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“LINE UPON LINE, *Precept, upon Precept*” (2 Nephi 28:30)

Sister Bednar and I have learned much as we visit with the youth of the Church. You are eager and anxious to learn the doctrines of the restored gospel. You want direct and forthright answers to your gospel questions. And you have earnest desires to appropriately apply correct principles in your daily lives. One question is asked over and over again as we meet with you: *“How can I tell the difference between my emotions telling me what I want to hear and the Holy Ghost telling me what I need to hear?”*

My purpose today is to answer this important question. In the Book of Mormon, in 2 Nephi 28, we read: “For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men *line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little*; and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more; and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have” (2 Nephi 28:30, emphasis added).

The theme for my message is contained in the phrase “line upon line, precept upon precept.” If you and I would learn to discern

the difference between our own emotions and the promptings of the Holy Ghost, then we must come to recognize the Lord’s pattern and process for giving us spiritual knowledge. And the phrase “line upon line, precept upon precept” describes a central feature of the Lord’s pattern.

A Faulty Assumption and Erroneous Expectations

I believe many of us unknowingly accept a faulty assumption about the Lord’s pattern. And this faulty assumption then produces erroneous expectations about how we receive spiritual knowledge. And that faulty assumption and our misinformed expectations ultimately hinder our ability to recognize and respond to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. Let me suggest that many of us typically assume we will receive *an* answer or *a* prompting to our earnest prayers and pleadings. And we also frequently expect that such an answer or a prompting will come immediately and *all at once*. Thus, we tend to believe the Lord will give us **A BIG ANSWER QUICKLY AND ALL AT ONE TIME.**

However, the pattern repeatedly described in the scriptures suggests we receive “line upon line, precept upon



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precept,” or in other words, **many small answers over a period of time**. Recognizing and understanding this pattern is an important key to obtaining inspiration and help from the Holy Ghost.

Now, we all acknowledge that receiving a big answer quickly and all at once is possible and, in fact, does occur in some exceptional circumstances. Perhaps we give overmuch emphasis to the miraculous experiences of Joseph in the Sacred Grove, of Paul on the road to Damascus, and of Alma the Younger. If our personal experiences fall short of these well-known and spiritually dramatic examples, then perhaps we believe something is wrong with or lacking in us. I am suggesting that the particular spiritual process evidenced in these three examples with Joseph, Paul, and Alma is more rare than it is routine, more the exception than the rule.

As President Boyd K. Packer has explained: “I have learned that strong, impressive spiritual experiences do not come to us very frequently” (*That All May be Edified* [1982], 337). Most typically we receive a series of seemingly small and incremental spiritual impressions and nudges, which in totality constitute the desired confirmation about the correctness of the path which we are pursuing.

Remember, Nephi tried several different approaches before he was able to successfully obtain the plates of brass from Laban (see 1 Nephi 3–4). And he did not learn how to build a ship of curious workmanship all at one time; rather, he was shown by the Lord “from time to time after what manner [he] should work the timbers of the ship” (1 Nephi 18:1).

The Lord’s Pattern

Please notice the Lord’s pattern of providing spiritual knowledge in the following statement by President Joseph F. Smith:

“When I as a boy first started out in the ministry, I

would frequently go out and ask the Lord to show me some marvelous thing, in order that I might receive a testimony. But the Lord withheld marvels from me, and showed me the truth, line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, until he made me to know the truth from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, and until doubt and fear had been absolutely purged from me. He did not have to send an angel from the heavens to do this, nor did he have to speak with the trump of an archangel. By the whisperings of the still small voice of the Spirit of the living God, he gave to me the testimony I possess. And by this principle and power he

will give to all the children of men a knowledge of the truth that will stay with them, and it will make them to know the truth, as God knows it, and to do the will of the Father as Christ does it. And no amount of marvelous manifestations will ever accomplish this. It is obedience, humility, and submission to the requirements of heaven and to the order established in the kingdom of God upon the earth, that will establish men in the truth” (*Gospel Doctrine*, 11th ed. [1959], 7).

It is interesting to note how as a young man President Smith expected a big answer quickly and all at one time. Ultimately, however, he received many small answers over an extended period of time, and thereby his testimony grew ever stronger.

