**Understanding the Importance of Scripture Study**

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 Brothers and sisters, I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak with you. To those of you who are brand-new to Ricks College, we welcome you. To those of you who are returning, welcome back. We note with sadness that yesterday three of our students were involved in a tragic accident in Thayne, Wyoming. Two of the students were injured, and the life of one was taken. We express our condolences and love to the families and pray for the speedy recovery of those who were injured.

Since assuming my responsibilities as the president of Ricks College last summer, one of my points of emphasis has been the study and use of the scriptures. Those of you who are new to Ricks will note that at the beginning of today's devotional assembly, Brother Bird asked you to hold up your scriptures. This is a new tradition we started at our first devotional last fall, and it is a tradition through which we will continue to encourage all students and faculty to consistently study and use the scriptures. As I am sure most of you recognize, the real significance of this tradition is not merely bringing and holding up your scriptures every Tuesday in devotional. Rather, this simple act is but a reminder and symbol of our collective appreciation for, desire to learn from, and commitment to consistently and conscientiously study the holy scriptures.

Today I hope to accomplish two objectives as I visit with you: (1) provide a doctrinal foundation for understanding the importance of studying the scriptures and (2) emphasize basic principles that can help each of us become more effective in our personal study of the scriptures. I pray for, I yearn for, and I invite the Spirit of the Lord to be with each of us today, that we may understand each other and truly be edified.

I am going to refer to a number of scriptures--many more than we could possibly look up and read together in the allotted devotional time. Some of the references I will specifically ask you to look up in your scriptures and read along with me; other verses I will quote directly and provide only the reference. You may find it helpful to jot down the references and study the quoted verses in more detail at a later time.

Prophets, church leaders, advisors, teachers, and parents all talk and teach about the importance of studying the scriptures. Why is studying the scriptures so important? May I suggest three answers:

• Studying the scriptures is important because of the covenants we have made.

• Studying the scriptures is important because of the direction we need in our lives.

• Studying the scriptures is important because scripture study is a preparation for and prerequisite to receiving personal revelation.

Those three answers can be summarized in the following words: covenants, direction, and revelation. Those are three doctrinal reasons why studying the scriptures is so important.

A covenant is an agreement between God and his children here upon the earth. God sets the conditions of the covenant, and there are promised blessings. As we are obedient to the conditions of the covenant, we receive the promised blessings. Verse 77 in Section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants outlines the three specific covenants we make at the time we enter the waters of baptism. We hear this prayer and are reminded of the covenants each Sunday as we partake of the emblems of the sacrament.

O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son, and witness unto thee, O God, the Eternal Father, that they are willing to **take upon them the name of thy Son**, and **always remember him** and **keep his commandments which he has given them**; that they may always have his Spirit to be with them. Amen. (D&C 20:77, emphasis added)

The three conditions are that we (1) take upon us the name of Christ, (2) always remember him, and (3) keep the commandments. The promised blessing is that we will always have his Spirit to be with us.

I want to draw your attention to the second covenantal obligation to "always remember him." I do not know of a better way to always remember him than to daily study the scriptures. That covenant is not an abstract notion. It can be honored in meaningful, personal prayer every morning and night and in diligent study of the scriptures.

When I served as a stake president and interviewed literally hundreds of members of the Church, I frequently would ask, "Do you remember and keep the covenants you have made?" I do not recall many people answering no. When I would inquire further and ask about their scripture study, some would say, "I do not have time." Then I would ask about their personal prayers, and the answer often was, "I am not as consistent as I should be." On some occasions I would then inquire, "Do you, in fact, keep the covenant to always remember Him?"

The covenants we make in the waters of baptism are a commitment to always remember him, in part through meaningful prayer and diligent study of the scriptures.

The second doctrinal reason for studying the scriptures is explained in 2 Nephi: ". . . the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:3). Please turn with me to Alma, Chapter 37. We will focus for just a moment on the blessing of direction in our life that comes through the scriptures.

O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God.

Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day. (Alma 37:35, 37)

Verse 35 is an admonition for us to obtain wisdom in our youth. Verse 37 focuses on the importance of prayer morning and night. Now look at verse 38:

And now, my son, I have somewhat to say concerning the thing which our fathers call a ball, or director--or our fathers called it Liahona, which is, being interpreted, a compass; and the Lord prepared it. (Alma 37:38)

So what was discussed immediately before this reference to the Liahona? Personal prayer. What did the Liahona provide? Direction in the wilderness for Lehi and his family.

Now note what follows:

And behold, there cannot any man work after the manner of so curious a workmanship. And behold, it was prepared to show unto our fathers the course which they should travel in the wilderness.

And it did work for them according to their faith in God; . . . (Alma 37:39-40)

In later verses it indicates that when they were slothful and disobedient, the Liahona no longer provided the direction that was needed. Look at verse 42:

Therefore, they tarried in the wilderness, or did not travel a direct course, and were afflicted with hunger and thirst, because of their transgressions. (Alma 37:42)

We have just read about the importance of personal prayer, the Liahona that provided direction, and how the Liahona worked to provide direction. Let's begin reading in verse 43:

And now, my son, I would that ye should understand that these things are not without a shadow; for as our fathers were slothful to give heed to this compass (now these things were temporal) they did not prosper even so it is with things which are spiritual.

For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them a straight course to the promised land.

And now I say, is there not a type of this thing? For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall **the words of Christ**, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. (Alma 37:43-45, emphasis added)

Thus, Alma teaches us in this chapter that personal prayer and scripture study provide direction in our lives just as the Liahona provided guidance to Lehi and his family in the wilderness.

By way of review, the first reason for studying the scriptures is the covenants we have made. The second reason is the word of Christ as contained in the scriptures will provide the direction we need in our lives.

Revelation is the third doctrinal reason for studying the scriptures. Scripture study is a preparation for and prerequisite to receiving personal revelation. Let us think for a moment of the experience of the Prophet Joseph Smith. What was it that preceded the First Vision? Joseph attended a number of religious revivals and was confronted with confusing and competing claims. In the midst of the confusion, and as he was striving to find which of all the churches he should join, he read in James: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; . . ." (James 1:5). Joseph was studying the scriptures. I would admonish you to read (at a later time) in the Joseph Smith History about the impact of that verse of scripture upon the young boy Joseph Smith. He reflected upon it over and over again. He stated that never before had a verse of scripture entered into his heart and soul with such impact as that verse did at that time. Scripture study preceded the First Vision.

Think of the experience the Prophet Joseph Smith had as he was translating the Book of Mormon. I would like you to turn to Section 13 of the Doctrine and Covenants; I will use this section as an illustration of how the work of translating the golden plates preceded many revelations. In the chapter heading at the beginning of Section 13 it says: "Ordination of Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery to the Aaronic Priesthood along the bank of the Susquehanna River, near Harmony, Pennsylvania, May 15, 1829." Now let me read something from the Joseph Smith History concerning this revelation:

We still continued the work of translation, when, in the ensuing month (May, 1829), we on a certain day went into the woods to pray and inquire of the Lord respecting baptism for the remission of sins, that we found mentioned in the translation of the plates.

It was during the work of translating the golden plates, while seeking to understand the need for the ordinance of baptism and having a question about proper authority, that Joseph and Oliver decided to inquire of the Lord.

While we were thus employed, praying and calling upon the Lord, a messenger from heaven descended in a cloud of light, and having laid his hands upon us, he ordained us, saying, . . ." (Joseph Smith History, 1:68)

What followed is recorded today as Section 13 of the Doctrine and Covenants. What was it that preceded the visitation of John the Baptist and the conferral of the Aaronic Priesthood? Scripture study.

