

Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! In this edition I'll be discussing the pursuit of truth and how we apply ourselves to it.

I would encourage you to go to <https://thechurchofjesuschrist.info> as I continue to update the site. I have links to several specific features below. Let me know what you think, whether you have any suggestions, or any requests.

As always, I'm extending an invitation for submissions to be published in The Gospel Notes Newsletter (TGNN). Additionally, if you have a subject or a question that you would like to have covered in a future edition of TGNN, feel free to send me a note and I'll do my best to address it.

The primary criteria for inclusion of articles are these:

1. It should be oriented towards the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
2. It should use the scriptures as a source of information.
3. It should include references for any quoted 3rd party sources.
4. It should not be political.

If you have a testimony to share, please send that to me and let me know if you would like it to be included in a future edition of the newsletter. Please keep in mind the four criteria listed above where applicable.

You can view previous editions of The Gospel Notes Newsletter (TGNN) in PDF (Portable Document Format) at <https://thechurchofjesuschrist.info/TheGospelNotesNewsletter>

Or you can access other educational/informational/inspirational resources at <https://thechurchofjesuschrist.info/Resources>

You can find the current preaching schedule for the Springfield, Missouri Restoration Branch at https://thechurchofjesuschrist.info/Resources/Service_Schedule.php

If you do not wish to receive the newsletter, please let me know. All responses to me will be treated confidentially unless you tell me otherwise.

Luke 6

41 And why beholdest thou the mote which is in thy brother's eye, but perceivest not the beam which is in thine own eye?

42 Again, how canst thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote that is in thine eye, when thou thyself beholdest not the beam which is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite! Cast out first the beam from thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote which is in thy brother's eye.

It does not take a lot of effort to understand this passage, but it can take a lot of effort to use it particularly because of the subject matter it involves – us. There are a multitude of things that can keep us from seeing ourselves clearly, and this is where I would like to take a little bit of a lesson from the world of science.

Making accurate “scientific” measurements is, in truth, exceptionally difficult to do. First, we have to think about what we want to measure, then we make the measurement, right? Not so fast. The idea behind an experiment is to get accurate information that reflects the nature of reality, and there are potentially many factors that can result in corrupt or misleading information that can change the conclusions we reach about the thing we are studying.

When I was in college I studied in the fields of physics and astronomy, with my personal preference being astronomy. In astronomy the subject of interest is the structure and nature of ... the universe. Doing this requires making observations of the universe and then using that information to develop, prove or disprove hypotheses or theories, and thereby gaining a better understanding of what surrounds us.

Observations in astronomy come in many forms, but I’ll focus on something I personally did.

The first instrument ever used in the study of astronomy is the human eye. By it we first perceived the light from the sun, moon, planets, stars, and everything else, but it is notoriously difficult to make accurate and consistent measurements using the human eye. That is because no two people have exactly the same kind of eyes. Some people may be colorblind, others may have very good sensitivity to color; some people have very acute vision – meaning they can see very fine details, while others have difficulty seeing even large objects. Moreover, the human eye doesn’t have one important capability – the ability to record data that can be directly shared with others. In other words, the human eye is an unreliable witness to the data that we want to use for measuring the universe, even if it is one of our most important senses in daily life.

Early astronomers understood this limitation, so they would draw what they saw to the best of their abilities, and this was the standard practice until the invention of photography. With photography came the ability to record things less subjectively, meaning that it simply recorded data that could be accessed at a later time without the same concerns for accuracy that the human eye afforded.

In time and with the invention of electronic sensing devices the ability to record images of objects that are “out there” in the universe became much more precise, but with every new invention there is a list of “buts” that must be understood. Without understanding how a measurement is taken, the data we collect from the measurement may be misunderstood or out of context, which can lead to incorrect conclusions.

That is what makes making accurate “scientific” measurements so difficult – there is “noise” in the measurement that detracts from the “signal” that you want to measure. In crude terms if you see periodic white hash or blips on your television screen, these are often not the result of what the broadcaster has sent, but things that have happened to the signal before it got to your television.

The same is true – and even more difficult to account for – when making precision measurements. You have to separate things that are not part of the real original signal from those things that are artifacts of how you took the measurement, environmental conditions that might corrupt the data, and the nature of what you are observing.

An anecdotal story in the history of modern astronomy comes from how astronomers at one particular observatory were taking spectroscopic measurements of stars. The light we receive from stars consists of a variety of different “colors” that may be brighter or dimmer, and this information can be used to collect lot of different kinds of information about the chemical composition of a star, the speed with which that star may be traveling, or even the rotational velocity of the star.

