

# *“If Thou Wilt Be Perfect, . . . Come and Follow Me”*

JAMES M. PARAMORE

**M**y brothers and sisters, one of the things that Dallin forgot to mention in that obituary was the fact that I was a cheerleader at BYU and as such was asked to be one of the Montana Queens. Brothers Mose Flake, Gene Jensen, and myself had the opportunity to dress up, complete with our Dracula false teeth, and ride on the float to represent the Montana Queens several years ago—a very creditable job, I might add.

It is wonderful to be back at BYU. I grew up in Provo, looked forward to attending the University, and was grateful to come here and be an associate of Dallin Oaks at that time. When I was in the mission field, I used to encourage the missionaries to come to BYU if they had that opportunity. I remember one missionary who said once, “Look, I don’t want to go to BYU.” He had a scholarship to one of the Ivy League colleges in the East, a basketball scholarship; and every time I offered my encouragement to him, he told me again about the discipline and all that would be required here.

About three months after he returned home, and I was in Brussels, I got a telephone call from him in the East. He said, “President, do you think you could help me to go to BYU? I am tired of smoke-filled rooms, and I am tired

of constantly having the principles of everlasting life challenged and threatened. Do you think you could help me to get in?” Well, he came and fulfilled his two purposes here; he got his degree and he got married. He later went on to get a Ph.D. and is now a very productive member of his community and his Church in California.

My brothers and sisters, I am basically a practitioner of the gospel. As Dallin has indicated, I have had many great and choice experiences in my life through working in the Church. It has been a thrill on every occasion. I have thought for weeks now what I might possibly say today that might be of help to you, and I have taken a thought out of Matthew, chapter 19, verse 21, where the Savior said, “If thou wilt be perfect, . . . come and follow me.” I believe that this is the Master’s invitation for all members of the Church to become knowledgeable about the gospel—to become

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gospel scholars, if you will—in the course of time.

One of the most spiritual experiences to come out of our mission occurred near the European supreme headquarters of the Allied powers, located in Belgium, during 1968. One evening one of our expectant American sisters became desperately ill and had to be rushed by an ambulance to a military hospital. Upon arriving, she was given diagnostic and x-ray examinations revealing a very serious obstruction that would have to be removed by surgery. Following the priesthood administration by her husband and another member of the branch presidency, she underwent the operation—only to have the same doctor who had examined her moments before find that there was no obstruction, in fact nothing wrong whatever.

While in the hospital convalescing for a few days she studied the scriptures and some other commentaries, and this attracted the attention of a medical orderly who was there on assignment as an American serviceman—a former alcoholic, incidentally. He wondered what this book with the strange title really meant. One week later he attended a Church activity with the husband of the woman in the hospital and committed himself to study the gospel. He and his family quickly went through the Book of Mormon and the discussions with the missionaries and were baptized into the Church. He has since read the standard works many times as well as all of the commentaries that he has been able to secure; and, in addition, he has been responsible for bringing many people into the church of Christ.

This experience, my brothers and sisters, along with hundreds—literally hundreds—of other experiences, has given a witness to me of the importance of gospel study in our lives. The Savior's injunction in Matthew 19:21 to "come and follow me" seems a most appropriate slogan for all members of the Church. A program of gospel study regularly and

consistently followed has meant the difference in the life of every missionary and member I have known in developing knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to be effective and to be worthy of the constant companionship of the Holy Ghost.

I have noticed that every member or missionary who enthusiastically and energetically and systematically pursues studies in the gospel and particularly in the standard works experiences a joy of discovery that is really marvelous to behold. One morning in Brussels while studying the gospel, our family noticed our youngest son, just born there a few months earlier, sitting in his playpen, as he discovered that he had toes. The exhilaration and the excitement of that moment were really a wonderful experience, for he just began to scream and cry out loud because he had found something on his body that moved. And I have thought of that many times as I have seen people in the Church learn a principle of the gospel, practice that principle, and feel the exhilaration that comes from that study and that knowledge.

