

Scripture Stories as Patterns for Our Lives

BY ELDER JAY E. JENSEN

Of the Presidency of the Seventy



I have been led to a significant scripture study pattern that can help us better understand the scriptures.

As young parents reading the scriptures with our children, my wife and I struggled to make these holy words come alive and have meaning to them.

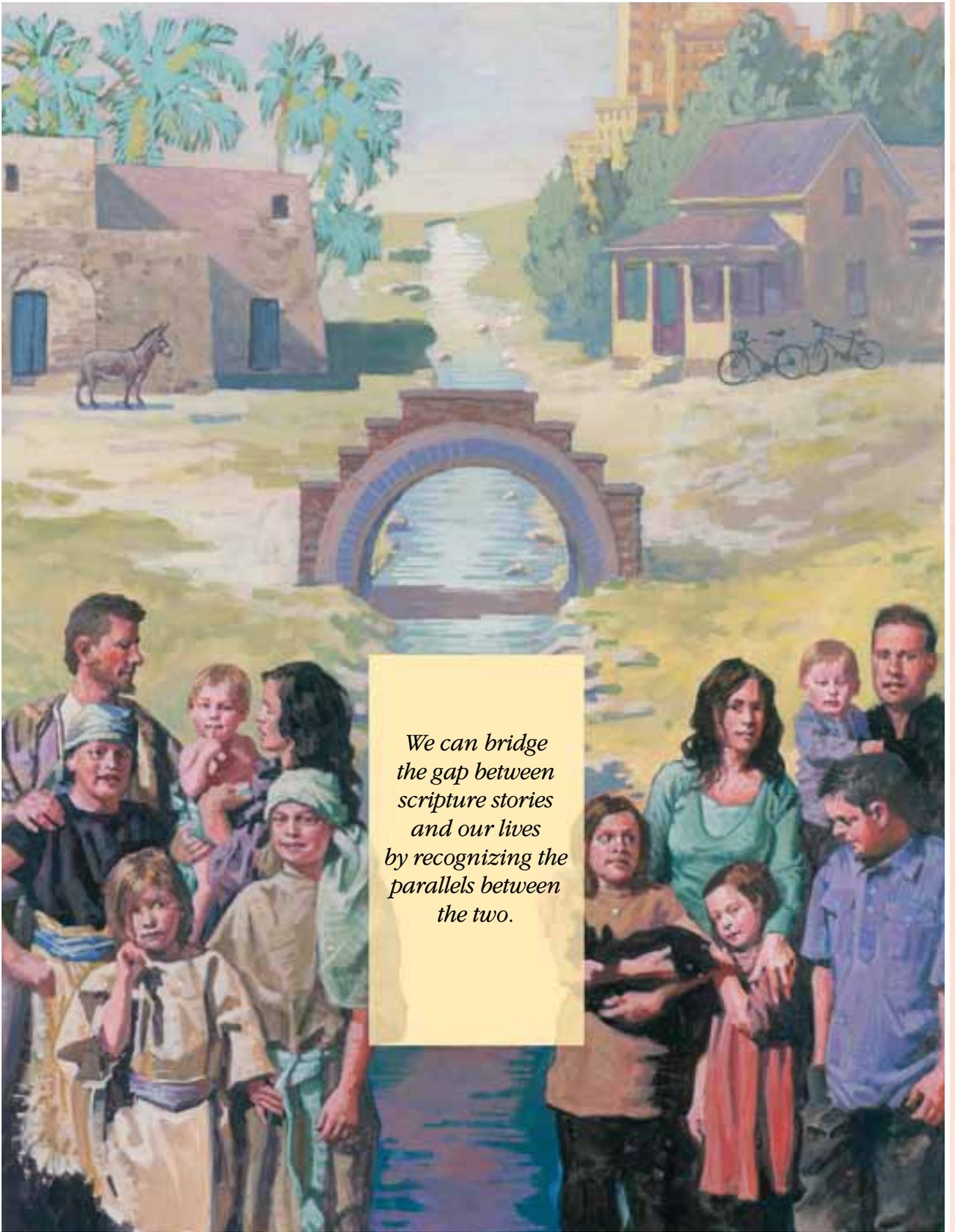
Sometimes we had successful experiences, and other times we did not. One morning one of our children said, “Dad, this is boring! I don’t understand what we’re reading.” Perhaps you have had similar experiences. Fortunately, since then I have been led to a significant scripture study pattern that has helped us individually and as a family to better understand the scriptures.

