

Podcast Episode 44: Breaking the Chains

QUESTION: How do we break the chains of tradition that bind us and keep us from hearing the voice of God?

DENVER: I have come to realize that everyone's religion is eccentric. And it doesn't matter how plausible an explanation they can make for it if you give them enough time. The first blush expression of whatever the religion is, it's always eccentric.

I was talking to a law partner of mine who is— He's extraordinarily orthodox, mainstream Latter-day Saint. He's been in a bishopric; I think he's in a high council right now. And I'm currently an excommunicated, former member of the LDS church who is a religious fugitive and vagabond at the moment. And he was— They're very careful not to talk religion with me at my law firm because who knows, the contamination of heresy may spread, and so everyone kind of avoids the subject. And I said, "Everyone's religion is eccentric." And he said, "No, no, not like this other guy...." And I said, "Wait a minute. You believe God is so pissed at the world that He wants to beat the world for their sins, and so to placate Himself, He sent a son here, and He killed the son or had the son killed, and that satisfied this angry God. And you believe this, and you think that that's truth." And he said, "Well, there's more to it." And I said, "Of course there's more to it! But if I want to put it in terms that make it appear to be out of proportion, it's possible to do so, and you can do that with any religion. Doesn't matter what it is."

So, I actually blame you people—probably these two on-campus ministerial folks. I blame you people for me becoming a Latter-day Saint. Now follow the logic on this.

I was raised by a Baptist mother. My father was Christian and a mason; he had hoped that I would join the Masonic lodge. And he put up with the Baptist minister coming for Sunday dinner, which was always fried chicken and mashed potatoes. (I don't know what it is about Baptist ministers that provoke the fried chicken. They do, and it's actually pretty good, so I was always glad to see the minister come if not for any other reason than the meal.)

Growing up, I never had the conviction that the Baptists really had the answer. So by the time I entered the military, I was vaguely Christian and unbaptized. And because *you* people didn't send out any missionaries, and Salt Lake *did* send out missionaries, I was

confronted with the Joseph Smith story and all that by the LDS version of the Restoration. I didn't even know there was another version that was out there at the time. And they challenged me to read the Book of Mormon as part of the missionary discussions. And I read— They had earmarked, gave me a free copy, and I read those pages. And they wanted to know, after I'd read them, what my impression was. And I can still tell you exactly the words of my answer. I said, "It's gotta be scripture. It's every bit as boring as the Bible." And I meant it. It did not connect for me. In fact, there was so much about the Restoration that my mother had told me, and I had that point of view that Bryce spoke about already embedded in me that made it impossible for me to really see this other paradigm that they were trying to advance and get me to buy into.

The angel who appeared to Joseph Smith preliminary to the Book of Mormon plates being shown to him said, Your name shall be had for both good and evil, or that people everywhere are going to speak of you in terms of both good and evil.

I grew up with a Baptist mother who only spoke evil of Joseph Smith. So to me, Joseph was not to be trusted. He was a scoundrel. He was a predator. He was the epitome of what goes wrong when someone seizes upon the idea of a religion to advance their own personal lies, agenda, wealth, power, and influence.

It really came as quite a surprise to me when we were at the birthplace of Joseph Smith in Sharon, Vermont, on a campout— They had a stake president; they had a fireside. The stake president got up, and he told the story of David and Goliath, which is Biblical (my mom had drilled that into me), except that he took this story as if it were actually true, as if all these people and all these events had really happened. And it struck me that there was a kind of naive, innocent literalism to what this guy was doing with the religion, and it was Biblical. And to me it was disarming; it was a little unsettling. How can a Mormon devotee of this imposter, tell a Biblical story in a way that evidences not only acceptance, but persuaded me that there might be more to it? He had actually computed the height of Goliath. Today, we have NBA players that are nearly that height. I mean, to me Goliath was like some Hollywood-animated character. No, he was of an attainable height. And the size of the spear that he threw—he calculated that. He gave that number, and I thought, "Actually, the guy who is nearly nine feet tall could throw a spear that has..." Everything about it seems plausible. Everything about the story he told convinced me that maybe, maybe there's something there. A kernel. Maybe there's a little spark of something good, even in this horrible, flawed religion developed by an imposter.

Well, they had a visitor center. And the visitor center had literature. The fellow I was with— They had what was called the Doctrine and Covenants. That's about that much of

this book. The fellow I was with at the visitor's center told me there was something in that book I ought to read. I assumed that if you're going to take a book, and you're going to start dog-earing it that you're going to have to pay for it. And he had dog-eared the page, and I thought, "Gah, you haven't even paid for this thing, and you're wrecking these people's book." And this elderly lady behind the counter told me that the book was mine. And I said, "Uh... I didn't bring any money, and I'm not..." And she said, "No, no, we give these away." And I thought, "Wow, foolish people. Here they are, they're giving their stuff away. And here, it's now my book, and you've dog-eared it? What the...what are you messing with my book for?"

