

Denver Snuffer Podcast 167: Contradiction, Part 1

This is the first part of a series where Denver discusses why contradiction exists, why it is a necessary part of our development, and how we can understand apparent contradictions in gospel principles.

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DENVER: The gospel is vast, and only the beginning, introductory part of the Restoration was established through Joseph Smith. There's still a great deal left to recover. The task is daunting. Unto what can I liken it to help you see it clearly?

I stand beside a great ocean, and I cannot convey it to you. I'm but a man, and all I have is a cup with which to show you. If I labor all my life using my cup, I can never convey the ocean to you. Using the limited talent and means I have and with only a cup at a time, I can never convey enough to allow you to comprehend the ocean's sheer size. My effort **mocks** the great ocean because my measure is too modest—comparatively microscopic.

Using a cup, how can I ever portray the depth and pressure of the ocean? How can you ever discover its vast range of temperature in my small cup? How will you understand the relation between temperature and current? Or the great power of the ocean's current? How shall I explain the effect of the moon on the ocean's tides when I have only a cup to declare it to you? How will the great diversity of both plant and animal life living in the ocean ever be understood when I have only a cup to show you?

In the top 600 feet of the ocean lives 90% of known oceanic animal life, but the ocean is over 36,000 feet deep. Mount Everest rises 29,000 feet, and the ocean plunges down more than 7,000 feet beyond Everest's height. If 90% of the animal life we know lives in less than the top 2% of the ocean, how much life is there in the oceans we know nothing about? Life we've not even a hint exists may thrive in abundance in depths completely hidden from our knowledge.

The grandeur of Christ's gospel makes my capacity to declare it pitiful. I confess my inability, and I fear I can never do enough to help this generation to awaken and arise. If I can help you grasp even a little of it, then let me point you to God who can do the rest. Men cannot utter what you need to learn. I'm not capable, and it is not lawful.

*Great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his Kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpasses all understanding, in glory, and in might, and in dominion, which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the Spirit, and are not lawful for men to utter, neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him and purify themselves before him, to whom he grants the privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves that through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, **while in the flesh**, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory. (T&C 69:29, emphasis added)*

You can know. **God** can show it to you. I testify to you that that **has** and **does** happen. But if God deigns to show you some of His great mysteries, never think that excuses you from the labor still left undone. Rejoice in your knowledge, but do not forsake God's work.

There have been some people who've been pointed to the greatness of God's work and have been so captivated by the wonder of the ocean's shoreline that they've gone astray. They've wandered off into their own exploration, thinking they have found something greater in a starfish than what has been shown to them in my cup. They have failed to continue because they think themselves independently enlightened and self-sufficient. One of the immediate casualties of their arrogance is their loss of any part in Zion. Zion will be interdependent, cooperative, and community-based. Zion will not consist of a solitary spiritual sojourner wandering the vast intertidal zones of an almost infinite shoreline. No matter how much they may discover along that journey, they will not grasp the ocean's depth they could have found in Zion.

There are many paradoxes (meaning apparent contradictions) in the gospel. Very often we must accept two truths that seem opposed to one another. The gospel is more art or music than math or science. But some kinds of art require math and science to engineer its creation. The scientist and artist may believe their skills conflict, but the gospel includes all truth and, therefore, unites both.

You will find paradoxes. Welcome them. Often ocean life depends on the pressure of the great deep to exist. Pressure more than a thousand times our atmosphere at sea level exists at ocean depths, yet there is life there. That life exists with 15,750 pounds of pressure on each square inch and is utterly dependent on the physical law that you cannot compress a liquid. Things that live there would explode if suddenly brought here, and if you were taken there suddenly, you would be crushed. The gospel is an ocean and includes both.

We live with conflicts, paradoxes, and opposing opinions. We must be at peace with all these.