Bridging the Gap

I learned this pattern when I was in my second year of teaching in the seminary program of the Church. We were informed that Leland Andersen, a master teacher and a professional in-service trainer in the

seminary and institute program, would be visiting our classes that day. We knew that we had only to invite him to say a few things to the students and he would take a good portion of the class time. Such was the case when he came into my Old Testament class that morning. He took a piece of chalk in hand and began with the story of David and Goliath. Within seconds he had the class’s full attention, but more important, I knew I was watching a master teacher at work as he taught the class and me a pattern to make the scriptures relevant using a concept I call “bridging the gap.”

Imagine a bridge. One side of the bridge is anchored in the past and is made up of three parts: (1) they—the prophets and people of the past, (2) there—the place where these people lived, and (3) then—the time period when they lived.



*We can bridge
the gap between
scripture stories
and our lives
by recognizing the
parallels between
the two.*

The other side of the bridge is anchored in the present and is made up of three parallel parts: (1) I—who live in the present, (2) here—the place where I live, and (3) now—the time period I live in.

The goal is to build a bridge from *they-there-then* to *I-here-now*, identifying common parallels between their day and ours.

Here’s how Brother Andersen did it as he told the story

of David and Goliath. First, he took us to 1 Samuel 17 and pointed out the setting of the conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines. He reminded us of the challenge to find someone in Israel to fight Goliath. Full of faith, young David volunteered. In that narrative, Brother Andersen identified a pattern consisting of four phrases from that chapter that parallel our day. They created a bridge from the past to the present (see table 1).



TABLE 1. PROVING GOD’S ARMOR IN HIS CAUSE (SEE 1 SAMUEL 17)

Verses	Phrases from the Scriptures	Parallels to Our Day
37	“He will deliver me.”	The Lord will deliver us today.
39	“I have not proved them [the armor].”	What armor have I proved, or tested?
45	“I come to thee in the name of the Lord.”	As covenant people, we come and go in the name of the Lord.
46	“All the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.”	Our purpose is to help others know there is a God in Israel.



What the Savior experienced as He started His ministry has become for me a true pattern for spiritual growth, a pattern that is found in many other scripture stories, including the experiences of Lehi and Joseph Smith.

Identifying Story Parallels

We can follow the same pattern in our teaching. Identifying story parallels is a spiritual matter. As you read and study the scriptures, pray often. Pray before you begin studying and, of course, following a study session. Pause at times as you study, and express gratitude for what you are learning. Ask for additional light and truth. When you are reading stories from the scriptures, pray to find parallels that will link the past to the present. Most of those that I have found came through praying, studying, searching, pondering, and listening to the Spirit.

Brother Andersen developed each of four parallels from the account of David and Goliath by emphasizing the key phrases, and then he illustrated them with examples from today. Watching a master teacher develop these four points opened a door to scripture study for me—that of searching for a pattern of parallels in stories.

The following elements are normally present in scripture stories and can easily be transferred with relevance to our day:

1. A story line is followed.
2. The story line has a beginning and an ending.
3. Phrases or sentences from the story are principles that illustrate eternal truths.
4. These phrases or sentences depict truths applicable both in the past and in our day.

A Story Parallel from the New Testament

One of the most useful illustrations of a story line came to me as I helped write a New Testament lesson for seminary teachers. When the Savior started His ministry,

He fasted 40 days and 40 nights and went into the wilderness to commune with God (see Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 4:1–11). What He experienced has become for me a true pattern for spiritual growth:

- He sensed His sacred responsibility and sought communion with God.
- Revelation and enlightenment came to Him.
- He was severely tested.
- Passing the test, He proceeded with increased light and truth.¹

This pattern is found in many other scripture stories. For example, Lehi sought help (see 1 Nephi 1:5); help came (see 1 Nephi 1:6); he was severely tested (see 1 Nephi 1:19–20); and he proceeded with increased light and truth (see 1 Nephi 2:1).

The Prophet Joseph Smith experienced a similar pattern:

- He sought communion (Which church is true?).
- An answer came after he read James 1:5 and prayed.
- He was severely tested.
- He passed the test and proceeded with increased light and truth.