The section that he had dog-eared is one that is common to both the RLDS and the Community of Christ, and that is the vision of the redemption of the dead that is Section 76 in the LDS version. It has a different number in the Community of Christ. But it is a vision of the redemption of the dead, in which during the translation or the editorial revisions that Joseph Smith made to the New Testament, in the Gospel of John, he comes across a statement concerning the afterlife which made him wonder about the segregation of people in the afterlife and the two categories of heaven and hell...and there had to be something more to that. And the vision of the redemption of the dead unfolds. I read that, and my reaction— The only way I can describe it is I was thunderstruck. How could a man who is an imposter and a deceiver compose a transcript of such sublime meaning of beauty as this? It was at that moment, for the first time, that I thought there may be more to Joseph Smith than what my Baptist mother has told me.

It's a fearsome thing to let loose of the anchor that holds you in the harbor that you were raised with as a child. But it was at that moment, whether I was willing to cut that anchor or not, that the chain was broken. Because if my mom could be wrong about the potential virtue of Joseph Smith, she could be wrong about a number of other things. Therefore, the search into the restoration of the gospel actually began as a consequence of that moment.

Now, the missionaries were persistent, basically because there's no one in New England that was interested in Mormonism at the time. I had joined the military. I grew up in Idaho, and I had been assigned to New Hampshire. In New Hampshire, it was the New England States mission, and I don't know how many missionaries they had out in that mission (a couple hundred, I guess), and *one* of them had actually managed to get *one* person who was willing to put up with their pamphleteering and film-stripping. And so I'm pretty sure that in their zone and regional meetings they talked about their investigator. Reluctant though I was, I was the guy that showed some interest.

As the stories unfolded, and you hear about the pillar of fire that descends and, within it, personages who speak to Joseph and call him by name, and the story progresses. And a few years later he's praying, and a conduit opens up and a light and a person of light appears and tells him about a book that is buried in a mountain that's engraved on gold plates, and you hear about the founding stories of the Restoration. The impression, naive as I was, the impression I got was that you people, you people have religion like the New Testament. Angels come talk to *you* people. God appears to *you* people. It's like Paul on the road to Emmaus, except now it's happening today. This is the old religion, the one that Moses went up on the Mount— The bush is burning, the voice, the finger of God writing on tablets of stone—it's happening again! Oh my word! Baptists have an old book, but you people have angels!

I'm thinking that I occupy a position of vast inferiority to you because the heavens are open to you, and they're not to me. And I would like to have that experience. I would like to be part of you people. I want to rise up to your glorious level because, from where I am, all I got are words in an old book, written by other people in another language, in another time, from another culture that I'm trying to make applicable to me by interpretation. But you people have the heavens, themselves, available to you.

So I want to obtain a testimony so that I can believe like you people believe. And I recall the night in which I sincerely undertook to try and be like you great people. I prayed, kneeling beside a government-issued bed with an army blanket on it. I had a roommate, but he wasn't there. He was out partying somewhere, and I was alone in the barracks. And I knelt down; I prayed— I wanted to be like you guys. And with all the fervency and sincerity of a young soul wanting desperately to be something akin to what you had attained, I poured out my heart. And when I was done praying, I got up, I sat on the bed, and I waited. And there wasn't a conduit to heaven, and there wasn't a glowing man in the dark. It was just me, alone in the room, sitting there. I don't know what I expected, but there wasn't any of that.

And as I thought about it, I thought, "You know, this story these Mormons are telling can't be true because there aren't any more angels appearing." As I thought about that for a moment. I knew what was in the New Testament because we read that every morning at breakfast with my mom growing up, and there was nothing in there that said, "I'm revoking the authorization of angels to appear." There literally was nothing in there. Then I thought, "Okay, but Joseph's put out new scripture, and the Bible says, Whoever adds to this book shall be cursed; whoever takes away from it God will take away his part in the kingdom." That's in the book of Revelation. But then it entered my mind, "Wait, the book of Revelation was actually written earlier than many of the other New Testament books that are in there,

so if it literally means you can't add scripture, we have to throw out most of the New Testament. So that's not a legitimate criticism." I went through issue after issue after issue, thinking of a problem why it can't be true, and as I thought of the problem, an answer always came that said, "No, because of..."