Later in his ministry, the Prophet Joseph Smith received the assignment to review and translate the Bible. During his work on that translation, he inquired of the Lord on numerous occasions. These are just a few examples of the revelations that were received: Section 76 (the vision pertaining to the degrees of glory; Section 77 (insights into the revelation of John); Section 91 (information about the Apocrypha); Section 132 (eternal marriage). All of these revelations came as a result of his work in translating the Bible.

Here are two assignments for you. First, in your personal study, see if you can learn how many and specifically which revelations presently contained in the Doctrine and Covenants came as a result of Joseph's work of translating the Book of Mormon. Second, see if you can determine specifically which revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants came as a result of his work in translating the Bible. As you undertake these assignments, you will quickly learn that the vast majority of the revelations presently contained in the Doctrine and Covenants came in connection with the work of translating these two volumes of scripture. What preceded revelation? Scripture study.

Please turn to Section 138 in the Doctrine and Covenants. This is the revelation in which Joseph F. Smith learned about the organization of the work of proclaiming the gospel in the spirit world. I draw your attention to verse 1: "On the third of October, in the year nineteen hundred and eighteen, I sat in my room pondering over the scriptures" (D&C 138:1). This verse contains tremendous insight about the relationship between scripture study and receiving revelation. We will not take the time now to detail those insights. But I encourage you, at a later time, to look at, study, and understand what is contained in Section 138 as it relates to scripture study and receiving revelation.

Again, let me summarize the three reasons why scripture study is so important: (1) It is one of the major ways whereby we keep our covenant to always remember him. (2) It helps us become familiar with the voice of the Lord and thus better prepared to receive his direction in our lives. (3) It is a necessary preparation for and prerequisite to receiving personal revelation.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie has explained:

May I suggest, based upon personal experience, that faith comes and revelations are received as a direct result of scripture study. Paul says *"faith cometh by hearing."* Joseph Smith taught that to gain faith men must have a knowledge of the nature and kind of being God is; they must have a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes; and they must so live as to gain the assurance that their conduct is in harmony with the divine will. Faith is thus born of scripture study. Those who study, ponder, and pray about the scriptures, seeking to understand their deep and hidden meanings, receive great outpourings of light and knowledge from the Holy Spirit. (Bruce R. McConkie, from "Holy Writ Published Anew," an address delivered at the Regional Representatives Seminar, April 2, 1982)

Now I would like to suggest just a few principles that can help each of us become more effective in our personal study of the scriptures.

First, **pray for understanding and invite the help of the Holy Ghost**. The things of the spirit can only be learned by and through the influence of the Spirit. Each time we begin a session of sincere scripture study, an earnest and humble prayer in which we petition our Heavenly Father in the name of his Son for the assistance of the Holy Ghost will greatly improve our learning and our understanding.

The second principle is **work**. Gospel knowledge and understanding come through diligent study of the scriptures and the tutoring of the Holy Ghost. The combination that opens the vault door to hidden scriptural treasures includes a great deal of work--simple, old-fashioned, hard work. A farmer cannot expect to harvest in the fall if he does not properly sow in the spring and work hard during the summer to weed, nourish, and cultivate the field. So it is for you and me. We cannot expect to reap scriptural insight unless we pay the price of regular and diligent study. Casual strolling through or dabbling in the scriptures will not yield enduring gospel understanding. As Elder Maxwell has noted on several occasions, we are to "feast upon the words of Christ--not nibble" (Plain and Precious Things, p. 3). And the scriptural treasures we seek in our lives cannot be borrowed or loaned or obtained second-hand. We must each learn to open the vault door by applying the principle of work.

The third principle is **consistency**. Given the hectic pace of our lives, good intentions and simply "hoping" to find the time for meaningful scripture study are not sufficient. My experience suggests that a specific and scheduled time set aside each day and, as much as possible, a particular place for study greatly increase the effectiveness of our searching through the scriptures.

The fourth principle is to **ponder**. Please turn with me to Chapter 4 in 2 Nephi. Nephi is describing the things of his soul:

And upon these I write the things of my soul, and many of the scriptures which are engraven upon the plates of brass. For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children.

