

GROWING UP UNTO THE LORD



RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO THE
VOICE OF THE SPIRIT, LIVING IN PEACE,
AND BLESSING GENERATIONS



CRAIG A. CARDON

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RECEIVING DIRECTION



IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUMMER SEASON IN Trieste, Italy, in July 1968. I had arrived in Italy just a few months earlier to begin my two- and one-half-year mission. The mission was new enough that instructions in Italian had not yet begun at what was then the Language Training Mission, or LTM. This meant that for a season, those called to Italy were given an additional six months in the field to aid in learning the language. And while I had made good progress with the language, there was something that for me seemed to overshadow the work.

Her name was Debbie. I had met this faithful, beautiful, selfless daughter of God in high school. Following the counsel of my parents, we had not dated steadily, but we had dated regularly. I had developed deep feelings for her, and I believed she for me, but my service to the Lord at the call of the prophets had always been the priority for both of us. Indeed, when I departed Arizona for my mission in February, we affirmed to each other that while we hoped things would work out for us after the mission, there were no formal or informal commitments between us. This wasn't the time. She was free to date, and I would devote my time to the Lord.

Upon arriving in Italy, unlike other missionary elders who had pictures of their girlfriends back home displayed in the apartment, I kept the picture I had of Debbie in a drawer, only viewing it on preparation day when I would write to her. But this outward practice attempting to show complete devotion to my missionary purpose wasn't really working. Inwardly my heart and mind were often with Debbie. Personally, I felt conflicted and duplicitous. I was not at peace spiritually. I had prayed much about this during my few months in Italy, but the matter had not rested in my heart and mind.

A few weeks earlier I had written to my father, asking for his counsel. Although it's hard

to remember such a time, those were the days before instant email and social media communication. Generally, it took two weeks for a letter to make it from Italy to Arizona and another two weeks for a response to make it back.

My father never held what some would consider to be a high Church position, but the flame of the gospel burned brightly in his heart, and he shared it with everyone. While I served in Italy, he served as what was then known as the stake mission president. My mother was a woman of great and abiding faith. Together, they taught me to pray, to obey the Lord's commandments, and to love the Lord and His gospel.

Dad responded to me with a letter dated July 7, 1968. It arrived a couple of weeks after that. His inspired and even prophetic counsel served to connect me with heaven in a way I had not previously imagined possible, notwithstanding my being immersed in the Lord's work at the time. An understanding of the significance in my life of this letter from my father is enhanced by the fact that the Lord called him home unexpectedly six months later at the age of fifty-nine, making the letter one of his last communications to me during his mortal sojourn. The letter is two typewritten pages in length, typed by my mother as my father dictated. As one of the few written communications I had from him before his death, the letter is precious to me.

Dad didn't tell me what to do about Debbie. Instead, he taught me how to get the answer to this important life decision through the gift of the Holy Ghost. I thought I already knew that, but in this momentous occasion, my heart was prepared as never before to receive a witness of spiritual truths taught to me by my father.

Dad drew parallels between what I was facing and what those learning about the restored gospel face. This reference to what I was encountering each day in my missionary activities greatly enhanced my understanding. Decisions about both obeying the Lord's commandments and decisions about serving Him must be made, and as Dad expressed it, "it all boils down to the fact that none of us, and I mean none, can get along without the Holy Ghost as our constant guide and companion."

Dad taught me from the scriptures, making reference to the Doctrine and Covenants¹ and to how the Lord taught Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to receive answers from Him, studying things out in our minds, making decisions as to a course forward, and then seeking confirmation from the Lord, receiving a burning in the bosom or a stupor of thought. Dad made this faith-filled statement: "I do not know the answer to your problem. The Lord is going to give you the answer and no one else." He then shared his personal counsel as informed by the prophets with this introduction: "But here are a few things you might consider before making your decision."

Experiences from his life followed, along with a few observations of things he had witnessed in the lives of others. In all of this counsel, he was connecting me with heaven again and again. He concluded:

I know from the bottom of my heart that when the time comes for you to make a choice, He will let you

know. . . .

Make your mind up as to what you should do, then go again to the Lord to find out whether you are right or wrong. When you know in your heart that your decision is right, then have the courage and strength to carry out your decision.

I love you son, and thrill with your testimony.²

This was not the first time my father had taught me about the influence and ministry of the Holy Ghost. For example, when I spoke in sacrament meeting just prior to departing on my mission, I quoted these words of an angel delivered to king Benjamin:

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the Atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father.²

Following sacrament meeting, my father came up to me, gave me a hug, noted my quoting of this scripture, and told me it was his favorite scripture, which I had not previously known. Indeed, at his funeral, his well-used and marked scriptures were on display, opened to this verse.

