

## D&C LESSON #23

# “SEEK LEARNING, EVEN BY STUDY AND ALSO BY FAITH”

**INTRODUCTION:** On December 27, 1833, Joseph Smith received the revelation now incorporated in the D&C as section 88. In part, the revelation instructed the Prophet in

... the order of the house prepared for the presidency of the school of the prophets, established for their instruction in all things that are expedient for them, even for all the officers of the church, or in other words, those who are called to the ministry in the church, beginning at the high priests, even down to the deacons—(D&C 88:127)

The revelation went on to give instructions on many aspects of the conduct of the school. In accordance with this revelation, Joseph Smith organized the School of the Prophets on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of January, 1833.

It was unusual enough at this time in Ohio for anyone to organize any kind of school. The country had not yet awakened to the importance of public education, and those fortunate enough to be educated had rarely progressed beyond the elementary level. But that someone should organize a *School of the Prophets* must have been considered incredible by the Gentiles. Some divinity schools had adopted the title *School of the Prophets*, based on Old Testament terminology, but Joseph really meant to organize a school and fill it with men possessed of the spirit of prophecy and revelation.

This school was the first formal attempt of the Church to educate its members. It began quietly in an upper room on the second floor of the Newel K. Whitney store in Kirtland. It was the beginning of great emphasis on education, an emphasis the Church has pursued passionately in the intervening years. The message of this school and the later ones—the secular schools and the spiritual ones—is that we really must seek learning by study and faith.

## 1. THE SCHOOL OF THE PROPHETS PROVIDES A PATTERN FOR US TO FOLLOW IN OUR LEARNING.

The meetings of the school of the prophets became the setting for many powerful spiritual experiences.. Joseph reported on the first two months of schooling:

Great joy and satisfaction continually beamed in the countenances of the School of the Prophets and the saints, on account of the things revealed, and the progress in the knowledge of God. (*History of the Church, Vol.1, Ch.24, p.333*)

Several accounts of spiritual manifestations in the school are available. Zebedee Coltrin, however, is the author of the most dramatic. The following is from Coltrin's account:

About the time the school was first organized some wished to see an angel, and a number joined in a circle, and prayed when the vision came, two of the brethren shrank and called for the vision to close or they would perish, they were Bros. Hancock and Humphries.

At one of these meetings after the organization of the school, on the 23rd January, 1833, when we were all together, Joseph having given instructions, and while engaged in silent prayer, kneeling, with our hands uplifted each one praying in silence, no one whispered above his breath, a personage walked through the room from East to west, and Joseph asked if we saw him. I saw him and suppose the others did, and Joseph answered that is Jesus, the Son of God, our elder brother. Afterward Joseph told us to resume our former position in prayer, which we did. Another person came through; He was surrounded as with a flame of fire. He (Bro. C[oltrin]) experienced a sensation that it might destroy the tabernacle as it was of consuming fire of great brightness. The Prophet Joseph said this was the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I saw Him.... This appearance was so grand and overwhelming that it seemed I should melt down in His presence, and the sensation was so powerful that it thrilled through my whole system and I felt it in the marrow of my bones. The

Prophet Joseph said: Brethren now you are prepared to be Apostles of Jesus Christ, for you have seen both the Father and the Son.  
(Zebedee Coltrin Journal, 23 January 1833, Church Archives)

John Murdock, who attended the school and boarded with Joseph reported a vision of the Savior.

During the winter that I boarded with Bro. [Brother] Joseph, as just mentioned, we had a number of prayer meetings, in the prophet's chamber, in which we obtained great blessings. In one of these meetings the prophet told us if we could humble ourselves before God, and exercise strong faith, we should see the face of the Lord. And about midday the visions of my mind were opened, and the eyes of my understanding were enlightened, and I saw the form of a man, most lovely, the visage of his face was sound and fair as the sun. His hair a bright silver grey, curled in most majestic form, His eyes a keen penetrating blue, and the skin of his neck a most beautiful white and he was covered from the neck to the feet with a loose garment, pure white, whiter than any garment I have ever before seen. His countenance was most penetrating, and yet most lovely. And while I was endeavoring to comprehend the whole personage from head to feet it slipped from me, and the vision was closed up. But it left on my mind the impression of love, for months, that I never felt before to that degree.(John Murdock Journal, typescript, BYU-A, p.13)

It would not do to over-emphasize the nature of these spiritual experiences. They are mentioned only to underscore the blessings that can come when we apply the principles of this first LDS school to our own study and our own lives. When we seek learning by faith, when we devote time to the study of the doctrines and the gifts of the Spirit, we open the door for the Lord to bless us and teach us in wonderful ways.

The grandchildren of the *School of the Prophets* are our seminaries and institutes, our church classes, even our Family Home Evenings. As we gather together in faith to seek learning by faith, we make it possible for the Lord to instruct us in ways that can happen only rarely in secular educational experiences. But such

opportunities will not come if we are unprepared. What kind of experience can students have in a gospel doctrine class if they never study the scriptures on their own, or if they never make effort to apply the principles being studied? Consider these items of preparation commanded by the Lord:

Appoint among yourselves a teacher, and let not all be spokesmen at once; but let one speak at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege.