The astronomers at this observatory noted that every night at a certain time the measurements they were taking would become skewed by light that didn’t seem to conform to the same patterns that they measured at other times of the night. It seemed very strange to them – either something very strange was happening with the stars they were observing, or there was another factor they couldn’t account for in their equipment. They were frustrated – they tested their equipment and everything seemed to be working perfectly.

The time during which those “skewed” measurements took place was consistent, though, and this led them to look “outside the box” – or in this case, outside the observatory. As it turned out, every night at the same time there was someone who worked at the observatory that would be driving up the mountain in his car to start his shift, and the car headlights would be reflected into the observatory dome, which led to the corrupted data. Making this discovery they changed the policies about using lights on or around the mountaintop at night to prevent this from happening.

Many measurements are like this though - factors that are external to how you make the measurements that change what you see. But there are also factors that are internal that need to be understood.

With the advent of imaging devices like those you use in digital cameras, there are benefits to be found that make the use of old-style photography less desirable. By using digital imaging devices you can make direct, precision measurements, but just because it is digital does not mean the data you collect is precise, or at least, not right away.

With any kind of equipment that you use to measure the world around you, you need to understand how, exactly, it works, and how, exactly, you are interpreting what you measure.

An imaging device such as a Charge Coupled Device (CCD) chip is an incredible piece of technology, but it is not without its flaws. Despite the manufacturer's intent, they are not 100% uniform in how they measure light, and for that matter they do not convert light into data with 100% efficiency. So, we have to take steps to remove the inaccuracies of the device from the resulting data.

If this sounds tedious and time consuming, well, it is. But if what you want is the truth, you have to do this, otherwise you might draw conclusions that are simply not correct.

So here is what you can expect if you were to be a visiting astronomer at an observatory. First, you have to cool the imaging equipment to a frosty -100 degrees Celsius, often using liquid Nitrogen, but sometimes using other means. This is necessary to remove thermal effects that cause electrons in the device to bounce around and generally produce "static" in the resulting image.

Next, you take a series of images from the device. Some of these images will have zero exposure time – meaning that you aren't measuring how light is being converted into electronic charges, but you are measuring very precisely how the device reads the data. This is called "bias" – and it is a unique electronic signature of each device.

Next, you'll take some images of a "perfectly" uniform white screen inside the dome of the observatory. These images are called "flats" because they help you to understand how each pixel (picture element) may behave differently from others.

Periodically you'll take what is called a "dark" frame. This is an image that you take without opening the "shutter" on the camera but will take from a few seconds to a few minutes, and it will be an image that will help you to understand whether there are any environmental effects that might cause the data to be skewed.

Lastly, you'll take the actual image of the thing you want to observe – whether stars, nebulae, galaxies, etc.

Using all of this collected information you have to process the images you've taken of stars, galaxies, or whatever object, to remove the effects of bias, to compensate for the non-uniformity of the imaging device, and to compensate for the environment effects on the device.

You're done, right?

Not so fast. There are two other factors you haven't accounted for yet, one of which relates to where you are and where the object is in the sky.

The problem that has been the bane of astronomers for more than a century is that the measurements we make are taken under the canopy of the earth's atmosphere. Though we think of the atmosphere – unless it is cloudy – as a clear portal into the sky, that isn't really true. You can see this when you look at the Sun (not for too long, please!) when it is on the horizon versus when it is directly overhead. On the horizon it appears orange or even red, while overhead it appears a bright white. The atmosphere causes this effect by scattering certain colors of light and absorbing others.

Looking directly overhead the atmosphere is only about 65 miles thick until you reach the vacuum of space, but looking at the horizon you may be looking through several hundreds of miles of atmosphere (this can be shown with basic trigonometry). The cumulative effect is that those extra hundreds of miles take their toll on the accuracy of your data. One solution is to only take measurements of things that are overhead, but that solution has some obvious problems, and it doesn't actually address the real problem – the atmosphere itself. You can see why astronomers love space telescopes – they don't have to look through atmosphere.

There is some complicated math and ways to address these problems that I won't get into, but suffice it to say that this is a real problem, and it has to be accounted for – particularly as you observe an object over the course of a night – it moves from horizon to overhead to horizon, and you have to adjust things to adapt to it.

So, are we done yet? Not exactly. You see, even though we can use space telescopes to get outside the atmosphere, the universe is still, in some respects, a non-uniform and dirty place. Stars and other objects shine their light towards us, but that light has to pass through what you might call the atmosphere of the galaxy – gas and dust clouds – which are sometimes thousands of lightyears long, and they are not consistently the same density, thickness, or composition (what they are made of) from one part of the sky to another.