Is it not interesting that the Savior constantly referred to and taught from the writings of the prophets even while yet in His youth, even though He was the Son of God? The following scriptures attest to the Savior's concern for knowing the word of God:

John 5:39: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me."

Doctrine and Covenants 11:21: "Seek not to declare my word, but first seek to obtain my word, and then shall your tongue be loosed; then, if ye desire, you shall have my Spirit and my word, yea, the power of God unto the convincing of men."

Acts 17:11: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."

And 3 Nephi 23:1: “And now, behold, I say unto you, that ye ought to search these things. Yea, a commandment I give unto you that ye search these things diligently; for great are the words of Isaiah.”

Our prophets have also confirmed the importance of a systematic gospel study. While reflecting upon the constant effort and diligence required to learn great truths, Elder Orson Pratt concluded:

*We need not be discouraged upon this subject; for if we do the best we can according to the position in which we are placed, and the opportunities which we have, we do all the Lord requires; and by and by we shall be placed in a condition in which we can learn much faster than we can now. We need not be discouraged. Perhaps the man who, under a sense of discouragement, gives up and does not make the best of his present limited opportunities, will be limited hereafter in the life to come, and will not be allowed to progress very fast because of his laziness and his want of desire, courage and fortitude to pursue certain channels of knowledge that were opened up to him here in this life. But when we see individuals not only willing to receive some few of the simple principles of the gospel of Christ, but are willing to press onward towards perfection as far as opportunities present themselves, we may rest satisfied that they will be honored of the Lord according to their diligence, perseverance, fortitude and patience in striving to understand the laws which he has given to all things. [Orson Pratt, Wonders of the Universe, p. 204]*

President Hugh B. Brown once said,

*Sometimes men say, “I have a testimony of the gospel.” I believe them. Sometimes I hear them say, “I know the gospel is true,” and I believe them. But especially with missionaries I have said time and again in various mission fields:*

*“When I hear you say, ‘I know the gospel is true,’ I would like to stop you and have you repeat that but say only, ‘I know the gospel.’”*

*Of course it is true if it is the gospel, but do you know the gospel? [Alfred L. Zobell, comp., Speaker’s Scrapbook, p. 138]*

I say it is one thing to know the gospel is true and another to know what the gospel is. Mere testimony may be gained with but perfunctory knowledge of the Church and its teachings as evidenced by thousands who are now coming into the Church with but bare acquaintanceship. But to retain testimony and to be of service in building up the Lord’s kingdom requires a serious study of the gospel and a knowledge of what it is. Can there be any question as to the importance of knowing these truths as we go about our Father’s business? A real understanding of the gospel brings one to the realization that the ability to live and teach eternal principles to others is dependent upon a growing knowledge of these priceless eternal verities. When this growing comprehension is woven into the fabric and character of one’s daily experience, it brings a continually greater appreciation for God, for His truths, and for the scriptures; and it creates a more profound intensity and urgency to help others understand. A member thus engaged and motivated is a priceless entity in the eternal scheme of the gospel. He becomes a discriminator of the truth learned out of the scriptures, and almost irrevocably he begins to embody these things in his countenance and deportment and to create in others a desire to hear it also. His life literally becomes what it feeds upon.

A basic study program can, I believe, form the foundation to which the Savior was referring in the scriptures—the absolute and firm foundation of the gospel. One of the most powerful scriptures attesting to this is found in the book of Helaman, chapter five, verse twelve:

*And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty*

*winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall.*

When I was at U.S. Steel, I had a very choice friend—a great young man with a great intellect. He had graduated with an electrical engineering degree when he was 21 years of age. He just had a finite mind. He was an inactive member of the Church, and one time he told me, “Jim, I’m going to prove that the Church is not true.” And so he went to the writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith and explored them, and one of the things he read about was the discovery of the golden plates. He took this as his first premise to build his own foundation, and he wrote about his exploration. He showed that the mass—which, according to the Prophet, was six by eight by eight, or approximately 288 cubic inches, and made up of malleable gold—could be assumed, based on the density of malleable gold, to weigh in the neighborhood of 184 pounds. And there would be no way that a young boy, even a farm boy, could bring 184 pounds of gold out of the stone box in the hillside.