In retrospect, I recognize that there were many occasions when my father and mother did what they could to help me recognize and respond to the voice of the Spirit, and yet it was on this occasion of great personal need and desire that Dad's attempt to again teach me now found meaningful reception. The scriptures teach the value of repeated attention to teaching eternal truths. Consider an eternal principle of teaching embedded in the following verse: "When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus had said."⁴

During His mortal ministry, on at least ten occasions the Lord taught His disciples of His impending death and resurrection.⁵ And yet it was not until they were face-to-face with the actual event that they began to understand what He had taught them. So it was with me. I had heard the teaching and had even felt the influence of the Holy Ghost, but it was now in this moment of personal desire and need that Dad was able to again patiently teach, and I "believed the scripture, and the word which Jesus . . . said."

Imagine the lasting influence of such inspired counsel from my father at such a critical point in my life. And as significant as were these lessons from my earthly father, even more powerful were the lessons that would soon follow from my Heavenly Father.

After receiving Dad's letter, I felt impressed to begin a private, personal fast during which, as our missionary work continued, I poured out my soul to the Lord on bended knee and in my heart and mind as we traveled about doing the work. A personally unsettling but spiritually peaceful thought rested upon me. I was to write to Debbie immediately, explaining that while I still thought the world of her, in order to have my heart fully upon the work of the Lord at this time in my life, I would not be writing

weekly, but would write occasionally as I may feel prompted to do. Privately, given our “non-committal” discussions at the time I left on my mission, I realized this could lead to Debbie not being available when I returned, but the spiritual impressions were clear and were accompanied by a feeling of hope. I wrote the letter before breaking my fast and put the letter in the mail the next day.

The day after mailing the letter to Debbie, I received a letter from one of my closest friends. I was not at all prepared for the message his letter contained. His full purpose in writing was to warn me that Debbie had been seen recently at several Church young single adult activities holding hands with a particular returned missionary, and to counsel that if I wanted to have any chance of Debbie being around when I returned from my mission, I needed to write her immediately and tell her to stop seeing this young man.

This was the complete opposite of what I had just done. I had never before experienced the emotion that I felt in that moment. It was as if my heart was being ripped out of my chest. Why had the Lord done this to me in this way? When I wrote my letter to Debbie, a comforting, confirming spirit of the answer I had received and acted upon had rested on me. I felt I was at a point to receive whatever would eventually happen with Debbie according to the Lord’s will and His timing. But the very next day?! I was overcome with sorrow and a feeling of deep, personal loss.

I couldn’t believe the timing. My friend’s letter had been in the mail for two weeks before arriving the day after I had sent my letter to Debbie. Unfortunately, my sorrow soon began to be replaced with a bit of anger. I penned a letter to Debbie that vented my feelings, and although I felt better, I did not feel the Spirit of the Lord. I set the letter aside and wrote another . . . and another . . . and another. Each of the five or more letters became calmer and kinder. As my heart and mind finally quieted with the last letter, a peace as great as had been my consternation overwhelmed me as the voice of the Spirit was now able to speak to my heart and mind. The Lord spoke to my mind the same words he had given to Oliver through the Prophet Joseph: “Cast your mind on the night that you cried unto me . . . concerning . . . these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?”⁶

All of the impulsive letters were set aside and never sent. It would take two weeks for my letter to get to Debbie and two weeks for a response to return. During this ensuing month, the Lord taught me much. Mostly, He helped me see inside my own heart and to connect more personally and directly with Him. Was it truly my intent to give Him my all during my mission, or was I just creating an elaborate facade? Did I really believe He had spoken to me in providing the words in the letter I had sent to Debbie? Did I truly trust Him? Was I really willing to accept His will, knowing that He loves me and knows what is best, and act as He directs?

Over the course of the month, my faith grew, and as it grew, my questions were answered. I was anxious to receive Debbie’s reply but knew that whatever that reply was,

the Lord would bless and direct me. Approximately a month later, when I received the letter from Debbie written after she had received my momentous letter, she made no reference to the other young man and little reference to what I had addressed in my letter. Rather, she wrote of work and school events in her life and made a simple expression of also desiring to do the Lord's will.

My heart and mind were now firmly on the Lord's work and the mission He had placed before me. Debbie and I continued to communicate, albeit less frequently, for the remainder of my mission. While it may seem rationally counterintuitive, spiritually we grew closer and closer over the ensuing twenty-six months. Because the Lord and His work were first in my heart and mind, and because I knew He knew it and Debbie knew it, expressions of closeness with Debbie toward the latter part of my mission caused no sense of duplicity.