Behold, my soul delighteth in the things of the Lord; and my heart pondereth continually upon the things which I have seen and heard. (2 Nephi 4:15-16)

The word *ponder* means to consider, to contemplate, to reflect upon, or to think about. The process of pondering takes time and cannot be forced, hurried, or rushed. As described by Nephi in the verses we just read, pondering is very much related to our covenant responsibility to "always remember him."

Recall the experience of President Joseph F. Smith in Section 138 as he sat in his room "pondering over the scriptures." This principle of pondering does not just apply to and work for apostles and prophets. It applies to you and to me in our everyday lives.

The Prophet Joseph Smith provided an important guideline about how we can ponder the scriptures. He said, "I have a key by which I understand the scriptures. I enquire, what was the question which drew out the answer, or caused Jesus to utter the parable?" (History of the Church, Vol 5, Ch. 13, p. 261). What was the question that brought about Section 13 of the Doctrine and Covenants? A question about the ordinance of baptism and the need for proper authority.

Think about Section 89 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Word of Wisdom. Listen carefully to this description by Brigham Young:

I think I am as well acquainted with the circumstances which led to the giving of the Word of Wisdom as any man in the Church, although I was not present at the time to witness them. The first school of the prophets was held in a small room situated over the Prophet Joseph's kitchen, in a house which belonged to Bishop Whitney. . . . The brethren came to that place for hundreds of miles to attend school in a little room probably no larger than eleven by fourteen. When they assembled together in this room after breakfast, the first they did was to light their pipes, and, while smoking, talk about the great things of the kingdom and spit all over the room, and as soon as the pipe was out of their mouths a large chew of tobacco would then be taken. Often when the Prophet entered the room to give the school instructions he would find himself in a cloud of tobacco smoke. This, and the complaints of his wife at having to clean so filthy a floor, made the Prophet think upon the matter, and he inquired of the Lord relating to the conduct of the Elders in using tobacco, and the revelation known as the Word of Wisdom was the result of his inquiry. (Brigham Young, Journal of Discourses, Vol. 12, pp. 157-158, February 8, 1868)

What was the question that brought about the inquiry and the revelation?

President Benson has provided another guideline that we can use as we ponder the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon. He said:

If [the Book of Mormon writers] saw our day and chose those things which would be of greatest worth to us, is not that how we should study the Book of Mormon? We should constantly ask ourselves, "Why did the Lord inspire Mormon (or Moroni or Alma) to include that in his record? What lesson can I learn from that to help me live in this day and age?" (Ezra T. Benson, "The Book of Mormon--Keystone of Our Religion," Ensign, November 1986, p. 6)

In other words, President Benson told us, as did Nephi, to "liken all scriptures unto us" (1 Nephi 19:23). So we have guidelines from both President Benson and Joseph Smith regarding the process of pondering the scriptures.

The fifth principle is to **look for connections and patterns and parallels** in the scriptures. Rather than simply tell you about this principle, I would like to use an example. Please turn to Mosiah, Chapter 3. We are going to read verse 19. I suspect most of us can recite this verse from memory. As I read, I want to draw your attention to the very last part of the verse.

For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ . . .

Now this is the part I want to emphasize. The verse thus far has described the process of putting off the natural man and becoming a saint through the atonement of Christ. As that process takes hold in our life, this is what occurs:

. . . and becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father. (Mosiah 3:19)

Keep your finger in Chapter 3 and turn to Chapter 24 in Mosiah. I want to draw your attention to verses 14 and 15. In this chapter Amulon and his followers are persecuting Alma and his people. Great burdens are placed upon their backs. Verses 14 and 15 describe how the people are enabled to bear the burdens.

And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs, even while you are in bondage; and this will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions.