There's a poem in the Book of Job I rather like. This is taken from a modern version:

*Have you given the horse strength?
Have you clothed his neck with thunder?
Can you frighten him like a locust?
His majestic snorting strikes terror.
He paws in the valley, and rejoices in his strength; He gallops into the clash of arms.
He mocks at fear, and is not frightened; Nor does he turn back from the sword. The
quiver rattles against him,
The glittering spear and javelin.
He devours the distance with fierceness and rage;
Nor does he come to a halt because the trumpet has sounded. At the blast of the
trumpet he says, 'Aha!'
He smells the battle from afar,
The thunder of captains and shouting. (Job 39:19-25)*

The culmination of the ages will require us all to face the conflicts, the unease, anxiety, or what Jesus described as *the distress of nations, with perplexity* (Luke 12:17 RE). The paradoxes and perplexities will require us all to charge ahead, like Job's horse, to the battle. A final conflict may still be comparatively afar, but it is coming. It can be seen in the news, media, politics, and society of our day. It creeps ever closer and is even now only held at bay by the providence of Heaven. This is a time to prepare. We are now in a season to reclaim and restore incomplete gospel understanding. These are precious moments and need to be well-spent. We need to gallop into the clash of arms and devour the remaining distance with the fierceness and rage of a committed heart, determined to defy the idolatry and foolishness of our vain age. Stand fast in the truth. Defend yourself with knowledge. Knowledge of the truth comes from above and fortifies the soul with light and truth.

When you understand that something in history was actually an event that took place, then you need to understand the event that took place. What are its details? How important are differing accounts? If there are contradictions among witnesses, how are they harmonized? When you've sorted through the material and arrived at the most accurate version, what does the incident mean? If you change the details, does the meaning change?

In the King Follett Discourse, for example, there were several note-takers who left accounts of the sermon. Most people are acquainted with this talk through *The Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. That version is an amalgamation of the various notes of those who were present. In compiling the consolidated version, some of the trimming and harmonizing left details out of the final transcript that may be important. Almost all of the notes from that day have been gathered by Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook in their book *The Words of Joseph Smith*. That very valuable book allows you compare what one person preserved of the talk with what another person preserved. The contrasts are important and make actual doctrinal differences.

If you are content with the *TPJS* version and have developed some of your religious views based on it, then discovering that it may have omitted details from Joseph's talk may alarm you. You must decide whether you want to know what Joseph actually said, and perhaps what he actually meant, or if you are only interested in keeping what you already believe.

Many people think they can "feel" the truth. They determine what they believe by how it makes them feel. Their "truth detector" is not rational, but intuitive. I've been involved in litigation for long enough to realize there is an irrational component to every conclusion we make. Despite the effort to be rational, we always have our personal filters and our hidden biases. Humans are rational, but not entirely so. Therefore, this "feel" for truth happens in us all. Malcom Gladwell has written several books exploring this trait.

The challenge is to control your impulse to come to a conclusion about something before you let all the available information develop. You may come to a conclusion that you can defend rationally and emotionally, but it may not be true. If, instead, you suspend your impulse to decide something and let information expand, you may still reach the same conclusion, but it will be deeper, richer, and more complete.

On the matter of “feeling” things to be true and right, we should not be hasty about closing the door on additional information. New information may change your view dramatically, and then with the new insights, you will “feel” right about another, better-informed view. When you deal with less information, you may think in your heart that everything is just as you believe it to be, only to later find that good-faith belief was sadly under-informed or misinformed. You can only proceed on the basis of what you know and never on the basis of what you do not know. This is why our good-faith critics who advance honest objections are not evil. They even raise questions we should ask ourselves and try to provide an honest answer.

I do not believe it is possible to acquire the faith necessary to arrive at the truth unless you are willing to know the truth. I believe that history is intended to be a test of faith, and we bar ourselves from heaven and heavenly messengers through our fears. Fear is the opposite of faith.

The right pathway is always filled with peril. King Benjamin said (and this is from the traditional account, Mosiah 4:29-30):

I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them. But this much I can tell you, that if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. And now, O man, remember, and perish not. (Ssee also Mosiah 2:6 RE)

That list is pretty all-inclusive. We have to watch ourselves, we have to watch our thoughts, we have to watch our words, and we have to watch our deeds, and beyond that, observe the commandments. And King Benjamin could not tell us all of the ways we could fail to do those things. There really is no list that can be compiled that says, “Don't do this, and don't do that, and don't do this, and don't do that,” and have an exhaustive list of all the “don'ts.” It can't be done. In fact, about the only way to avoid all the “don'ts” is to have a handful of the “do's,” the things that you ought to do in order to honor God. And Christ summarized those basically in two brief statements: “Love God with all your heart,” and “love your fellowman as yourself.” It's practically impossible for us to avoid errors by putting together a list of what to avoid, so I wouldn't attempt it.

