

Self-Reliance and Gospel Learning

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A kindergarten teacher was once observing her class of children while they drew. As she walked around to see each child's artwork, she asked one little girl, "What are you drawing?" The girl replied, "I'm drawing God." Somewhat surprised, the teacher said, "But no one knows what God looks like." Without hesitation, the girl replied, "They will in a minute."

Wouldn't it be nice to have such confidence? In actuality, Heavenly Father wants us to become confident in our knowledge of Him. The Lord told Jeremiah that we should not glory in our wisdom or in our might or in our riches. Rather, He said, "let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me" (see Jeremiah 9:23–24).

The Prophet Joseph Smith (1805–44) taught, "God hath not revealed anything to Joseph, but what He will

make known unto the Twelve, and even the least Saint may know all things as fast as he is able to bear them, for the day must come when no man need say to his neighbor, Know ye the Lord; for all shall know Him . . . from the least to the greatest."¹

Becoming confident in our knowledge of God does not happen without personal effort. Parents and teachers can help, but we must become self-reliant gospel learners. Just as we learn how to feed ourselves physically to sustain our bodies, we must learn how to feed ourselves spiritually to sustain our spirits.

Years ago the seagulls in St. Augustine, Florida, USA, were starving. For generations the gulls had learned to depend on the shrimp fleets to feed them scraps from their nets. The shrimpers eventually moved from the area. The seagulls had not



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learned how to fish for themselves; nor did they teach their young how to fish. Consequently, the big, beautiful birds were dying even while there was plenty of fish all around them in the water.²

We cannot afford to become like the seagulls; nor can we let our children go through life dependent on us, or others, for their knowledge of the Lord. “Our efforts,” said President Marion G. Romney (1897–1988), First Counselor in the First Presidency, “must always be directed toward making able-bodied people self-reliant.”³ When we become self-reliant gospel learners, we know how to feed ourselves spiritually and strengthen our relationship with God.

President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught, “Spiritual

self-reliance is the sustaining power in the Church. If we rob you of that, how can you get the revelation that there is a prophet of God? How can you get answers to prayer? How can you *know*? If we move so quickly to answer all your questions and provide so many ways to solve all of your problems, we may end up weakening you, not strengthening you.”⁴

While we enjoy learning and receiving inspiration at church, we cannot rely solely on that for our spiritual nourishment. President George Albert Smith (1870–1951) explained, “I fear that as members of the Church we depend too much upon the auxiliary organizations, and upon the advice and counsel of those outside our own households. We have already heard of many of the blessings that the Lord has given to us in the sacred

records that have been kept until our day, and that contain the advice and counsel of an all-wise Father. It seems strange that so many of our people . . . lack familiarity with the contents of these sacred records.”⁵

I enjoy learning the gospel at church, but I get more excited about the gospel when I discover inspired insights during my personal study. There is nothing more thrilling to me than finding a small treasure of truth in the scriptures that enlightens my understanding and fills me with the Spirit of the Lord.

Learn How to Learn

When I returned from my mission, I found it necessary to go to firesides and devotionals almost weekly to maintain my spirituality. The speakers fed me with their gospel insights, and I appreciated the way those insights made me feel. I had studied and taught the gospel for two years, but I didn’t seem to have the necessary skills to feed myself on a regular basis. I was just reading the scriptures and not really searching them diligently.

Gospel study is much like learning to paint. It is not intuitive or natural for everyone. We would not think of giving someone a paint palette and expect that person to become an artist immediately. Becoming a self-reliant gospel learner is the same. We can’t expect to discover great insights on a regular basis if we haven’t learned

some basic gospel-study skills.

President Packer explained that the scriptures “contain the fulness of the everlasting gospel, an eternity of knowledge. But one must learn to use them or the search will be discouraging.”⁶

That’s how it was for me—discouraging—when I first tried to find meaning and guidance from my scripture study. So I began to analyze how the speakers got their insights. It took a while, but I eventually saw how they extracted specific statements of doctrine from the scriptures; how they mined meaningful teachings about the Savior from the verses; how they formulated life-guiding principles from scriptural phrases; how they interpreted symbols; and how they connected the teachings of prophets and apostles to specific verses of scripture.