And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord. (Mosiah 24:14-15)

The latter portion of verse 19 in Chapter 3 describes the characteristics of those who are putting off the natural man and becoming more saintlike through the atonement of Christ. In Chapter 24 we learn how Alma's people were strengthened. The burden did not change. Rather, their strength and capacity were increased to bear the burdens "with ease." How did that strengthening occur? If we compare Mosiah 3:19 and Mosiah 24:15, it is clear that the additional strength came through the enabling power of the atonement of Christ. As we put off the natural man and become more saintlike through the atonement, we become increasingly childlike and submissive. Look at the very end of verse 15 in Chapter 24: ". . . and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord." These characteristics in Chapter 24 parallel and are related to the characteristics described in Chapter 3. There is a connection and a relationship between what happened to Alma and his people and King Benjamin's preaching about the atonement.

There are layers of meaning in the scriptures, brothers and sisters. As we have the companionship of the Holy Ghost, those meanings can be revealed to us.

The sixth principle is to **write your thoughts and feelings**. Recording what we learn and writing about what we think and feel as we study the scriptures helps us to revisit the same spirit that brought the initial insight or revelation and invites even greater understanding than was originally received. Recording our learnings and writing about our thoughts and feelings is another form of pondering and of always remembering him and is an invitation to the Holy Ghost for continued instruction.

I personally bear testimony of the power of this principle. As we take the time to write what we think and feel in relation to studying the scriptures, an additional and increased outpouring of insight will come.

Let me summarize the six principles:

• Pray for understanding and invite the help of the Holy Ghost.

• Work.

• Be consistent in terms of time and place.

• Ponder.

• Look for connections and patterns and parallels in the scriptures.

• Record your thoughts and feelings.

I want to conclude with a testimony that may initially seem unrelated to my remarks about scripture study. The scriptures are prerecorded revelation. Just as you can listen to recorded music over and over again and be greatly benefitted, so we can repeatedly review the written word. But would you rather listen to a prerecorded tape or attend a live performance? I would suggest, for example, that a CD of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, as good as that CD may be, does not compare to a live performance in the Tabernacle where you can feel the spiritual power of those magnificent voices.

What follows is a description by Wilford Woodruff of an episode that took place with Brigham Young and the Prophet Joseph Smith:

I will refer to a certain meeting I attended in the town of Kirtland in my early days. At that meeting some remarks were made that have been made here today, with regard to the living oracles and with regard to the written word of God. The same principle was presented, although not as extensively as it has been here, when a leading man in the Church got up and talked upon the subject, and said: "You have got the word of God before you here in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants; you have the written word of God, and you who give revelations should give revelations according to those books, as what is written in those books is the word of God. We should confine ourselves to them." When he concluded, Brother Joseph turned to Brother Brigham Young and said, "Brother Brigham I want you to take the stand and tell us your views with regard to the written oracles and the written word of God." Brother Brigham took the stand, and he took the Bible, and laid it down; he took the Book of Mormon, and laid it down; and he took the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and laid it down before him, and he said: "There is the written word of God to us, concerning the work of God from the beginning of the world, almost, to our day." "And now," said he, "when compared with the living oracles those books are nothing to me; those books do not convey the word of God direct to us now, as do the words of a Prophet or a man bearing the Holy Priesthood in our day and generation. I would rather have the living oracles than all the writing in the books." That was the course he pursued. When he was through, Brother Joseph said to the congregation: "Brother Brigham has told you the word of the Lord, and he has told you the truth." (Wilford Woodruff, Conference Report, October 1897, pp. 22-23)

Brothers and sisters, I bear testimony of the power of the word of God as taught by living apostles and prophets and as contained in the holy scriptures. I pray that we will understand the doctrinal foundation and principles I have outlined today. May we go from this assembly and apply them. I testify that these doctrines and principles are true. I know of their power and promise that you will feel that power in your life. I know God lives. I testify that Jesus is the Christ. I am grateful for the tutoring influence of the spirit of the Holy Ghost. And I testify that God, the Eternal Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to the boy prophet, Joseph Smith. I further testify that there are living apostles and prophets on the earth today who direct the affairs of this church, even The Church of Jesus Christ. Of this I testify and of this I declare my witness, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.