

# *Building upon the Rock*

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Sister Jensen and I are thankful to be here today. We feel a debt of gratitude to the administration, faculty, and staff of this great university. To have studied and taught here are among the great experiences of our lives, and now they are memories we treasure. Three of our four sons and a daughter-in-law are BYU graduates.

No one who knows the scriptures, specifically the prophecies concerning the latter days, is surprised by the events in the world. We do live in the perilous, stormy times prophesied (see Matthew 24, 2 Timothy 3:1–7, and D&C 45), and we see the fulfillment of the prophecy to Joseph Smith that “all things shall be in commotion; and surely, men’s hearts shall fail them; for fear shall come upon all people” (D&C 88:91). However, the Lord promises, “My people will I preserve” (Moses 7:61).

During my lifetime, or the last 60-plus years, we as a Church and as a people have successfully weathered the storms of life because of our willingness “to be guided in a right and proper way” (D&C 101:63) and because of the rock upon which we build. Helaman counseled his sons:

*And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your founda-*

*tion; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. [Helaman 5:12]*

I know that we will face both current and future storms successfully because of this rock upon which we build our lives, our faith, and our testimonies. I began to build on this foundation in my childhood at home.

## **Making Jesus Christ the Rock in My Parents’ Home**

I hold in my hand two books that are truly among my most prized possessions. The first is titled *A Voice from the Dust*, a narrative edition of the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1939); the other is a leather edition of the Pearl of Great Price. These two books, and my experiences with them, helped me to

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build my life, my faith, my testimony, and my ministry on Jesus Christ and His gospel.

I am the sixth of 10 children. We lived in a humble home in Mapleton, Utah, about eight miles south of Provo. Father and Mother listened to and followed the counsel of the prophets and apostles. They had faith in President Joseph F. Smith's promise that parents will not lose their children if they teach them the gospel at home. It was in that humble setting that Father and Mother held what were called family nights.

The family nights I remember consisted of lessons, games, and Mother's desserts. I can visualize myself sitting by my father's side or on his lap, listening to him read stories from *A Voice from the Dust* and helping us build our lives on the rock of our Redeemer.

We experienced together a central Book of Mormon theme that I call "the power of the word" (see Alma 31:5).

### **Emphasizing the Word—A Central Book of Mormon Theme**

In the very first verse of the Book of Mormon, Nephi emphasized the power of words when he wrote, "I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; . . . having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God" (1 Nephi 1:1). A focus on words continues on through the Book of Mormon. Moroni's last chapter concludes with an emphasis on the power of the word and an invitation to come unto Christ:

*And I exhort you to remember these things; . . . for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man? . . .*

*And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true.*

*And again I would exhort you that ye would come unto Christ. . . .*

*Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him.* [Moroni 10:27, 29–30, 32]

Similarly, a significant theme repeated through Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and 3 Nephi is this power of the word. From page 195 to page 427 in the Book of Mormon, the word *word* appears over 165 times. Not surprisingly, most of the instances center on learning and teaching the word. For example:

*Now these sons of Mosiah were with Alma at the time the angel first appeared unto him; [and] they were still his brethren in the Lord; yea, and they had waxed strong in the knowledge of the truth; for they were men of a sound understanding and they had searched the scriptures diligently, that they might know the word of God. [Alma 17:2]*

These missionaries said their successes were "because of the power of his word which [was] in [them]" (Alma 26:13).

### **Comparing the Word to a Seed**

A powerful focus on the power of the word is found in chapters 31 through 34 of Alma, beginning with this verse:

*And now, as the preaching of the word had a great tendency to lead the people to do that which was just—yea, it had had more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, which had happened unto them—therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God. [Alma 31:5]*

To try the virtue of the word is to try the power of the word.

I have learned much by studying these four chapters in Alma as a single treatise on the power of the word. I recommend that you take time to study, search, and ponder this treatise, disregarding the chapter breaks and verse numbers. Consider reading them aloud. Focus on the doctrines, principles, and commandments and on the power of the word and the central message of Jesus Christ and His infinite Atonement! It can be a profound experience!

Alma compared the word unto a seed. I pause to emphasize that I have heard some in the Church cite Alma 32:28 and teach that Alma compared faith to a seed. The precise comparison is the word to a seed. I will read verses 28 and 30, and in each instance following the first sentence where the word *seed* appears, I will substitute the word *word*:

*Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a [word] may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true [word], or a good [word], if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good [word], or that 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. . . .*

*But behold, as the [word] swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, then you must needs say that the [word] is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow. And now, behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith: for ye will say I know that this is a good [word]; for behold it sprouteth and beginneth to grow. [Alma 32:28, 30]*

True words, true doctrines, and true principles planted by faith, like seeds, will sprout and grow. They lead to testimony. Listen again to three words from the last line of verse 30. They are “I know that.” These words often introduce expressions of testimony: “I know that God lives” or “I know that Jesus is the Christ” or “I know that the Book of Mormon is true.” We hear variations of this phrase in “I testify that” or “I declare that” or “I witness that”—all acceptable and appropriate.

