

Podcast Episode 69: Effective Study, Part 1

QUESTION: How do I get the most out of gospel study? Where do I begin? It can be frustrating to read and not really get much out of a text, aside from the most obvious and superficial reading. What can I do, or what skills or approaches do I need to utilize in order to make my study effective, so I can both understand *and* experience the gospel, as well as prepare for Zion?

DENVER: We have a tendency, all of us, to take concepts or pictures or ideas and to put them in our heads, and then to rely upon those pictures as we go forward learning new things. The object being to fit what we learned, that is new, into the framework of what we already know or we're already familiar with. That can be handicapping.

In the twenty-eighth chapter of Second Nephi, Nephi cautions us about permitting what he calls the "traditions of men" to override what he calls the "whisperings of the spirit." And he suggests that you run into mistakes, you run into errors—some of them terrible errors—when you permit those traditions, or those pictures that you already have inside your head, to be the framework from which you reconstruct new information that you learn. It's hard to do so, but when it comes to the gospel of Jesus Christ, you would be best advised to start with a blank slate and to allow it to inform you as if you're hearing it for the first time—because those words in scripture don't necessarily mean what the picture in your head suggests that they mean.

Let me pull an example. (If you've got your scriptures, you're welcome to pull them out, and turn the pages, and make all the noise you want finding the Joseph Smith History. You are NOT in a Sacrament meeting, and therefore, your scriptures are welcome to be used.) In the Joseph Smith History, it's the eighth verse, he says, about halfway through that eighth verse: *In process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them* (Joseph Smith History 1:8; see also JSH 2:2 RE). Once again, this is high praise for Margaret Barker, a Methodist scholar.

But laying that aside, during the time of this period there was a (particularly in the revivalist part of Methodism)—there was a group called the Shouting Methodists; and the Shouting Methodists had a tradition. That tradition was to go into the woods alone to pray; and when they prayed alone in the woods, they were looking for some experience that would bind them up. And when they got bound up, they knew that they'd had an experience with God and the Holy Ghost, and they came back converted.

The miracle of The First Vision of Joseph Smith does not consist in the fact that he went in the woods alone to pray. Nor does it consist in the fact that when he's in the woods alone and praying, that he got bound up by some darkness which entirely overcame him. The miracle of Joseph Smith is that when that happened, he rejected it as the source of conversion. He did not allow his fears to control him. He did not allow the tradition to control him. But calling upon God, he then pressed through to receive what lays on the other side of the fears and of the darkness and of the things that put you off the trail to God. And he tells us about the vision of the Father and the Son telling him that he was to join none of them.

He goes on for some space of years; and during that space of years, he talks about how he frequently fell into many foolish errors—displayed by the weaknesses of youth and the foibles of human nature. And then he talks about he was guilty of levity and sometimes associating with jovial company. One of the pictures I think you have in your head about me (if you've read what I've written and you've read my blog) is that you may entirely misapprehend:

#1—how difficult it is for me to get up here and do THIS, and

#2—how incredibly irreverent I am by my native nature.

I am not a stoic religious person. I undertake to do what the Lord asks—what I think pleases Him—at the cost of personal inconvenience. I don't like being up here, and it's being recorded—by my voice and not by a camera—because I don't want people recognizing me. I don't want to be a celebrity. I want my privacy. And when it comes to a native, cheery temperament, I have, I suppose, a wicked sense of humor.

Well, he called upon, and he had confidence because he had previously received an answer. In verse 29, he had confidence that he would have an answer and a divine manifestation, as he had previously had one (see also JSH 3:1 RE). Then he gives the account, in some detail, of the appearance of the angel Moroni, how it occupied the night. And he passes through the events of his life until we get to the time in which, during the translation of the Book of Mormon (beginning in verse 68), they come upon the ordinance of baptism. They went into the woods. They prayed, in May of 1829, and John the Baptist appears and confers authority upon them. And immediately after conferring the authority upon Joseph Smith, the angel says to him: *He said [that] this Aaronic Priesthood had not the power of laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, but that this should be conferred on us hereafter* (Joseph Smith History 1:70; see also JSH 14:1 RE).

