

# *Come Joyfully and Partake of the Gospel Feast*

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**Y**ou know that I teach nutrition, but I also need to tell you that I like to eat! Today I want to share a few ideas about spiritual nourishment based on some principles of physical nutrition and experiences we have with eating. I have prayed for the Spirit to help us understand how to apply these ideas in our lives.

The first principle of nutrition is simple and obvious: we need to eat food regularly to supply nutrients to our bodies. We need to do this daily, several times each day. Although our bodies store some nutrients for months or even years, we run out of others after a few weeks or even days. When we become deficient in essential nutrients, body processes gradually deteriorate and our health declines.

A gospel application of this principle is fairly obvious. We need to participate in gospel activities regularly—daily, even multiple times each day. You know the list: prayer, scripture study, tithing, humility, kindness in our interactions, and so forth. Our spiritual health declines if we are deficient in daily spiritual nourishment. Have we heard it all before? Are they the same messages over and over in the scriptures? Absolutely! But still we *do* need another lesson on fast offerings, on genealogy, on forgiveness, or [you fill in the blank].

The next nutrition principle is about hunger. Eating is so important that the body signals when it's time to eat. How do you feel when you go a long time without eating? Maybe it's only as long as from breakfast to lunch or lunch to dinner. I know I get really hungry on fast Sunday, and I look forward to eating again. People who have gone on survival adventures say that they fantasized about food and eagerly anticipated their first regular meal at the end of the adventure.

How might such feelings of hunger apply to the gospel? How hungry are we to live the gospel? Whenever I hear the phrase "hunger and thirst after righteousness," I recall an experience with BYU students in Mexico some years ago. Students were assigned to wards and branches in several towns. One day I accompanied two students on their visits to a village to teach Relief Society sisters in their homes. The bus dropped us off by the side of the highway, and we headed up the hot, dusty path to the village. We walked uphill for at least an hour, spent several hours

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in the village, then walked back to the highway to catch the bus.

We each carried a canteen of water with us, but for some reason I didn't have enough. I don't remember the name of the village or what we taught that day, but I still remember how desperately thirsty I was by the time we got to town. How often do I—do we—hunger and thirst after righteousness? How grateful are we when we have been spiritually fed?

Worse than just being hungry or thirsty, some of our Father's children are starving. Some are like refugee children who are innocent victims of wars, famine, poverty, or ignorance. They don't have enough food to eat, and what little they get isn't the right kind of food. They are deficient in many nutrients. You can see the outward signs: skinny legs and arms with sagging skin where fat and muscle have disappeared. When malnutrition is this obvious, many different internal processes have already been affected. *If* emergency relief arrives in time, these children *may* survive, but their growth and health *will* be permanently affected.

Less extreme undernutrition can also have long-lasting consequences. Let me describe two children who were born in a poor, rural Mexican village about 35 years ago. The little girl was born during the first two years of a nutrition project, when researchers simply monitored the growth and health of all the pregnant women and their offspring. The researchers' objective was to understand more clearly the consequences of early poor—or good—nutrition on children's health and growth. The little boy was born during the second two years of the project, when the usual food intake of the pregnant women and their offspring was supplemented with additional nutritious foods.

Some of the differences between good and poor nutrition are obvious. In a picture of these two children, the girl is almost four years old and the boy is two and a half. Despite

their age difference, the children are about the same height. But if the little girl's growth were normal—if she had received adequate nutrition early in life—we would expect her to be about two inches taller than the little boy. He appears to be energetic and confident, and she appears to be timid. He has thick, dark hair, and she has thin, wispy hair. He is at a normal height and weight for his age, whereas she is much too short and thin. Nutritionists call these effects of undernutrition *stunting* (meaning children don't grow to their normal, expected height) and *wasting* (when children are too thin). Depending on how severely undernourished children are, they may never be able to make up for the missed nutrition nor reach their growth potential in this life.

In a picture of the two-and-a-half-year-old boy with his seven-year-old brother the stunting is even more obvious. The older brother is only about three inches taller, but we would expect him to be about 10 inches taller if he had received better nutrition. The older brother has the same timid, insecure demeanor as the poorly nourished little girl. Before the nutrition project the villagers thought their poorly nourished, short children were normal, because all of the village children were undernourished. But when villagers began having healthier children, they could see the impact of better nutrition. Moreover, the active, energetic, well-nourished children stimulated their parents to interact with them more, which further enhanced the children's mental development.

You who have traveled in other countries or served missions where there is much poverty can picture the village marketplaces. The women come to sell on market days, bringing their young children with them. Did you notice that the little children sat passively by their mothers all day? It wasn't because they were better behaved than the children you and I know. It was because they were undernourished! They didn't even have the energy to get into trouble!