Alma continued his emphasis on the power of the word. He then concluded his message, encouraging the people to

*begin to believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works.*

*And now, my brethren, I desire that ye shall plant this word in your hearts. [Alma 33:22–23]*

While Alma was teaching, Amulek had discerned the thoughts of the multitude and pointed out, “We have beheld that the great question which is in your minds is whether the word be in the Son of God, or whether there shall be no Christ” (Alma 34:5). Amulek then reminded the people that Alma had used scriptures—the testimonies of others—to prove “that the word is in Christ unto salvation” (Alma 34:6; see also verse 7). Amulek then went on to give his own witness and testimony, an excellent example of what scriptures call “pure testimony” (Alma 4:19):

*And now, behold, I will testify unto you of myself that these things are true. Behold, I say unto you, that I do know that Christ shall come among the children of men, to take upon him the transgressions of his people, and that he shall atone for the sins of the world; for the Lord God hath spoken it. [Alma 34:8]*

All of this is summarized by Alma’s promise to those who experiment upon the word:

*And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you, behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, . . . sweet, . . . and pure. [Alma 32:42]*

I pause to note that the words *by and by* today may mean a future time or occasion, but an archaic meaning is “before long, soon.” In

the New Testament they mean “immediately” (see Bible Dictionary, s.v. “by and by,” 627–28).

### **Building a Testimony on the Rock of Revelation**

Beginning in my home under the loving care of my faithful parents and through my mission and marriage and family life, Jesus Christ and His gospel have been the rock upon which I have built my testimony. As I look back now, I find that my knowledge and testimony of the doctrines and principles of the restored gospel came sequentially in four ways.

First, during my childhood and youth my testimony was one of faith—faith in the words, the testimony, and the examples of parents, teachers, and leaders.

Second, my testimony was strengthened intellectually during missionary service. I immersed myself in the scriptures, especially in the Book of Mormon. I read and studied all four standard works and found a symphony of divine doctrine—so reasonable, so logical, and so satisfying.

Third, my testimony developed through experiences such as receiving answers to prayers, giving and receiving priesthood blessings, paying tithes and offerings, recognizing the blessings of fasting, and many others.

Fourth, I received absolute assurances of the Holy Ghost—revelations that came directly to my mind and my heart.

The testimony that took root in me those many years ago—like the seed that is watered, nurtured, and cared for—has grown into a tree and continues to grow today.

Sister Jensen and I dated in high school and graduated together in 1960. In January 1961 we decided that we would marry and that I would not serve a mission. We attended sacrament meetings together, either at her ward in Springville or at mine in Mapleton. In mid-January we attended my ward and listened to a returned missionary report on his mission to Mexico. Following that meeting I turned

to Lonie and said, “We have made a mistake. I want to serve a mission.”

At that time prospective missionaries were interviewed by a General Authority. The Presiding Bishop of the Church, Joseph L. Wirthlin, interviewed me. I remember only two questions he asked me: The first was “Can you walk 25 miles a day?”

I said “yes.” I was playing a lot of basketball and was in excellent physical condition.

The second question was “Can you stand on a street corner anywhere in the world, gather a crowd around you, and testify to them that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God?”

I said “yes” to Bishop Wirthlin because of the second book I brought with me today, the Pearl of Great Price. This book was always visible in our home. Of course it is shorter than the triple combination, so, as a boy, I read it. I read it several times, especially the accounts of the First Vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. I knew that what I read was true. I began to feel the power of the word in my heart. There were other influences on my testimony, such as the hymns of the Restoration, experiences in seminary, Church meetings, and service, but at its bedrock, my testimony was founded on the word of God as recorded in scripture.

Sister Jensen said she would wait for me, and, as you can see, she did—although during the mission I did detect some apostasy on her part when I learned that she was dating another man. A few well-worded letters from me about not getting serious with him had their desired effect. I am thankful she listened. We married in the Manti Temple 33 days after I returned home.

Although I left for my mission partially relying on the borrowed light of the faith and testimony of excellent parents, wonderful neighbors, and good teachers and leaders, I soon lost myself in the service of others. I worked hard and I was obedient. As a result, I experienced what President Gordon

B. Hinckley experienced on his mission. “Something happened inside of me in England that was so significant and deep-rooted that I have never gotten over it,” he said. “It is the same thing I have seen happen to thousands of other young men and women who commit themselves to the Lord, and their faith in Him becomes their anchor. Everything good that has happened to me is a result of what happened while I lived in that land” (in Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996], 547).

### **Building on the Rock Through Consistent and More Meaningful Scripture Study**

During my mission I resolved to live the gospel, to be obedient, to keep sacred covenants, to remain active and serve in the Church, and to always be worthy of and have a current temple recommend. Two specific commitments were to never let a day go by without daily personal prayer and daily scripture study. Since coming home from my mission more than 45 years ago, I have not faltered in keeping these commitments.