And then we get to verse 73, which is a description of what happened after being baptized:

Immediately on our coming...out of the water after we had been baptized, we experienced great and glorious blessings from our Heavenly Father. No sooner had I baptized Oliver Cowdery, than the Holy Ghost fell upon him...he stood up and prophesied many things which should shortly come to pass. And again, [as] soon as I had been baptized by him, I also had the spirit of prophecy, when, standing up, I prophesied concerning the [rising the] Church, and many other things connected with the Church, and this generation...We were filled with the Holy Ghost, and rejoiced in the God of our salvation. Our minds [now being] enlightened, we began to have the scriptures laid open to our understandings, and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed unto us in a manner which we [could never] attain to previously, nor ever before had thought of. (Joseph Smith History 1:73-74; see also JSH 14:3-4)

Now, here are the questions: He saw God the Father and he saw Jesus Christ in a vision. And if you read all of the accounts, you find out it was a vision that included a view into Heaven, for he saw the Heavenly hosts—because the Father does not appear without a host. The Son can appear alone, but the Father never does. If you see the Father, you are going to see a host.

And thereafter, he's visited by the angel Moroni, and he's tutored—not merely through the one night, but in successive, annual occurrences for four years. AND YET, the first time his testimony mentions the Holy Ghost is after baptism. And after baptism using authority (which the angel told him HAD NOT the right to confer the gift of the Holy Ghost—that would happen at some *subsequent* occasion), why then—without the laying on of hands by one having authority—did Joseph Smith receive the Holy Ghost? Not merely as a visitation, mind you. Read the words. It lingered. It persisted. Because after they were baptized: *we began to have the scriptures laid open to our [understanding], and the true meaning and intention of their more mysterious passages revealed [to] us* (ibid). That required scripture study—over the ensuing weeks, months, years.

There we encounter a word: “mysterious” passages. You know that Peter, in Second Peter chapter 1, (I don't know) verse 16, maybe? You look it up. He says that the scriptures are *not of any private interpretation...but holy men...spake as they were moved [upon] by the Holy Ghost* (2 Peter 1:20-21; see also 2 Peter 1:5 RE).

The scriptures were given by the power of the Holy Ghost, and now Joseph Smith is explaining that he could *unravel* their *mysteries* by the power of the Holy Ghost. And things that did not make sense before, began to make sense. If you've read *The Second Comforter*, in the chapter about becoming as a little child there is an excerpt taken from a book: *Godel*,

Escher, Bach—a brilliant mathematical book about Bongard problems. Bongard problems are designed to test a certain kind of reasoning, using symbols in order to test the person evaluating them. And invariably, Bongard problems are solved by children. And they confuse adults because the children’s minds have not become cluttered by the kind of mathematical complexity that we have bouncing around in our heads, as a consequence of which, they look at it simply, and they see things simply, and they can solve the Bongard problems in a way in which adults fail to grasp.

The gospel is adapted to the simple mind. The statements that are contained in scripture are given in simplicity and in plainness. So when we encounter Joseph Smith speaking to us, now, about having the mysteries of the gospel laid open to his mind—as a consequence of having the Holy Ghost—I’m reminded of a statement that he made that you find in the *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* about the Holy Ghost, on pages 149 and 150, which I’m going to read an excerpt from:

There are two Comforters spoken of. One is the Holy Ghost, the same as given on the Day of Pentecost, and that all Saints receive after faith, repentance, and baptism. This first comforter...” [And by the way, Joseph Smith is saying this at a time when the authority for the laying on of hands had been restored, but his list is faith and repentance and baptism; and that produces the same effect as on the Day of Pentecost. If you listen to the words of the ordinance that’s performed in the church, the words of the ordinance are an admonition to **you** to receive the Holy Ghost. It’s telling **you** to do something. Well, this first comforter] or Holy Ghost has no other effect than pure intelligence. [It’s] more powerful in expanding the mind, enlightening the understanding, and storing the intellect with present knowledge. (TPJS, p. 149)

Did you get that list of things? The effect of the Holy Ghost is pure intelligence.