Then there is “the weakness of mind and spirit of mankind.” Moroni discussed the ministering of angels and he described in these words:

*...neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men. For behold, they are subject unto him, to minister according to the word of his command, showing themselves unto them of **strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness**. And the office of their ministry is to **call men unto repentance**, and to fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father, which he hath made unto the children of men, to prepare [a] way among the children of men, by declaring the word of Christ unto the chosen vessels of the Lord, that they may bear testimony of him. (Moroni 7:29-31; see also Moroni 7:6 RE)*

If you go through those verses and you look at what he's saying, it requires a "firm mind in every form of godliness."

A firm mind can be descriptive of a variety of things, including someone that's just stubborn. But it's not stubbornness! It's a firm grasp on the things that lead to godliness—not excesses, not foolishness (and we'll get more into that in a bit). But their purpose in ministering is to equip the person who has an audience and those who hear the message to be called to repentance—not a lot of flowery, fancy things, but repentance—because essentially, without repentance (that is, turning to face God in all you do), none of us are gonna make it. He goes on to say that the purpose of calling people to repentance is to *fulfil and...do the works of the covenants* (ibid.).

There's sort of a pattern here in what is happening. Angelic ministrants come to people of "a firm mind in every form of godliness," calls repentance in order to fulfill and in order to **do** the work of the covenants. "To fulfil and to do the work of the covenants of the Father"—and that requires that people bear testimony of Him. These are the essential things that are needed. It doesn't require a fanciful or a flowery imagination. It does not require that we bear testimony of ourselves. It doesn't require us to do something other than to fulfill and do the work of the covenants. Therefore, I would suggest this is a pretty good guide to consider when you're evaluating all of the competing claims that are now being made by people to having inspiration or revelation or the word of God to them.

We are vulnerable to being misled even as we claim to be inspired. Now, I'm gonna read from a recent study from the *National Academy of Science*. And I read from it because it's a really interesting study result:

Religion appears to serve as a moral compass for the vast majority of people around the world. It informs whether same-sex marriage is love or sin, whether war is an act of security or of terror, ...whether abortion rights represent personal liberty or permission to murder. Many religions are centered on a god (or gods) that has beliefs and intentions, with adherents encouraged to follow "God's will" on everything from martyrdom to career planning to voting. Within these religious systems, how do people know what their god wills?

When people try to infer other people's attitudes and beliefs, they often do so egocentrically by using their own beliefs as an inductive guide. This research examines the extent to which people might also reason egocentrically about God's beliefs. We predict that people would be consistently more egocentric when reasoning about God's beliefs than when reasoning about other people's beliefs. Intuiting God's beliefs on important issues may not produce an independent guide, but may instead serve as an echo chamber that reverberates one's own beliefs.

The Jewish and Christian traditions state explicitly that God created man in his own image, but believers and nonbelievers alike have long argued that people seem to create God in their own image as well.

That's a problem that you find everywhere. "God wills this to be so, well, because God agrees with me that it ought to be so, and therefore I'm comfortably in tune with God."

