

“How Knoweth This Man Letters”

MERRILL J. AND MARILYN S. BATEMAN

Elder Bateman: Brothers and sisters, it is wonderful to see the large number gathered this morning in the Marriott Center as Sister Bateman and I extend our welcome at the beginning of a new year. The attendance at the devotionals during the last semester was exceptional as many students, faculty, and staff responded to the challenge given on that fateful day, September 11th. The devotionals are an important part of the BYU experience. They add significantly to the Spirit on campus and provide a weekly opportunity for all to ponder the meaning of life and reflect on ways in which we may improve. I encourage everyone to recommit to attend this semester. Safeguard the 11 a.m. hour each Tuesday to be in the Marriott Center.

Today Sister Bateman and I wish to focus on the Savior and the process by which He grew spiritually during His mortal sojourn. The process He followed is no different than the one He has asked us to follow. We hope the presentation will inspire and motivate you to apply the principles outlined.

In the rural towns of Galilee, Jesus often frequented the synagogues and took occasion to teach. He also was well-known as a teacher at the temple in Jerusalem. Each time He

taught, those who listened were astonished by His knowledge of the scriptures, the clarity of His doctrine, and the authority with which He spoke. The impact of His teaching is typified by the words of Mark. Mark recorded that during the early part of the Savior’s ministry, Jesus went “straightway on the sabbath day . . . into the synagogue, and taught. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:21–22).

Jesus’ first opportunity to teach in the temple at Jerusalem occurred when He was still a boy. At 12 years of age, He accompanied His parents to the Feast of the Passover to celebrate Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. When the time came to return home, Joseph and Mary believed that He was with relatives in another part of the company. After a day’s journey they learned that He was not with their kinsfolk, and they returned to Jerusalem to find Him. After three days of searching, they located Him in the temple, “sitting in the midst of the doctors, and they were hearing him, and asking him questions. And all

BYU President Merrill J. Bateman and his wife, Marilyn S. Bateman, gave this devotional address on 8 January 2002.

who heard him were astonished at his understanding, and answers” (JST Luke 2:41–47).

Even at 12 years of age, His spiritual understanding and maturity were well beyond His years. Eighteen years later, again at Passover, Jesus entered the temple at Jerusalem. On this occasion He cleansed the temple of those selling merchandise and taught the gathered Jews about His atonement, death, and resurrection by citing scripture (see John 2:13–22). Even those closest to Him, however, did not understand the full import of His sermon until after the Resurrection. But again, they were amazed with His knowledge of the doctrine. On another occasion Jesus returned to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Tabernacles. Again He taught at the temple. John recorded that the “Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?” (John 7:15).

What was meant by this paradoxical question? On the one hand, Jesus demonstrated the same knowledge as a man of letters; but on the other, He had never learned. What did the Jews mean when they said, “How knoweth this man letters?” Those who interacted with Jesus quickly grasped that He was fully conversant with the law, the scriptures, and the doctrine. His knowledge of the prophets and their words exceeded that of the Pharisees and Scribes as He confounded them on numerous occasions. On the other hand, the Jews saw Him as one “having never learned.” What did they mean by this phrase? Jesus, unlike Paul, had not sat at the feet of Gamaliel or any other celebrated teacher. He had not been a student in the Jewish system of higher education. Therefore, how could He have acquired such profound knowledge?

Today Sister Bateman and I will address the question of how Jesus grew spiritually and illustrate the importance of searching and pondering the scriptures as part of not only Jesus’ spiritual growth process but our own. First, Sister Bateman will discuss three ways by which Jesus grew spiritually. Second,

I will illustrate the importance of searching and pondering the scriptures as part of the growth process—a process that each one of us must also attempt. Actually there is a fourth element that contributed to Jesus’ spiritual maturation that will not be discussed today. It is the Atonement. The Apostle Paul said that Jesus “learned . . . obedience by the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).¹ In other words, the atoning process was an incredible learning experience. But that is a subject for another day.

