

Vision and Light
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Fall 2005 Open House

Announcement

The new Mutual theme for 2006 is “Arise and shine forth, that thy light may be a standard for the nations” (D&C 115:5). We have seen the youth rising to their potential, shining with the light of testimony, as they have celebrated Joseph Smith’s 200th birthday and the 175th anniversary of the Restoration of the Church. This new theme will give all of us the opportunity to share this light in countless ways—through example, missionary work, service, etc.

Gratitude

Hasn’t this been a “great and marvelous” season? During this celebratory year, we celebrate you! Our hearts are bursting with gratitude for your goodness, dedication, and hard work. The activities and commemorative events have truly been wonderful and meaningful. One hundred and fifty to two hundred thousand youth in Utah alone had a Joseph Smith experience. Through your efforts, testimonies have been bolstered and lives have been changed. We know something about the tiring schedules you keep, but even one positive result in the life of a young person invigorates and renews us again both in body and spirit.

Celebrations

Let me share just one of the many wonderful stories I’ve heard about testimonies that blossomed through participation in the Joseph Smith celebrations.

Devan Sheffield, age 10, was asked, along with his family, to participate in the “Preparation of a Prophet” dance at the big celebration in the Marriott Center at BYU. They would portray the family of Joseph Smith in his early childhood years with Devan playing the boy Joseph right after his leg surgery. The choreographer was surprised at his response. He said: “I think that will help me prepare for my heart surgery. I think I can relate to the Prophet better than a lot of other boys my age” (Wendy Sheffield, personal correspondence). He had just learned that he would need to have open heart surgery two days after the production.

He took his role very seriously, reading the account of Joseph’s surgery over and over again. He also repeatedly watched a video of it at the Church History Museum display of the Prophet. About three weeks before the performance, he told his mother that his new motto was, “If the Prophet Joseph could bear having surgery without anesthesia, then I know I can wake up from surgery and bear having tubes in my chest.” He then said: “Whenever I get scared, I think of Joseph and do what he did when he needed help—I drop on my knees and pray.” Through the production, Devan gained a testimony that “Joseph was a prophet and that I can live as he lived, and that I’m happy when I do that. I learned that the Book of Mormon is true, and it really happened. Before, I wondered if the Church was true, but now I know it is. I’ve prayed, and it is!”

Besides gaining this sweet testimony, Devan was blessed in additional ways. Just prior to the surgery, he had a blessing. In it he was told that his portrayal of the Prophet was more than just a role. The entire medical staff kept referring to his recovery as a “miracle.” He was in a complicated surgery for over eight hours, but everything went perfectly. The doctor commented that he must have a strong spirit and an incredible tolerance for pain. He was discharged within 72 hours from start to finish, and they had been told to plan on about 10 days.

His mother, Wendy Sheffield, said of the entire experience: “Nothing could have prepared our family (and especially Devan) better for this particular trial. Not only have all of our testimonies of the Prophet grown tremendously, but we all have a very unique and special bond with him. The Joseph Smith commemoration will have a lasting impact on our family throughout all eternity.”

Vision and Light

Why have these celebrations had such a tremendous impact on the lives of our people? I believe it has to do with the vision of a prophet of God. “Where there is no vision [or revelation], the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18). President Hinckley is the one who asked us to celebrate. He has asked us, “Are the youth having fun?” At his direction, he wants young people to celebrate at temple dedications, during jubilee years (like the 50th anniversary year of the Church in Korea), for Joseph Smith’s 200th birthday, and for the 175th anniversary of the Restoration of the Church. What happens when we celebrate? The right things happen if we’re focused. President Hinckley knew that if we did it right, with correct purpose, our youth would be strengthened in their testimonies. As a presidency and board, we saw many performances. They were all great and we loved them. But they were more successful to the degree that the leaders understood the vision of the prophet.

Now the year isn’t over yet, and we must continue to do purposeful things with our youth. Our prophet continues to offer his vision. He knows what we’ve accomplished and what we’ve learned thus far. Now he has asked us to read or reread the Book of Mormon. Why? What does he want us to learn, to know, to feel? How can we capitalize on the experiences we’ve just had? By following his prophetic priorities, leaders can facilitate growth and light in our youth.