As I continued my study of the scriptures and the teachings of prophets and apostles, I found myself asking questions:

- What doctrine is being taught in these verses, and what do I learn about that doctrine?
- Where and when have I seen this gospel principle effectively applied?
- What do I learn about Heavenly Father and His plan for my happiness?
- What do I learn about Jesus Christ and His Atonement?





- What does the Lord want me to learn from this?
- What inspired thoughts and feelings am I receiving as I read?
- Is there something here that helps me with a current challenge in my life?
- What do I learn that will help me live from day to day?

Powerful, Persuasive Teachers

As my scripture study changed, so did my teaching. I became more interested in helping people discover gospel truths that would guide them than I was in telling them what the scriptures meant to me.⁷ It thrilled me to see the joy others felt when they discovered something new. It was, and is, one of the most gratifying experiences of my teaching experience.

I also found that when I helped those I taught consistently use the

skills and questions above, their ability to become self-reliant gospel learners accelerated. They didn't have to go through the long process I went through.

Learning comes before teaching, and good learners make more spiritually inspiring teachers. “Seek not to declare my word,” said the Lord, “but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if you desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men” (D&C 11:21). Who wouldn’t want that magnificent blessing!

Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has emphasized the growing need for us to become self-reliant gospel learners:

“I suspect we emphasize and know much more about a teacher teaching by the Spirit than we do

about a learner learning by faith. Clearly, the principles and processes of both teaching and learning are spiritually essential. However, as we look to the future and anticipate the ever more confused and turbulent world in which we will live, I believe it will be essential for all of us to increase our capacity to seek learning by faith. . . .

“Ultimately, the responsibility to learn by faith and apply spiritual truth rests upon each of us individually. This is an increasingly serious and important responsibility in the world in which we do now and will yet live. What, how, and when we learn is supported by—but is not dependent upon—an instructor, a method of presentation, or a specific topic or lesson format.”⁸

Blessings of Self-reliant Learning

We are certainly blessed by the inspired teachings of parents and Church teachers, but perhaps more important is learning to inspire ourselves. When we become self-reliant gospel learners, we are better able to invite personal revelation. Self-reliant gospel learners don’t need incentives to study regularly beyond knowing that the next time they study they will be edified rather than bored. Self-reliant gospel learners are also better equipped to survive the onslaught of sophistry that is so prevalent in our 21st-century society.

At least one of the Lord's promises seems largely meant for self-reliant gospel learners: "Whoso treasureth up my word, shall not be deceived" (Joseph Smith—Matthew 1:37).

President Thomas S. Monson has promised, "If you will study the scriptures diligently, your power to avoid temptation and to receive direction of the Holy Ghost in all you do will be increased."⁹

Self-reliant gospel learners experience the Savior's promise:

"If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink.

"He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37–38).

I still have a lot to understand, but becoming a self-reliant gospel learner is one of the best things I've done. It has blessed every aspect of my life. ■

NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 268.
2. See "Fable of the Gullible Gull," *Reader's Digest*, Oct. 1950, 32.
3. Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-reliance," *Ensign*, Nov. 1982, 91.
4. Boyd K. Packer, "Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, Aug. 1975, 87.
5. George Albert Smith, in Conference Report, Apr. 1929, 30; see also *The Teachings of George Albert Smith*, eds. Robert and Susan McIntosh (1996), 53.
6. Boyd K. Packer, "Agency and Control," *Ensign*, May 1983, 67.
7. President Heber J. Grant (1856–1945) taught, "The aim of the Church is to help people to help themselves" (in Conference Report, Oct. 1936, 3).
8. David A. Bednar, "Seek Learning by Faith," *Ensign*, Sept. 2007, 61, 65; *Liahona*, Sept. 2007, 17, 21.
9. Thomas S. Monson, "Be Your Best Self," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2009, 68.