If you get the idea that astronomy has some real hindrances to getting reliable, accurate data, you would be right. That is not to say that it is impossible, but it has to be understood in context. All of this data has to be processed before you can begin to do the “science” part of astronomy.

Doing “science” can be very hard because the nature of the universe is not such that it will just throw you the answers you look for, but the same is true of any discipline. If you don't do your diligence in getting through the layers of noise and corruption, you may draw the wrong conclusions about how the universe is put together. That is true for biology, geology, meteorology, or any other “ology” - if you want to do “good science” that is.

In religious circles we often look down upon science as a corrupt body of atheists, but that would not be fair to them or to us. Many of those that study nature and work in the scientific disciplines do so honestly and with integrity. Yes, they are people, and while

many of them are religious – even Christian – there are also some that fall into that category of either atheist or agnostic.

While I love to talk about astronomy, my intent is not to make you more informed about astronomy, but to show that the problems faced by scientists is sometimes our problem as well – if we are truly interested in the truth.

I've heard it said often enough by Christians that, "The scriptures say it, so I believe it!" and that would be wonderful if it were true. But it is apparent that not all Christians do this, even those who say it.

Jesus' admonition about the mote and the beam is on center stage in this respect. Very often we have to sort through the noise and get to the signal, and then we have to look at that signal intently so we can understand the context of it.

We read the scriptures and think to ourselves, "I believe that!" but have you applied yourself to what it says so thoroughly that you can understand what it is that you believe?

As Christians we have to fight back against the temptation to have blind understanding. An example of this might be to say that we believe the earth was created in six days, but do you understand what that means, both to yourself and to someone whom you might be asked to explain it to? Or as some might say, "Are you just kicking the can down the road?" – passing off the explanation as just something you have in your library of "things to say to people"?

If you believe that Jesus was crucified, died, and was resurrected, have you applied yourself to studying this enough to understand what each part of that means? Enough that, given the chance, you could explain it to someone that doesn't know?

The "beam" we often have to address in our own eyes is what we think we know versus what we can really be confident about.

I have been in that untenable position of believing something, telling someone what I believe, and then being completely unable to explain why I believe that. It is embarrassing and uncomfortable, not because what I believed was untrue, but because I had not studied it enough to back up my belief with any suitable explanation. Do you find yourself in that position?

In fairness, Adam didn't know "why" he was commanded to offer sacrifices, and so he could not explain the meaning of what he was doing to the angel who asked him, but in lieu of that explanation he performed what he had been told to do because of who told him to do it.

Genesis 4:6 (Inspired Version) And Adam was obedient unto the commandments of the Lord. And after many days, an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying, Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And Adam said unto him, I know not, save the Lord commanded me.

At the time of Adam there were not a lot of books of revelation and history to explain this for him, so he acted in faith on the words given to him by that trustworthy source – the Lord. We are not in the position of Adam in the sense of not having scriptures to explain these things, or to study. But because of the centuries of distance between Adam and us, there is some noise that has crept into that scriptural signal – noise in the sense of cultural nuances that we don't understand today, noise in the sense of language differences, and noise in the sense of what people around us tell us, and last of all, noise within our own biases and misunderstandings.

Adam didn't have to root through all of this noise to get to the truth – and in that respect he had some privilege, but it came at great cost to himself.

In today's world, as Christians, we are often faced with the accusation that we are unwilling to find the truth because we don't use the methods of science. Sadly, in many instances, those critics are right. We often don't use this process, and not because the methods of science are inherently wrong, but because of the word "science" which is often used as an epithet by religious people. The reality is that there is nothing wrong with the scientific method. In fact, Alma embraced it with passion:

Alma 16

147 And now, my beloved brethren, as ye have desired to know of me what ye shall do because ye are afflicted and cast out--now I do not desire that ye should suppose that I mean to judge you only according to that which is true;

148 For I do not mean that ye, all of you, have been compelled to humble yourselves; for I verily believe that there are some among you who would humble themselves, let them be in whatsoever circumstances they might.

149 **Now as I said concerning faith, that it was not a perfect knowledge, even so it is with my words.**

150 **Ye cannot know of their surety at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge.**

151 **But behold, if ye will awake, and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.**

152 Now we will compare the word unto a seed.

As you read this passage, he lays out – using the language of a prophet – the scientific method as it is applied to the word of God. Would you accuse Alma of being opposed to science, when he himself used the same process modern science uses?

This is the trial-and-error-and-correction method of science and true Christianity. If you honestly devote yourself to the principles of the Gospel of Christ it will guide you into the truth, just as scientists use this same method to find out how the material world operates.

