

C. NOELLE McBRIDE



Beauty
for **ASHES**

—
DIVORCE AND THE LATTER-DAY SAINT WOMAN
—

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Contents

Introduction

Prologue

1. The Beginning

2. Joy Amid Sorrow

3. Foundation in Christ

4. Healing and Forgiveness

5. Forgiveness and Boundaries

6. Steadfast and Immovable

7. Partnering with Jesus Christ

8. Thy Faith Hath Made Thee Whole

Works Cited

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Chapter 1

The Beginning

“You can have revelatory, profoundly instructive experiences with the Lord in the most miserable experiences of your life.” [1](#)

—Jeffrey R. Holland



Choices

How does one go from being married—sealed for time and all eternity—to being divorced, with three children, nearly twenty years later? I do not have the answers, in all honesty. I know some issues required our bishop's help and counsel. However, there was no single thing that I could clearly point to and say, "There! That is the single reason for my divorce."

As I look back, the reasons appear to lie in a series of hundreds of small choices. Some choices were daily; some were over a period of months, others years. These little daily choices added up to decisions that then turned into habits. Those habits shaped us into the people we were seventeen years later after we were sealed for time and all eternity that chilly day in December. President Hinckley cautions, "The course of our lives is seldom determined by great, life altering decisions. Our direction is often set by the small, day to day choices that chart the track on which we run. This is the substance of our lives—making choices."²

There are always two parts to every divorce. My part in the story of our divorce centers around my unhealthy relationship with food. Overeating for me was a symptom of a deeper problem—a desire to escape reality. I was desperately unhappy, and it showed through unhealthy patterns of eating: bingeing, restricting, and over-exercising, all in an effort to control and limit weight gain over the years. I loved being a mother and a wife but often felt that I was falling short in my own expectations. I also felt very alone in my efforts working full-time, running a household, and trying to raise our children in a Christ-centered home. Through a series of miraculous events, I was led to a twelve-step program for my eating.

That journey began a few years before my divorce. I won a cruise to Mexico with the company I worked for. (I was an independent contractor and professional makeup artist.) The trip was "girls only," and I was excited to spend time with my coworkers/friends. It had been a year since I had seen some of them because while we worked for the same company, we all worked in different parts of the country.

My friends and I spent the first day aboard the cruise ship, exploring the various decks and talking nonstop. While exploring, I discovered food was served aboard the ship 24/7. The first night at dinner, I learned you could literally order *everything* off the menu; it was all-inclusive! I had never experienced such decadence before and thoroughly enjoyed indulging in everything food-wise.

After a couple of days on the cruise, I had a moment alone with one of the gals I was rooming with. She was fit and thin, about ten years older than me. Residing with her, I had seen her nighttime routine of Pilates and stretching exercises. I was thoroughly impressed because I was not sure I could even do a proper sit-up.

During our one-on-one conversation, she asked if I would be willing to pray for her. I was surprised and immediately replied, "Of course." I was especially touched that she asked me because we were not of the same faith. I asked, "What do you need me to pray for?"

She shared she was experiencing many severe health issues. I was shocked because she looked like she was the epitome of health. She then turned to me, cupped my

cheek, and kindly said, “And I will pray for you.”

I was taken aback. “What do I need any prayers for?”

She looked me straight in the eyes. “Oh, sweetie. You look so unhappy.”

In that moment, my walls completely crumbled, and I cried. Someone finally had seen me, had looked past the smiles, the “everything is fine” lines, and had seen ME.

My friend and I had a good heart-to-heart talk. I confessed that in trying to deal with all the stress of working full-time, running the household, and all my own expectations, I had clearly been using food as a coping mechanism. I knew I needed help. After our talk, I had a spark of courage to go home and take some action.

Once home, I did some research before I lost the little determination I had gained. I decided to join a twelve-step program. I found where a local group met and attended my first meeting. Walking in those doors for the first time was absolutely terrifying. I felt that I had reached the lowest of lows in my personal life to have to sit in that room. I listened as the other people shared and thought to myself, “Maybe I don’t really have a problem. Their situations sound much worse than mine!” Before I could slip out at the end of the meeting, several members welcomed me warmly and encouraged me to keep coming back. I felt as if they could read my mind and had known I had not planned on returning.