With undernutrition there are always more problems than just the obvious physical symptoms. Even if these children recover, they probably can't learn as much or as quickly as well-nourished children. They have low resistance to infections. They are more susceptible to developing chronic diseases as adults. They will have a lower capacity for hard work. Some of these limitations can be overcome in this mortal life, but too often they are permanent. In other words, good nutrition matters.

Can people be spiritually undernourished? Of course! If we aren't actively living the gospel we will waste away, losing whatever spiritual muscle mass or strength we have (picture the loose skin on refugee children's arms). Our spiritual growth will be stunted. Like the undernourished children who grow into adults with less capacity for hard work, the spiritually weak and underdeveloped will be unprepared and unqualified to serve in our Lord's kingdom on earth. Like the villagers who thought their poorly nourished children were normal, could we fail to recognize our own spiritual undernutrition because we are so much like the world around us? On the other hand, the more often we have spiritual experiences, the more often we will be blessed—like the healthy children whose mental development was further enhanced by increased interaction with their parents.

Now I want to turn to a more pleasant nutrition idea: feasting! Picture a time when you have had a wonderful, abundant meal—perhaps at Thanksgiving—or when you celebrated an important event or honored a special person. Fine food was served on the good china, with silverware polished for the occasion. Maybe the table was set with a sparkling white, ironed tablecloth. If you were the host, you worked hard to make it a wonderful meal, and you gladly paid what it cost. If you were the guest, you were excited to eat a meal that you didn't have to prepare, and you gladly brought your ready appetite.

As you ate, you began to feel full, and by the meal's end you were positively stuffed! You thought, "How can I possibly ever be hungry again?" Yet what happened? Just a few short hours later you were thinking about eating, and before long you were actually hungry. Finally, you ate again.

I think the idea of feasting provides rich imagery relevant to the gospel. The gospel is a feast prepared for us to enjoy by a loving Father in Heaven and His Son!

For years I have pictured the gospel as a feast. Often I have visualized a wonderful scene from the old musical version of *Scrooge*. When Ebenezer Scrooge looks into the room where the Spirit of Christmas Present is waiting to welcome him, he sees a feast that is marvelous to behold. A wonderful abundance of beautiful, delicious-looking food is piled high! To me this feast represents the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this gospel is so much more than unappetizing, cold, soggy leftovers in a Styrofoam take-home container!

We can think of the gospel feast in two ways—a feast available to enjoy right now and also as the incomprehensibly magnificent feast that awaits us when this life is over. What is the feast for us right now? It is peace and joy, security in our knowledge of the plan of happiness, companionship of the Comforter, faith in our Savior Jesus Christ, and confidence that His ultimate judgment will be just and merciful to all His children. Brothers and sisters, this is truly a feast!

As guests at the feast, we need to show up and partake. A fullness of blessings in this life is not given to the nonparticipants. Do you remember the parable of the great supper, when the host invited many respectable people, but one by one they made excuses? So the servant was sent out to invite the poor, the maimed, the halt, and the blind; and then he was sent out again to find even more guests in the highways and hedges, that the house might be filled (see Luke 14:16–35). So it is that

we must do something—show up and partake fully—to receive the gospel blessings. The message that the Women’s Chorus sang to us illustrates this really well: “Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee” (Frances Ridley Havergal, 1874). Thank you, Women’s Chorus.

As for the eternal nature of the gospel feast, those who are faithful in the gospel will receive unimaginable blessings: “thrones, kingdoms, principalities, and powers, dominions, all heights and depths” (D&C 132:19), “everlasting life” (Helaman 12:26), “a crown in the mansions of [our] Father” (D&C 59:2; see also 106:8), “endless happiness” (Alma 41:4), and “[our] joy shall be full forever” (2 Nephi 9:18). Wow! I know that from a mortal perspective I can’t begin to comprehend how wonderful it will be, but I know that it will be worth whatever it takes to participate in that great feast.

What about eating so much that we think we can’t possibly ever be hungry again? No matter how satisfying a specific spiritual feast may be, this nourishment doesn’t sustain us indefinitely. Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—the three witnesses of the Book of Mormon—had many spiritual feasts, and yet they fell away from participation. They never denied their testimonies, yet for most of their lives they denied themselves the peace and happiness they might otherwise have enjoyed. The incomparable spiritual manifestations they received still weren’t sufficient to sustain them indefinitely. As magnificent as the spiritual feasts may be (and we can enjoy the upcoming general conference with that in mind), we can’t ignore the daily spiritual nourishment that comes through faith and obedience.

Now for the last nutrition principle I want to talk about today. A lot of people think that food that is good for us has to be distasteful. From a nutrition point of view, this is a wrong idea! Specific preferences may differ, but we can choose from an enormous variety of nutritious, delicious foods. If we don’t like these foods, there are plenty of others to eat. In fact,

I think it is part of the divine plan for this earthly experience that we enjoy eating!