Then he read further, and in order to recreate the case properly he built that body of mass to prove to himself what it looked like and to get a good feel for his subject matter. When he got through he noticed two interesting things: there were voids between the plates, and that accounted for loss of mass and weight; and also, according to the Prophet’s description, there were engravings on the plates, and that would account for loss of metal. When my good friend finished, he guessed that the plates probably weighed 94.35 pounds. And it would have indeed been possible for a twenty-year-old farm boy to carry those out of the hills.

A real understanding of the gospel brings one to the realization that the ability to live and keep these eternal principles is dependent upon a growing knowledge of these priceless eternal verities. Regular scripture study can form and develop a comprehensive understanding of the gospel. Most of our members do not have this comprehensive understanding, and in the lives of most of our members this is not a growing dimension. It is an exhilarating experience to really know the will of God and to become intimately acquainted with the life and the importance of Jesus Christ—to know His thoughts, His joys, His concerns, His compassion, and the love He felt for all mankind. Is it not possible that, in similarly doing those studies and religiously pursuing them, we might also become like Jesus?

Someone once said that there are two churches, even in the Latter-day Saint Church: a doctrinal church and an institutional church. The goal of the doctrinal church is achieved when the understandings and the commitment and the pattern of life resemble the life of Jesus. The institutional church exists to fellowship and give to man the social fulfillment of his being that is, of course, urgently needed, as well as to administer the ordinances of the gospel. Only the doctrinal church can enter into the heart and life of an individual.

Imagine, if you will, what can occur if we approach these experiences enthusiastically and energetically throughout all our lives. The lives and testimonies of hundreds of missionaries attest to the irrevocable fact that reading and studying the holy scriptures can fill our minds and souls with knowledge—knowledge sufficient not only to protect us against the ever-increasing encroachments of a material world and the temptations of mediocrity but also to exalt us and, what is equally important to us as members of this Church, exalt others in the kingdom of our Father.

When I was in Belgium a sister came to our office one day. Her husband had been a district

president, a great man responsible for building a beautiful new chapel in Brussels. He was now dying of cancer. I was the brand-new mission president, and she asked, "Brother Paramore, what happened to my husband? He did so much for the Church. He gave his whole life, even his business, and all things we had were dedicated to the work of the Lord. And yet today he lies on his bed without a vibrant testimony of the gospel. What happened?" In examining the case, we learned that this good brother had never really studied the gospel. He never attended a Sunday school class or a priesthood meeting, and when he sat in sacrament meeting he was thinking of the myriad of administrative duties he had as branch president or district president. Consequently, the gospel of Christ, a growing comprehension, never really entered his life. One cannot, throughout all one's life, live on someone else's light. Ultimately, in order to evade temptation and the wind of Satan, each one will have to stand on his own testimony.

I have noticed an interesting thing about preparation by gospel study in the lives of young people: the more they know the sacred scriptures and gain an understanding of the scriptures' importance in their lives, the more power they have for good. And this power is a very real thing. It literally lifts and exalts mankind out of a mundane existence which sometimes becomes too greatly circumscribed to the material sway of life. My observation in all these practical duties I have held in the Church leads me to believe and know that gospel study is the real basis for all spiritual growth.