Sister Bateman: Brothers and sisters, I also extend my welcome this morning. A new year and a new semester present opportunities to rededicate our efforts to become more Christlike, to lift others, to lighten burdens, and to increase faith. My subject today concerns the steps taken by the Savior that increased His spiritual understanding and faith. Just as the Lord’s physical growth followed a natural sequence, so did His spiritual progress, although the latter was accelerated. What were the key elements that defined the Savior’s growth? As John the Baptist stated, “He received not of the fulness at first, but continued from grace to grace” (D&C 93:13). In a similar vein, Luke stated that as Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, He also “increased . . . in favour with God and man” (Luke 2:52). What was the process?

First, like every child, He was taught by His parents. Joseph and Mary had been specially prepared to teach Him. He was in their home and under their tutelage for more than half of His life. They had special knowledge concerning His identity and earthly ministry (see Matthew 1:19–21; Luke 1:29–38). Both of them knew of His divine Sonship. They had been taught by the angel Gabriel of His mission and destiny. They had been taught about His atonement and that He was the Messiah about whom there had been prophecies for centuries. And Mary knew that His mercy

and salvation would last “from generation to generation” (Luke 1:50). With little doubt Mary and Joseph were knowledgeable and highly effective teachers during the Savior’s early years.

Second, knowing the identity of His Father and His purpose on earth, it is reasonable to assume that Jesus learned much through prayer and the power of the Holy Ghost. Undoubtedly He was taught to pray as a young boy—a practice He continued in adulthood. The importance of prayer in His life is illustrated by the fact that His ministry began with 40 days of prayer and fasting in the wilderness and concluded with a night of agony and prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Often He sought the privacy of the mountains to pray. After one of those private moments, a disciple, having watched Him, pleaded, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Jesus clearly pointed out to His listeners that the doctrine He taught was not His but came from God. Only through prayer and the Holy Ghost could He have known this truth. Jesus received the Holy Ghost following baptism and heard His Father’s voice declare His divine Sonship. Luke recorded that “the heaven was opened” at this time, which suggests that the Father and the Son enjoyed a close working relationship (Luke 3:21).

The Apostle John speaks of this relationship as follows: “God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand” (John 3:34–35). In other words, Jesus was given “a fulness of the Holy Ghost” following His baptism, indicating that access to the Father was uninhibited (D&C 109:15). The Savior’s learning process was orderly in that He received “line upon line, precept upon precept,” but the process was accelerated and highly compressed because of His righteousness, talents, and capacities. In contrast, our learning is also “line upon line, precept upon precept,” but we are given “here a little and

there a little” (2 Nephi 28:30). We are not given all things at once. In contrast to the Savior’s experience, the Holy Ghost is given “by measure” to us, and our access to spiritual truth increases as we increase in faith, repent of our sins, and learn to be obedient. For us a lifetime or more may be required to receive the Holy Ghost in its fulness. But again, like the Savior, we do have access to the Holy Ghost to help us grow spiritually.

Third, Jesus was a student of the scriptures. I believe that scriptural study was a major contributor to His knowledge of spiritual truths. If He was to understand our learning process in mortality so that He could succor us, then it was essential that He learn in like manner. The evidence is strong that He was diligent in searching the scriptures prior to His ministry. Jesus’ first sermon in Nazareth is a demonstration of His familiarity with the Old Testament—the scriptures of His day. He deliberately chose Isaiah 61:1–2 to announce His divine Sonship to those in the synagogue. The passage reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.
[Luke 4:18–19]

Following the reading, Jesus told the congregation that He was the fulfillment of the passage. The Jewish leaders understood the meaning of the verses. They knew that Isaiah’s words were a direct reference to the Messiah. For them, Jesus’ claim to be the fulfillment was blasphemous. “Is not this Joseph’s son?” they declared (Luke 4:22). Jesus then likened Himself to Elijah and Elisha, saying, “No prophet is accepted in his own country” (Luke 4:24–27). The Jews were enraged by His use of the scriptures and attempted to kill Him.