In the Doctrine and Covenants we learn that the fullness of the earth is ours; that things that come of the earth are made for our benefit and use to please the eye and gladden the heart; and that food, with its tastes and smells, is meant to strengthen the body and enliven the soul (see D&C 59:16–20). God is pleased to give us these things. This doesn’t sound like austerity and asceticism!

How might someone’s attitude toward eating—reluctant or favorable—apply to the gospel? I know people who are unwilling or afraid to wholly commit themselves to the gospel because of some perceived obstacle, maybe a past hurt. At times we ourselves may resist.

In his fable *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis described a busload of souls from hell who travel to the outskirts of heaven. Without exception, they have the opportunity to dwell there permanently and experience the eternal joy available to all our Father’s children. But the invitation is conditional. In order to stay, they must give up something they hold dear: one desires popularity and fame; another continues to nurse a grudge; one is committed to a false principle; another wants the power felt through selfishly manipulating others. Unfortunately, most of the travelers from hell are so immersed in their self-centered preoccupations that they don’t recognize the beauty, abundance, glory, and, yes, the *joy* of heaven! They refuse to see that what they would have to give up is nothing in comparison to what they would gain. Most of them choose to cling to their misery and return to hell. (See C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996].)

The point here is that we are free to choose the comfort, peace, and joy of the gospel—or we can choose otherwise. I will illustrate with two experiences from my life. I share them humbly, with the hope that someone hearing

my words may recognize ways in their own life to overcome obstacles and participate more joyfully in the gospel feast.

The first was a very small experience, but with long-lasting consequences. When I was in graduate school many years ago, I attended a branch potluck supper. One of the leaders said something to me that offended me. I have long forgotten what was said, but I remember I felt so hurt that I went back to my apartment and wept. I thought, “I’ll show them! I don’t want to be with people like that. I won’t go to church anymore!” But reason—or the inspiration of the Comforter—prevailed. I realized that I could continue to feel offended and harm only myself or I could acknowledge that although my feelings had been hurt, I knew the hurt was not intentional and I had best just let it go. It was one small experience, but it had eternal consequences. My life would have been very different, in unhappy ways, if I had held onto my hurt feelings. Instead I humbled myself and chose to continue participating in the gospel feast.

The second experience was incomparably greater in magnitude. My husband was a widower, and I gained an instant family of four sons when I married him. We had our fifth son and were barely expecting our sixth when my husband was called home to our Heavenly Father—only 19 months after we were married. I was devastated! I questioned God’s wisdom. It wasn’t fair.

Without going into all the details, I will admit that I continued grieving for three years—and I had only known my husband in this mortal life for two short years. I finally realized I had to make a decision. I could continue my prolonged pity party and have a soul like a wrinkled prune when I was reunited with my husband, or I could put my grief behind me and let joy into my life again. Although I did not understand God’s purposes—I still do not understand them all—

I had to make a conscious decision to choose a positive outlook. I know I chose rightly.

I share this not as a model of coping with grief or disappointment—because it isn’t a very good one. Nor do I suggest that my suffering was worse than anyone else’s. We each have our own tailored challenges to endure. I offer my experience only as an illustration that sometimes we must consciously choose how we will react—and that choosing to come to the gospel feast can increase our happiness.

Since that time I have met many individuals who are positive and joyful in spite of terrible disappointments or devastating tragedies. I admire them and rejoice that they have chosen to find peace and hope and joy in the gospel.

A friend recently told me of a stake conference where the stake president invited those who were happy to raise their hands. To those who raised their hands, he said something like, “Congratulations! You are candidates for the celestial kingdom. The rest of you need to repent.” It was his understanding that only happy people would be in the celestial kingdom. I would like to invite you to do the same thing today, but I don’t have the authority for that kind of pronouncement.

President Hinckley has said:

*It is very important to be happy in this work. We have a lot of gloomy people in the Church because they do not understand, I guess, that this is the gospel of happiness. It is something to be happy about, to get excited about. [TGBH, 256]*

Let me restate the principles of spiritual nutrition I have tried to describe today. Think about them sometimes when you eat.

- We must receive daily spiritual nourishment.
- We must be hungry enough to want to partake.
- We must prevent spiritual wasting and stunting and instead maximize our spiritual growth.

- We must come to the feast with a positive attitude, willing to give up those stupid, little things that might otherwise prevent us from tasting how delicious it is.

The gospel offers us a feast fit for royalty, and we are immature and growing princes and princesses.

But to receive the fullness offered to us—and think of that in the physical sense of being full when you eat—we must partake wholeheartedly, joyfully. Jesus invited us to “take, eat: this is my body” (Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22). He is the Bread of Life. He is the Living Water.

May we come and enjoy the feast is my prayer. In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.