

Podcast Episode 73: Good Questions

QUESTION: How do we formulate and ask good questions?

DENVER: The opening of the book of Enos has some interesting language that describes what Enos went through in order for him to receive revelations and confirmations and blessings from God. The way in which he opens his book is a pretty good description of what it takes to prepare your mind and your heart in order to *get* answers from God. The challenge is not merely to know how to ask a good question, it's also to prepare yourself to receive a good answer.

Enos wrote: *Behold, it came to pass that I, Enos, knowing my father that he was a just man—for he taught me in his language, and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord* (Enos 1:1). It's important that Enos had been taught in the language of his father because it was in another language that the plates were written; therefore, for him to be able to read and ultimately write upon them, he had to have the competency and command of a foreign language to the one that was commonly spoken. So, he was taught in the language and also in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Nurture is an interesting word, and you ought to ask yourself what that looks like to be 'nurtured' and 'admonished' of the Lord—because that suggests to *my* mind that he was trying to incorporate into his life things that he'd been taught by accepting what he got out of the scriptures to nurture (that is, fortify, strengthen, inform him) and to admonish him. We sometimes view the whole thing as a one-way street, where God bestows upon us endless blessings, instead of looking at it as a two-way street, where God's also in the process of rehabilitating us and correcting us and sometimes disapproving of us, in order for us to be admonished and nurtured in the Lord. I think those two things go together.

And blessed be the name of God for it (ibid), meaning he praises God that his father taught him the language so he could read the scriptures, and then he took seriously enough what he found in the scriptures to let it inform him and to correct him and to point out to him his faults. Therefore, he accepted that admonition *and blessed be the name of the Lord for it*.

And I will tell you of the wrestle which I had before God, before I received...remission of my sins (ibid, vs.2; Enos 1:1 RE). See, the **wrestle** that he had with God is a really apt way to put what's necessary in order to get from where you are to where you want to be in obtaining answers from God to questions that you pose. 'Wrestle' is not complacent. It's not reclining and meditating. It's not sitting back, impatiently tapping your fingers, and waiting for God

to do something. It's a wrestle—*actively* working, *actively* searching, *actively* trying to find what it is that you're looking to gain from God.

So Oliver Cowdery wanted to be able to work on and translate—'cuz he saw what Joseph was able to do; he wanted to do the same thing—he wanted to translate. In April of 1829, as he was acting as Joseph's scribe, he wanted to switch roles; and they switched roles temporarily, but his attempt failed. And in the failed attempt, we learn a few things that are applicable not merely to Oliver, but to **everyone** who's going to inquire of the Lord.

*Even so [sure] shall you receive a knowledge of whatsoever things [ye] shall ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that you shall receive a knowledge concerning the engravings... [okay, so "whatsoever things you...ask in faith" almost seems limitless, doesn't it? "With an honest heart, believing...you shall receive a knowledge..." So, that— the breadth of that language seems really loose, really wide, but then it tightens up a bit], which contain those parts of my scripture of which have been spoken by the manifestation of my Spirit [meaning that it is through the Spirit that he's gonna be able to obtain what he asks for, in faith, believing that he can receive it]. Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart. Now, behold, **this** is the spirit of revelation; behold, **this** is the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground. (D&C 8:1-3; see also T&C 3:1, emphasis added)*

Okay, so first he tells them: whatever you ask for, you're gonna be able to get that—if you ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that you can receive; and the **manner** in which the answer will come to you is to be told in your mind and in your heart.

There's one time when I was teaching Elders Quorum many years ago, and we were on the topic of the heart, and I was posing the question for discussion: What does "heart" mean? And someone said, "Oh, the heart—the heart is just part of your mind." And so, in response to that answer, I said, "Okay, if the heart is part of your mind, what part of your mind is your heart?" Because the heart and the mind are discussed **separately** in scripture; they both have a function. Oliver's being told that in his *mind* he's going to be told something, and in his *heart* he is going to be told something *by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you... which shall dwell in your heart*. Well, what part of the human consciousness is the heart?

Joseph defined pure revelation as intelligence, not emotions. **We** tend to view the heart as if it were entirely emotions:

- “Oh, she touched my heart; therefore, I’m in love with her.”
- “My heart reaches out to the puppy, to the kitten.”

We tend to view “heart” as if it were merely sentiment, but if you accept Joseph’s definition of the Holy Ghost, then the heart is not **necessarily** a place where mere sentiment exists.

Your mind (which might be knowledge) and your heart (which might be wisdom)—in other words, I will tell you in your mind (I’ll give you information) and in your heart (I’ll give you the wisdom by which you know how to apply the knowledge that you’re given), which comes to you by the mind of God, the Holy Ghost, which includes both the Father and His Companion and the Son.