See that ye love one another; cease to be covetous; learn to impart one to another as the gospel requires.

Cease to be idle; cease to be unclean; cease to find fault one with another; cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.

And above all things, clothe yourselves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace. (D&C 88:122-125)

Are there items of instruction in these verses to which you ought to give heed to increase your sensitivity to the whisperings of the Spirit?

## **WE SHOULD LEARN BY STUDY AND ALSO BY FAITH.**

It has never been a part of God's program to do for his children things that they could do for themselves. He seems to require a full measure of effort before he takes up the slack in our capacity. Because of this, the Prophet and his followers quickly recognized the need for an aggressive and effective program of secular education for those who belonged to the kingdom. They must have understood that all true knowledge comes by inspiration and revelation, and that it was their obligation to seek it wherever it might be found. Sidney Rigdon indicated the order of this study when he stated that " . . . when science fails, revelation supplies its place . . ." and that " when science fails, and philosophy vanishes away, revelation .

.. begins . . ." (Oration Delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1838, Far West, Missouri, p. 9)

In June of 1831, William Phelps and Oliver Cowdery were commanded by the Lord to select and to write books for church schools.

And again, you shall be ordained to assist my servant Oliver Cowdery to do the work of printing, and of selecting and writing books for schools in this church, that little children also may receive instruction before me as is pleasing unto me. (D&C 55:4)

The Lord commanded his people to " . . . set in order the churches, and study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people." (D&C 90:15) Saints were to " . . . obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man, and all this for the salvation of Zion." (D&C 93:53)

Again, referring to the words of Rigdon,

The object of our religion is to make us more intelligent . . . to make men better by making them wiser; more useful, by making them more intelligent; not intelligent on subjects only, but on all subjects, on which intelligence can be obtained. (Oration Delivered by Mr. S. Rigdon on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1838, Far West, Missouri, p. 9)

The Lord indicated how comprehensive this learning by study should be when he indicated that it should deal with

. . . things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms— (D&C 88:79)

If this outline is followed explicitly, the course of study must include, among other

things, astronomy, agronomy, geology, mineralogy, history, current events, domestic and foreign affairs, geography, and language.

It would be a mistake to assume that learning by faith would require less effort than the regimen described above.

When we have gone as far as human learning can carry us, or when the information we need can only be obtained by divine dispensation, then we must seek learning by faith. In the D&C the Lord directed his followers to learn such things as "... the law of the Gospel ..." (D&C 88:78), "all things that pertain to the kingdom of God ..." (D&C 88:78), "... the doctrine of the kingdom ..." (D&C 88:77), and the "... laws of God ..." (D&C 93:53). In other words, to use the language of Alma,

... he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full. (Alma 12:10)

Brigham Young received this instruction:

Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear; For my Spirit is sent forth into the world to enlighten the humble and contrite, and to the condemnation of the ungodly. (D&C 136:32,33)

Joseph Smith said, "I want to come up into the presence of God, and learn all things ..." (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p.327) Well, where else could a man or a woman possibly learn all things?

### **3. WE SHOULD CONTINUE TO LEARN THROUGHOUT OUR LIVES.**

The cultural emphasis on education might lead us to believe that going to school and learning are the same thing and that the second cannot take place without the first. A moment of thought will convince you that this cannot be true. What gaps would there be in your ability to deal with life if all you knew was what you

learned in school?

The Saints are under divine and prophetic injunction to continue learning throughout the years of mortality.

. . . we must seek intelligence, education, learning, knowledge. I was thrilled by the quotation made by President [Levi Edgar] Young yesterday, showing how the early hard-handed farmers of middle age or beyond gathered after the day's toil to study Latin, Greek, and subjects of the mind. We must not forsake the tradition of education. (John A. Widtsoe, Conference Report October 1949, p.64)

A modern-day apostle said it this way:

"In the age in which we live today, education is absolutely essential. No one without a good education can really excel. We have a great responsibility in the Church to encourage everyone to have a lifetime search for education." (Elder L. Tom Perry, News of the Church, *Ensign*, Mar. 1999, 78)

The announcement of the Perpetual Education Fund in April Conference is powerful evidence of the importance the prophets have placed on education. Can we not extract a message for ourselves from that? If education serves a vital function in the countries where it is difficult to obtain, it will also serve a vital function among those who have a much greater access to educational opportunities. We ought to contribute when we can to the PEF, but we also ought to search for continuing opportunities to increase our own education throughout our lives.

#### **4. IN THE TEMPLE WE GAIN EDUCATION FOR ETERNITY**

In D&C 88:119, we are told that the temple is to be a "house of learning." The temple is a place of covenant and ordinance and endowment, but it is also clearly an educational institution. My opinion is that the temple experience is the most intense and powerful educational experience on the planet.