The greatest help given to us to solve the contradiction between praying to God and the answer being **exactly** what we wanted, **exactly** what we expected, and **exactly** what makes us right and everyone else wrong—the greatest guide is the Scriptures. They provide us a lifeline for measuring any inspiration we think we obtain from God. But that's not enough if it's not coupled together with prayerful, ponderous thought, and time, and experience. I want to compare these statements from Joseph Smith about this topic:

A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas, so that by noticing it, you may find it fulfilled the same day or soon; ...those things that were presented unto your minds by the Spirit of God, will come to pass; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation, until you become perfect in Christ Jesus. (*DHC* 3:381, June 1839)

That seems to suggest that answers can come suddenly, quickly, perhaps even easily. But Joseph also said this:

A fanciful and [a] flowery and [a] heated imagination beware of; because the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! if thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss, and the broad expanse of eternity—thou must commune with God. (*TPJS*, p. 137, March 1839)

That second quote is taken from a letter that Joseph Smith composed while he was in Liberty Jail, in which he had plenty of time to fashion the language. The first quote, sadly, is taken from a source which may not be reliable or accurate. The source for that first quote is *Willard Richard's Pocket Companion*, in which he quoted something which, if Joseph Smith said it, Joseph said it while Willard Richards was in England on a mission, and he could not possibly have heard it. He doesn't even attribute it to Joseph Smith. But when the *Documentary History* was being compiled, they used the *Willard Richard's Companion* to take that language and attribute it to a talk given by Joseph in 1839 (because most of the stuff that's in the *Pocket Companion* can be tracked to Joseph, and therefore, they conclude this one likewise fit that same category). The second one is clearly, unambiguously from Joseph Smith and describes the process.

Now, while Joseph was in the Liberty Jail, on occasion he would have a friendly face show up, or he would have a letter arrive. And on one of the occasions, he got letters from other people and his wife Emma. And Joseph (who had been brooding at the time and longing for the companionship of some friends) describes what his mind was going through at the time of the letter and his response to it. He says his "mind was frenzied"—and any man's mind can be when contemplating the many difficult issues we are called upon to confront.

Just like Joseph, we have perpetual conundrums and contradictions. We all face them. Some are of our own making, but others are just inherent in living in this existence. When we thoughtfully consider the challenges, just like Joseph, it seizes the mind and, like Joseph in Liberty Jail, makes us reflect upon so many things with the “avidity of lightning” (that was Joseph’s word). The mind is in this frenzied state, and with the avidity of lightning, he’s jumping from subject to subject, a fence to a fence, from things that console to things that outrage you, from things you know to be true to things that offend you, back and forth and back and forth until, as Joseph puts it, “...finally all enmity, malice and hatred, and past differences, misunderstandings and mismanagements are slain victorious at the feet of hope; and when the heart is sufficiently contrite, then the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers...” It’s almost poetry, the way Joseph describes what he went through there. But it is poetry describing the actual bona fides of Joseph receiving answers from God.

God’s most important inspiration for the most challenging subjects is often not hasty, quick, and without effort at our end. Consider the advice to Oliver Cowdery that he must “study it out in his own mind first” before asking God to tell him the answer. Many people want a quick, perfunctory response from God with no forethought. What they receive in turn is a quick, perfunctory answer. God is almost always, for the most difficult challenges, not a “short order cook,” although there are certainly false spirits who are willing to be just that.

I asked God in October what the term “mutual agreement” (as used in the “Answer”) meant. Before I asked, I hesitated and pondered the issue for two months. I discussed it with my wife and several others and then discussed, again, the views of others with my wife. I read emails from people involved in an active discussion about the meaning of the term.

It requires humility to approach God and ask Him for **His** answer—and yet more humility to know it is from Him and not my own ego, presumptions, hopes, desires, wants, and conceit. It is for me, as it was for Joseph, only “when the heart is sufficiently contrite, then the voice of inspiration steals along and whispers” the truth. **That** comes from a purer source, higher than myself, and more filled with light than any man—certainly, greater light than **I** have.

When the definition was given, it was accompanied by the realization the Lord could have disputed every day of His life with someone! He deliberately chose to not contend. He was not an argumentative personality.

The more we contend with others, the more we are taken captive by the spirit of contention. We become subject to the spirit we submit to follow. Those who are prone to contention become more contentious as they listen to that spirit. Eventually, they are overcome by that spirit, and it’s a great work involving great effort to subdue and dismiss that spirit from the heart and the mind of the victim.