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation...this is the spirit by which Moses brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea on dry ground (ibid). So, Moses (we tend to think) had a whole lot of heavenly guidance and advantages that are awesome to behold and greater than what **we** have. But this definition suggests that Moses was relying upon the thoughts that came to him and the wisdom to apply the understanding that he was given; and that it was through **that** mechanism that Moses proceeded in **faith**—and **that** delivered him, and **that** delivered the children of Israel who followed him, also.

Well, then—as we get further into the revelation to Oliver Cowdery—things tighten considerably. Whereas it starts out, *a knowledge of whatsoever things you shall ask in faith, with an honest heart*, it then goes on to say,

Trifle not with these things; do not ask for that which you ought not. Ask [in other words, there are things about which you can make an inquiry, and you just shouldn’t be asking; and if you’re asking about things that you shouldn’t be inquiring about then “whatsoever things you shall ask in faith” doesn’t apply. Do not ask for that which you ought not. Ask that—here’s the first thing:] that you may know the mysteries of God, and [in the case of Oliver] that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred; and according to your faith shall it be done unto you. (D&C 8:10-11; see also T&C 3:3)

So the limit on asking and getting an answer includes: do not/don’t/it is not appropriate to ask for things that are inappropriate. So what **is** appropriate to ask about?

- “know the mysteries of God”—that would apply not just to Oliver, but to any inquiring soul.
- “that you may translate and receive knowledge”—okay, it’s been translated; we don’t need to re-translate it. But **all** of us need to receive knowledge from all those ancient records which had been hid up that are sacred.

In other words, one appropriate subject for almost limitless inquiry to understanding (for which we have a promise that we can ask and receive an answer—if we ask in faith, with an honest heart, believing that we'll receive knowledge) is inquiring about an understanding of those ancient records that had been hid up that are sacred—or in this case, the Book of Mormon, and (although it wasn't on the horizon in April of 1829) we would also later get (through the translation that Joseph Smith made of the Bible) a record of—a more complete record of—the account of Moses, which includes within it a record of Enoch, and later still, it would include the Book of Abraham.

So if you want to know what **is** within bounds and what **is** appropriate for inquiry, questions

- about the scriptures,
- about the meaning of scriptures,
- about an understanding of how the scriptures apply.

Those are all things that are appropriate for an inquiry, in particular the Book of Mormon; because used in that manner, the Book of Mormon becomes a great Urim and Thummin, revealing to us things that we would not otherwise be able to comprehend.

Then, later in that same month, there's another revelation that—the same revelation, but it's a revelation that's worded differently, dealing with Joseph's instruction: "Remember that without faith you can do nothing; trifle not with these things. Do not ask for that which you had not ought; ask that you may know the mysteries of God." So the admonition to ask that you might know the mysteries of God—

Mysteries of God consist of things that are important for salvation/are part of the Gospel/are part of the message/are part of the scriptures, but we just don't get 'em yet. We haven't noticed 'em yet. We don't understand them yet; and therefore, to us, they consist of a mystery. The greatest mysteries are always embodied within ceremonial rites, in which God symbolically teaches us a great deal of things using ritual and symbol (just as He used parables during His mortal ministry to hide things and to require people to be initiated and capable of understanding what He's really talking about); that's what ritual mysteries of God also contain: embedded within them are multiple meanings that are told in story-form, requiring that **we** use the skill, the aptitude, the knowledge (or the "key") to understand why the mystery's so.

The other thing that you have to keep in mind is that Enos wrestled, and Oliver was admonished that he took no thought except to ask and that he need[ed] to study it out in

his own mind. Even if you've got a great question, that doesn't mean that you're automatically entitled to an effortless answer.

There was an issue that I struggled with in the scriptures that I'll use as an example. It's one of those things that creates a paradox, if you take the wrong answer. Jesus promised the twelve apostles, at one point—and it was early enough that the twelve apostles included Judas, that would betray Him—He gave to the twelve, including Judas, the promise that when He came in His kingdom, that the twelve of them would sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And so, if the answer is that the twelve would sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel, and Judas is **included**, then there's a paradox of why someone that would betray the Lord would have been found worthy to sit on a throne. So the question presented itself as to how would those twelve thrones be occupied; because Judas—it seems self-evident—should not be qualified to occupy one of them.

It was an issue that comes from reading the scriptures. It's an issue that, to me, seemed incongruent. And the question presented itself in a way that I would like an answer to. But I didn't just take no thought save to ask; I studied it out. And it seemed to me that shortly after His resurrection, He called an apostle that wrote two-thirds of the books of the New Testament—the apostle Paul. Even though Paul was not with Him during His mortal ministry, Paul met the Lord on the road to Damascus, and the Lord called him. And Paul would later self-identify as an apostle of the Lord—meaning a messenger that was sent by the Lord. And so Paul claimed the role that would apparently make him a candidate for replacing Judas, assuming Judas fell. And I thought it was safe to conclude that Judas did fall.