One woman in particular encouraged me to attend six meetings before deciding anything. Although I didn’t want to go back, part of me felt that attending six meetings seemed a reasonable request to prove this wasn’t where I needed to be. However, after attending six meetings, I found that those meetings were precisely the place I needed to be.

After many months of attending meetings and faithfully working the program, I began to see a significant change in the way I was thinking and feeling. My relationship with my Father in Heaven grew, and I began to understand the gospel in a whole new way. I realized the expectations I’d had for myself were not my Father in Heaven’s expectations.

I learned that living the gospel was not merely looking like I had everything together, but truly relying on the Lord. I had relied on myself too much. Living the steps alongside the principles of the gospel, I experienced an increase of peace in my life and felt more balanced in my roles as a mother and wife. With better balance, I slowly began to lose weight.

As a result of my weight loss, my self-confidence and self-esteem increased. I finally became willing to address some of the serious things that I felt were amiss in my marriage. Before my twelve-step program, I believed that if everything in my marriage *looked* good, then it must *be* good.

I made a list of the most pressing concerns and began to earnestly work on these issues within my marriage. Some items on my list were small adjustments that I could personally make. Other issues challenged both of us to work together as a couple and required a more long-term view of the changes that needed to be made. A year later, I was still faithfully working the twelve-step program and doing well in many areas of my life but felt discouraged at the lack of any real change for the better in my marriage. I recognized I was responsible for my choices but not anyone else’s. I confided my discouragement and concerns to a good friend. After listening, my

friend asked if I had sought counseling for my marriage. At that point, I had not. My friend replied with quiet intensity, “Fight. Fight for your marriage, Noelle. Fight with everything you have for your children and your home.”

I realized in that moment that a part of me had given up hope that change was even possible within my home. Hearing my friend encourage me to do better for my family kindled a fire in me. The following week I met with my bishop and started counseling with a certified marriage counselor from the Church’s branch of social services.

Taking Responsibility

*“You must take responsibility for your own choices and actions,
for you learn nothing until you take ownership of your life.”³*

—Leon Brown

Counseling enabled me to work on the things *I* could do. I had felt hopeless in the past about my ability to maintain any kind of lasting change. While working with my counselor, I learned about healthy boundaries: “Any confusion of responsibility and ownership in our lives is a problem of boundaries. . . . We need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries to help us distinguish what is our responsibility and what isn’t. An inability to set appropriate limits . . . can be very destructive [in our lives].”⁴

In my personal life, I struggled with the inability to say no and frequently took responsibility for things that were not my responsibility. Initially, it was difficult to realize that my choices, intentional and unintentional, concerning setting limits had made my personal life and marriage that much more difficult. I was praying daily, especially for my husband and our marriage. I asked Heavenly Father to help open my eyes so I could (1) see things accurately and (2) lovingly practice my newly learned boundaries. I also prayed to find ways that I could show my love more fully toward my husband. For an entire year, this was the plea of my heart that guided my daily thoughts and actions. I was not perfect, but the desires of my heart were good.

The Lord continued to give me the strength to make necessary small changes and to show an increase in loving behaviors toward my husband. Through regular prayer, patience, and repentance, I gained new insights on what my Heavenly Father wanted for me. As I practiced setting healthy boundaries, I felt an increase of peace that came from working to align myself with the will of my Father in Heaven.

Several months passed, and despite my prayers and months of therapy, things continued to be difficult between my husband and me. The very real issues that had come to light during counseling and with help from our bishop were not being resolved in any way. We were simply not making any progress toward any reconciliation as a couple. I felt we were not equally yoked, and our home was constantly filled with strife and anger.

I continued to work with my counselor and bishop, but I received the prompting that my spouse and I needed to separate. We had been living independently of each other within our home, but that temporary solution was no longer working. The

decision to ask my husband to move out was not an easy one. I had felt the prompting to separate for months but could not bring myself to do it. I pleaded with the Lord for another way. I was terrified that separation was the answer. I honestly wondered how being apart could bring us closer together.

The Lord continued to be patient with my doubts. I went to the temple for confirmation, and I talked it over with my counselor. I wanted him to approve of my choice, to encourage me that I was doing the right thing, but he would not. In fact, he was noticeably clear in saying, “Noelle, I know you want me to say this is okay, or the right thing to do, but I can’t. Only you have the right to receive that personal revelation.”