Another illustration of His familiarity with the scriptures is the story of Jesus and the two men on the road to Emmaus following His crucifixion and resurrection. It was Sunday, the day of the Lord’s resurrection, and the two men were discussing the recent events. The Savior approached and joined them. Luke indicated that the eyes of the two men “were holden that they should not know him” (Luke 24:16). Jesus asked them why they were so sad. They in turn questioned Him, suggesting that He must be a stranger in those parts if He was not aware of the events concerning Jesus of Nazareth. The two men then repeated for the Master the particulars of the trial, the crucifixion, and their disappointment in that they had thought Jesus was the one who would redeem Israel. They concluded by telling the story of His reported resurrection. Women of their company visited the tomb early that morning and found it empty. Angels reportedly told them that Jesus was alive. They were astonished by the women’s report and did not know what to make of it. After listening to their recitation, Jesus said:

O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken:

Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?

And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. [Luke 24:25–27; emphasis added]

Jesus used the scriptures to teach the two disciples the purpose of His mission and the necessity of His death and resurrection as part of the plan of salvation. The prophetic words of all the Lord’s servants had pointed to these three days. All of the prophets from Moses to Malachi had looked forward to the atoning events and had written about them. Later that evening, after the scales had fallen from their eyes and they recognized their Master and

Lord, Jesus vanished from their sight. The two men then said: “Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and *while he opened to us the scriptures?*” (Luke 24:32; emphasis added).

Jesus knew the scriptures. His familiarity with them was earned through study and prayer. He became a student as a boy, and familiarity with the scriptures increased throughout His life. He was the Jehovah of the Old Testament. The heavens were opened to Him because of His righteousness, and His understanding of and familiarity with the scriptures came quickly through prayer and the Holy Ghost.

I testify, brothers and sisters, that scriptural study was a key element in the Savior’s growth from “grace to grace” (D&C 93:13). Likewise, time invested in the scriptures will pay huge dividends for us. Our spiritual progress will be shaped by our familiarity with God’s words as revealed through the prophets. May each of us commit a few minutes daily to that study in my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Elder Bateman: Jesus was not only a student of the scriptures Himself, but He commanded that we join with Him in that pursuit. He said, “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).

From the beginning of time God has directed the affairs of His children in mortality through prophets. Their inspiration has been written down for the benefit of the believer. According to the Apostle Paul, these written words have been passed from one generation to another for the purpose of declaring “doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16), or, as Christ said, for a testimony of His divinity and understanding of His mission that we might “have eternal life” (John 5:39). By illustration and commentary I wish to help you to appreciate the spiritual power and understanding that await you if you are willing

to pay the price of becoming a diligent student of the scriptures.

In a direct statement to the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord declared why reading and studying the scriptures can be a revelatory experience. In section 18 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord, speaking of the Book of Mormon and all scripture, said:

These words are not of men nor of man, but of me; wherefore, you shall testify they are of me. . . .

For it is my voice which speaketh them unto you; for they are given by my Spirit . . . and by my power you can read them one to another. . . .

Wherefore, you can testify that you have heard my voice, and know my words. [D&C 18:34–36]

In this passage the Lord states that when reading the scriptures one may hear His voice, feel His Spirit, and know His words.

Now I turn to the New Testament and the Gospel of John, where we will examine a few scriptures and ponder their meaning in order to understand better the Apostle's message concerning Christ. All of us are familiar with the four Gospels in the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The first three are known as the synoptic Gospels because they "see alike"—i.e., they are similar in approach and use much of the same material. These three Gospels bear witness of Christ through a narrative beginning with His birth and ending with His death and resurrection. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, is different. Ninety-two percent of the material in John is not found in the other three Gospels. Rather than telling the story of Jesus' life, John employed key events to teach gospel truths.

The LDS Bible Dictionary indicates that the four books were written for different audiences. The dictionary states:

It appears from the internal evidence of each record that Matthew was written to persuade the Jews that Jesus is the promised Messiah. To do so,

he cites several [Old Testament] prophecies and speaks repeatedly of Jesus as the Son of David, thus emphasizing his royal lineage. Mark appeals to a gentile audience and is fast moving, emphasizing the doings more than the sayings of the Lord. . . . Luke offers his readers a polished literary account of the ministry of Jesus, presenting Jesus as the universal Savior of both Jews and gentiles. . . . John's account does not contain much of the fundamental information that the other records contain, and it is evident that he was writing to members of the Church who already had basic information about the Lord. His primary purpose was to emphasize the divine nature of Jesus as the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh. [LDS Bible Dictionary, "Gospels," 683]

As noted, John appears to have been written for members of the Church who have an understanding of basic gospel principles and of who Jesus is. With this context in mind, what did John want the members of the Church to know? We do not have time today to discuss the entire book, but a brief review of the first five chapters may be helpful in answering the questions.

The first chapter of John presents testimonies of who Jesus is. Through the Doctrine and Covenants and the Gospel of John we know that the primary testimonies are those of John the Beloved and John the Baptist (see D&C 93:1–18). A knowledge of the Godhead and the plan of salvation is required to appreciate fully the messages given in this chapter. The first verse of John 1 indicates that Jesus was in the beginning, that He was with God, that He was God. To appreciate the meaning of this verse, a knowledge of the premortal world and the relationship between the Father and the Son is necessary. Jesus was the Firstborn in the spirit and lived in the world of spirits with the Father before coming to earth. Because of His righteousness, the light within Him, and His anointing, He was a God. As such, Jesus was the Creator of all things, as noted in the

third verse. We know through other scriptures, including modern revelation, that Jesus did create all things under the direction of the Father (see Hebrews 1:2; Moses 1:32–33).

Verses 4 through 9 of John 1 state that Jesus is the source of life and light for every man and woman. We know that the Light of Christ is given to every person who comes into the world to help them know right from wrong. We also know through modern revelation that the Light of Christ is the ultimate source of light and energy for the sun, for the stars, and for this earth (see D&C 88:7–10). Jesus is the source of light and life.

Perhaps the most important verse in chapter 1 is verse 14. It reads: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

Only Latter-day Saints fully understand and appreciate the meaning of the phrase “the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh.” Jesus as a person in the premortal world was the spirit offspring of heavenly parents. For His earthly parents, however, Jesus had an immortal Father and a mortal mother. Through His mother He received mortal seeds that allowed Him to die. Through His Father He inherited immortal genes that allowed Him to live forever if He so chose. On one occasion He told the Jews, “For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself” (John 5:26). On another occasion Jesus said:

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.

No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. [John 10:17–18]

Although the Romans nailed Jesus to the cross, His death was of His own volition. As Paul said, He had “the power of an endless

life” (Hebrews 7:16). He did not have to die. He was the Son of an immortal being. His death was a voluntary sacrifice. From His mother He had the power to lay down His life. From His Father He had the power to take it up again. That is why the Atonement is “infinite and eternal” (Alma 34:10, 14). It was performed by an infinite and eternal being. Although there is much we do not understand about the Atonement, a knowledge of Christ’s relationship to the Father clarifies the source of His power to accomplish it. Also, a knowledge of the mortality within Him helps us appreciate the tremendous pain and suffering He endured to atone for our sins (see D&C 19:16–19).

The first chapter of John concludes with other testimonies that Jesus is the Messiah. John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. In other words, He is the sacrificial lamb for all mankind. Andrew and Philip also bore witness. This wonderful chapter of John 1 is an introduction to Jesus as the Redeemer of the World. It teaches us of His divinity and the source of His power.

The second chapter is concerned with Jesus’ mission and purpose on earth. He is the promised Messiah whose mission is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man”—to accomplish the Atonement (Moses 1:39). Two key statements in the second chapter illustrate that Jesus knew at the beginning of His ministry what the end would be. The story used by John to illustrate these truths is the marriage feast at Cana.

Jesus and His disciples entered Cana on the third day of the week to attend a marriage celebration to which they had been invited. During the feast the host and hostess ran out of wine. The Savior’s mother then approached Jesus and asked for help. His response was: “Woman, what wilt thou have me to do for thee? that will I do; for *mine hour* is not yet come” (JST John 2:4; emphasis added).

Jesus agreed to the request made by His mother but noted that His actions would relate

to His hour, even though that hour had not yet come. What was Jesus' hour? In numerous references it is the time in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross. His hour is the time during which He performed the Atonement (see John 12:23; 17:1).

After asking the servants to fill six waterpots to the brim—waterpots used for cleansing and purifying—He told them to “draw out” and take to the governor, who then asked why the “good wine” had been kept until now. John then stated, “This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and *manifested forth his glory*; and his disciples believed on him” (John 2:11; emphasis added).

As stated earlier, the glory of the Father and the Son is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. How did the conversion of water to wine relate to His hour? What did the conversion signify? What did the wine represent?

There are a number of parallels that might be drawn. The power to convert water to wine might parallel the power of Christ's atonement to change men and women from mortal to immortal beings, to transform corruptible bodies into incorruptible ones, to create an inseparable connection between body and spirit in the Resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 15:42–44; D&C 93:33–34). In short, the miracle at Cana not only illustrated Christ's power to change the earthly element of water to wine but also His power to “cleanse” and “purify,” to lift men and women from mortality to immortality—from an earthly to a celestial state. The miracle was connected with His hour and did show forth His glory.

The third chapter of John is concerned with the introductory ordinances of the Church. After introducing Christ in chapter 1 and confirming the purpose of His mission in chapter 2, John turned to the basic ordinances required for members to participate in the blessings of the Atonement. The story is that of the Jewish leader Nicodemus coming to Christ by night,

asking what he must do in order to enter into the kingdom of God. He is told that he must be born again of water and of the Spirit. He must be baptized by immersion for the remission of sins and receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Chapter 4 then describes what a member following baptism should do to stay on the path to eternal life. This chapter tells the story of Christ meeting the Samaritan woman at the well and telling her of living water that quenches one's thirst forever. Christ is the Fountain of Living Waters, and those who drink from His well will never thirst. The water is a symbol for His words, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The water is also linked to the sacrament in our day, which reminds us that we must internalize His words by taking His name upon us and by keeping His commandments.

The fifth chapter of John is the story of Jesus healing the sick at Bethesda. For me the story has great meaning. The scriptures read:

Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches.

In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.

For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had.

And a certain man was there, which had an infirmity thirty and eight years.

When Jesus saw him lie, and knew that he had been now a long time in that case, he saith unto him, Wilt thou be made whole?

The impotent man answered him, Sir, I have no man, when the water is troubled, to put me into the pool: but while I am coming, another steppeth down before me.

Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk.

And immediately the man was made whole, and took up his bed, and walked. [John 5:2–9]

Why did John include this story in the Gospel? To what ordinance, covenant, or promise does this miracle refer? Will there come a day when Jesus tells each of us to rise, walk, and be made whole? One of the great blessings that awaits all mankind is the glorious Resurrection, the opportunity to be redeemed from the bands of physical death—a time when each person will be given power to restore the “sleeping dust” “unto its perfect frame, bone to his bone, and the sinews and the flesh upon them” (D&C 138:17). As Jesus lifted the blanket of despair from the lame man, so He will lift the blanket of the grave in a future day, allowing us to rise in a newness of life through the power of His atonement and resurrection. When that day comes, no man or woman will be able to say, “I have no man to help me!” As the lame man at Bethesda was made whole, so we in the Resurrection will experience the greatest healing of all as “spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33).

The 1883 Carl Heinrich Bloch painting of *Christ Healing the Sick at Bethesda* now hangs in the BYU Museum of Art. It is a masterpiece. It is a signature piece for this campus as it

portrays the Lord as healer and comforter both in time and eternity. I encourage you to visit the museum and see it. I encourage you to ponder its message.

Brothers and sisters, do you feel the beauty and power of the scriptures? Can you sense the blessings that await if you drink deeply of Christ’s living water? Will you set aside a few minutes each day to read from the scriptures and then ponder the meaning of the verses read? When the day comes for us to stand before the keeper of the gate, the Holy One of Israel, it is my prayer that He will not perceive in us a slowness of heart to believe that which the prophets have said. Rather, may He see us as men and women of spiritual letters, having learned day by day over a lifetime. May each of us prepare to meet Him in his holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.

Note

1. The JST indicates that this verse applies to Melchizedek and not to Christ. However, Melchizedek is a type for Christ (see Alma 13), and the principle stated is applicable to the Savior as well (see Alma 7:11–12).