Each of us must also appreciate the roles of faithfulness and diligence and obedience in the Lord’s pattern for receiving help from heaven. Please turn with me again to 2 Nephi 28:30. “For behold, thus saith the Lord God: I will give unto the children of men line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; *and blessed are those who hearken unto my precepts, and lend an ear unto my counsel, for they shall learn wisdom; for unto him that receiveth I will give more;* and from them that shall say, We have enough, from them shall be taken away even that which they have” (emphasis added).

“By the whisperings of the still small voice of the Spirit of the living God, he gave to me the testimony I possess.”

Thus, those who faithfully hearken to and obediently heed the Lord's direction will learn wisdom and receive more. As described by Elder Richard G. Scott: "When we receive help from our Father in Heaven, it is in response to faith, obedience, and the proper use of agency" ("Learning to Recognize Answers to Prayers," *Ensign*, Nov. 1989, 30).

Please note how this principle is both reiterated and amplified in the following verses. "For he will give unto the *faithful* line upon line, precept upon precept; and *I will try you and prove you herewith*" (D&C 98:12; emphasis added).

"*If thou shalt ask*, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal" (D&C 42:61; emphasis added).

"And they shall also be crowned with blessings from above, yea, and with commandments not a few, and with revelations *in their time—they that are faithful and diligent before me*" (D&C 59:4; emphasis added).

"That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, *and continueth in God*, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:24; emphasis added).

If you and I would distinguish our personal emotions from the impressions placed in our hearts and minds by the Holy Ghost, then we must desire and seek, ask and discern, hear and obey, and then again desire and seek and ask and discern and hear and obey. Our faith and diligence and obedience are ongoing invitations for additional spiritual knowledge and insight. Faith leads

to obedience, which yields wisdom and an even greater desire for added light and truth.

The process of discerning between our will and God's will becomes less and less of a concern as time goes by and as we strive to rid ourselves of worldliness—and thereby cultivate the spirit of revelation in our lives. That is, as we mature spiritually, we begin to develop sound judgment, a refined and educated conscience, and a heart and mind filled with wisdom. It is not just that we have grown older, nor have we simply become smarter and had more experiences on which to draw, as important as those experiences are. Rather, the Holy Ghost has over time been expanding our intellect, forming our feelings, sharpening and elevating our perspective, such that we increasingly think and feel and act as the Lord would under similar circumstances. In short, we have made steady progress in obtaining "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16).

This ongoing cycle of gaining spiritual knowledge ultimately produces a precious and delicious fruit, but that fruit cannot and does not grow from a blossom to its ripened state overnight. Furthermore, such fruit cannot grow in barren soil. Obedience to God's commandments and our personal integrity and adherence to commitments provide the needed nutrients for fertile spiritual soil. It should be obvious to all of us that evil influences such as filthy language, immodest clothing and appearance, and pornography are bitter poisons that kill the soil and halt the spiritually subtle process of receiving help from heaven "*line upon line, precept upon precept*." There can be no shortcut around the law of the harvest; truly, we reap what we sow (see Galatians 6:7).



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Illustrations and Implications

Both the history of the Church and our personal lives are replete with examples of the Lord's pattern for obtaining spiritual knowledge "line upon line, precept upon precept." For example, the fundamental doctrines and principles of the restored gospel were not delivered to the Prophet Joseph Smith in the Sacred Grove in a neatly organized binder. Rather, these priceless treasures were revealed line upon line as circumstances warranted and as the timing was right.

Another episode from Church history described by Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) also illustrates the Lord's pattern. "Meekness is so necessary as to our readiness to learn not only these sweeping truths but particular truths as well, which come incrementally, 'line upon line, precept upon precept' (D&C 98:12). The Prophet Joseph Smith, for instance, first translated the thirteenth chapter of First Nephi in perhaps late 1828 or the spring of 1829. These verses note that certain things had been 'kept back' and 'taken away.' In June 1830, Joseph received the 'precious morsel' we know as the first chapter of Moses. Therein Moses was told by the Lord that of the scriptures Moses would write, certain individuals would 'take many of them from the book' (Moses 1:41). It was not until February 16, 1832, however, after a conference in Amherst, Ohio, that Joseph said it was apparent to him, 'from sundry revelations which had been received,' that 'many important points touching the salvation of man had been taken from the Bible, or lost before it was compiled' (Preface to D&C 76). On that date, among other things, came the sunburst of celestial truths about the three degrees of glory (*Meek and Lowly* [1987], 73).