Shortly after attending the temple and speaking with my counselor, events transpired within our home that made me realize that it was now imperative that I follow the whisperings of the Spirit and ask my husband to move out. In the past, when I had received similar promptings to separate, I had tried to wait and come up with the perfect plan to cause as little disruption as possible. This time, despite the fear I felt, I followed the prompting immediately.

The next morning after getting the kids out the door for school, I went for a run as my husband moved some temporary belongings out. I remember that it was a beautiful sunny morning. The sunshine was a sharp contrast to the pit of fear I felt in my stomach as I left my house. I was fearful of what long-term consequences would come from the decision to separate. I did not know what was next for our little family. But, as I ran, a feeling of peace descended over me. I realized I had grown in strength and faith to such a degree that being obedient to the Spirit was more important to me than anything else. This realization was of great comfort.

As I returned home and entered my house an hour later, there was a different feel to the entire space. As I looked around, it seemed brighter and lighter. Suddenly, I was filled with the Holy Ghost to a fulness I had not been able to feel in my own home for so long. I sat on my couch and wept. I thanked my Heavenly Father for the courage to do what I had thought was impossible.

Several days passed after our separation, during which time I met with my bishop and counselor. We worked together to set a plan to help me feel as though I were moving forward despite the reality that I was in a holding pattern with my husband. I was still hopeful that our time apart would allow us to work through our issues and eventually reunite.

My counselor and I made a simple list of changes that would need to occur during our time apart to help us determine if our separation had achieved its desired purpose. Within a few short weeks, it became apparent that the changes were not happening. In frustration, I began to pray for understanding about what the next step should be. Again, the Spirit reminded me that I could not control anyone else’s choices but my own. Changing my prayers to focus on *my* next steps helped me have more patience and trust the Lord’s timing. Elder Uchtdorf’s words gently reminded me to continue to have faith when he stated, “We cannot force God to comply with our desires—no matter how right we think we are or how sincerely we pray.”²

During the separation, I spent a lot of time in prayer and reflecting on my life. I realized that many of my best attributes, such as being strong-willed and determined,

had been frequently viewed by those closest to me as negative qualities. To compensate, I tried minimizing myself as much as possible. I put all my wants and needs on the back burner, tending to everyone's needs first.

Through counseling and my twelve-step work, I realized that the negative perceptions of my attributes were not negative at all. My attributes were really gifts from a loving Heavenly Father. But the years of thinking and hearing the worst concerning my talents and gifts had led me to doubt my self-worth. Due to my current calling in the Young Women organization and my struggle with self-confidence, my counselor suggested that I complete the Young Women Personal Progress program again. I loved the idea! Plus, it gave me something solid to focus on while I was waiting.

As I began reading the Personal Progress booklet's inspired words, my mind was flooded with thoughts and feelings I had not considered in years. I felt as if I had forgotten all the lessons I had learned as a youth when I had completed the Personal Progress program the first time and earned my Young Women medallion. I realized that survival mode had been my normal for many years. This new program was slightly different than the one I had completed, but the essentials were the same. Slowly, my mindset toward myself began to shift.

My self-worth became less contingent on what other people thought or felt about me and more focused on what my Father in Heaven felt and thought about me. What He wanted for my children and I became of paramount importance. Working on the Personal Progress program was a sacred experience for me. It reminded me of who I was and what my Heavenly Father needed me to do in this life. Focusing my energies in this direction strengthened my ability to listen more intently to others' needs, especially those of my children. Recognizing and honoring my own needs also became easier. As a result, an even greater balance developed within our family and home.

After several months, the changes my counselor and I had discussed would need to happen for my husband's and my separation to end still had not occurred. In fact, there were several more issues that came to light during this time that led me to believe that any kind of reconciliation would be impossible. I prayed fervently to know what I should do next.

As I prayed and studied the scriptures, I felt the overall impression I needed to ask for a divorce. The idea was awful to me—devastating on every level. Yet, when I tried other courses of action, my way became blocked every time. I prayed for weeks to know if I should move ahead with a divorce but did not receive a clear answer in my mind. At that point, I was simply asking the Lord if I should get divorced or not. When I spoke to my counselor, he suggested that instead of asking a question, I make a decision and then pray to know if I should move forward with that decision.