While I have had many experiences in my life that follow this pattern, my call as a member of the Seventy is illustrative. The call came the first week of June 1992, and my first assignment was to serve as a member of the Central America Area Presidency beginning on August 1. During my vacation time in July, I immersed myself in the scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, and spent hours studying, praying, and pondering to help me prepare and overcome my feelings of inadequacy.

Based on Matthew 4:1–11 and the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 4:1–11, the parallels shown in table 2 came to me.

The Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 4:11 differs substantively from Matthew 4:11; however, the truth taught in the latter—“angels came and ministered unto him”—is a true principle.

You, too, may examine your own life and reflect on times when you have gone through this pattern of spiritual growth.

A Story Parallel from the Book of Mormon

While I was serving as a bishop, a ward member who had committed a serious transgression came to me seeking

counsel and direction. His standing in the Church was in jeopardy, and his confession to me, a judge in Israel, would help him in the repentance process. A story parallel from Alma 36 helped this ward member begin to repent (see table 3).

Note that after Alma was forgiven, he did not remember his pains, nor was he harrowed up by his sins. However, he did remember his sins (see v. 16). But when he remembered them, he was not troubled by them. The Lord grants us a memory of sins to help prevent them from happening again, but He does take away the pain and hurt.

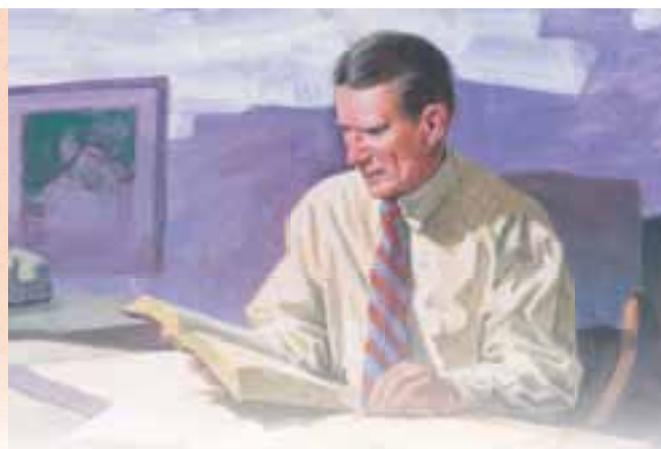


TABLE 2. A PATTERN FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH (SEE MATTHEW 4)

Verses	Phrases from the Scriptures	Parallels to Our Day
1	The Savior sensed His sacred responsibility and sought to commune with God.	I sensed my sacred responsibility and sought to commune with God.
1	He communed with God.	Enlightenment came as I studied, fasted, pondered, and prayed.
3–10	He was tempted and challenged.	I was challenged with feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness.
11	Angels ministered to Him.	The Holy Ghost comforted, taught, enlightened, and strengthened me to go forward with divine assistance.



TABLE 3. REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS (SEE ALMA 36)

Verses	Phrases from the Scriptures	Parallels to Our Day
6	Alma went about seeking to destroy the Church.	This member went about sinning.
6–11	God sent His angel to stop Alma.	He was caught in his sin.
11–16	Alma was struck with fear; he was racked with torment.	He was tormented, afraid, remorseful, and penitent.
17	Alma remembered to have heard his father prophesy of the Atonement.	He remembered that his father and mother had taught him about the Atonement in family home evening.
18	Alma prayed for mercy.	He prayed for forgiveness.
19	Alma could remember his pains no more.	He felt no more pains for his sins.
21–23	Alma received joy, light, and strength.	He received joy, light, and strength.
24	Alma labored without ceasing to save souls.	He labored to save souls.
27	Alma was supported in his trials.	He was supported in his trials.

For Our Profit and Learning

Story parallels begin with stories in the scriptures or from the events surrounding them. As you read and study these stories, you will see a word, a phrase, or a principle that seems as applicable today as it was in the past. As you continue your prayerful study, other principles will become apparent. As you put the principles together, you will begin to bridge the gap between the prophets and

people who lived in the past—*they-there-then*—and us in our day—*I-here-now*. Perhaps this is what Nephi meant when he said that he “did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning” (1 Nephi 19:23). Furthermore, by so doing we are treasuring up the Lord’s words (see Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37). ■

NOTE

1. See *Life and Teachings of Jesus* (Church Educational System manual, 1974), 41.