Let me give you a description of the “Prayer for the Covenant”: It took **months** of pondering, testing, questioning beforehand before I even dared to ask. The idea that presented itself to my mind was that Joseph’s prayer at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple was a pattern to be followed when some great event involving God was to take

place. The House of the Lord was one such event in Kirtland, but having a new volume of Scripture was at least equally important to that. Therefore, a prayer to God asking for His acceptance was an idea that continued to press upon my mind.

But it concerned me that the idea of my offering that prayer may be based on my own will and not Heaven's. Before proceeding, I questioned my motive, my desire, and why I would even ask. I was haunted by the continuing impression that it needed to be done and was required of me. Finally, when the idea could not be shaken from my mind, I determined it was not my own thought but God's beckoning voice telling me that this was an obligation I needed to act upon and not suppress. I want you to think of Joseph's description that says: *Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of...heart. I reflected on it again and again...* (JSH 2:3 RE).

Joseph did not act hastily when the impression came to him. He couldn't shake it. It persisted. He reflected upon it again and again. I don't know whether that's days, weeks, or months, but I can tell you before the "Prayer for the Covenant" was offered, for me it was months—because if it isn't of God, I have no right to step forward and do something. I ought not be volunteering for things of that nature.

At length, I determined that I should act on the impulse, and therefore, I ought to offer a prayer for the acceptance of the Scripture. When I began to compose the prayer, the content was provided by inspiration from Heaven and not my own words. It took me nearly 200,000 words to write a history of the Restoration from the time of Joseph to the present in a book that's fairly lengthy. The "Prayer for the Covenant," coming by inspiration, only took a few pages and stated in more concise terms, more correctly the history of the Restoration from the beginning until now. The "Prayer for the Covenant" (the prayer for the Scriptures) is not me being clever and insightful and succinct. The words were given, and the words are God's view of what has happened.

There are those who have claimed inspiration on very important matters who make decisions quickly. Almost as soon as they finish a prayer asking for something, they assume the first thing that pops into their mind is God's infallible answer. I do not doubt that **may** happen; it has happened to me. But for the most important things, I have found that careful, ponderous, and solemn thought and meditation over time produces God's will and word with clarity that does not happen in haste.

In order to keep my license to practice law, I have to be trained in continuing legal education. And much of that is wasted time, but there was one speaker who came during one get-together who talked about his work as a consultant with a large group of law firms in New York and Washington, D.C. And he was trying to convey the idea that you need to have diverse viewpoints, and he used an example:

They did a preliminary... They used a preliminary test at one large law firm to determine who would get in, and the consultant took a look at the way in which they decided who the next hire would be. On the test, they would only consider taking someone if they got 90% or

better of the exam correct. And he looked at all of the test results, and he said, “Your new hire should be from among this small group.” And it was only two or three people, this small group, **all** of whom had gotten less than 40% on it, and one of whom had only gotten about 15% on the test. And their reaction was, “Why on earth would we hire anyone that does that poorly on the exam?” He said, “Because these are the only people... Everyone that got the 90% missed the same material. This small group of people are the only ones who picked up on and got **that** correct. Therefore, your law firm will never... If you're only hiring for this, you will be oblivious to—you will never pick up on—what you are missing.” And so, his recommendation was to hire... They were reluctant to do so, but they did it as an experiment. And we found out that the firm really valued this “lone voice” that was contrariwise to almost everything that was going on.

Well, the lone voice that speaks up in contradiction to group-think is sometimes the one voice that you ought to spend a little time listening to, because if it hasn't yet entered into your heart, but it resides in theirs... That doesn't mean that they get to rule the roost. It simply means that: take it into account; let **that** become value; let that **other** viewpoint become precious to you, and realize that they're just... They're giving you something just as valuable as what you've got already.

The foregoing excerpts were taken from:

- Denver's remarks titled “Keep the Covenant: Do the Work” given at the Remembering the Covenants Conference in Layton, UT on September 30, 2018
- Denver's blog post titled "Interpreting History, Part 8" originally published on February 2, 2012 and subsequently recorded for this podcast on August 28, 2022
- A fireside talk titled “That We Might Become One”, given in Clinton, UT on January 14th, 2018
- Denver's remarks made during an EU Fellowship Meeting on June 14, 2020