I can watch *Lawrence of Arabia*, and when they’ve successfully knocked the train off the track, and the group he is leading has charged and overcome the enemy, and Lawrence is walking on the top of the trains with the flowing robes, I can get goose bumps. It is moving. It is stirring. That’s **not** the Holy Ghost. I can have that same effect with *Les Miserables*. I can have that same effect with some of the scenes in *Joseph’s Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Moving and stirring things can delight your senses. That’s **not** the Holy Ghost. It “has no other effect than pure intelligence...expanding the mind, enlightening the understanding, ...storing the intellect with present knowledge.”

I'm not here to entertain you. I'm trying to inform you of doctrine that will save you. I don't care if any of you are stirred or (like one of our MSNBC folks) had a tremor run up his leg at the president's speaking. I don't care about that. I care about your salvation; I care about your souls; and I care about you understanding the things that will save you. Joseph Smith gave the list: pure intelligence, expanding the mind, enlightening the understanding, storing the intellect with present knowledge.

In the translation of the Book of Moses (which was Joseph correcting the Book of Genesis), he gives a list there of the Holy Ghost as well. Let me read you that list: *The Comforter; the peaceable things of immortal glory*— This is Moses chapter 6, verse 61: *The Comforter; the peaceable things of immortal glory; the truth of all things; that which quickeneth all things, which maketh alive all things; that which knoweth all things, and hath all power according to wisdom, mercy, truth, justice, and judgment* (Moses 6:61; see also Genesis 4:9 RE). This is the Holy Ghost.

Joseph Smith returned from the First Vision and didn't talk about the Holy Ghost because that incident, quite frankly, was not understood by Joseph Smith at the time it occurred. When he explained to his mother, he said, *Never mind...I'm well enough off. [I've] learned for myself that Presbyterianism [isn't] true* (Joseph Smith History 1:20; see also JSH 2:6 RE). And I think that is a candid description of what Joseph got out of it that day, at that time. He had been converted, and he knew now not to join the Presbyterians.

What Joseph Smith learned from the angel Moroni, also, did not confer upon him the Holy Ghost. Faith, repentance, baptism, and *then* he notes the Holy Ghost. And what are the effects that he reports? Immediately?

- Number one: prophecy, one of the hallmark signs. Paul lists it in Corinthians. Mormon and Moroni list it in Moroni's book—the list of what the gifts are. You can find it in the Doctrine and Covenants—section 46, if I'm remembering that correctly—the list of the gifts. Prophecy is always included as one of the hallmark signs of what it is that the Holy Ghost does.
- And then secondly: allow Joseph to understand the real intent of what is in the scriptures. How much of a blank slate was Joseph at the time that the Holy Ghost allowed him the “pure spirit of intelligence”?

Well, I would suggest that if Joseph Smith can pass through the First Vision and can pass through the incident of the visits of the angel Moroni, and if he can even translate the Book of Mormon—which was then underway at the time this occurred—by the gift and power of God, but not attribute anything to the Holy Ghost until after he is baptized—that it is equally possible for you good people to go through everything you've gone through in your

life, and yet not have experienced the thing that Joseph is talking about—which comes as a consequence of faith, repentance, and baptism.

In Revelation chapter 3, verses 20 and 21, there's a promise that John records— Well, the 20 is where He stands at the door and knocks: *Behold, I stand at the door, and knock*. See, in this description, it's almost a flip. It's not **you** knocking to get in; it's the **Lord** knocking to come to you. It's the Lord who is the eager One—the One who would like to have this relationship take up. He's the One knocking. He's the One trying to get into your life. And so, in this account: *I stand at the door* [the Lord speaking], *and knock: if any man hear my voice...* See, His sheep hear His voice. Do you **hear** His voice? *If any man hear my voice, and open the door*—because you're the one that shut it. You're the one that's saying:

- “Yeah, no thanks; I'll pass. I mean, I've got a skeptical mind now. I've been to college and have received training to practice law;”
- “I'm an engineer, and I understand formulas and equations;”
- “I'm a mathematician, and I know some things add up and some things don't;” and
- “I also know that I've been leading a reasonably decent life, and I've never had Jesus in **my** car.”