Studying and searching scriptures are not ends in themselves; rather, they are means to the higher ends of building our faith and testimony on the rock of our Redeemer so we can “pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, . . . sweet, . . . and pure” (Alma 32:42).

I have identified six suggestions. Some of them come from the apostles. These suggestions have constantly helped me to make daily scripture study more meaningful and ensure that I am building upon the rock of our Redeemer. I testify they will help you.

1. Pray. Make prayer a part of scripture study. Pause to ask God for His Spirit to teach you. I had a chastening experience by the Spirit one day for failing to pray and reverence the scriptures. I had boarded an airplane, and while waiting to take off I thumbed through

an in-flight magazine and a newspaper. I then took my scriptures from my briefcase and began to thumb through them, treating them like the magazine and newspaper. Suddenly this thought came into my mind: “You are treating my holy words like ordinary magazines. The scriptures are sacred. Pause to pray. Treat them with reverence and respect.”

2. Pay the right price. Whether you study and search the scriptures chronologically, by themes, by topics, or by using a combination of the two, pay the right price: study, search, ponder, liken, feast upon, compare, analyze, and synthesize.

3. Look for patterns, themes, and connections. The footnotes and other scripture study aids are there to assist you.

4. Create outlines and write down your scripture insights. Have paper and pencil by you as you study the scriptures to mark and annotate them and to write down your impressions. Going through the scriptures regularly is good, but to have the scriptures go through you and to have them change you only comes at a price. A superb illustration of this principle is recorded in the vision of the redemption of the dead found in Doctrine and Covenants 138. Note the following:

- a. As we are told in verses 1 and 2, President Joseph F. Smith sat in his room pondering the Atonement. I visualize him seated at a table with scriptures, paper, and pencil, having eliminated distractions. I have learned that it is not productive to lie down while studying the scriptures. Perhaps you have learned this same lesson.
- b. He opened his scriptures, read them, reflected, and connected ideas (see verses 2–6).
- c. He pondered, he marveled, and he wondered (see verses 11, 25, 28–29).
- d. He recorded the revelation on paper, and it is now canonized (see section 138 heading).

5. Mark, annotate, and write in your scriptures. Shading, underlining, and making marginal notes and annotations are useful practices. I found in my early years that I overmarked my scriptures. Since serving as a mission president in 1975, I am on my fourth set of scriptures and will likely do a fifth set. Two purposes for marking, annotating, and writing in your scriptures are (1) to capture revelations you receive as you study and (2) to retrieve or recall what you learned. In a way, well-marked scriptures are a portable revelatory filing system.

6. Teach what you learn. By this you will demonstrate if you have truly mastered a topic. Until I am able to articulate what I am studying, I confess that I have not yet mastered it. I will be forever thankful to the faculty in the College of Education who instilled in me the simple concept “teach to learn” rather than “learn to teach.” Dr. Walter Gong, father of Gerrit Gong, assistant to President Samuelson, was a visiting faculty member in the mid-1980s who taught me principles of learning and teaching that are central to my service as a General Authority.

#### **A Pattern for Using the Word to Prepare for the Coming of the Lord**

Before I conclude, allow me to briefly summarize what has been taught today. We began by noting that those who build on the rock of our Redeemer are successfully meeting the challenges of our day. We discussed how to ensure that we build on the rock, focusing on the power of the word as an effective way to build a firm testimony. Finally, I shared with you six suggestions for ensuring that your study of the word leads you always to the rock of our Redeemer.

One of those six suggestions was to look for patterns. The Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith, “I will give unto you a pattern in all things” (D&C 52:14). One pattern that has singular parallels with us and our day can be seen in the Book of Mormon, beginning in Mosiah 25 and ending in 3 Nephi 11.

The events described in Mosiah 25 took place about 145 B.C., when we see the formation of a church. In the rest of Mosiah, in all of Alma and Helaman, and in the first 10 chapters of 3 Nephi, parents, prophets, missionaries, and other leaders labored diligently to prepare a people for the First Coming of the Savior.

In 1830, as described in the Doctrine and Covenants, we see the formation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Today, parents, prophets, missionaries, and other leaders labor diligently to prepare a people for the Second Coming of the Savior. I have heard some teach that the Book of Mormon is a handbook to that end. That preparation will not be free from opposition. You, my young brothers and sisters, and you who teach them, have an obligation to participate fully in this wonderful and sometimes tumultuous time of preparation. We simply cannot afford to be anchored to anything less consequential than the saving rock of our Redeemer.

I place my love, my loyalty, and my devotion in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ. I bear witness that They live. They spoke to Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove, and I testify that he is the Prophet of the Restoration and that Thomas S. Monson is God’s spokesman today. He and the other 14 apostles are prophets, seers, and revelators. I bear you my solemn witness that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.