

# Precious Precepts of Truth

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What a blessing it is to be here at BYU—to sing, study, and worship under the light of the restored gospel and to be guided by prophets, seers, and revelators! I am deeply grateful for that, and grateful today to be surrounded by superb faculty, extraordinary students, parents, friends, and family—including my brothers Robert and Wayne Barrett, both of whom are also professors here at BYU.

I was privileged to teach a Book of Mormon class last semester, which I count as one of the greatest experiences I have had in the 20 years I've been here at BYU. While grading a student's paper from that class, I was prompted with some thoughts that I would like to share with you here today.

## **"Nearer to God"**

Joseph Smith said:

*I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.<sup>1</sup>*

Since I am, by nature, an experimental scientist, I wanted to see if that statement was true. So I performed "an experiment upon [the] words."<sup>2</sup> To conduct the experiment,

I kept a daily Book of Mormon journal. Each morning I would read and ponder a verse and then write about it—sometimes only part of a verse, because the Book of Mormon is so rich. Sometimes I would write a paragraph and sometimes two to three pages. It took me several handwritten journals and five years to get through 2 Nephi. The meaning of many verses would not yield themselves to a single reading—such as those in the Isaiah chapters. Often, multiple prayerful readings and ponderings were necessary, following which often came the sweet, tutoring influence of the Spirit as I would write. And I would find myself learning from what was being written.<sup>3</sup> I would also try to teach and apply what I read and what I wrote.

What was the result of this experiment? Not only did it get me nearer to God, but the catalyzing influence of the Book of Mormon taught me to listen to and learn from the Spirit and to treasure the precious precepts and freshwater doctrine that flow unimpeded from its pages. It has also cultivated a love for the Book of

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*William A. Barrett was a BYU professor of computer science when this devotional address was given on 6 March 2007.*

Mormon that will never fade. I read from it every day. In short, I'm hooked!

### **"Precept upon Precept"**

I remember reading one morning the words of Nephi found in 2 Nephi 28:30, where Nephi wrote:

*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.<sup>4</sup>*

And I wrote the following:

*Our ever-so-generous Heavenly Father does not penuriously withhold precious precepts from us. He is not stingy but is giving. But He does not want to drown us in doctrine or give us more than we can handle. Rather, He gives us "line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little," measuring carefully what we can handle, what we can assimilate, making sure that we absorb and respond to that which we have been given before pouring more upon us. What a gracious and kind Heavenly Father we have!*

My writing prompted me to ask the question I began with: Why and how are we blessed when we hearken to His precepts and lend an ear to His counsel? And the answers began to flow.

First, our Father's divine laws are packaged in precious precepts taught by His Son. For example, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."<sup>5</sup> And those who make peace with God, with their neighbor, and with themselves are blessed—with an increased measure of the Spirit in their lives, with happiness, and with greater knowl-

edge and purpose. Thus, "when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated."<sup>6</sup> The law, in this particular example, is to live in peace. The precept is that blessings come from living the law. *The perceptive come to learn and love the predicates of the precepts.*

A motivating precept for those at BYU might be: "Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection."<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this precept can be generalized: Whatever principle of testimony, devotion, and worthiness I attain unto before my mission will rise with me in the mission field. Whatever principle of obedience, diligence, and selfless service I attain unto during my mission will rise with me when I return. Whatever principle of kindness, gentleness, and charity I attain unto before marriage will rise with me in my family life. And maybe even, for us here now: Whatever measure of work, effort, and understanding I attain unto during this semester will rise with me in finals week.

A second reason why we are blessed when we hearken to His precepts and lend an ear to His counsel is that those who receive and act on the precepts of God receive more. And, since each precept brings with it attendant blessings, receiving more precepts brings more blessings.<sup>8</sup> Thus to the list of precious precepts we may add the *precept of perpetuation*, since one precept, acted upon, begets another. This is not quite the precept of *perpetual precepts*, since it is incumbent upon us to act, but it is close.