Receiving Revelation

*“Personal revelation is a powerful, persuasive
antidote to uncertainty and confusion.”* [6](#)

With my counselor's advice in mind, I made the choice to remain married. I told the Lord I was willing to do whatever was required. I had invested everything in our marriage. We had seventeen years of history and three boys who were my world.

With that decision made, I went to the temple for additional insight on what to do next. As I sat in the temple that day, I felt as though the heavens were closed. I received no confirmation that my decision was right. I felt uneasy and anxious. Later that night, when I returned home, I knelt and prayed. I felt nothing and heard only silence. I retired to bed but could not sleep. I lay awake and thought about the silence from the Holy Ghost I was experiencing. It was a stark contrast to the constant stream of inspiration I had previously felt and had come to expect over the past year.

As I continued to lie in bed and begin to drift off, certain phrases in my patriarchal blessing kept coming to my mind. I had been studying my blessing as part of my journey through the Personal Progress program, and I had noticed that several key promises had yet to be fulfilled in any measure. While I was half-asleep and pondering, my mind was illuminated, and I understood that if I chose to stay on my current path, those blessings the Lord had in store for me could not be fulfilled. I clearly saw two paths before me: one was flooded with a bright light; everything was lush and green. The other path was lifeless, dark, and desolate.

I fell asleep, pondering these thoughts. When I awoke in the morning, I still recalled the powerful dream-like scene I had witnessed. After more thought, I got on my knees, trembling, and told the Lord what I remembered of the two paths. I spoke out loud. I said that I would choose the path He would have for me, not what I wanted. With tears streaming down my face, I told Him that I felt that I needed to get a divorce. My whole being, though shaking with this decision, was instantly filled with peace and light, and I felt a confirmation that divorce was the path I must take.

After determining my course, I waited a couple of days before moving forward with any action. I wanted to ponder the message I had received from the Holy Ghost. Frequently when I thought of what my course was really going to mean, I felt paralyzed by the "hows" and "whys." Then, I would burst into tears, feeling as though my heart was breaking in half.

Each time I felt completely overwhelmed, I would turn to the Lord in prayer. Every time I asked for a confirmation, I felt comfort and peace. After a week, I decided to go to the temple before moving forward with actually filing for divorce. By this point, I had told my mom and sister of my plans. My sister was not surprised that I had decided to file for divorce. She and her husband had observed several alarming issues throughout the years, and she had been actively praying that I would be able to confide in her when I was ready. My mom had a different reaction. She encouraged me to find a way to "work it out." She just could not believe that divorce was the answer. Hearing her doubts began to work on my mind. I was terrified of making the wrong choice, terrified of the long-term effects this would have on my children and my eternal family.

Burgeoning Peace

*“Because of His pain, in the midst
of ours, we can find peace.”^z*

—Laurel C. Day

In retrospect, I believe that the Lord understood the magnitude of faith that I would need in order to get through a trial of this degree. As a result, He willingly poured out His Spirit upon me. He patiently held my hand through the whole process and blessed me with peace each time I stumbled or wavered in my faith.

One such precious moment came one day just prior to attending the temple. I sat in my room, pondering the scriptures I was reading and writing in my journal. I wrote down my fears of making the wrong decision for my family. Afterward I read these words in the scriptures: “Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be afraid for them: for the Lord thy God, he that is doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”⁸

I felt prompted to look at my patriarchal blessing again. As I read the sacred words of my blessing, a phrase seemed to leap off the page. In my blessing, I was told that I would make the right choices if I counseled with the Lord and made each decision in my life prayerfully. Knowing that I had done just that alleviated my fears and allowed me to move forward with more confidence.

My next step was to go to the temple to receive confirmation of the promptings I had received. I asked my family to fast and pray for me. In response, and to show her support, my mom offered to attend the temple with me. I was grateful to have her company.

My heart was full while we attended the endowment session together. Afterward, I sat in the celestial room, taking in the beauty and incomparable peace found only in that holy space. My mother had entered the room before me and sat in her own contemplative prayer. I took advantage of the relative privacy of the moment by seeking out a quiet spot to pray and ponder as well.

