Keeping Records

I assume that all of you love to study history. Talking to you about the importance of history or the keeping of records would appear almost like “taking owls to Athens,” “carrying coal to Newcastle,” or “selling snow to Eskimos.”

As a slight variation of what I said at the beginning, let me add, “Those who *don't* study history are doomed to repeat it, and those *who do* study history are doomed to stand by helplessly while *everyone else* repeats it.”

On April 6, 1830, a revelation was given to Joseph Smith the Prophet at Fayette, New York. The revelation was given at the organization of the Church in the home of Peter Whitmer Sr. Six men, who had previously been baptized, participated. By unanimous vote these persons expressed their desire and determination to officially organize the Church. In this revelation one half-sentence has great significance for our discussion today. It reads, “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you.”¹⁹

Almost five years later, in February of 1835, Joseph Smith met with nine members of the Twelve and placed before the council an item that would be of importance. He told them that he had learned something from experience that gave him deep sorrow. Then he said:

It is a fact [that] if I now had in my possession, every decision [we] had [made] upon important items of doctrine and duties, since the commencement of this work, I would not part with them for any sum of money; but we have neglected to take minutes of such things, thinking, perhaps, that they would never benefit us afterwards; which, [if we] had them now, would decide almost every point of doctrine which might be agitated. But this has been neglected, and now we cannot bear record, to the Church and to the world, of the great and glorious manifestations which have been made to us, with that degree of power and authority we otherwise could, if we now had these things to publish abroad.

Joseph Smith then urged the members of the Twelve to keep records of important events and decisions. He said if they would do this, even with items that may seem to have little or no worth, that later they would “find [them] of infinite worth, not only to your brethren, but [they] will be a feast to your own souls.”²⁰

With this being emphasized by the Prophet Joseph, I thank you for the efforts you are making to record the history of the Church and its people.

Sometimes we feel that our lives are mundane and trivial. “Of what interest would my life be to anyone?” we might say. Those of you who are deeply involved in the recording and teaching of history can answer that



Photo by Thomas A. Wayment

At the organization of the Church, in the home of Peter Whitmer Sr., a revelation was given that contained these words of great significance: “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you.”

question far better than I. You understand the worth of journals that may have seemed trivial and mundane to the people who wrote them at the time but are cherished and treasured years later.

I commend you for all you do to keep a history of the Church and for your efforts in encouraging others to keep a record of their lives and their families. This is a cause that is of great importance to God's work and to His Church.

I am grateful for the marvelous work that is being done to prepare and publish *The Joseph Smith Papers*. Learning about the real struggles and real successes of early Church leaders and members is a very faith-promoting process for me. We always need to remember that transparency and openness keep us clear of the negative side effects of secrecy or the cliché of faith-promoting rumors. Jesus taught the Jews, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."²¹ Truth and transparency complement each other. "The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth."²²

A Religion of Learning

My dear brothers and sisters, one of the most fascinating things about this mortal experience is that there is so much to learn. Isn't it a remarkable feeling to belong to a Church that not only embraces truth—no matter the source—but that teaches there is much more to come, that God "will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God."²³ As a result, we are humble about the truth we have. We understand our knowledge is a work in progress, that the leaf we have before us is simply one microscopic snapshot—part of an infinitely vast forest of fascinating knowledge.

Our little world—our small section of experience—may be an accurate and true reflection of our reality. But, it is only an infinitesimal atom in the vast universe of what we eventually will know. Isn't that a glorious concept!

Isn't it wondrous to belong to a Church that teaches that infinite progress and eternal knowledge await those who set foot upon the path of discipleship of Jesus Christ and follow it in faithfulness and dedication?

I wish you the best in this noble effort as you pursue the great adventure of recording and clarifying history. The roads we travel are certainly not guaranteed to be easy or ever pleasant, but if we keep traveling in the pursuit of truth, they will always lead back to the ultimate truth: they will lead us to our Heavenly Father, who is the great historian, the great record keeper, the

great Creator, mentor, and friend. Of this I testify and leave you my blessing, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense*, vol. 1 of *Life of Reason; Or, The Phases of Human Progress* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 284.
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3. Mosiah 5:2.
4. Alma 32:27.
5. See Alma 32.
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8. John 1:46.
9. 1 Corinthians 1:25.
10. *Elders' Journal*, October 15, 1906, 26, as quoted in Spencer W. Palmer, "World Religions (Non-Christian) and Mormonism: Overview," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 4:1589.
11. Articles of Faith 1:9.
12. See Isaiah 55:9.
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14. Ether 12:27–28.
15. 1 Corinthians 1:28–29.
16. Clifton Fadiman and Andre Bernard, *Bartlett's Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2000), 218.
17. Thomas S. Monson, "Thanks Be to God," *Ensign*, May 1989, 51.
18. Dedication and rededication prayer for the German Democratic Republic, given by Elder Thomas S. Monson near Radebeul, between Dresden and Meissen, April 27, 1975; see <http://www.mission.net/germany/berlin/history/prayer.htm>.
19. Doctrine and Covenants 21:1.
20. "History of Joseph Smith," *Millennial Star*, April 2, 1853, 212–13.
21. John 8:32.
22. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.
23. Articles of Faith 1:9.