Our minds are skeptical. **We** have to open the door because, almost invariably, the door that **we** configure to keep him out, from our construct, is something that has come about as a consequence of what happened in **your** life—from the time you left that state of innocence, as a child in the Garden, until today. Every painful experience you've been through; every humiliation you've suffered; everything that has gone on in your life that has led to where you now construct a door—some of oak, some of iron—whatever it is that's happened to you, you use **that** to keep Him out. “Well, if He really cared, He would... ” You know, the **notion** that He doesn't care is the greatest lie of all. If you knew what He suffered, you would **never** say, “If He cared.” But if you'll open the door, He says: *I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me* (Revelation 3:20; see also Revelation 1:20 RE).

Verse 8, once again: *So great were the confusion and strife among the different denominations, [that] it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things, to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong* (Joseph Smith History 1:8; see also JSH 2:2 RE). See, that's the way it is. In verse 10—

There's always this ~~war of worlds~~ war of **words** (*War of Worlds*—that's what your kids play)—*war of words and tumult of opinions*. And so Joseph is confused. How do you resolve this?

Verse 11: *While I was laboring...* While-I-was-labor—

Folks, in general, have your skulls so junked up with the crap of the Internet that you don't even **have** the capacity to labor the way it needs to be labored; to solve the questions that need to be solved. It is labor. It is labor over the scriptures. It is labor. *Under the extreme difficulties caused by... these parties of religionists, [he] was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter...fifth verse, which reads: If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

“Let him ask of God.” God gives “to **all** men liberally, and upbraideth not; **and it shall be given him**” (emphasis added). I can ask God. God will give to **me**. God will give to me **liberally**. God will not tell me, “There are lines here you mustn't cross. There are things about which you must not inquire. There are things your heart is not yet prepared to receive. You don't have standing!” He gives liberally. He can let **you** know what you **need** to know from **your** study and inquiry into the truth. And no man can stop that! Because this is a matter between you and God. It has **always** been a matter between you and God. There is no friar with a brown frock that you need to bend the knee to, in order to please God. If Joseph had known that (the friar with the frock), he would never have achieved the revolution that he achieved.

Well, when you're laboring, as verse 11 suggests, and when you hit the right verse, as verse 11 recites, **then** verse 12 confirms how you get answers to these kinds of inquiries: *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.*

Turn back to Doctrine and Covenants section 76, and look at verse 18. This is the Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, that gave us the three degrees of glory. They're reading in John; and he gives you the verse in John that they were reading, in verses 16 and 17. And look at 18: *Now this caused us to marvel, for it was given unto us of the Spirit* (D&C 76:18; see also T&C 69:4).

The Spirit cannot lean upon you and cannot focus your mind upon the revelation that you are entitled to receive unless you use the scriptures as they were intended to be used—as a Urim and Thummim—as the basis from which you draw out the truths of God. And the best version of that is, of course, the Book of Mormon.

You can look at D&C section 138, and you'll find that Joseph F. Smith sat in his room **pondering** over the scriptures. He's near death—it's about eight weeks before the death of Joseph F. Smith. The Church had a lot of challenges going on at that time. Fortuitously for

us, the man who sat at home—infirm and worried about death—happened to happily be the president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And so, when he got an answer—not to his inquiry about leading the Church—when he got an answer to an inquiry that had nothing to do with his position or budgets or anything else that manages an organization; it had to do with his **own** concern, about his **own** deepest apprehensions: his impending death, which would follow about eight weeks after this, the scriptures opened like a Urim and Thummim to his view, and we get a Vision of the Redemption of the Dead, which we've now canonized.

It [entered]— This is back— Verse 12 of the Joseph Smith History: It [entered into his heart] with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again (Joseph Smith History 1:12; see also JSH 2:3 RE).

Now **that's** an interesting statement—because it doesn't appear that this “labor” was a one-off event but that it occurred over and over as he sought more understanding, searching deeper and deeper into trying to understand what it was he ought to do and how it is he ought to accomplish it. *Again and again, knowing... if any person needed wisdom from God, I did.*

You should be asking God so that you can understand scripture. You shouldn't be trusting the expositions of **anyone**, myself included. These scriptures have a message for you. God has a message for you. God would like to talk to **you**—not through me or any other man. God would like to talk with **you**. You'll be saved by knowledge, and the things you need to know are uniquely situated. The things you have the right to get from God are uniquely situated.