The Robes of Righteousness

Leaders need to clothe our youth with the “robes of righteousness” (D&C 109:76). That phrase from the scriptures may be better understood when we know about an old Arabic custom. If a young man was fleeing for his life, he would seek refuge in the tent of a great leader. The chief would place the hem of his robe over the shoulder of the young guest and declare him under his protection from all his enemies.

Nephi sought that protection from his enemies. He says: “O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies!” (2 Nephi 4:33). One of those enemies was sin, just as it is for our youth. How can we be as the Arabic chief and clothe our young people in such robes of protection from sin?

Our prophet has the vision. Understanding, knowing, and testifying that Joseph Smith is the prophet of the Restoration provides protection from sin. Coming to a personal testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon provides protection from sin. Leaders, as the Arabic chiefs, need to be in tune with the vision of the prophet, so we can assist these valiant spirits in this formative season of their lives.

Like Nephi, our youth will find protection and light as they “feast upon the words of Christ” (2 Nephi 32:3). Our missionary daughter is learning to feast. In a recent letter she said: “I feel like one of the ways I’ve changed the most is the way I study my scriptures. I *LOVE* studying the scriptures now. I get so excited every time I have a chance to study. I can hardly explain it, except that it’s just like Alma 32:28 where the word becomes delicious. I love it! I think I used to like the scriptures and now I *love* them! My companion says she always knows when I’m about to turn to a scripture [when we’re teaching] because my eyes light up and then I start flipping through pages. I just love answering [people’s] questions through the scriptures” (personal correspondence).

Youth Need Experiences with the Scriptures

How can we help our youth learn to feast upon the scriptures? Let’s concentrate on three things that will help: (1) They need their own scriptures. (2) They need experiences with the scriptures. (3) They need to be consistent in their study of the scriptures.

1. The first thing doesn’t need too much explanation. Each girl needs her own copy of the Book of Mormon. It is available in paperback for very little cost. It is somewhat ironic to me that even the very humblest people I saw in Africa had scriptures and that some young women I have visited right here in Utah do not.

Our three-year-old grandson received his own copy of the Book of Mormon as a gift from his Nursery leader in Primary. He no longer wants his mommy to read to him from the Book of Mormon reader. He says he likes the “real words” the best. We desire that same thing for young women everywhere.

2. Secondly, young people need to have experiences in the scriptures. They should learn how to use them so as to come to a greater understanding of them, using the footnotes, the index, Topical Guide, dictionary, and maps. If a piano teacher wanted her student to learn to play the piano, she wouldn’t just tell him about it each week. She would also show him how to do it and then give him the opportunity to try it, and then he would go home and practice it over and over again until it became easier and more familiar and comfortable. Then he could come back in a week and show what he had learned. We should use a similar process as we teach the scriptures.

We can learn from the Church Educational System about how to teach youth. They suggest that we go through four steps as we learn: (1) define, (2) illustrate, (3) experience, and (4) share. Many times in our teaching, we only cover the first two steps—defining and illustrating. Our students also need to be able to *do* it or *experience* it and then talk about it. The Personal

Progress experiences were designed by inspiration following this very pattern. They allow the girls to define and illustrate a principle such as faith by searching the scriptures. Then they practice it and live it for several weeks. After completing these three steps, they then report what they have learned in a discussion with a parent or leader. Finally, they process their learning as they write about it in their Personal Progress journals.

3. Finally, they need to be consistent in their scripture study. It is more beneficial for them to read a little every day than to try to eat the whole elephant at once. President Howard W. Hunter taught this. He said:

Those who delve into the scriptural library, however, find that to understand requires more than casual reading or perusal—there must be concentrated study. It is certain that one who studies the scriptures every day accomplishes far more than one who devotes considerable time one day and then lets days go by before continuing. Not only should we study each day, but there should be a regular time set aside when we can concentrate without interference.