May I share with you an experience about a young man? He left Canada to go on a mission and was assigned to our mission, but on the way to Salt Lake City he kept asking his companion what he was doing; he did not really want to go on a mission. When he got to the mission home he told me very candidly that he really did not want to be there, that pressures

had brought him to the mission field. And for the first fifteen months of his mission he proved that what he said he felt was really true, that somehow he could not commit himself. One day, while he was tracting in one of the old cities of Europe, he found a man with the same name as his and later learned in conversation with him that this man was his uncle. His father and this good uncle had both left the eastern countries at the same time, and one had immigrated to Canada and the other to France. After he had given his opening tracting speech: "Nous sommes les missionnaires"—that was about all he could say—his uncle asked, "How long have you been in France?"

He said, "Fifteen months."

"You mean you've been here that long and that's all the French you have learned? I am ashamed of you."

This young man somehow that day met his Waterloo. He went home and from the next day on throughout the remaining fifteen months of his mission he committed himself to 5:30 a.m. arisings and two-and-a-half-hour study periods. Within several weeks he had memorized all the French discussions and begun to know and feel the power of the gospel in his life. Now picture this young man calling his mission president at 10:30 at night, saying, "President, I just left the most beautiful family I've ever known. They're my own. We taught them this tonight. Please tell me if there's anything I need to know to do, because I just cannot lose them. They are so great! This is what I plan to do tomorrow night!" I have never seen such a dramatic change in an individual in my whole life.

The gospel, even for a missionary, needs to become a regular diet pursued with great urgency. The scriptures answer questions that exist in normal and everyday life. They explain the purpose of this life and the need and value of spiritual relationships in the family. They give us understanding of the forces that operate to perfect and unify man with the infinite.

They help us to understand the reasons for evil, contention, judgment, the Restoration, the Resurrection, the need for a Redeemer. They lead us unto all truth, which, when properly understood through the workings of the Holy Ghost, invariably brings peace to the soul and an inner confidence to the person.

A branch president in one of our larger cities once told me that one of the greatest factors in his conversion to the gospel was that the missionary was able to answer his questions out of the scriptures, thus pointing the way for his own personal study and enlightenment. This outstanding man, now a stake president and a dedicated leader in the Kingdom, is totally committed to the cause of gospel study partly because he learned to find the answers to his problems from the scriptures. And is it any wonder that he would have sought help from the scriptures? For he could not understand why authority would not be in other churches, particularly the Catholic church, because his own brother, whom he loved and admired, was a Catholic priest and his sister a nun—he loved and respected them. To have a young man, aged nineteen, come into his life and tell him that there was another way, a Restoration, required a serious study of the prophecies of God as laid out in the scriptures. Is it any wonder that God counseled us, “Let your time be devoted to the studying of the scriptures” (D&C 26:1)?

Another wonderful experience occurred when an outstanding brother, a high official in the United States Army in charge of all public relations for all of Europe and a member of our mission, was called upon to preside over one of the branches of the Church. In all humility he replied that he felt incapable of assuming such a great responsibility because he did not have the understanding he needed of the scriptures, and he was afraid that people would approach him for help and he would not be able to respond. He felt this to be a real obstacle in fulfilling his calling.

Upon reviewing this situation, his feeling of inadequacy, and the feeling we had that he had been called of our Heavenly Father, we recommended that he make a comprehensive study of the scriptures—commencing with the Doctrine and Covenants, because that is the framework for organization in the Church—for fifteen to twenty minutes a day. This good brother, a former all-conference football champion from Utah State, committed himself wholeheartedly. He began to gain more light and understanding, and very soon he found himself being led to the understanding he needed to direct the branch and the work effectively. Study became a very real thing to him, for now he was studying with an intent to know, and was not just reading the passages. Each night prior to retiring, no matter what the hour—ofttimes with his wife—he would follow his program and then contemplate seriously the thoughts he had studied before going to bed.