I had come to the Lord’s holy house that day to seek a confirmation that my decision to move forward with divorcing my husband was the correct one. As I pondered the decisions before me, I walked to a table to get a set of scriptures and then returned to my seat. I prayed quietly in my heart as I paged through the Book of Mormon. I turned to my favorite book, Jacob. Not knowing what I was looking for, I began reading Jacob 5, the parable of the olive tree. I skimmed through most of the verses but began to read in earnest around verses 41–46. When I got to verse 47, I had a hard time not gasping aloud. The verses I read mirrored what I had been asking the Lord: “Tell me what more I need to do.” Verse 47 answered:

But what could I have done more for my vineyard. Have I slackened mine hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it, and I have pruned it, and I have dunged it; and I have stretched forth mine hand almost all the day long, and the end draweth nigh. And it grieveth me that I should hew down all the trees in

my vineyard and cast them into the fire that they should be burned. Who is it that has corrupted my vineyard?⁸

As I sat in the celestial room, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I had done all that the Lord required of me to save my marriage. I had “nourished it,” I had “dug about and pruned it.” My time of waiting through our separation had been analogous to “my hand outstretched still,” and I was “grieving the loss of this tree.” My whole being was filled with such peace. Tears streamed down my face. I knew this scripture was the answer to my prayer.

That moment in the temple was nothing short of a small miracle for me.

As I finished reading and said a prayer of gratitude for the sweet experience I’d had, my mom joined me. Her face was filled with light. She gently grasped my arm in a half embrace and whispered to me, “Noelle, I don’t know how, but I know everything is going to be all right, and that you are being led by the Spirit.” Even with the passage of time, the deep conviction of the truthfulness of my mother’s words is still written on my soul. I count that experience in the temple as one of the most sacred witnesses in my life. Indeed, as Elder Neil L. Andersen has said, “The peace of the temple [was] a soothing balm to [my] wounded soul.”⁹

Despite the reassurances from my Heavenly Father that I was on the right path, it was difficult and heartbreaking to begin to move forward with the steps of getting a divorce. I had no knowledge of the process and felt I needed legal advice. I asked a good friend for the name of a lawyer. She suggested Mr. Smith, a lawyer who practiced locally. I went to my first meeting, armed with a list of questions, and my mother joined me again for support. Mr. Smith answered all my questions and gave me a plethora of other information.

The most shocking fact I learned was that the state in which we lived had a ninety-day waiting period—a time designated to allow things to “cool off” (in case either party changed their mind). Once you filed the paperwork for the divorce, the ninety days began. After all my praying and fasting, waiting and agonizing over my decision, I just wanted to move forward with my life. Hearing that yes, we could begin the process, but no, not yet was very difficult, especially when the waiting period was an additional ninety days!

After the divorce paperwork was officially filed, I sent a letter notifying my husband of my intention. I had wrestled mentally about whether to have a face-to-face conversation with him or to write a letter. Ultimately, I decided that in light of my emotions, I could express my thoughts more coherently in a letter. I prayed for direction and took a few days to write the letter. I then signed to have it delivered with the divorce papers.

When I next met with my bishop, I informed him that (1) I had already begun the process of filing for divorce and that (2) I had sent a letter to my husband telling him of my intent. The letter explained that I was acting in accordance with what I felt were the Lord’s desires for us. The bishop was kind and sympathetic as he listened, but then he asked me if I would wait. I was so confused. I could not understand why he was asking me to wait. He explained that he felt prompted to ask me to wait before taking any more action with the divorce proceedings.

I cannot express the internal struggle I felt in that moment. I knew I had received my answer from my Heavenly Father, but I also knew the bishop had been called of God. Moments passed while I mentally struggled with how to reply to his request. I felt that his appeal that I wait to move forward with any more action was in direct conflict with the answer I had received to proceed with the divorce. I silently prayed for guidance.