Upon my return from Italy, I learned that she had ended the relationship with the other young man prior to receiving my letter. She later told me that also before receiving my letter, she had independently felt from the Lord that she was to be available when I returned, although she continued to date. By the conclusion of my mission we had known each other for more than five years. We were married two and one-half months after my return from Italy.

My experience affirmed to me a principle that C. S. Lewis identified: "Put first things first and we get second things thrown in: put second things first and we lose *both* first and second things."⁷ This does not mean that the second things will always be what we may have originally desired. But when we put first things first with the Lord, the second things we receive are always what He knows are best for us and will ultimately bring us the greatest joy.

Following our marriage, the Lord taught me another important and related lesson about priorities. It was now a new season of life, and I was equally yoked with an eternal companion with the Lord as our Partner. As I pondered on these things, one day in my scripture study He brought to my attention that there are two things in this life He has commanded that we are to love with all our hearts: Him⁸ and our spouse.² So long as we do the will of the Lord, we love both "with all our hearts" without duplicity.

I also learned a companion truth, found in the similarity of the Lord's scriptural instructions for "love" and "cleave." For greater understanding, it is helpful to note that the word "cleave" is a contranym, meaning that depending on the context of its use, the same spelling and pronunciation of the word can have an opposite meaning. To cleave in one instance means "to adhere closely; stick; cling; and to remain faithful." To cleave also means "to split or divide; to cut off; sever."¹⁰ The use of both meanings is found in scripture. The companion truth similar to love, of course, is found with the first meaning. In all of scripture, there are only two "persons" to whom we are commanded to cleave: God¹¹ and our spouse.¹² While the scriptures counsel us to cleave or not to cleave unto

various “things,”¹³ the only persons to whom we are commanded to cleave are God and our spouse, “and none else.”¹⁴ God loves us and cleaves unto us as we individually love Him with all our hearts and cleave unto Him. As spouses individually love God with all their hearts and cleave unto Him, and as they love each other with all their hearts and cleave unto each other and none else, all other relationships find their proper divine order as they continue to obey God’s laws and keep His commandments.

Although my increased understanding of the significance and power of loving and cleaving as the Lord has commanded provides an example of continued learning, I am not able to adequately communicate the profound effect Dad’s timely and inspired communication had on me, not only during my mission, but for the remainder of my life in recognizing and responding to the voice of the Spirit. Even now, a half a century after receiving it, I still refer to the letter occasionally and find great peace in knowing that he knew me, he knew the Lord, and he loved me enough to help me better connect with heaven.

At that critical time during my mission, Dad placed squarely on my shoulders the responsibility to seek an answer from God rather than simply telling me what to do. But in the process, he provided guidance, experience, and testimony to help me along the way. He told me he loved me and that he had confidence in me. And perhaps most significantly, Dad’s letter—this letter of a father to his son—bore the imprimatur of the Holy Ghost. It was the Holy Ghost who delivered the message, and it touched me to my very soul.

I have relied on this sacred spiritual communication my entire life. I am dependent upon it. Through the precious gift of the Holy Ghost the Lord has guided, comforted, blessed, and protected me in every aspect of my life. I have heard His voice and felt His influence in matters relating to my immediate and my extended family, and in church, business, education, medical, civic, and personal matters. What a gift!

1. Doctrine and Covenants 8:1–5; 9:8–9.

2. Wilford P. Cardon, letter to author, July 7, 1968.

3. Mosiah 3:19.

4. John 2:22. (See also John 12:16.)

5. Matthew 12:38–41; 16:4, 21–23; 17:22–23; 20:17–19; 26:31–32; 27:62–66; Mark 8:31; 9:30–32; 10:32–34; Luke 11:29–32; 9:21–22, 43–45; 18:31–34; 24:3–11; John 2:18–21; 10:17–18; 11:25; 16:16–30; 20:9.

6. Doctrine and Covenants 6:22–23.

7. C. S. Lewis, letter to Dom Bede Griffiths, April 23, 1951.

8. Matthew 22:37.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 42:22.

10. [dictionary.com/browse/cleave?s=t](https://www.mormondictionary.com/browse/cleave?s=t), accessed September 21, 2019.

11. Doctrine and Covenants 11:19.

12. Doctrine and Covenants 42:22; Genesis 2:24.

13. See: 2 Kings 3:3; Psalm 102:5; Isaiah 14:1 (2 Nephi 24:1); Romans 12:9; Moroni 7:28, 46; Doctrine and Covenants 25:13; 98:11.

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