The Lord said:

10 Verily I say unto you, that it is my will that a house should be built unto me in the land of Zion, like unto the pattern which I have given you.

11 Yea, let it be built speedily, by the tithing of my people.

12 Behold, this is the tithing and the sacrifice which I, the Lord, require at their hands, that there may be a house built unto me for the salvation of Zion—

13 For a place of thanksgiving for all saints, and for a place of instruction for all those who are called to the work of the ministry in all their several callings and offices;

14 That they may be perfected in the understanding of their ministry, in theory, in principle, and in doctrine, in all things pertaining to the kingdom of God on the earth, the keys of which kingdom have been conferred upon you. (D&C 97:10-14)

Look at these verses in D&C 97 and consider the statements and the implications relating to education—to instruction. As we sang “America the Beautiful” today in a meeting, I was struck by the phrase, “I love they templed hills.” Suddenly it seemed prophetic. How many hills now have temples in this land? How many hills around the world? Every new spire, every new Moroni with the trumpet of salvation to his lips, every new pane of stained glass is an invitation to us all to go to school. The temple is a well of knowledge that will never run dry. We can and must drink freely and often.

**CONCLUSION:** I love this story from Marion D. Hanks.

President David O. McKay wrote:

“What, then, is true education? It is awakening a love for truth, a just sense of duty, opening the eyes of the soul to the great purpose and end of life. It is not teaching the individual to love the good for



personal sake, it is to teach him to love the good for the sake of the good itself; to be virtuous in action because he is so in heart; to love and serve God supremely, not from fear, but from delight in His perfect character." (Instructor, August 1961, p. 253.)

In the face of a great, changing world, it is our duty to teach the truth, to transmit the fine, sweet, uplifting things of our culture, and to inspire action. In order to do this, we must keep learning.

Keep learning. Where to discover your interest and how to amass relevant information are illustrated in the story of an obscure spinster woman who insisted that she never had a chance. She muttered these words to Dr. Louis Agassiz, distinguished naturalist, after one of his lectures in London. In response to her complaint, he replied: "Do you say, madam, you never had a chance? What do you do?"

"I am single and help my sister run a boardinghouse."

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I skin potatoes and chop onions."

He said, "Madam, where do you sit during these interesting but homely duties?"

"On the bottom step of the kitchen stairs."

"Where do your feet rest?"

"On the glazed brick."

"What is glazed brick?"

"I don't know, sir."

He said, "How long have you been sitting there?"

She said, "Fifteen years."

"Madam, here is my personal card," said Dr. Agassiz. "Would you kindly write me a letter concerning the nature of a glazed brick?"

She took him seriously. She went home and explored the dictionary and discovered that a brick was a piece of baked clay. That definition seemed too simple to send to Dr. Agassiz, so after the dishes were washed, she went to the library and in an encyclopedia read that a glazed brick is vitrified kaolin and hydrous aluminum silicate. She didn't know what that meant, but she was curious and found out. She took the word vitrified and read all she could find about it. Then she visited museums. She moved out of the basement of her life and into a new world on the wings of vitrified. And having started, she took the word hydrous, studied geology, and went back in her studies to the time when God started the world and laid the clay beds. One afternoon she went to a brickyard, where she found the history of more than 120 kinds of bricks and tiles, and why there have to be so many. Then she sat down and wrote thirty-six pages on the subject of glazed brick and tile.

Back came the letter from Dr. Agassiz: "Dear [page 62] Madam, this is the best article I have ever seen on the subject. If you will kindly change the three words marked with asterisks, I will have it published and pay you for it."

A short time later there came a letter that brought \$250, and penciled on the bottom of this letter was this query: "What was under those bricks?" She had learned the value of time and answered with a single word: "Ants." He wrote back and said, "Tell me about the ants."

She began to study ants. She found there were between eighteen hundred and twenty-five hundred different kinds. There are ants so tiny you could put three head-to-head on a pin and have standing

room left over for other ants; ants an inch long that march in solid armies half a mile wide, driving everything ahead of them; ants that are blind; ants that get wings on the afternoon of the day they die; ants that build anthills so tiny that you can cover one with a lady's silver thimble; peasant ants that keep cows to milk, and then deliver the fresh milk to the apartment house of the aristocrat ants of the neighborhood.

After wide reading, much microscopic work, and deep study, the spinster sat down and wrote Dr. Agassiz 360 pages on the subject. He published the book and sent her the money, and she went to visit all the lands of her dreams on the proceeds of her work.

Now, as you hear this story, do you feel acutely that all of us are sitting with our feet on pieces of vitrified kaolin and hydrous aluminum silicate—with ants under them? Lord Chesterton answers: "There are no uninteresting things; there are only uninterested people."

Keep learning. (Marion D. Hanks, "Good Teachers Matter," *Ensign*, July 1971, 61,62)

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