If we are completely fair, there are good scientists and bad scientists, just as there are good Christians and bad Christians. The conclusions you reach in your study are just as influenced by your biases, preconceptions, and personal beliefs in either field. To the evolutionist the idea of a creator may be anathema, and to the Christian the idea that animal biology may change – even slightly - over time is anathema, and yet they each decry the blindness of the other.

Here is a challenge for you – and it is the same challenge faced by scientists around the world: ask the “why” question. What do I mean? Let me explain.

When you are presented with a belief, ask, “Why?”

With that answer, ask, “Why?”

With that answer, ask, “Why?”

Keep asking until you have understanding. For example: Why was it necessary for Christ to be crucified?

“Because there had to be an atonement made for our sin.” Why?

“Because without the atonement man would not have the opportunity for eternal life.” Why?

“Because the choice made by Adam and Eve was in opposition to the commandment of God, which has brought about the need for redemption.” Why?

“Because until they were tempted they could not exercise their free agency to choose.” Why?

“Because without something to compare with, there is no decision that can be made for one or the other.” Why?

“Because choice is something that we have been guaranteed from the very beginning – whether to do good or to do evil.” Why?

“Because God created us out of a love for us and wanted us to choose him freely.” Why?

“Because God is by his own standard a loving being, who wants us to be like him as loving beings.” Why?

“Because he created us to be with him, and without the ability to love we could not be with him.” Why?

“Because God is a holy God and there can be no unclean thing in his presence. Anything that chooses evil is not acting out of a love for God.” Why?

“Because love itself is a choice that requires the ability to decide upon a course of action one way or the other, and anything which chooses to do evil is opposed to the love of God.” Why?

“Because God is good.”

You get the idea by this point. Use this process yourself to understand what you believe and you won't find yourself in that uncomfortable position of being unable to explain what you believe to others. You may find that the answers you receive are more enlightening than you would have imagined.

Jesus wanted us to clearly see the path before us. The “beam” in our eyes is what leads to hypocrisy, so the solution to that problem is to remove the beam. This requires humility. Not a false humility, but a true one.

False humility can be described like this:

Alma 16

91 Holy God, we believe that thou hast separated us from our brethren; and we do not believe in the tradition of our brethren, which was handed down to them by the childishness of their fathers; but we believe that thou hast elected us to be thy holy children;

92 And also thou hast made it known unto us that there shall be no Christ; but thou art the same, yesterday, today, and forever; and thou hast elected us, that we shall be saved, whilst all around us are elected to be cast by thy wrath down to hell; for the which holiness, O God, we thank thee;

93 And we also thank thee that thou hast elected us, that we may not be led away after the foolish traditions of our brethren, which doth bind them down to a belief of Christ, which doth lead their hearts to wander far from thee, our God.

94 And again, we thank thee, O God, that we are a chosen and a holy people. Amen.

This is not just a beam for the Zoramites in this passage: it is a massive tree, and for some people it is firmly rooted, placed in concrete, and held in position by chains. For others who realize that they are less than the dust of the earth, this beam simply vanishes away. Self-importance in the hallmark of vanity, conceit, and pride.

Proverbs 11:2 When pride cometh, then cometh shame; but with the lowly is wisdom.

Proverbs 18:11 The rich man's wealth is his strong city, and as an high wall in his own conceit.

Romans 12:16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.

The task of seeking and finding the truth is not impossible, but it is one that requires discipline, diligence and patience. When Jesus said this:

Matthew 7

12 Say unto them, Ask of God; ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

13 For everyone that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and unto him that knocketh, it shall be opened.

He did not specify how much time or effort was involved in this, only that the result is that you get the things which you ask for, seek after, or knock on. It does require faith though.

Just so that you understand, the methods of science are based on a kind of faith. Faith is described this way:

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Alma 16:143 And now, as I said concerning faith: Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore, if ye have faith, ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.

Ether 5:7 Wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith; for it was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers after he had risen from the dead;

When you pursue the study of something, you don't do it expecting to learn nothing, but to learn something. In science this how a hypothesis becomes a theory – you make an observation, test it, and examine the results. If the result is consistent with the hypothesis, you proceed with further testing, but if not you revise the hypothesis and test again. Eventually you will discover if there is any merit in it. In other words, if the test comes back in favor of your hypothesis, “you know that the seed was a good seed.” You trusted the process to work and now you have gained a knowledge of something you didn't know perfectly before, but that leads you on to discover more than just this preliminary knowledge – you now have confidence to pursue this further so that you might understand it in full.

Yes, the scientific method uses a form of “faith” to make conclusions about the world and how it works. There is nothing wrong with this. Contrary to what many scientists will say, science is not based on doubt, but on faith, because it is a process and not a conclusion.