I got an answer from God. That's why, 40 years ago today, I went in, and I got baptized. Elder Brian Black baptized me. During the baptismal service, because it was approaching twilight, the sun was beginning to set, the moon had emerged, and the first stars began to shine. And Brian Black commented in the talk that was given by him, before laying on hands, that all of the signs of heaven—the sun, the moon, and the stars—had been visible during my baptismal ceremony. I have felt the presence of God with me from that moment through today. Just this morning I checked into my office before coming here, and when I arrived at my office there was a dove on the lawn to meet me, and she stayed there as I went by. Now, it's a small thing, but if you're acquainted with the scriptures, you understand what such a symbol **can** mean, and to me, **did** mean.

Your lives should be **filled** with wonder. Be not faithless, but be believing—and be of good cheer! He knows you better than you know yourself. I was belly-aching about an idiot

(friend), and as I am wont to do, it was prayerful. (The Stake President asked me, a few weeks ago, about whether I was praying at the time that I had one of the encounters he and I discussed. And I said, "It's not a fair question. I wake up in the morning, and I start to pray. Throughout the day, I will take care of a thousand things; and whenever I am free, my mind will revert back to the prayer, and we'll continue the dialogue. And it goes on all day. There's not a moment in my life in which I am not being prayerful. And so, the answer to the question is, I suppose, Yes, I was praying. Because there's hardly a moment—when I'm idle—when I am not praying.")

Well, God intends to speak to each of us—about us and about what matters to us and about what matters to **you**. He, unlike us, is not bounded by the linear existence that we have. All things past, present, and future are continually before the Lord. In fact, it's really sort of an interesting study.

If you take and you look at what the Lord does in Third Nephi, He has this agenda that He's been assigned by the Lord—or by the Father—and Christ discharges the agenda. And He goes through; and as you read the chapters in Third Nephi, it's really structured; it's really orderly. And then He announces: Now I have finished what the Father told me to deliver to you. And He just begins to talk. And as He begins to talk, what unfolds is non-chronological. It's topical; but it's past, present, and future. His thoughts are not like our thoughts. They aren't. They're nonlinear. And sometimes that's not easy.

At length—he says, in verse 13—I came to the conclusion...I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God (Joseph Smith History 1:13; see also JSH 2:3 RE). And so it is for all of us. You want to know the truth of a proposition? You ask God. And **don't be fearful**. If you ask, He'll answer. But you better be prepared for the answer. Because the battle that is already upon us is going to require valiance. Cowardly, effeminate, hen-like behavior can never, never obtain the promises of God. Christ asked: *What went [you forth]...to see? A reed [shaking in] the wind?* (Matthew 11:7; see also Matthew 6:2 RE). **That's** what you want?! I don't think John the Baptist cried on demand. And Zion isn't a bank.

So [it is] in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life...I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally. After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed...finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was seized upon by some power which entirely

overcame me...had such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me...seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction. (Joseph Smith History 1:14-15; see also JSH 2:3-4 RE)

You know, we have Orson Hyde's account of this thick darkness, and I want to read it to you. This is Orson Hyde writing about the incident we just looked at:

He, therefore, retired to a secret place, in a grove, but a short distance from his father's house, and knelt down and began to call upon the Lord. At first, he was severely tempted by the powers of darkness, which endeavored to overcome him. The adversary benighted his mind with doubts, and brought to his soul all kinds of improper pictures and tried to hinder him in his efforts and the accomplishment of his goal. However, the overflowing mercy of God came to buoy him up. (Orson Hyde, Published in a German Pamphlet, 1842)

You know, if salvation consists in obtaining knowledge, you can't afford to clutter your mind with the kinds of things which can readily summon up improper images, improper thoughts, improper ambitions. In fact, it doesn't matter what you **want** . There's only one thing that matters. And that is: What is the Lord's will **for** you, **with** you. And that will is always the same—to bring about your happiness; ultimately, to bring about your joy. He tells you that His burden is light. Because however it may seem in the direful circumstances of 1838 in the life of Joseph Smith, **this** statement of faith, **this** testimony of truth was worth the price that Joseph was called upon to pay to obtain it.