There is nothing more helpful than prayer to open our understanding of the scriptures. Through prayer we can attune our minds to seek the answers to our searchings. The Lord said: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Luke 11:9). Herein is Christ’s reassurance that if we will ask, seek, and knock, the Holy Spirit will guide our understanding if we are ready and eager to receive. . . .

Perhaps what is more important than the hour of the day is that a regular time be set aside for study. It would be ideal if an hour could be spent each day; but if that much cannot be had, a half hour on a regular basis would result in substantial accomplishment. A quarter of an hour is little time, but it is surprising how much enlightenment and knowledge can be acquired in a subject so meaningful. The important thing is to allow nothing else to ever interfere with our study. [“Reading the Scriptures,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1979, 64]

I saw a seminary teacher use a tooth-brushing demonstration to illustrate this principle. He had a student brush his teeth. Then he had him do it again, then again and again, up to 14 times. Then he remarked that the student was now done with that task for the entire week and wouldn’t have to bother with it again until next week. The students knew that in order for tooth hygiene to be most beneficial, it had to happen consistently every day. They easily made the analogy to scripture reading. I believe as each of us begins to feel the great blessings of the scriptures in our lives, our desire to read will grow and consistency will start to take care of itself.

Prophetic Promises

In August President Gordon B. Hinckley asked every member of the Church to read or reread the Book of Mormon by the end of this celebratory year. Then he promised us that “there will come into your lives and into your homes an added measure of the Spirit of the Lord, a

strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to His commandments, and a stronger testimony of the living reality of the Son of God” (“A Testimony Vibrant and True,” *Ensign*, Aug. 2005, 6). As those promises are realized in our lives and the lives of our youth, we will be able to “arise and shine forth, that [our] light may be a standard to the nations” (D&C 115:5)—our Mutual theme and emphasis in 2006.

The Spirit Comforts

The first of these promises is that we will feel a greater measure of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that comforts and guides us. It is the Spirit that teaches us and reveals the Lord’s mind and will for us. Now is a time in the lives of youth when they are making important decisions about everything both spiritual and temporal—standards, schools, jobs, missions, friends, dating, marriage, faithfulness in the Church, etc. They need individual guidance and personal revelation that will help them through their own unique circumstances. Alma taught that “the preaching of the word had a . . . more powerful effect upon the minds of the people than the sword, or anything else, . . . therefore Alma thought it was expedient that they should try the virtue of the word of God” (Alma 31:5). I know and I testify that as we “try the virtue of the word of God” that comfort, guidance, and personal revelation will come to each of us. President Spencer W. Kimball said: “I find that when I get casual in my relationships with divinity and when it seems that no divine ear is listening and no divine voice is speaking, that I am far, far away. If I immerse myself in the scriptures the distance narrows and the spirituality returns” (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, ed. Edward L. Kimball [1982], 135).

Even our little grandson found comfort in the scriptures. Tanner, who is six, took swimming lessons this summer. At first he was quite fearful of the water. On the day they were finally supposed to jump into the deep end on their own, the family apparently had not read scriptures at breakfast time as usual. Although he was nervous, Tanner made the jump into the deep water. But when he got out he chided his mother, saying, “If we had remembered to read scriptures this morning, I wouldn’t have been so scared to jump in.” Our daughter felt reprimanded but also pleased that her little son placed such value on the spirit and strength that the scriptures bring into his life. Scripture study can give us strength to jump into the deep water we too are sometimes called to swim in (see D&C 127:2).

The Spirit Guides

Scriptures also bless us with revelation. Sometimes the exact words from the scriptures forcefully answer our prayers. Reading the scriptures also opens our minds and hearts to thoughts prompted by the Spirit. We are more apt to receive such help if we go to the scriptures seeking, desiring, and asking.

Revelation came over and over again to Joseph Smith as he read the scriptures and asked inspired questions. We all know that the glorious First Vision was a result of this 14-year-old boy studying the scriptures with an urgent question. He needed to know which church was true, and he clung to the promise in James that the Lord would answer those who sincerely ask Him.