Third, in addition to the blessings attached to a given precept, and the promise of more to come, there is a bonus blessing. That is that the compounding and knitting together of precious precepts yields compounded blessings, just as with compounded interest. The quantum mechanics of both precepts and blessings rubbing against each other also produce a quantum leap in gratitude and joy, in faith and humility, and in the ability to perceive the

higher-level precepts that flow from the inter-leaving of precept with precept and blessing with blessing. Such weaving produces genuine wisdom and, when woven by the Lord, becomes part of the tapestry of our lives.

So in this verse *more* really does mean more—more than we have room to receive, because such precepts and blessing are forever growing so that we can forever grow, because that too is woven into the fabric of our divine nature. Thus when we say “we’ve had enough,” we cease to grow and begin to shrink from the endowment attendant to our being sons and daughters of God. Such shrinking not only curtails growth but causes a spiraling decline and unraveling of the compounded precepts and blessings we once enjoyed. In such shrinking I do not believe that our kind Father snatches back that which we have with anger or disgust or retribution, for His hand is ever “stretched out still,” but I do believe His heart breaks a little, and often a lot, when we are not willing to receive that which we might have received.<sup>9</sup> And being an all-wise Heavenly Father, He will not burden us with precepts and blessings we are not prepared to receive. As the Master Gardener, He *titrates the soil of our soul* in a mercifully measured way, “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little,” not because He is not giving—quite the opposite. It is so that little by little we can one day receive all that He has.<sup>10</sup> Because His love for us is perfect, He will not drown us with perfect precepts or blessings if we are not prepared to receive them—*whether they are being dispensed with an eyedropper or a fire hose*.

### Learning Precepts from Life’s Experiences

Life in general is a grand experiment in learning correct precepts. Allow me to illustrate this with an example from my childhood. When I was 10 years old, I was out in the country at my grandmother’s house sledding with my two brothers on New Year’s Day. It

was a beautiful Currier and Ives setting as we stood at the top of the hill gazing down over the pasture covered in white with a beautiful, clear stream angling across the bottom. As in a Norman Rockwell painting, I hopped on my Flexible Flyer and told my brother Wayne to hop on top. My artistic brother, Robert, remained at the top of the hill to capture the magic moment in his memory as down the hill we went. As we leveled out at the base of the hill, I performed the hard-rudder-right maneuver to avoid the impending stream. The sled disregarded my instructions, and into the icy stream we went.

Undaunted, we dragged ourselves back into the house, took a hot bath, put on some warm, dry clothes, and went out again. As we approached the top of the hill again, I hopped on the sled and invited my older but now somewhat more cautious brother to hop on board. I thought to myself, “This really should have worked.” And down we went again. But as we neared the stream, age gave way to discretion and, discretion being the better part of valor, my older brother bailed on me. (After all, he is a mathematician, and he had a “proof by example.”) As for me—and, as you might suspect—the flexible steering mechanism again failed me, and again I plummeted into the icy stream. Alone. However, this time a stick from the brush went through my cheek, and we had to go find someone to sew it up, or else I would have been out there a third time. Even though it “really should have worked,” the laws of physics said otherwise. But perhaps some useful precepts can be drawn—even from failed experiments.

For one, overwhelming momentum overrides small course corrections: a vital lesson to remember in sledding as well as in personal relationships when you are alone with someone late at night—a potential slippery slope and a pattern for heartache; a reminder that if we fail to follow divinely established patterns of conduct and morality,

as taught by living prophets, the momentum of the moment may inflict mortal wounds, robbing us of virtue, happiness, and peace of mind. Small course corrections each week as we partake of the sacrament and each morning and night as we kneel before our Heavenly Father, remembering Him who was wounded for our transgressions, will prevent us from taking on the debilitating wounds that delay or destroy our scheduled patterns of personal progress and our future rendezvous with happiness. Such spiritual corrections are vital because the adversary also has patterns and plans by which he tries to destroy us—patterns that fuel the vain and foolish precepts of men. But, for us, a better pattern is: Don't be alone with someone late at night. Instead, allow small course corrections to guide your momentum rather than the other way around. Such careful thinking and behavior, if practiced daily and exercised thoughtfully, will allow us to one day steer our immortal souls to "the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>11</sup>