The things of God are infinitely preferable to anything that can be offered to you here in this world. You may indeed be able to buy anything in this world for money, but don't let that ever be the case with your heart or your soul. Zion will not have an economy—because they have all things in common.

So Joseph, in verse 16, tells you that it is some marvelous power from the unseen world. Let me take you back to that statement: “A man is saved no faster than he gets knowledge, for if he does not get knowledge, he will be brought into captivity by some evil power in the other world, as evil spirits will have more knowledge, and consequently more power” (TPJS, p. 217). Well, apply that quote in the context of what Joseph is experiencing there, and realize this is not merely something that will happen after you depart this world. It's something that, in fact, does happen here. I mean, being blinded here is part of being captured by the captivity of the adversary of your soul.

Awake and arise! Shake off the scales that blind you. Scales which [are] like contact lenses, on the one hand; but scales like judging wrongly, on the other hand. You have to judge a matter aright. And if the judgment that you judge is not just, then the scales of **your** eyes are darkness, indeed.

And so he called upon God to escape this being from the unseen world, and:

[He] saw a pillar of light exactly over [his] head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me. It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two Personages. (Joseph Smith History 1:16-17; see also JSH 2:4 RE)

We'll get into this more in Idaho Falls. He saw two "Personages." Note the word. Joseph **knows** what he's talking about. He was in the presence of these Beings. He will later describe them, as a doctrinal exposition (which the Church accepted as doctrine, and which was, for a season, in your scriptures). That's why you need to bring your ~~Articles of~~ [Lectures on] Faith to Idaho Falls.

One of them spake unto me, calling me by name (ibid). I've mentioned this on a number of occasions, and I want to mention it again here. When God calls a person by name, it is not your full legal name. "Joseph Smith, Jr." (I mean, that's my Cecil B. Demille version of *The Ten Commandments* voice of God—"Moses.") The casual friendship— I don't know what Joseph was called at this point in his life. I don't know if it was Joey. I don't know if it was Junior. I don't know what the name was that he went by. Whoever his most intimate companion was, that was what the Lord called him. If it was Joey, it was "Joey." God doesn't call you by whatever your driver's license says.

So, He called him by name. Do you know how comforting it is to have God call you by a familiar name? Instead of recoiling in horror, He's drawing you in. Instead of stiff-arming you, like "I am the Great and Powerful," He wants you comfortable in His presence, so much so that, when you enter into His presence, it is a matter of course that God invariably forgives your sins.

In 1921, the Lectures on Faith were dropped from the scriptures by a committee that was comprised of George F. Richards, Anthony W. Ivins, Melvin J. Ballard, James E. Talmage, John A. Widstoe, and Joseph Fielding Smith. That committee dropped the Lectures on Faith from the scriptures because, they said,

Certain lessons, entitled Lectures on Faith, which were bound...with...Doctrine and Covenants in some of its former issues, are not included in this edition. Those lessons were prepared for use in the School of Elders...but they were never presented...nor accepted by the Church as being otherwise than theological lessons or lectures.” (Explanatory Introduction, Doctrine and Covenants, 1921 edition, p. V)

That's a lie. And the *Joseph Smith Papers*, if you will read them today, tell you that that's not at all the truth. And part of what I hope to get to tonight—and if not tonight then in Logan—is the reasons why. Joseph Smith called this "doctrine—important doctrine;" "leading items of the religion;" and that he would answer to every principle that's advanced in the document.

Now to his credit, Joseph Fielding Smith, who was on that [committee] said (this was in 1966)—he said: *"I suppose that the rising generation knows little about the Lectures... In my own judgment these Lectures are of great value and should be studied... I consider them to be of extreme value in the study of the gospel of Jesus Christ"* ("The School of the Prophets", BYU Leadership Week, June 18, 1956).