Each of us is entitled to personal revelation. The scriptures may be our most profound source for this. A professor at BYU told this story of a woman being guided by the Spirit through her study of the scriptures. The professor said:

One woman was guided to learn how to hear the voice of the Spirit while reading the scriptures. She was tutored to kneel in prayer, to thank her Heavenly Father for the scriptures, to request that the Spirit be with her as she read, and then to tell the Lord what she needed from the scriptures that particular day—one question she needed answered, perhaps guidance in a relationship, perhaps confirmation of a decision. She would then open her scriptures . . . and begin reading. She never had to read very far . . . before the Spirit gave her the answer she was seeking. Through these daily question-and-answer sessions with the scriptures and the Spirit, her sensitivity to the whisperings of the Spirit increased—and she fell in love with the scriptures.

The professor went on to say:

I have related her experience to others who then tried the same experiment; the results have been astonishing. Everything from financial problems to relationship concerns have been solved. And in the process, their ability to hear the voice of the Holy Ghost has increased.” [Wendy L. Watson, “Let Your Spirit Take the Lead,” in *The Power of His Redemption* (2004), 326]

I too have come to love and rely on the scriptures in my life. Answers do not always come easily for me, but they do come. Sometimes it is even in the form of peace and comfort while I am waiting to understand the Lord’s will or His timetable. When I was a young mother, President Spencer W. Kimball encouraged the women of the Church to become “scriptorians” (see “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 102). If time permitted I could tell you innumerable ways that following his injunction helped me in my mothering. If you looked through my scriptures, you could see my children’s names written out to the side of many passages which I knew by the force of revelation I needed to share with them.

Likewise the words of the Lord have blessed me in my Church service. When I was first called to be the Young Women president, I went to the scriptures seeking. I sought comfort and guidance in my feelings of inadequacy and being overwhelmed by a responsibility that dwarfed my limited capacity. The scripture stories of prophets and leaders who felt inadequate in their callings brought peace and taught me that the Lord magnifies those whom He calls.

One such prophet, Enoch, said: “Why is it that I have found favor in thy sight, and am but a lad, and all the people hate me; for I am slow of speech; wherefore am I thy servant? And the Lord said unto Enoch: Go forth and do as I have commanded thee. . . . Open thy mouth, and it shall be filled, and I will give thee utterance” (Moses 6:31–32). Moses also felt inadequate, and the Lord promised, “I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say” (Exodus 4:12). And Jeremiah received the blessing, “Be not afraid . . . for I am with thee to deliver thee, . . .

[and] I have put my words in thy mouth” (Jeremiah 1:8–9).

As I studied, I was especially comforted by promises given to the Savior. I felt that Heavenly Father intended for me to liken those blessings to myself in my need: “The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary” (Isaiah 50:4). This scripture referred me to another one that I have clung to as my theme: “For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist” (Luke 21:15). Every single day for the past three years I have prayed for a mouth and for wisdom. It was my greatest desire (and precisely where I felt most inadequate) to know what it was the Lord wanted me to teach—to have wisdom. And then to be able to have the words to articulate that message—to have a mouth. Through the scriptures I found personal revelation that has guided me and comforted me in this calling.

Doctrine Changes Behavior

The second blessing that President Hinckley promised us through our scripture reading is a strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to the Lord’s commandments. The Book of Mormon is a book of doctrine. And learning doctrine changes the way we act and live. President Boyd K. Packer has said this many times: “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior” (“Do Not Fear,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 79). Through the scriptures we can learn true doctrine right from the source, which will help us become perfect or complete as Paul says: “And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:15–17).

The Book of Mormon is just such a book. It is packed with true doctrine. There is a great illustration of the power of that doctrine by Elder Jay E. Jensen in the August 2005 issue of the *New Era*. He told about a very fine missionary who had lost his enthusiasm for the work. Elder Jensen, who was then his mission president, tried in a thorough interview to uncover the reason for this change. But it seemed the missionary was doing everything right. He was keeping the mission rules, getting up on time, reading the scriptures (at that time the Old Testament), praying, and getting along well with his companion. Finally the president asked him to do a little experiment—to add to his scripture study each day some reading from the Book of Mormon. Two weeks later the missionary called the president to report that he had done what he asked, and much to his joy his enthusiasm for the work had returned. President Packer also said that “spiritual development is tied very closely to a knowledge of the scriptures, where the doctrines are found” (“Agency and Control,” *Ensign*, May 1983, 67). Nowhere is the doctrine taught so clearly as in the Book of Mormon. (See “Why We Ask People to Read the Book of Mormon,” *New Era*, Aug. 2005, 40.) So as we read the Book of Mormon, we will be blessed with a strengthened resolution to obey the commandments.