After this meditative process that went on for about just under a couple of hours, my final thought was, "Okay, yeah, all of that may be good and well and not a reason to reject, but how do I know there's even a God?" [Clapping once] That quickly, the words came into my mind, "Who do you think you've been talking to for the last two hours?" At that moment I thought, "This was not the way in which I expected to encounter God. But if I have now encountered God, and if He has spoken to me, and if this means that I can get into His good graces, then I have to act in response to what He just told me, or I might be cut off, and I would like more of this, not less of this."

So I told the missionaries I got an answer to prayer. And I thought, "I'm going to be the world's worst Mormon, but okay, I'll be a Mormon. I'll try. But I just don't have what it takes to be that great a person" (because I think you people are all great). And I went ahead, and I got baptized, and to my surprise, that connection with God did not go away or diminish, it grew. And it grew brighter and brighter.

Understand, I assumed God and angels and the heavens themselves were wide open to all of you. I assumed it was a common experience for people to have angelic ministrants. I had every expectation that sooner or later you're just going to find yourself in the presence of angels, because that's what the Restoration is all about. So I had no doubt that that would happen.

I had an experience in which I did encounter an angel. He had very little to say, but he certainly would have answered a question if I had put one. The words that he said to me were, "On the first day of the third month in nine years, your ministry will begin, and so you must prepare." And then he waited.

Now, some things that ought to be obvious if that's a statement that's made is, "Okay, how does one prepare? What is this ministry? What are you talking about? How am I to do what you just suggested I ought do?" But I wasn't doing that. I was looking at him; I was looking at the clothing; I was looking at the scene. I was trying to take in— And there were things that were visible that were odd to me. Art, for example. And I thought, "Why would you have artwork in the afterlife or in the eternities or...?" I was like a tourist. If I'd had spray paint, I might have sprayed, "Denver was here." I may have behaved really poorly, but I did not ask a question.

So he leaves. I'm left thinking about that scene, and I can conjure it back up into my mind. I can see that moment right now, and it's been decades.

Well, I didn't, at that time, know that you ought to keep a journal. I didn't, at that time, know that you ought to keep a record and know dates. But I kept it in my mind, and I did what I thought was a calculation. And I calculated out when the first day of the third month of the ninth year had arrived, and on that date I'm expecting, "Hey, hey! Something big!" And the date comes, and the date goes, and nothing happens—just another day in school. It's just nothing at all. So I thought, "Okay, 'and so you must prepare' is how heaven gets out of this. I didn't prepare, so it's my fault. I blew it. Not worthy, not prepared. Shoot! I wish I had known what I should have done." Because obviously, I had not done it.

The next year, on the first day of the third month, on my door comes an LDS bishop and Sunday School president to call me to be the new gospel doctrine teacher for the ward. It was actually a few days after they had extended to me the request that I teach gospel doctrine that I went back and realized it was the first day of the third month. And then I went back and recalculated everything, and because I had not kept a record, I had assumed that the nine year calculation began from the year in which I was baptized, which was 1973. But it had been sometime apparently months later in '74, so I was off by a year in my calculation.

Well, in the LDS church, the gospel doctrine teacher is given a one-year curriculum to teach, in which you spend one year on the Old Testament, you spend one year on the New Testament, you spend one year on the Book of Mormon, and you spend one year on the Doctrine and Covenants and Church History. And then when you finish with that, you start all over again, and you spend one year on each one of these, and you go through, and you teach them for a year. And then when that year ends, you start all over again.

When I got called to be the gospel doctrine teacher, I had not yet gained any appreciation for the Book of Mormon. In all honesty, I didn't know what to make of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith, the vision of the redemption of the dead, some of the things that Joseph taught, some of his revelations resonated with me. Old testament, not a problem; the New Testament, loved it. The Book of Mormon, to me, was a— It was hard for me to have that book resonate with me. I taught it. They give you a manual. I followed the manual, and we got through the year. And the calling to be the gospel doctrine teacher didn't end. So we cycle through, and I taught the Book of Mormon for a second year.

In year one I used the the manual. In year two, I said to myself, "I'm going to bore *me*, even if I'm not boring the people. I'm going to bore *me* if I do that again." So I began to push into the Book of Mormon a little more carefully, using more resource material, studying it a bit more closely, and using outside material that had been provided by— This was the LDS church; this was by scholars. I began to have a little more appreciation for the Book of Mormon. There might be a little more to this.

Well, as circumstances would have it, I moved from the city I was living in to a new city in Utah, and I would have been released if I had stayed where I was living. But when I moved to the new place, the new bishop asked me, "What is your calling in the ward you're leaving?" And I said I was a gospel doctrine teacher. He said, "Oh good, good. We are releasing ours. We haven't yet called anyone, so we're going to call you." So I changed cities, but I kept the calling, and I continued on being "this guy" teaching these scriptures. It was easy to push this material into greater depth. That was easy. This was a little more difficult.