And then in a talk given by Elder Bruce R. McConkie at Brigham Young University (the son-in-law to the one of the committee members, whose words I just read), in January the 4th of 1972 (that would have been before I was there), Elder McConkie said (every time I read Bruce R. McConkie [impersonating Bruce R. McConkie's voice] "I am tempted to read it in the voice of Elder McConkie, which echoes still in my skull." I won't do that. And I'm reading him now):

In my judgment, it is the most comprehensive, intelligent, inspired utterance that now exists in the English language—that exists in one place defining, interpreting, expounding, announcing, and testifying what kind of being God is. It was written by the power of the Holy Ghost, by the Spirit of Inspiration...it is, in effect, eternal scripture, [it is] true. (BYU Speeches, 4 January, 1972)

Which brings us, then, to the Third Lecture on Faith. Now we're starting really to get into some important stuff, so I hope your chair's painful enough to keep you awake. Personally, I'd rather stand up here than sit in one of those things. That's it! You could get this over with a lot quicker if you put me in one of those chairs and said, "Talk until you're sick of that!"

Verse 2 of Lecture 3: *Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God [faith in God] unto life and salvation*

(Lectures on Faith 3:2). Faith in **God**, not in man, not in men, not in an institution, not in some magic talisman—*faith in God*. Faith in God unto life and salvation. Faith in **God**, not in man, not in men, not in an institution, not in some magic talisman—*faith in God*.

To the extent that anyone is trying to displace your faith in God and attract attention to themselves, **myself included**, that is a perversion. It will not save you. It is a distraction. It is evil. It is wrong. It is damnable. Anyone that tries to attract your worship, myself included, ought to be sent to hell. It's why I continually remind you: talking about me is a waste of time. Talking about the things I'm saying; talking about the content of these scriptures; talking about the doctrines that will save you; that's **very** important. But you can leave me out of that. You don't ever need to mention my name again in your life. But pay attention to the **doctrine** that we're talking about. Pay attention to the message that comes to us through scripture. You will never be saved because you relied upon some guy to elevate you. The only way in which that will happen is when you connect with God. You have to *exercise faith in God unto life and salvation*.

There are three things:

- *First, the idea that he actually exists*. You can get that from someone else.
- *Secondly, a **correct** idea of His character, perfections and attributes*. Any error in that prevents you from having faith. Therefore, in order to get *that* right, it's going to require something of you in the way of study and effort. Because if you're making—well, look at the word, they italicized it—a **correct** idea of His character perfections and attributes, that's what you need to study to show what it is you're going to have faith in.
- *Thirdly: an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to His will*. (Lectures on Faith 3:3-5)

You must know this. And **you** cannot cover the gap by lying to yourself. You can't lie to yourself, pretending that you are on God's course, and then have **actual** knowledge that the course of life that you are pursuing is according to His will. Nor can you depend entirely upon what other people are telling you. You're supposed to be asking and getting answers from God. And the answers from God are going to tell you what you need to do. And the sacrifices that He will require of you are unique to you, because the contribution that you can make for the salvation of yourself and others is unique to you.

There are things that you and only you can do. And if you will sign up with God, He will have you do them. You may find yourself doing things you would rather prefer not doing. It doesn't matter. If you have faith in Him, and you do what He asks, you'll **know** that the course you're pursuing is according to His will. And doing things He asks of you, according

to **His** will, invariably produce faith. And they produce faith unto salvation. Because it always grows. Light grows or dims; it never stays static. Therefore, when you set on this course, you never turn back. If you turn back, you lose everything that you've gained up to that point. Look at verse 5 (this is third):

*An actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to His will. For without an acquaintance with these three important facts, the faith of every rational being must be imperfect and unproductive, but **with** this understanding it can become perfect and fruitful, abounding in righteousness unto the praise and glory of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Lectures on Faith 3:5, emphasis added)*

Therefore, these three things you need to know: God exists; you need to study until you have a correct understanding of his character, perfections, and attributes; and then you have to live your life so that you actually know that the course you're leading in your life conforms to what He would have. Turn to verse 23:

But it is also necessary that men should have an idea that he is no respecter of persons, for with the idea of all the other excellencies in his character, and this one wanting, men could not exercise faith in him; because if he were a respecter of persons, they could not tell what their privileges were, nor how far they were authorized to exercise faith in him, or whether they were authorized to do it at all, but all must be confusion; but no sooner are the minds of men made acquainted with the truth on this point, that he is no respecter of persons, than they see that they have authority by faith to lay hold on eternal life, the richest boon of heaven, because God is no respecter of persons, and that every man in every nation has an equal privilege. (Lectures on Faith 3:23)