Testimony of the Son of God

The third blessing promised to us by our dear prophet if we read the Book of Mormon is that we will have a stronger testimony of the living reality of the Son of God. I have reread the Book of Mormon in the past several weeks. It has rekindled a testimony burning in my heart that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world. Almost every verse testifies of Him. President Boyd K. Packer said, “Of more than 6,000 verses in the Book of Mormon, far more than half refer directly to Him” (“The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 8–9). The Book of Mormon people looked forward to Him with hope in His redemption, and they looked back upon His exemplary life and redeeming death with hope in His Atonement. Long before Christ was born, Jacob wrote: “Believest thou the scriptures? . . . For they truly testify of Christ. Behold, I say unto you that none of the prophets have written, nor prophesied, save they have spoken concerning this Christ” (Jacob 7:10–11). And after Christ had come, Mormon wrote: “And the things which are upon these plates pleasing me, because of the prophecies of the coming of Christ; and my fathers knowing that many of them have been fulfilled” (Words of Mormon 1:4). What a broad and wonderful perspective to witness. As I read, I knew it was through the people’s faith in Christ and His Atonement that they endured pain and affliction and overcame sin and temptation. I know that Jesus is the living Christ. I have felt to sing the song of His redeeming love (see Alma 5:26).

Light and Truth

I know that as we catch the vision of our prophet and read the Book of Mormon, each of us will receive the promised blessings. This has been a great and marvelous year where our youth have felt truth and testimony. They will continue to find light as they read the Book of Mormon.

My friends Wilford and Kathleen Andersen, who served as mission president and companion in Guadalajara, Mexico, literally saw the spirit of the Book of Mormon at work. Sister Andersen felt impressed during the final year of their mission to educate her three sons at home rather than in a public school. However, she needed help in teaching them Spanish. She prayed to find a suitable tutor. She was led to Irma Encinas, who had been a teacher for 20 years and had just recently moved into this new city. Irma Encinas came twice a week to work with the boys.

Three weeks into the school year, Sister Andersen realized she had hired someone who might be interested in learning more about our Church, so she told her about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Sister Andersen then decided to have the Spanish curriculum for her boys be the Book of Mormon. The boys each read out loud in Spanish from the scriptures on every visit. Then the teacher was instructed to ask them questions about the reading, and the boys had to answer her in Spanish. While the boys were learning Spanish, Irma Encinas was learning about the Book of Mormon.

After Christmas, Irma Encinas came to Sister Andersen and started to cry. She needed to tell her what was happening. She said that every time the boys read from the Book of Mormon, she saw light around their faces. When they closed their books, the light immediately went away. She confessed that her sister who lived with her had received a copy of the Book of Mormon 11 years

earlier but had not read it. This unusual experience caused them both to search their bookshelves for the dusty book. They wanted to discover for themselves what this light was that emanated from this book. I'm sure you can figure out the rest of the story. They started reading the Book of Mormon and desired to have missionaries teach them. Two weeks after their first missionary discussion, they were baptized.

Each of us is promised this same light as we read the Book of Mormon. Our souls can be "illuminated by the light of the everlasting word" (Alma 5:7). "For the word of the Lord is truth, and whatsoever is truth is light, and whatsoever is light is Spirit, even the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (D&C 84:45). As we follow our prophet's vision and light, we will find our own light. Then may we move forward into the coming year and share that light. We must help each youth to build upon the testimony he has begun, to grow in truth and light, that each may "arise and shine forth, that [his] light may be a standard for the nations" (D&C 115:5).