What most people truly have objections to are the conclusions reached by scientists, and sometimes the particular individuals themselves, but the idea of finding truth is not restricted to either science or to faith, but it is a path to the discovery of knowledge.

As Christians we have the understanding that there is a source which has a knowledge and understanding of all things that we can call upon for help. Too often I think we use God as our personal librarian rather than as the teacher that He is. By reference I can point out this passage in the Doctrine and Covenants:

D&C 9

3a Behold, you have not understood; **you have supposed that I would give it unto you when you took no thought save it was to ask me;**

3b **but behold, I say unto you that you must study it out in your mind;**

3c then you must ask me if it be right; and if it is right, I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

3d But if it be not right, you shall have no such feelings; but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing which is wrong;

3e therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred, save it be given you from me.

While this was directed at Oliver Cowdery, the same can be said for each of us. If we want to know something, we should think about it first – put some real effort into it – before we ask the Lord. Think about this:

Ether 1

55 And the Lord said unto the Brother of Jared, **What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?**

56 For behold, ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed in pieces; neither shall ye take fire with you, for ye shall not go by the light of fire; for behold, ye shall be as a whale in the midst of the sea; for the mountain waves shall dash upon you.

57 Nevertheless, I will bring you up again out of the depths of the sea; for the winds have gone forth out of my mouth, and also the rains and the floods have I sent forth.

58 And behold, I prepare you against these things; for howbeit, ye cannot cross this great deep, save I prepare you against the waves of the sea, and the winds which have gone forth, and the floods which shall come.

59 **Therefore, what will ye that I should prepare for you, that ye may have light when ye are swallowed up in the depths of the sea?**

60 **And it came to pass that the Brother of Jared (now the number of the vessels which had been prepared was eight) went forth unto the mount, which they called the Mount**

Shelem because of its exceeding height, and did molten out of a rock sixteen small stones;

61 **And they were white and clear, even as transparent glass, and he did carry them in his hands upon the top of the mount and cried again unto the Lord,** saying, O Lord, thou hast said that we must be encompassed about by the floods.

62 Now behold, O Lord, and do not be angry with thy servant because of his weakness before thee; for we know that thou art holy and dwellest in the heavens and that we are unworthy before thee;

63 Because of the fall, our natures have become evil continually; nevertheless, O Lord, thou hast given us a commandment that we must call upon thee, that from thee we may receive according to our desires.

64 Behold, O Lord, thou hast smitten us because of our iniquity and hath driven us forth; and for this many years we have been in the wilderness; nevertheless, thou hast been merciful unto us.

65 O Lord, look upon me in pity, and turn away thine anger from this thy people, and suffer not that they shall go forth across this raging deep in darkness, but behold these things which I have molten out of the rock.

66 **And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of man; therefore, touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea.**

67 Behold, O Lord, thou canst do this. We know that thou art able to show forth great power, which looks small unto the understanding of men.

68 And it came to pass that when the Brother of Jared had said these words, **behold, the Lord stretched forth his hand and touched the stones, one by one, with his finger;**

This is a bit of a longer passage, but it shows that the Brother of Jared had a question, and the Lord asked him how he wanted to proceed (the Lord knowing all things beforehand). Before the Brother of Jared posed his question, he spent time to think of a plan and to ask the Lord if he would be willing to go with that plan. He didn't just go back to the Lord and say, "I don't know, what do you think I should do?"

Do you suppose the Lord would have been pleased if the Brother of Jared had just said, "this is your problem – you told me what to do – you fix it." I think instead that this passage shows that the Lord is pleased when we use our minds and treat him according to rules of humility, respect and love. We have to do our part, and the Lord will do his part.

In the early 2000's I was teaching a class on computer networking, which involved as you might expect a lot of technical details about computers, software, how to configure them, etc., and I had a student that said something to me after a test which showed to me a mis-perception that I found interesting.

The student said something to me along the lines of, "Well, this is easy for you – you have your certification."

I replied to him, “I gained this knowledge through a lot of study and effort – I didn’t have someone teaching it to me. Getting a certification does not mean a bucket of knowledge just drops on you.”

I came to realize that this is how some Christians believe their salvation comes about. Jesus “did it all” and they have to “do nothing,” despite all the many scriptures that might suggest it isn’t quite so easy as that. And some likewise take, “Ask and ye shall receive,” to mean there is no thought necessary to get the answers you want. This is a flawed perspective, but it is prevalent.

I think Jesus might have been generous and understated in referring to the “beam” in our eyes. It might be that there are many such beams in our eyes that have to be plucked out, and it can be difficult and time-consuming, but it is worth the effort if we seek the truth.