That's you. **That's you.** God has done nothing for Joseph Smith He will not do for you. I understand all of the doctrinal arguments. I can make them all. I **have** made them all. And I've made them to the Lord. I've argued with Him on every point of doctrine that any of you— I've quoted to Him every scripture that any of you have advanced, and many more besides. And the Lord has always borne testimony back, consistently. This stuff is true! You're hedging up the way of your own salvation and of the salvation of others when you say, "No one has the privilege in our day, **yet**, to lay hold on salvation." You're hedging up the way; you are damning yourself. And you're damning those that will listen to you when you say people in our time are not yet authorized to exercise faith in God unto salvation—because you **are** authorized.

I have done so. I have spoken with Him as a man speaks to another. He speaks in plain humility, reasoning as one man does with another. He will reason with you. The first night I

got a testimony, I was in the middle of an argument with God—I thought with myself—until when I got down to the final question in my mind, which was, “How do I even know there is a God?” To which the response came, “Who do you think you've been talking to the last two hours?” I didn't realize that that Still Small Voice, which will talk with any and all of you, was God. When you exercise the required faith to permit Him to step out from behind the veil, like the brother of Jared, He'll do that, too. He's no respecter of persons. You should not question what your privileges are, nor how far you are authorized to exercise faith in Him, or whether you're authorized to do it at all. Don't have doubts about your privileges.

And then verse 24, twice: *He is love...he is love*. He **is** love.

In verse 3, it talks about:

Having the assurance that they were pursuing a course which was agreeable to the will of God, they were enabled to take, not only the spoiling of their goods, and the wasting of their substance, joyfully, but also to suffer death in its most horrid forms; knowing (not merely believing) that when this earthly house of their tabernacle was dissolved, they had a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (Lectures on Faith 6:3)

That's why Joseph could say, as he did, that he left with a conscience void of offense against God or any man—going as a sheep to the slaughter (see *TPJS*, p. 379). But he was okay with it. He was okay with it: *Such was, and always will be, the situation of the saints of God, that unless they have an actual knowledge that the course they are pursuing is according to the will of God, they will grow weary in their minds, and faint (Lectures on Faith 6:4).*

That's the problem with many of us. We grow weary in our minds and faint because we don't know that the course we're pursuing is according to God. Don't grow weary. Stay on that course. I have the absolute conviction that much of the stuff that we plague ourselves with, and think is such a heavy burden of sin, is because our minds are occupied with the wrong stuff. Study the things of God and fill yourself with light—and how quickly it is that all the rest of that stuff will simply dissolve away and evaporate. President Boyd Packer said you can fix behavior a lot more quickly by studying doctrine than you can by studying behavior (see '*Little Children*,' *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, p. 17).

And you'll be called upon to make a sacrifice, because knowing God requires obedience to Him and sacrifice to Him, and not to some man—certainly not to me; but not to a pope, not to a president, not to a priest—to Him. You're not trying to get to know me (or if you are, you're damn fool). You're supposed to be getting to know the Lord. You're supposed to be

getting to know the Lord—you're not supposed to be getting to know some local presiding authority.

The foregoing are excerpts taken from:

- Denver's fireside talk on "The Temple," given in Ogden, UT, on October 28th, 2012;
- Denver's 40 Years in Mormonism Series, Talk #1, entitled "Be of Good Cheer," given in Boise, ID, on September 10th, 2013; and
- Denver's 40 Years in Mormonism Series, Talk #2, entitled "Faith," given in Idaho Falls, ID, on September 28th, 2013.

In addition, Denver has written extensively about this topic. If you are interested in learning more, please review the following blog posts:

[Gospel Study](#), posted November 17, 2011

[Christians Should Study Mormonism](#), posted January 12, 2017

[How I Study the Scriptures](#), posted March 18, 2010

[3 Nephi 11: 36](#), posted September 29, 2010

[Scriptures, Not Traditions](#), posted February 24, 2014