Soon I felt a calm settle over me. The bishop's request did not make sense to me, but with the comfort of the Spirit, I could agree to what he asked. I would wait. I would not move forward yet with any further legal proceedings. I found comfort in Paul Alan Cox's words, "We must not despair because the Lord's timetable is different from ours, sometimes we just have to wait."¹⁰

Through a series of phone calls over the next few days, my husband replied to my letter and the divorce papers. The conversations were consistently heated and produced no progress toward reconciliation. After a week had passed, he told me that he had attended the temple the night before and wanted to share an experience with me. I agreed to have a conversation about it. As I prepared to hear his experience, I became cautiously hopeful. I thought that maybe this was the reason why the bishop asked me to wait. Maybe this conversation would be the turning point for us, and we could still reconcile.

We met. My husband related to me that he had attended a temple session, during which he had felt impressed that he should not get divorced. I was surprised by the direction of the conversation. His answer was in direct conflict with the numerous impressions I had already received. I honestly did not know what to say. I remember sharing some of my thoughts with him about why I felt the way I did. He kept repeating that he had received the direction to not get divorced. I considered his words, then recommended that we both pray about our answers and move forward after concentrated prayer.

I went home and immediately got on my knees. I was so frustrated and upset by the whole conversation. I felt that the answer I had received had been reinforced several times. But, if so, then why did the bishop ask me to wait? And how could my husband have been led in a completely different direction? Nothing made sense to me anymore. I was angry with the Lord. It had taken an immense amount of faith to begin this process. Now it seemed that there were differing answers left and right. In the moment I doubted the words in the scriptures, "Know ye not that ye are in the hands of God?"¹¹

That night, I returned home and tucked each of my children in bed, temporarily setting aside the distress I was feeling. After the house was quiet, I knelt at my bed and prayed for understanding. As I cried out to the Lord in my confusion and despair, I felt the peaceful calm of the Spirit come over me. My mind quieted. Finally, I found myself willing to listen to what the Lord was saying in reply to my petition. Very clearly, an answer came to my mind that my husband had indeed received the answer that he was not supposed to get divorced. That was the answer *he* had been given. It was not my answer, but *his*. How he chose to act on it would be up to him.

I felt a huge weight lift off me. I realized I had not gotten the wrong answer, and he had gotten the right one. We had each been given our own answers, and we each had our agency to choose how we would act on those. Further, our bishop (under inspired guidance) had asked me to wait. I now saw that I was to wait and see what my husband chose to do with the answer he had received. The Spirit confirmed the answer I received with peace in my heart.

With this understanding, I confidently followed the counsel of my bishop. I waited. I did not file any more legal paperwork and continued to attend my counseling sessions. After an additional three months, it was plain to see that no issues were being resolved between my husband and me due to circumstances not in my control. I knew that it was time to move forward with the divorce. I met with my bishop again and informed him of my intention. He was supportive of my decision to now move forward. He thanked me for my willingness to follow his counsel faithfully. Ninety days later, following negotiations regarding our household items and our parenting plan, we were officially divorced.

“At times . . . we feel surrounded by the pain of broken hearts, the disappointment of shattered dreams, and the despair of vanished hopes . . . We feel abandoned, heartbroken, alone. If you find yourself in such a situation, I plead with you to turn your Heavenly Father in faith. He will lift you and guide you. He will not always take your afflictions from you, but He will comfort and lead you with love through whatever storm you face.” [12](#)

—Thomas S. Monson

Lessons Learned: Chapter 1

1. There is no right or wrong way to get divorced. This decision is between you and the Lord.
2. Invest in counseling.
3. Take responsibility for your part of the story. Divorces do not occur alone; it takes two to tango.
4. You cannot control anyone else's choices but your own.
5. Seek the Lord's approval for your decisions, value His opinion above all others.
6. Be willing to wait on the Lord. Sometimes it takes time to understand what the next step is. Trust in the Lord's timing. It is always perfect.
7. Work on a personal self-improvement course (the new "strive to be" on churchofjesuschrist.org is a great resource.)
8. Instead of asking a question and expecting an answer, make a decision and pray for confirmation.
9. Read your patriarchal blessing often (or get one, if you don't have yours yet).
10. Consider where you are going for answers. Ask yourself if they are trustworthy sources (scriptures, prayer, blessings, temple, trusted leaders, and family).

Our ability to worthily receive divine revelation is contingent on our willingness to act on the knowledge we receive. That is what I believe Moroni meant when he referred to as real intent: "And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things."¹³ The Lord knows the intent of our hearts and whether we are willing to obey what He tells us to do.

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