I want to highlight another example from the history of the restored Church. President Joseph Fielding Smith taught the following principle.

"This work of salvation for the dead came to the

Prophet like every other doctrine—piecemeal. It was not revealed all at once. When the Angel Moroni came to the Prophet Joseph Smith, one of the things he told him was that the hearts of the children should turn to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to the children, so that when the Lord should come the earth should not be smitten with a curse. That is significant. That was the first inkling the Prophet had concerning salvation for the dead, and he did not know just what it meant. He had a very vague idea of the meaning of the words that Elijah would come to 'plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers,' and I suppose he pondered over it a good deal" (*Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. [1954–56], 2:168).

That first small inkling given to the Prophet Joseph grew line upon line and precept upon precept—and eventually included the restoration of priesthood keys in the Kirtland Temple, the performance of essential ordinances in the Nauvoo Temple, and the availability of more than 130 temples throughout the world today. Truly progress has been made in this eternally important work, line upon line and precept upon precept.

I could recount many more examples from Church history about the Lord's pattern. However, I now want to highlight some personal examples to which I hope all of us can relate.

Sister Bednar and I frequently visit with youth who wonder about career choices and how to properly select a school at which to study and receive additional education. Many times a young person is perplexed—having felt as though *the answer* about a career or a school was received at one particular point in time, only to feel that a different and perhaps conflicting answer was received at another point in time. The question then is often asked, "Why did the Lord give me two different answers?" In like manner, a student may sincerely seek to know if the person he or she has been dating is "the one." A feeling of yes at one

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time may appear to be contradicted by a different feeling of *no* at another time. May I simply suggest that what we initially believe is *the answer* may be but one part of a “line upon line, precept upon precept” ongoing, incremental, and unfolding pattern of small answers. It is clearly the case that the Lord did not change His mind; rather, you and I must learn to better recognize the Lord’s pattern as a series of related and expanding answers to our most important questions.

Sister Bednar and I knew each other for 19 months and dated for 15 months before we were married. I do not recall ever receiving a single, overwhelming spiritual confirmation that she was “the one.” I do recall that as we dated, as we talked, as we became better acquainted, and as we observed and learned about each other in a variety of circumstances, I received many small, simple, and quiet reassurances that she was indeed a remarkable and spiritual woman. All of those simple answers over a period of time led to and produced an appropriate spiritual reassurance that indeed we were to be married. That reassurance did not come all at once; rather, it was spiritually subtle and gradually distilled upon our minds as the dews from heaven, as described in the 121st section of the Doctrine and Covenants (see verse 45).

Now, please understand that I am not trying to suggest the experience Sister Bednar and I had is precisely what will or should happen to you. I am suggesting that we should not feel spiritually inadequate or unqualified if we do not receive a big and immediate answer to a request or plea for help the first time we ask. And we will be better served spiritually by studying and understanding the Lord’s pattern of revealing

things to us “line upon line, precept upon precept.”

A final statement by Elder Maxwell summarizes the importance of learning and applying the Lord’s pattern in our lives. “Paced progress not only is acceptable to the Lord but also is recommended by Him. Divine declarations say: ‘Ye are little children and ye cannot bear all things now’ (D&C 50:40); ‘I will lead you along’ (D&C 78:18). Just as divine disclosure usually occurs line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, so likewise we will achieve our spiritual progress gradually (see D&C 128:21; 98:12)” (*Men and Women of Christ* [1991], 23).

As you ponder the principle of “line upon line, precept upon precept,” you will be able to discern more clearly the consistent help from heaven you have received in your lives. And your faith in the Savior will be stronger, and your hope for the future will be brighter. I pray you will recognize the Lord’s pattern and process for obtaining spiritual knowledge.

I declare my witness that these things are true. I have come to know the reality of the Restoration the same way most of you have come to know—line upon line and precept upon precept. I know that God lives; I testify and witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of the Eternal Father. And I know that the Holy Ghost is a revelator and the testator of all truth. I further testify that the fullness of the gospel has been restored to the earth in these latter days. **NE**

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