But the other eleven, likewise, took a vote, and based upon the criteria of faithfulness and understanding in having been with Him throughout the ministry of the Lord, they drew lots—and the lot fell upon Matthias. Now, Matthias is mentioned in the book of Acts, but we don't have a testimony from him; we don't have letters from him; we don't have any basis upon which to conclude that Matthias would be a better candidate to sit upon the vacant throne than would Paul, other than, clearly, the Eleven felt some considerable confidence in the man. But **we** have no basis upon which to **ratify** their confidence in him. We don't know anything about the man.

Well, I studied it out. I looked at all the verses I could find that might help tip it one way or another, and I came up with my answer and concluded that it had to be the apostle Paul. And so, having worked my way through and reached a conclusion, and believing that I could get an answer from God, I inquired to know about this (that I consider a mystery—an unknown-but-perhaps-important question because the day of judgment holds meaning for

all of us, for all mankind), and therefore, will it be Paul that we have to confront, or will it be Matthias? And I concluded it was Paul.

Prayerfully asking the Lord, taking my answer to Him, I got an answer. And the answer was: I was wrong. It was neither Paul, nor was it Matthias—because there was never ~~eleven~~ [twelve] vacancies for the princes of Israel. There were eleven who betrayed their brother (and one about whom we know not enough to determine righteousness or not). But there was one of the sons of Jacob (Joseph) who clearly deserved to sit upon a throne— who, in fact, had visions that told him that others would bow down: the wheat stalks would bow down to him; the stars would bow down to him. The life of Joseph was exemplary. He was prophetic. We have prophecies of his that are preserved in the Book of Mormon and **not** in the Old Testament—which, again, tells us that Joseph the Patriarch was a worthy man and a prophetic man. And therefore, there's no reason to ever remove him from the throne upon which he should sit as the **real** patriarch—who never left his position at the head of his tribe, because there was only eleven vacancies. Judas fell, and therefore, all of the other thrones were available for assignment; and the Lord assigned those to the remaining eleven. But the twelfth—the twelfth was never vacated by the patriarch and prophet—Joseph—who was sold into Egypt.

Very often, if you come up with a great question, the key to getting the answer is to then study it out—unlike Oliver. You don't take no thought save to ask. You study it out. You reach your best conclusion—not profunctorially; not quickly. The objective is to try and get it right. And then, when you think you've reached the very best answer and you've studied it out in your own mind, God'll give you an answer. And if you're in error, He'll give you an understanding that will exceed where you were before. But if you're right, you'll get the confirmation—in your mind and in your heart—to understand (by knowledge and by wisdom) that you have reached the right conclusion, and you have, in fact, gained understanding of one of the mysteries of God.

Good questions **come** from scripture study. The experiences of peoples' lives in scripture give us analogies for every difficulty, every circumstance, every health challenge, every mental challenge, every broken heart, every loss and every gain, and every blessing, and every undeserved gift from God that's bestowed upon us. Everyone that has gone before, in the process of living the Gospel, have been exposed to the challenges of this world. Sometimes it's a bigger challenge to deal with blessings than it is to deal with adversity. But the scriptures tell us how to deal with both.

Study out the thing that is troubling you in your life by going to the scriptures to get guidance. We need to plunge deep into them. There's no reason why you can't get

recordings and listen to scripture as you drive, as you find spare moments. There's no reason not to become acquainted with the scriptures by listening to them over and over.

I had—when I was teaching Gospel Doctrine—I had recordings of the Book of Mormon. And the chapters that I would teach, I would listen to on a CD while I'm driving places. I tried to listen to the same chapters—if I was teaching three chapters in Alma, I'd try to listen to those three chapters at least **ten** times all the way through during the week before the lesson. Then I would try to read it—physically reading it from paper—at least **three** times during that week. And then, if I could find commentary or other information, I'd look at that.

We're supposed to plunge deep into the scriptures. That's where you will find your good questions. Good questions reckon from understanding, studying, and comprehending the scriptures. And in the case of the Book of Mormon, in the case of the Teachings & Commandments, they were written originally in English that most of us speak. As to the Bible, there are varying qualities of translations, but the scriptures we adopted in a conference in Boise are the Joseph Smith Translation. It's a whole new root of scripture, and Joseph Smith spoke English as his native tongue. So using the Old and New Testaments—Old and New Covenants that we have in the scriptures that we have accepted by covenant—you also have an English-based version from which to study and from which to discover your questions.

The foregoing was recorded by Denver Snuffer on June 15th, 2019 in Sandy, Utah.