### **The Gospel Embraces All True Precepts**

Clearly, discovering *all* true precepts from personal experience can be hazardous. As a practical matter, you have to be willing to learn from others, since there isn't time to perform all of the experiments or make all of the mistakes yourself. This is why the restored gospel is placed within our grasp and why we are here at BYU. Discovering true precepts in faith, in science, in the arts, in great literature, or in whatever course of study is a great adventure. I am confident that our Father in Heaven does not differentiate true precepts based on their perceived domain.

Brigham Young taught:

*Our religion is simply the truth. It is all said in this one expression—it embraces all truth, wherever found, in all the works of God and man that are visible or invisible to mortal eye.*<sup>12</sup>

Yet, having said that, we must still labor for and search for true precepts like the woman who, if she lost a piece of silver, would "light a candle, and sweep the house, and seek diligently till she find it."<sup>13</sup> Sometimes students wring their hands, cross their fingers, and hope that their answer to a problem is right, even when the answer is hollow or not well thought out. Such flawed thinking can also lead to bad results when it comes to life's real problems regarding relationships, finances, or other personal choices. In contrast, I am convinced that those who really love the truth care more about finding correct answers and about what is really right than they care about vacuous answers that are expedient or acceptable. The world already offers too many solutions of this kind. Life's real reward for genuine solutions to real problems is an exclamation point, not a check mark!

Henry Eyring, a noted chemist and father to Elder Henry B. Eyring, stated:

*The significant thing about a scientist is this: he simply expects the truth to prevail because it is the truth. He doesn't work very much on the reactions of the heart. In science, the thing is, and its being so is something one cannot resent. If a thing is wrong, nothing can save it, and if it is right, it cannot help succeeding.*<sup>14</sup>

Brigham Young stated that "truth is calculated to sustain itself; it is based upon eternal facts and will endure, while all else will sooner or later perish."<sup>15</sup>

So, whether in the lab, in the classroom, or in the scriptures, we search for true principles and precepts with dogged determination. Whether in sledding or in science, we search for answers with tenacity and faith that we will find a solution.

I've often told my own children that my idea of heaven is being trapped in a room with a handful of bright students and some problems that are so difficult you don't even know

how to articulate them. They often respond by saying, “Hmmm, that kind of sounds like the other place to me.”

But when we have paid the price, needed answers to tough problems come as sudden bursts of ideas and intelligence, bringing elegant, high-level insights—the unmistakable signature of the Spirit—but in His own time and in His own way. The best ideas always come from the Spirit. The rest we just labor and muddle over and try to make work. The following examples illustrate some of our current muddling:

1. In computer graphics we create models of real-world objects so that they can be animated and placed in movies. In our lab we do this by extracting points from photographs and then connecting the dots to describe the object geometry. By assigning the right color to these points, a realistic model is created. Just as correctly connecting points here result in a believable model, so connecting the “points” of true precepts helps us to see “things as they really are, and . . . as they really will be.”<sup>16</sup>

2. With about 2.5 billion document images in the granite mountain vault, automated handwriting recognition has become an important problem in family history because it helps us more efficiently identify names and information for temple work. We approach this problem using pattern-recognition algorithms coupled with human training. Finding and recognizing ancestors not only helps us find ourselves but also helps us recognize the unfolding patterns and precepts in our own lives.

3. Our recent research in the medical domain makes use of globally optimal algorithms to accurately extract anatomy from medical scans. Just as a global understanding of object properties in medical imaging allows proper and timely diagnosis, so seeing our own inner parts through the lens of precious precepts from the restored gospel will help us not only see who we currently are but what we ultimately must become.

As we try to understand secular knowledge, we do the best we can—the best we can surmise with what we know. But it changes. Keep that in mind as you learn. We don’t repudiate ideas just because they are from men, but, as we muddle along, we winnow and sift for the truth, weighing what we learn carefully in the balance of restored truth and subjecting it to the light of the restored gospel. If a precept is true, it fits within the gospel framework. It is a piece of the puzzle. And if we will search and study by faith, the spiritual dimensions of all the precepts that we learn will become more evident to us, and thereby enhance our faith.

### Precepts of God Versus Precepts of Men

Nephi warned us about the precepts of men that will prevail in our day. He used phrases such as “contend one with another”; “eat, drink, and be merry”; “lie a little”; and “take . . . advantage of [others].” He described these as “false and vain and foolish doctrines.”<sup>17</sup> Thus another instructive experiment that enhances spiritual knowledge is to identify a precept of men and then discover the contrasting precept of God, or vice versa. For example:

- The precepts of men tell us that we must see before we can believe. Nephi teaches us that we must believe before we can see.<sup>18</sup>
- The precepts of men teach that resources are scarce—that you must get *all* you can *while* you can. Scriptural precepts teach us that “there is enough and to spare.”<sup>19</sup>
- Men’s precepts urge a makeover in the image of the world. Alma urges a makeover in the image of God.<sup>20</sup>
- Men teach to believe in nothing; hope for nothing; endure nothing; and “live without God in the world.”<sup>21</sup> But we believe all things, hope all things, endure all things, and find abundant life through Him.<sup>22</sup>
- Men’s ways are to hide or cover sins because “no one will know.”<sup>23</sup> God’s way is for us to



“confess . . . and forsake” sins so that He *can* “remember them no more.”<sup>24</sup>

- The precepts of men speak of being beaten “with a few stripes” but ultimately being saved without ever having to change, without ever overcoming self or the world, without ever changing our hearts or feeling the peace and joy of repentance and forgiveness—without ever becoming like Him.<sup>25</sup> But by accepting our Savior’s stripes for us<sup>26</sup> and repenting “in the depths of humility,”<sup>27</sup> we can overcome ourselves and the world.<sup>28</sup>

The precepts of men will ultimately fail. The precepts of God will endure forever.<sup>29</sup>

### Precepts That Get Us Nearer to God

A year or so ago I conducted another experiment. I began to write down a list of precepts that I felt were unique to the Book of Mormon. Several hours and several pages later I knew that I had only just begun. Allow me to close where I began, by sharing a few of the precepts from the Book of Mormon that have become precious, personal precepts to me and that get me nearer to God.

- Nephi’s “I will go and do”<sup>30</sup> reminds us that it is in the *going* and *doing* that we not only find that the Lord provides a way but we find *the way* itself. And in following that way we also find ourselves drawing nearer to Him.
- Lehi’s “opposition in all things”<sup>31</sup> helps me understand and cope with life’s triumphs and tragedies. It helps me remember that I chose to choose and that is why I am here. And it helps me remember, too, that our Savior had agency too but gave it away for you and for me, allowing His will to be swallowed up in the will of the Father as He suffered, bled, and died for me. And that I can never forget. And it draws me nearer to Him.

- Jacob’s “infinite atonement”<sup>32</sup> brings me nearer to God because it lets me know that I can be forgiven and become clean again and have my guilt swept away. It draws me nearer to God because it helps me understand how very comprehensive the *infinite* Atonement of Jesus Christ truly is as He suffered for every broken bone and every broken heart. It helps me understand that His *infinite* suffering was born out of His *infinite* love for you and for me and that we are of *infinite* worth because an *infinite* price was paid for us!
- Saved by grace, “after all we can do”<sup>33</sup> reminds me that some of the most precious precepts are found in pondering the “parentheticals.”
- From cover to cover, the Book of Mormon teaches me that Jesus Christ is and was the long-promised Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, our Savior and Redeemer, the Lamb of God, the Son of God.<sup>34</sup> Understanding His premortal identity, His long-suffering with the children of Israel, and the very personal love He showed to the Nephites helps me remember that He who has “graven [us] upon the palms of [His] hands”<sup>35</sup> cannot forget us but is in this for the long haul. And seeing His endurance helps me endure a little longer too.
- And, finally, enduring to the end<sup>36</sup> gets me nearer to Him—because it is at the end I will find Him!