An interesting thing occurred one night when he came home very late from an important meeting. Because of the lateness of the hour he went directly to bed; then, as he recalled the story, he tossed and turned for nearly an hour before he realized he had not studied the scriptures. So he got out of bed, read for a few minutes, and then fell fast asleep. It was interesting to note that within a matter of a few short weeks a new confidence and reassurance came into his life, giving him more light and knowledge, more power and authority, and a greater possibility to lead his members—all for just taking a few minutes a day in study of the words of God.

The Savior, in His instructions to the elders of Israel in the 50th section, verse 24, of the Doctrine and Covenants, has promised that this light and knowledge will grow “brighter and brighter until the perfect day.” My observations with missionaries and members alike are the following:

1. Testimony is in direct proportion to the study of the gospel.

2. Work and diligence in the Church are in direct proportion to the study of the gospel.

3. The happiness of every member or missionary I have ever known is in direct proportion to his study also. One of my missionaries, a vice-president here at summer school a few years ago, once said that the only difference between a happy and an unhappy missionary is about three inches—the width of the standard works.

4. Greater success in the mission field and in life is obtained through gospel study. I find that at the conclusion of his mission a missionary almost invariably says that the greatest change he would have made in his mission would have been to have earlier become better acquainted with and more knowledgeable about the scriptures, the life and teachings of the Master, and the doctrines as expounded in the scriptures.

5. We remain strong, testifying members if we study the scriptures regularly. In the ten thousand or so people that I have known in the Church I personally have never known anyone who studied the scriptures regularly to leave the Church.

6. The scriptures, like prayer, aid us in placing all things in eternal perspective, which enhances our celestial values.

7. The scriptures are a permanent means by which we can measure our spirituality. In their study we are able to determine if we are obtaining the things that are expected of us. Conversely, if we do not study them we may be led ever so carefully, quietly, but surely to the things of the world.

8. When we study the scriptures, we begin to understand more clearly the importance of our individual and personal commitments to Christ and to the gospel.

9. A regular study of the scriptures brings strength against all criticism and actions of

others. One is built on a firmer foundation than mere activity in the Church. If we study the scriptures, we gain confidence and we lose our fears. Verse 30 of the 38th section of the Doctrine and Covenants states that if we are prepared we shall not fear. As we really contemplate the responsibility before us of committing the gospel of Jesus Christ into the lives of people, we are struck with the sheer magnitude of that responsibility. Because it is such a great responsibility, we may be rendered ineffective unless systematically and properly prepared.

Underlying all personal and spiritual growth and testimony is this study of the standard works of the Church. It leads us to prayer. It helps us to understand and have a desire to keep the commandments, to keep the Sabbath day holy, to prepare for missions, to save our kindred dead, and in all ways to serve with an eye single to the glory of God. Investigators who study the scriptures and commit themselves to their principles receive a witness of the truth. Every member of the Kingdom has an invitation from the Savior to know God, His word, His work, His desires. I love the invitation of the Savior wherein He seeks the aid of Peter to feed His sheep: "So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs" (John 21:15).

The opportunity is ours today, and the soul who senses this great challenge and seeks to prepare to meet it through careful analysis and contemplation of these holy scriptures can then meaningfully and with expectancy pray for guidance, for remembrance of His teachings, and for the Spirit to make the messages of the gospel live in the lives of others as it begins to live and have meaning in his own life. Imagine what fifteen to thirty minutes of study of the scriptures each day can bring.

Six years ago the Brethren decided that we would no longer have a manual written by men or the Melchizedek Priesthood quorums of the Church, but that we would begin to build every member of the Melchizedek Priesthood on a sure footing. Beginning four years ago next September, the scriptures became the study manual for all Melchizedek Priesthood brethren, and a little study guide was developed—just a thin guide with about 30 outlines—so that they might understand the doctrines and their duty as they progressed in the Church.