By the time I got through teaching the Book of Mormon a second full year, I began to realize there was a good deal more to this book than I had anticipated. And so the next time I went through, I assumed that this text was actually what it purported to be, and I began to have respect for it trying to get *it* to tell *me* what *it* contains.

The third year I spent on the Book of Mormon, I began to have experiences and a growth in faith that resembled those very earliest days encountering the missionaries. You see, I had joined Mormonism in New Hampshire, but I had gone to college in Utah. And in Utah, Mormonism is jaded. In Utah, Mormonism consists of one guy who holds all the keys, who's the president of everything, that one rises to their feet when he enters the room, and you don't sit until he sits, and when he's through talking and he's ready to leave, you rise, and you stay where you are until he leaves the room, because holy, holy, holy, *he is the man*. That's Mormonism in Utah. No one expects an angel, except *that* guy might get one. No one expects an open vision, except *that* guy might get one. No one expects God to have a darn thing to do with you or me because He's too busy with *that* guy. He's the one who, if someone were to walk on water today, would be *that* guy. We are mere minions supporting the pyramid, atop which is *that* guy and God. And God won't talk to us, but He will talk to *him*. So in Utah I realized angels don't come talk to people, and they don't expect angels to come talk to them. And no one expects spiritual connection to the other side except for an office, and that office owns the right to that. But we don't.

The problem with that realization is that it was contrary to my actual experience. I knew that I wasn't just a minion at the time; I was a newly potential baptized person when God spoke to me, and I was a newbie, ignorant, fresh-out-of-the-water newbie when an angel

had spoken and visited with me. So I knew the paradigm that prevailed in Utah could not be true. But it was only the third time through teaching the Book of Mormon for a year that that light, that ignition began to return, and the other side began to become more accessible, more understandable, more lively, more communicative.

When I taught the Book of Mormon for the fourth year, I was able (in a 50 minute class) to cover one or two verses. We were assigned like eight chapters, and I said, "Okay, eight chapters—you can read the material. I want to delve into the meaning of this verse." And for 50 minutes I talked about one verse or sometimes two verses. Because the Book of Mormon has that much to say.

There's a bunch of scholarly efforts to talk about the content of the Book of Mormon, but the Book of Mormon itself explains how the translation process was done. This is in 2 Nephi 27. Nephi has used the Isaiah material to testify about Nephi's experience. He does not have a Jewish intent, an Isaiah intent, in using Isaiah's words. Nephi has been prohibited from writing about the vision that he has had, but the angel tells him "others have seen this." And so Nephi, intending to express his own testimony of what God has shown him, uses Isaiah's words to tell you Nephi's visionary experience. When he gets to chapter 27 of 2 Nephi, he begins to transition. He ceases to be directly quoting Isaiah, and he begins to paraphrase Isaiah in a transitional chapter 27 before he then gives you an explanation for why he said all of the Isaiah materials that went on before. And chapter 27 begins to be the transition from Isaiah quotes, Isaiah paraphrase, Isaiah meaning in the words of Nephi, in the experience of Nephi.

So in 27 we get to the Isaiah material where he talks about the words of a book that's going to be delivered to someone who's learned, who says he can't read a sealed book, and then he's going to go from there when the learned won't do it. And God tells you how the Book of Mormon was translated: *"I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee... I will show unto the children of men that I am able to do mine own work"* (2 Nephi 11:20 RE). The translation of the Book of Mormon was not done **by** Joseph Smith; it was done **through** Joseph Smith. The translator of the text of the Book of Mormon was God. God told Joseph what was in the text of the Book of Mormon. You want to know who translated it? God.

Then we have the testimony of the Three Witnesses. This is what the Three Witnesses say: *"And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for His voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true."* God translated the Book of Mormon. After God gave Joseph the words that God wanted to be included in

the Book of Mormon, then the angel showed the plates to the Three Witnesses, and God vouched for the translation process that He had done, by the gift and power of God.

Joseph Smith once said that a man can get closer to God by heeding the Book of Mormon than any other book, and that it was the most correct book that there is, and that if you will abide it's precepts, you will come closer to understanding God.

I started out with the Book of Mormon as a pedestrian looking in the book and saying, "Yeah, it's something. And it's part of the religion." If I had not been called to be a gospel doctrine teacher and left in that position— I moved again into a third location. I taught gospel doctrine in Pleasant Grove, UT; Alpine, UT; and Sandy, UT in two different places there. I was this guy going through this material. It took between 10 and 20 hours of study and preparation each week for a 50 minute class, as I went deeper and deeper into the text of all these materials, but deepest of all into the Book of Mormon.

— — —

The foregoing message from Denver is taken from the first half of his lecture entitled "Remembering the New Covenant," given on November 10, 2018 at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa.