

A Reservoir of Living Water

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Sister Bednar and I are grateful to meet with you tonight. As we travel the earth, we especially appreciate opportunities to gather with and learn from faithful young people like you. Tonight I pray for the assistance of the Holy Ghost as we worship together and seek in unity to be taught from on high (see D&C 43:16).

I want to begin by asking a simple question. What is the most valuable substance or commodity in the world? We might initially think that gold, oil, or diamonds have the greatest worth. But of all the minerals, metals, gems, and solvents found on and in the earth, the most valuable is water.

Life springs from water. Life is sustained by water. Water is the medium required to perform the various functions associated with all known forms of life. Our physical bodies are approximately two-thirds water. Whereas a person can survive for many days or even weeks without food, an individual will usually die in only three or four days without water. Most of the world's great centers of population are situated near sources of fresh water. Simply stated, life could not exist without the availability of and access to adequate supplies of clean water.

Living Water

Given the vital role of water in sustaining all forms of life, the Savior's use of the term "living water" is supernally significant. As described in the fourth chapter of John, Jesus and His disciples passed through Samaria as they were traveling from Judea to Galilee. In the city of Sychar they stopped at Jacob's well:

There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink.

(For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.)

Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

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The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water? . . .

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life. [John 4:7–11, 13–14]

The living water referred to in this episode is a representation of the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel. And as water is necessary to sustain physical life, so the Savior and His doctrines, principles, and ordinances are essential for eternal life. You and I need His living water daily and in ample supply to sustain our ongoing spiritual growth and development.

The Scriptures Are a Reservoir of Living Water

The scriptures contain the words of Christ and are a reservoir of living water to which we have ready access and from which we can drink deeply and long. You and I must look to and come unto Christ, who is “the fountain of living waters” (1 Nephi 11:25; compare Ether 8:26, 12:28), by reading (see Mosiah 1:5), studying (see D&C 26:1), searching (see John 5:39; Alma 17:2), and feasting (see 2 Nephi 32:3) upon the words of Christ as contained in the holy scriptures. By so doing, we can receive both spiritual direction and protection during our mortal journey.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a sacred stewardship to preserve the written revelations in purity and in safety (see D&C 42:56)—this precious reservoir of living water. A monumental work was accomplished by the Church in the 1970s and 1980s and resulted in the edition of the scriptures we enjoy today with extensive footnotes, cross-references, and additional study aids, maps, and information.

As the updated scriptures were first introduced to the members of the Church in the early 1980s, Elder Boyd K. Packer prophesied:

With the passing of years, these scriptures will produce successive generations of faithful Christians who know the Lord Jesus Christ and are disposed to obey His will.

The older generation has been raised without them, but there is another generation growing up. [CR, October 1982, 75; or “Scriptures,” Ensign, November 1982, 53]

Twenty-four years have passed since Elder Packer spoke those words. And the generation to which he was referring is seated tonight in Church buildings all across the globe! He was talking about you, and he was talking about me. The vast majority of you have only known the scriptures as we have them today. Please keep that fact in mind as I continue to quote Elder Packer:

The revelations will be opened to them as to no other in the history of the world. Into their hands now are placed the sticks of Joseph and of Judah. They will develop a gospel scholarship beyond that which their forebears could achieve. They will have the testimony that Jesus is the Christ and be competent to proclaim Him and to defend Him. [CR, October 1982, 75; or “Scriptures,” 53]

Not only are we blessed to have these scriptures so readily available to us today, but we also have the responsibility to use them consistently and effectively and to drink deeply from the reservoir of living water. I believe this generation of youth is more immersed in the scriptures, more deeply acquainted with the words of the prophets, and more prone to turn to the revelations for answers than any previous generation. But we still have a great distance to travel along the strait and narrow path—more to learn, more to apply, and more to experience.

Obtaining Living Water from the Scriptural Reservoir

I now want to review with you three basic ways or methods of obtaining living water from the scriptural reservoir: (1) *reading* the scriptures from beginning to end, (2) *studying* the scriptures by topic, and (3) *searching* the scriptures for connections, patterns, and themes. Each of these approaches can help satisfy our spiritual thirst if we invite the companionship and assistance of the Holy Ghost as we read, study, and search.

Reading a book of scripture from beginning to end initiates the flow of living water into our lives by introducing us to important stories, gospel doctrines, and timeless principles. This approach also enables us to learn about major characters in the scriptures and the sequence, timing, and context of events and teachings. Reading the written word in this way exposes us to the breadth of a volume of scripture. This is the first and most fundamental way of obtaining living water.

Studying by topic typically follows, grows out of, and builds upon our reading of the scriptures from beginning to end. For example, as we read the Book of Mormon we may identify and seek to find answers to important doctrinal and practical questions such as these:

- What is faith in the Savior?
- Why is faith in Jesus Christ the first principle of the gospel?
- Why and how does faith in the Redeemer lead to repentance?
- How does the Atonement strengthen me to do things in my daily life that I could never do with my own limited capacity and in my own strength?

Focusing upon such questions and studying by topic, using the Topical Guide and index to the triple combination, allow us to dig into and explore the depth of the scriptures and obtain a much richer spiritual knowledge. This

approach increases the rate at which living water flows into our lives.

Both reading from beginning to end and studying by topic are prerequisites to the third basic method of obtaining living water from the scriptural reservoir. Whereas reading a book of scripture from beginning to end provides a basic breadth of knowledge, studying by topic increases the depth of our knowledge. *Searching* in the revelations for connections, patterns, and themes builds upon and adds to our spiritual knowledge by bringing together and expanding these first two methods; it broadens our perspective and understanding of the plan of salvation.

In my judgment, diligently searching to discover connections, patterns, and themes is in part what it means to “feast” upon the words of Christ. This approach can open the floodgates of the spiritual reservoir, enlighten our understanding through His Spirit, and produce a depth of gratitude for the holy scriptures and a degree of spiritual commitment that can be received in no other way. Such searching enables us to build upon the rock of our Redeemer and to withstand the winds of wickedness in these latter days.

I want to emphasize an essential point. You might initially assume that a person must have extensive formal education to use the methods I am describing. This assumption simply is not correct. Any honest seeker of truth, regardless of educational background, can successfully employ these simple approaches. You and I do not need sophisticated study aids and should not rely extensively upon the spiritual knowledge of others. We simply need to have a sincere desire to learn, the companionship of the Holy Ghost, the holy scriptures, and an active and inquiring mind.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that we should

search the Scriptures—search the revelations which we publish, and ask your Heavenly Father, in the

name of His Son Jesus Christ, to manifest the truth unto you, and if you do it with an eye single to His glory, nothing doubting, He will answer you by the power of His Holy Spirit. You will then know for yourselves and not for another. You will not then be dependent on man for the knowledge of God. [HC 1:282]

If you and I will ask, seek, and knock (see Matthew 7:7), always keeping ourselves worthy to learn from the Spirit, then the gates of the spiritual reservoir will open to us and the living water will flow. I witness, I testify, and I promise that this is true.

Let me briefly explain and provide examples of what I mean by connections, patterns, and themes.

Connections

A connection is a relationship or link between ideas, people, things, or events, and the scriptures are full of connections. Consider the relationship between the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (see Mosiah 15:1–9); between mercy and grace (see 2 Nephi 9:8); between clean hands and a pure heart (see Psalm 24:4); between a broken heart and a contrite spirit (see 3 Nephi 9:20); between the wheat and the tares (see D&C 101:65); between knowledge and intelligence (see D&C 130:18–19); between justification and sanctification (see D&C 20:30–31); between sheep and goats (see Matthew 25:32–33); between immortality and eternal life (see Moses 1:39); and countless others. Prayerfully identifying, learning about, and pondering such connections—the similarities and differences, for example—is a primary source of living water and yields inspired insights and treasures of hidden knowledge.

As I have read each of the standard works from beginning to end and studied different topics, I noticed that the word *understanding* was commonly described in relation to the heart. Two verses in the Book of Mormon illustrate this connection:

“Ye have not applied your *hearts* to *understanding*; therefore, ye have not been wise” (Mosiah 12:27; emphasis added).

“And the multitude did hear and do bear record; and their hearts were open and they did *understand* in their *hearts* the words which he prayed” (3 Nephi 19:33; emphasis added).

I find it most interesting in these and many other verses that understanding is linked primarily to the heart. Note that we are not explicitly counseled to apply our minds to understanding. Obviously, we must use our minds and our rational capacity to obtain and evaluate information and to reach appropriate conclusions and judgments. But perhaps the scriptures are suggesting to us that reason and “the arm of flesh” (D&C 1:19) are not sufficient to produce true understanding. Thus, understanding, as the word is used in the scriptures, does not refer solely or even primarily to intellectual or cognitive comprehension. Rather, understanding occurs when what we know in our minds is confirmed as true in our hearts by the witness of the Holy Ghost.

The spiritual gift of revelation most typically operates as thoughts and feelings put into our minds and hearts by the Holy Ghost (see D&C 8:2–3, 100:5–8). And as testimony and conviction move from our heads to our hearts, we no longer just have information or knowledge—but we begin to understand and seek after the mighty change of heart. Understanding, then, is the result of revelation; it is a spiritual gift, it is a prerequisite to conversion, and it entices us to more consistently live in accordance with the principles we are learning.

This revealed insight about the relationship between the heart and understanding has greatly influenced my approach to gospel learning and study, has affected positively the way Sister Bednar and I teach our children and grandchildren, and has impacted my priesthood service.

Patterns

A pattern is a plan, model, or standard that can be used as a guide for repetitively doing or making something. And the scriptures are full of spiritual patterns. Typically, a scriptural pattern is broader and more comprehensive than a connection. In the Doctrine and Covenants we find patterns for preaching the gospel (see D&C 50:13–29), for avoiding deception (see D&C 52:14, 18–19), for constructing temples (see D&C 115:14–16), for establishing cities (see D&C 94), for organizing priesthood quorums (see D&C 107:85–100) and high councils (see D&C 102:12), and for a variety of other purposes. Identifying and studying scriptural patterns is another important source of living water and helps us become acquainted and more familiar with the wisdom and the mind of the Lord (see D&C 95:13).

As I have both read from beginning to end and studied topics in the Doctrine and Covenants, I have been impressed with a pattern that is evident in many of the Lord's responses to the questions of missionaries. On a number of occasions in 1831, various groups of elders who had been called to preach the gospel desired to know how they should proceed and by what route and manner they should travel. In revelations given through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord respectively counseled these brethren that they could travel on water or by land (see D&C 61:22), that they could make or purchase the needed vehicles (see D&C 60:5), that they could travel all together or go two by two (see D&C 62:5), and that they could appropriately travel in a number of different directions (see D&C 80:3). The revelations specifically instructed the brethren to make these decisions "as seemeth you good" (D&C 60:5; 62:5) or "as it is made known unto them according to their judgments" (D&C 61:22). And in each of these instances the Savior declared, "It mattereth not unto me" (D&C 60:5, 61:22, 62:5, 63:40; see also 80:3).

The Lord's statement that such things "mattereth not unto me" initially may seem surprising. Clearly, the Savior was not saying to these missionaries that He did not care about what they were doing. Rather, He was emphasizing the importance of putting first things first and focusing upon the right things—which, in these instances, were getting to the assigned field of labor and initiating the work. They were to exercise faith, use good judgment, act in accordance with the direction of the Spirit, and determine the best way to travel to their assignments. The essential thing was the work they had been called to perform; how they got there was important but was not essential.

What a remarkable pattern for you and for me to apply in our lives. Jesus Christ knows and loves us individually. He is concerned about our spiritual development and progress, and He encourages us to grow through the exercise of inspired, righteous, and wise judgment. The Redeemer will never leave us alone. We should always pray for guidance and direction. We should always seek for the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost. But we should not be dismayed or discouraged if answers to our petitions for direction or help do not necessarily come quickly. Such answers rarely come all at once. Our progress would be hindered and our judgment would be weak if every answer was given to us immediately and without requiring the price of faith, work, study, and persistence.

The pattern I am describing is illustrated succinctly in the following instruction to those early missionaries:

I, the Lord, am willing, if any among you desire to ride upon horses, or upon mules, or in chariots, he shall receive this blessing, if he receive it from the hand of the Lord, with a thankful heart in all things.

These things remain with you to do according to judgment and the directions of the Spirit.

Behold, the kingdom is yours. And behold, and lo, I am with the faithful always. Even so. Amen. [D&C 62:7–9; emphasis added]

The principal issues in this episode are not horses, mules, or chariots; rather, they are gratitude, judgment, and faithfulness. Please note the basic elements in this pattern: (1) a thankful heart in all things; (2) act according to judgment and the directions of the Spirit; and (3) the Savior is with the faithful always. Can we begin to sense the direction and assurance, the renewal and strength that can come from following this simple pattern for inspired and righteous judgment? Truly, scriptural patterns are a precious source of living water.

The most demanding judgments we ever make are seldom between good or bad or between attractive and unattractive alternatives. Usually, our toughest choices are between good and good. In this scriptural episode, horses, mules, and chariots may have been equally effective options for missionary travel. In a similar way, you and I also might identify at various times in our lives more than one acceptable opportunity or option that we could choose to pursue. We should remember this pattern from the scriptures as we approach such important decisions. If we put essential things first in our lives—things such as dedicated discipleship, honoring covenants, and keeping the commandments—then we will be blessed with inspiration and strong judgment as we pursue the path that leads us back to our heavenly home. If we put essential things first, we “cannot go amiss” (D&C 80:3).

Themes

Themes are overarching, recurring, and unifying qualities or ideas, like essential threads woven throughout a text. Generally, scriptural themes are broader and more comprehensive than patterns or connections. In fact, themes provide the background and context for understanding connections and patterns. The process

of searching for and identifying scriptural themes leads us to the fundamental doctrines and principles of salvation—to the eternal truths that invite the confirming witness of the Holy Ghost (see 1 John 5:6). This approach to obtaining living water from the scriptural reservoir is the most demanding and rigorous; it also yields the greatest edification and spiritual refreshment. And the scriptures are replete with powerful themes.

For example, the Book of Mormon came forth in this dispensation to “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations” (Book of Mormon title page). The central and recurring theme of the Book of Mormon is the invitation for all to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32). The teachings, warnings, admonitions, and episodes in this remarkable book of scripture all focus upon and testify of Jesus the Christ as the Redeemer and our Savior.

Let me provide a few additional examples of important themes using scriptures from the Book of Mormon:

“If . . . the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them” (1 Nephi 17:3).

“Press forward with a steadfastness in Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20).

“Men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25).

“In the strength of the Lord thou canst do all things” (Alma 20:4).

“Wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10).

If you promise not to laugh, I will tell you about one of the simple ways I search for scriptural themes. I do not advocate or recommend that you use the same approach; different people use different methods with equal

effectiveness. I am simply describing a process that works well for me.

In preparation for a recent speaking assignment, I was impressed to talk about the spirit and purposes of gathering. I had been studying and pondering Elder Russell M. Nelson's recent conference message on the principle of gathering (see *CR*, September–October 2006, 83–87; or “The Gathering of Scattered Israel,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 79–82), and the topic was perfectly suited to the nature of and setting for my assignment (see “The Spirit and Purposes of Gathering,” address delivered at a BYU–Idaho devotional, 31 October 2006; www.byui.edu/Presentations/Transcripts/Devotionals/2006_10_31_Bednar.htm).

I recognized that I had much to learn from the scriptures about gathering. So I identified and made copies of every scripture in the standard works that included any form of the word *gather*. I next read each scripture, looking for connections, patterns, and themes. It is important to note that I did not start my reading with a preconceived set of things for which I was looking. I prayed for the assistance of the Holy Ghost and simply started reading.

As I reviewed the scriptures about gathering, I marked verses with similar phrases or points of emphasis, using a colored pencil. By the time I had read all of the scriptures, some of the verses were marked in red, some were marked in green, and some were marked in other colors.

Now, here comes the part that may make you laugh. I next used my scissors to cut out the scriptures I had copied and sorted them into piles by color. The process produced a large pile of scriptures marked with red, a large pile of scriptures marked with green, and so forth. I then sorted the scriptures within each large pile into smaller piles. As a first grader I must have really liked cutting with scissors and putting things into piles!

The results of this process taught me a great deal about the principle of gathering. For

example, I learned from examining my large piles that the scriptures describe at least three key aspects of gathering: the *purposes* of gathering, the *types and places* of gathering, and the *blessings* of gathering.

I noted that some of the primary *purposes* of gathering are to worship (see Mosiah 18:25), to receive counsel and instruction (see Mosiah 18:7), to build up the Church (see D&C 101:63–64), and to provide defense and protection (see D&C 115:6). In studying about the *types and places* of gathering, I discovered that we are gathered into eternal families (see Mosiah 2:5), into the restored Church (see D&C 101:64–65), into stakes of Zion (see D&C 109:59), into holy temples (see Alma 26:5–6), and into two great centers: old Jerusalem (see Ether 13:11) and the city of Zion or New Jerusalem (see D&C 42:9; Articles of Faith 1:10). I was grateful to learn that edification (see Ephesians 4:12–13), preservation (see Moses 7:61), and strength (see D&C 82:14) are some of the *blessings* of gathering.

Through this process I gained an even deeper appreciation for the spirit of gathering as an integral part of the restoration of all things in the dispensation of the fulness of times. I will not take the time now to recount the other things I learned about gathering; my purpose here is to briefly illustrate one way of searching for scriptural themes.

The Blessings We Can Receive

The blessings of knowledge, understanding, revelation, and spiritual exhilaration that we can receive as we read, study, and search the scriptures are marvelous. “Feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20) is edifying, exciting, and enjoyable. The word is good, “for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me” (Alma 32:28). “Behold they are written, ye have them before you, therefore search them” (3 Nephi 20:11), and they “shall be in [you] a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

In my personal reading, studying, and searching over a period of years, I have focused many times upon the doctrine of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. No event, knowledge, or influence has had a greater impact upon me during my 54 years of mortality than repeatedly reading about, studying in depth, and searching for connections, patterns, and themes related to the doctrine of the Atonement. This central, saving doctrine, over time, gradually has distilled upon my soul as the dews from heaven; has influenced my thoughts, words, and deeds (see Mosiah 4:30); and literally has become for me a well of living water.

Lehi's Vision

The importance of reading, studying, and searching the scriptures is highlighted in several elements of Lehi's vision of the tree of life.

Father Lehi saw several groups of people pressing forward along the strait and narrow path, seeking to obtain the tree and its fruit. The members of each group had entered onto the path through the gate of repentance and baptism by water and had received the gift of the Holy Ghost (see 2 Nephi 31:17–20). The tree of life is the central feature in the dream and is identified in 1 Nephi 11 as a representation of Jesus Christ. The fruit on the tree is a symbol for the blessings of the Savior's Atonement. Interestingly, the major theme of the Book of Mormon, inviting all to come unto Christ, is central in Lehi's vision. Of particular interest is the rod of iron that led to the tree (see 1 Nephi 8:19). The rod of iron is the word of God.

In 1 Nephi 8, verses 21 through 23, we learn about a group of people who pressed forward and commenced in the path that led to the tree of life. However, as the people encountered the mist of darkness, which represents the temptations of the devil (see 1 Nephi 12:17), they lost their way, they wandered off, and they were lost.

It is important to note that no mention is made about the rod of iron in these verses. Those who ignore or treat lightly the word of God do not have access to that divine compass which points the way to the Savior. Consider that this group obtained the path and pressed forward, exhibiting a measure of faith in Christ and spiritual conviction, but they were diverted by the temptations of the devil and were lost.

In verses 24 through 28 of chapter 8 we read about a second group of people who obtained the strait and narrow path that led to the tree of life. This group pressed forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree. However, as this second group of people was mocked by the occupants of the great and spacious building, they were ashamed and fell away into forbidden paths and were lost. Please notice that this group is described as *clinging* to the rod of iron.

It is significant that the second group pressed forward with faith and commitment. They also had the added blessing of the rod of iron, *and they were clinging to it!* However, as they were confronted with persecution and adversity, they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost. Even with faith, commitment, and the word of God, this group was lost—perhaps because they only *periodically* read or studied or searched the scriptures. Clinging to the rod of iron suggests to me only occasional “bursts” of study or irregular dipping rather than consistent, ongoing immersion in the word of God.

In verse 30 we read about a third group of people who pressed forward continually holding fast to the rod of iron until they came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree. The key phrase in this verse is “continually holding fast” to the rod of iron.

The third group also pressed forward with faith and conviction; however, there is no indication that they wandered off, fell

into forbidden paths, or were lost. Perhaps this third group of people *consistently* read *and* studied *and* searched the words of Christ. Perhaps it was the constant flow of living water that saved the third group from perishing. This is the group you and I should strive to join.

What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree?

And I said unto them that it was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction. [1 Nephi 15:23–24; emphasis added]

What, then, is the difference between clinging and holding fast to the rod of iron? Let me suggest that holding fast to the iron rod entails the prayerful and consistent use of all three of the ways of obtaining living water that we have discussed tonight.

And it came to pass that I beheld that the rod of iron, which my father had seen, was the word of God, which led to the fountain of living waters, or to the tree of life. [1 Nephi 11:25]

Each of these approaches—reading from beginning to end, studying by topic, and searching for connections, patterns, and themes—is edifying, is instructive, and provides an intermittent portion of the Savior’s living water. I believe, however, that the regular use of all three methods produces a more constant flow of living water and is in large measure what it means to hold fast to the rod of iron.

Through normal activity each day, you and I lose a substantial amount of the water that

constitutes so much of our physical bodies. Thirst is a demand by the cells of the body for water, and the water in our bodies must be replenished daily. It frankly does not make sense to occasionally “fill up” with water, with long periods of dehydration in between. The same thing is true spiritually. Spiritual thirst is a need for living water. A constant flow of living water is far superior to sporadic sipping.

Are you and I daily reading, studying, and searching the scriptures in a way that enables us to hold fast to the rod of iron—or are you and I merely clinging? Are you and I pressing forward toward the fountain of living waters—relying upon the word of God? These are important questions for each of us to ponder prayerfully.

As we conclude tonight, we will sing together the hymn “The Iron Rod.” Indeed, this song of the righteous will be a fervent and poignant prayer (see D&C 25:12). May we have ears to hear the lessons this hymn teaches.

I witness of Jesus Christ and of the power of His word and of Him as the Word. He is the Son of the Eternal Father, and I know that He lives. I testify that holding fast to the rod of iron will lead to His living water. As His servant, I invoke this blessing upon you: that your desire and capacity to hold fast to the rod of iron will be enlarged, that your faith in the Savior will increase and replace your fears, and that as you drink deeply from the scriptural reservoir you will come to know Him. May we ever remember that

*when temptation’s pow’r is nigh,
Our pathway clouded o’er,
Upon the rod we can rely,
And heaven’s aid implore.*

[“The Iron Rod,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 274]

In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