This preparation went through about three years before it was finalized and before the Council of the Twelve and the Presidency of the Church gave their stamp of approval to this concept. And, my brothers and sisters, a minor miracle has occurred in the Church, for wherever you go people are carrying the scriptures now—not just missionaries, but ordinary priesthood bearers and members. When one goes to a stake conference, as I do every weekend, and a scripture is cited, people in the congregation begin to thumb through those pages to try to track the speaker as he gives a scripture. Do you know that it is the contemplated plan of the Lord that in eight years every member of the Melchizedek Priesthood—every father who has this great responsibility—will have gone through three hundred doctrines of the Church and over two hundred duties that are his as father, brother, son, and member of the Church?

So, you young people beginning your lives, if you could just follow the programs that our Heavenly Father has given us, this can lead you to a comprehension and a fortification to ward off all the challenges that this life may bring. Some suggestions for your personal study:

1. *Try to establish a regular time every day.* President Marion G. Romney, when he was an attorney in Salt Lake City before being called as a General Authority, used to go to his law

office one hour early every day, and for that hour, before the business of the world began in his busy practice, he spent time studying the scriptures. I wonder if you can see that power in his life now as he speaks to the membership of the Church.

President Joseph Fielding Smith, while touring a mission in England, was once asked how he came to know the scriptures so well. He said, “When I was about ten years of age, I began working on a farm and whenever there was a break held I would take a little set of scriptures that I had, a little New Testament or a small copy of the Book of Mormon, and read it.” And he acknowledged that day that if you gave him two or three words of a given scripture he could find it for you in the scriptures. Is it any wonder that this great man was able to make the contribution he did to an understanding of the importance of these things in our lives? Establish a regular time every day.

2. *Make the schedule regular*, recognizing that on occasion you may have to change. You missionaries are smiling because you are doing this at least an hour every day. But there will come a time in your lives when you will not be compelled, as it were, to study, and then you will be on your own to continue to develop those understandings you will need.

3. *Try to commit someone to study with you.* This could be a member of your family, a friend, the others in your apartment. If it were students in the apartment, there would be multiple benefits from having this study.

4. An important point: *Make notations in the scriptures as you proceed.* Just little notations in the margins to recall a given story or experience elucidating that particular scripture give it meaning to you.

5. *Set for yourself some realistic objectives* in your gospel study. Study with an intent to know. For example: “How can Sections 20 and 107 of the Doctrine and Covenants help me become a better priests quorum adviser? How



can the concepts I am studying in 1 John help me to love my family more?"

6. *Review your readings and notations periodically* so that you have recall of some of these things that you have studied. Maybe monthly, just leaf through each of your scriptures and read those little notations that you have made. You will find that you have hundreds of talks, witnesses, or testimonies ready to be given.

7. *Pray constantly when you are studying.* Brother McConkie said that a true searcher for faith, if he would study the Book of Mormon and at the end of each page would get on his knees and ask God if Joseph Smith could have written it, will get a testimony at the end of the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith was the translator and that these are the words of God. He would have an absolute testimony burning in his life.

In resume, let us conceptualize what we are suggesting. Set a time to study with some specific objective in mind, relate it where possible to your own life and experiences, make notations which are meaningful recall patterns to you, pray for the Holy Ghost to help internalize the message, and review periodically to retain the usability of those doctrines and understandings.

My brothers and sisters, as a practitioner I learned when I was a bishop—when I did not have the facility of the gospel knowledge that I later gained as a missionary the second time around—that the real true way to build testimony is first to build upon this great and fundamentally important understanding of God. In my mind, it is the first principle of Church leadership to have a burning testimony that Jesus lives and to know the doctrines. I labored with President Kimball for four years of my life. I used to watch through the crack in the door as he interviewed people, and every time President Kimball took those large volumes of scripture and opened them and counseled people out of the scriptures. Then, of course, he tied his personal testimony and experiences to those witnesses.

May God bless us at this University and in the mission field and always to build upon that understanding, that our lives can be safeguarded against the fiery darts of the devil, against temptation, against mediocrity. May we have the faith to really accomplish things in this world and to stay faithful, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.