### Abiding in Him—The Only True Precept

It is both the reading and abiding that gets us nearer to God, and that allows us to accept His invitation to come unto Him and be saved because we cannot be saved in ignorance. We cannot receive all that our Father has without understanding all that He is and does. And so we perform the ultimate experiment by planting the seed in our own hearts. We nourish it with patience and faith until it becomes “a tree, springing up in [us] unto everlasting

life,”<sup>37</sup> throwing out a branch of charity here and virtue there and overcoming the natural man in the process. Through His incomparable Atonement, Christ offers to us the fruit of the tree if we will fall down and partake of it.<sup>38</sup> And if we do, then “when he shall appear we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”<sup>39</sup> We will not only get nearer to Him spiritually but nearer to being like Him, and you can’t get any nearer than that.

Elder Holland taught that to “abide” means “‘to remain, to stay’ . . . but stay *forever*.”<sup>40</sup> If we will abide in these precepts, they will abide in us. More important, if we will abide in these precepts, we will abide in Him whose precepts these are, and *He* will abide in us<sup>41</sup>—“permanently, unyieldingly, steadfastly, [and] forever.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus Christ, of whom the Book of Mormon bears witness, is the ultimate precept. It is of Him that our lives must bear witness as we accept His invitation to come unto Him and become like Him.<sup>43</sup> And it is of Him and His living reality that I bear witness. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. HC 4:461.

2. Alma 32:27.

3. See A. Theodore Tuttle, “Teaching the Word to the Rising Generation,” address to religious educators, 10 July 1970, BYU; full talk printed in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1982), 129–32.

4. 2 Nephi 28:30; emphasis added.

5. Matthew 5:9; see also 3 Nephi 12:9.

6. D&C 130:21.

7. D&C 130:18.

8. See Alma 12:10.

9. See D&C 88:33.

10. See D&C 84:38.

11. Helaman 3:30.

12. JD 10:251.

13. Luke 15:8.

14. Henry Eyring, *Reflections of a Scientist* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 7; emphasis in original.

15. JD 14:115.

16. Jacob 4:13.

17. 2 Nephi 28:4–9.

18. See 1 Nephi 4:6, 11:1.

19. D&C 104:17; see also D&C 49:19.

20. See Alma 5:14.

21. Mosiah 27:31.

22. See Articles of Faith 1:13; also John 10:10.

23. See D&C 121:37, Isaiah 29:15, 2 Nephi 28:9, Luke 12:3, D&C 1:3.

24. D&C 58:43 and 42.

25. 2 Nephi 28:8.

26. See Isaiah 53:5.

27. 2 Nephi 9:42, Mosiah 4:11.

28. See D&C 63:47, 64:2.

29. See Moroni 7:46–47.

30. 1 Nephi 3:7.

31. 2 Nephi 2:11; see also verse 15.

32. 2 Nephi 9:7.

33. 2 Nephi 25:23.

34. See 1 Nephi 10:4, 13:40, 22:12; 2 Nephi 1:10; Mosiah 3:8; Helaman 14:12.

35. 1 Nephi 21:16.

36. See 2 Nephi 31:20.

37. Alma 33:23; see also Alma 32:33, 40–41.

38. See 1 Nephi 8:30.

39. Moroni 7:48, 1 John 3:2; see also Ephesians 4:13.

40. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Abide in Me,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 32; emphasis in original.

41. See John 15:4.

42. Holland, “Abide,” 32.

43. See 3 Nephi 27:27, Moroni 10:32.

