

# *“Lean Not unto Thine Own Understanding”*

GARY E. STEVENSON

I couldn't be more thrilled to have received this assignment to come to Provo—to Brigham Young University to speak at your weekly devotional. As you have just heard, I am Bishop Stevenson. It was just about twenty months ago in general conference that I was sustained with Bishop Gérald Caussé and Bishop Dean M. Davies as the Presiding Bishopric. For several years previous to that our family lived in Japan, where we presided over the Nagoya Mission, followed by service in the Asia North Area Presidency.

Since we were sustained, a question that is often asked of me is “What does the Presiding Bishopric do?” I too had the same question. Charles W. Nibley was the Presiding Bishop of the Church from 1907 to 1925. He later became a member of the First Presidency. He described the Presiding Bishopric duties as follows: The Presiding Bishop helps take care of the business and administration of the Church so that the First Presidency can focus on more important spiritual matters. I think this is a good description of what we do. Under the direction of the First Presidency we look over the construction and care of meetinghouses and facilities throughout the world and oversee the Welfare Department—which includes bishops' storehouses, Deseret Industries, and

LDS Family Services. We also participate in the administration of humanitarian funds, which bless many of our Heavenly Father's children around the world afflicted by natural disasters or catastrophes.

As the First Presidency announces new temples, they look to us to oversee the construction of them. We also see that scriptures and other materials are translated properly and distributed throughout the world. One of our great blessings is to meet with the First Presidency each Friday morning—a meeting that has been held for over one hundred years, I am told. I can bear a personal witness to each of you that President Thomas S. Monson, President Henry B. Eyring, and President Dieter F. Uchtdorf love each one of you. I testify that they are living prophets and that President Monson possesses and is authorized to exercise all priesthood keys.

BYU—what a beautiful place to receive an education. One of the most unforgettable and stunning sights seen on national TV comes each time network television cameras covering

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Cougar football games pan from Cougar Stadium to the majestic backdrop to the east—to the Wasatch Mountains and to Mount Timpanogos. Not only is this a beautiful place, but BYU has special meaning to my family as well, as my parents met, courted, and married while they were students here.

What remarkable circumstances led to the establishment of this historic institution. The pedigree of institutional leadership is very impressive. I personally recall the tenure of past presidents beginning in the seventies: President Ernest L. Wilkinson, Elder Dallin H. Oaks, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, President Rex E. Lee, Elder Merrill J. Bateman, and now President Cecil O. Samuelson.<sup>1</sup> I am deeply impressed with the leadership and vision of President Samuelson and his very capable team, and I treasure my association with him, which started many years ago.

Late nights, early mornings, in between classes and work—my memory informs me that much of my life as a university student revolved around the library. Even now it evokes a plethora of memories—some fond, others not so fond. For me it was the library at Utah State University. Each time I entered, I was greeted by a sign over the entry that read, “And with all thy getting get understanding.”<sup>2</sup> We all know that recall follows repetition. I therefore have this scripture from the book of Proverbs engraved indelibly in my mind, having read it each time I entered the library during my four years of undergraduate work.

This morning I offer the same exhortation to each of you: “And with all thy getting get understanding.” I also invite you to think about its meaning and how it might benefit you. I have done so. I have turned this over in my mind time and time again, and my interpretation of the meaning has evolved considerably. Perhaps you can benefit from my observations.

As a young missionary in Japan struggling to learn a very difficult language, I heard some

vocabulary words early and often. Greetings such as *ohayo gozaimasu* or *konnichiwa* were two of these. Another was *wakarimasen*, which means, “I don’t understand.” This word, along with a side-to-side hand expression, seems to be a favorite response from Japanese contacts, directed to young missionaries as they attempt to strike up conversations. Initially, as I reflected on the meaning of “and with all thy getting get understanding,” I thought of understanding more in terms of this type of comprehension—what I might hear with my ears and understand in my mind. I thought of the Japanese saying, “Wakarimasen”: Do I understand or not understand? “And with all thy getting get understanding”—or make certain to obtain a higher level of comprehension. However, as I have studied and observed the use of the word *understanding* in the scriptures or from the words of living prophets, I have come to realize a deeper meaning. Consider these words from Elder Robert D. Hales when he was the Presiding Bishop:

*First, we start with the intelligence with which we were born. To our intelligence we add knowledge as we search for answers, study, and educate ourselves. To our knowledge we add experience, which should lead us to a level of wisdom. In addition to our wisdom, we add the help of the Holy Ghost through our prayers of faith, asking for spiritual guidance and strength. Then, and only then, do we reach an **understanding** in our hearts—which motivates us to “do what is right; let the consequence follow.” (Hymns, 1985, no. 237.) The feelings of an **understanding** heart give us the sweet spirit of assurance of not only knowing but doing what is right no matter what the circumstances. The **understanding** in our hearts comes from a close interdependence of study and prayer.<sup>3</sup>*

Now consider again: “And with all thy getting get understanding.” Understanding in this context follows intelligence, knowledge, experience, wisdom, and promptings from the Holy

Ghost—all of which lead us to understanding or to know and do what is right.

Most of you seated here today are approaching or have entered a critical intersection or crossroads in your life. You are becoming more independent with each year of your life that passes, and you are moving deeper into the “and with all thy getting” phase of your life. What is it that you are going to be getting? It may be getting a husband or a wife, your own family, a car, a job, a salary, a house, and a mortgage, to name a few. In order to manage these very important things that we “get,” one must also obtain “understanding,” as the scripture teaches. This understanding comes through *an interdependence of study and prayer*. Said another way, one must have trust or reliance upon the Lord. Alma described this when he likened the word unto a seed. As he stated, “It beginneth to enlighten my *understanding*, yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me.”<sup>4</sup>

President Monson often quotes a scripture from Proverbs that adds another dimension about this understanding: “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

As we trust and rely on the Lord, a greater measure of understanding comes from Him into our heart—rather than our own understanding, which comes to our head.

Let me offer an example of a powerful woman who played a key role in the Restoration, who trusted in the Lord, and who leaned not unto her own understanding.

Shortly after the Church was organized in Palmyra, New York, Lucy Mack Smith remained in Waterloo, New York, with a large group of Saints while her husband, Joseph Sr., and sons, including Joseph Jr., departed before her to Kirtland, Ohio. Her responsibility was to bring this group to Ohio when she received word from Joseph.

Well, word came in early spring 1831. Lucy, with the help of some of the brethren, began to move the group to Buffalo, New York, with the

intention of making passage to Ohio by ship on Lake Erie. In her words:

*When the brethren considered the spring sufficiently open for traveling on the water, we all began to prepare for our removal to Kirtland. We hired a boat . . . ; and . . . we numbered eighty souls.*

And then, as they pushed off into the Erie Canal, headed to Buffalo:

*I then called the brethren and sisters together, and reminded them that we were traveling by the commandment of the Lord, as much as Father Lehi was, when he left Jerusalem; and, if faithful, we had the same reasons to expect the blessings of God. I then desired them to be solemn, **and to lift their hearts to God continually in prayer**, that we might be prospered.*

About halfway to Buffalo from Waterloo, passage along the canal became impossible. Conditions for the eighty Saints were uncomfortable, and murmuring began almost immediately. Lucy, relying on the Lord, had to unite their faith:

*No, no, . . . you will not starve, brethren, nor anything of that sort; only do be patient and stop your murmuring. I have no doubt but the hand of the Lord is over us.*

When they arrived in Buffalo on the fifth day after leaving Waterloo, the harbor leading to Lake Erie was apparently frozen solid. They took passage on a ship with Captain Blake, a man acquainted with Lucy Smith and her family. After a couple of days, although conditions on the ship were not conducive for all of them to stay while awaiting notice of departure, Lucy reported:

*Captain Blake requested the passengers to remain on board, as he wished, from that time, to be ready to start at a moment's warning; at the same time he*

*sent out a man to measure the depth of the ice, who, when he returned, reported that it was piled up to the height of twenty feet, and that it was his opinion that we would remain in the harbor at least two weeks longer.*

This was devastating news to the group, as supplies were low and conditions were difficult. Lucy Mack Smith further recorded her admonition to the Saints:

*You profess to put your trust in God, then how can you feel to murmur and complain as you do! You are even more unreasonable than the children of Israel were; for here are my sisters pining for their rocking chairs, and brethren from whom I expected firmness and energy, declare that they positively believe they shall starve to death before they get to the end of their journey. And why is it so? Have any of you lacked? . . . Where is your faith? Where is your confidence in God? Can you not realize that all things were made by him, and that he rules over the works of his own hands? And suppose that all the Saints here should lift their hearts in prayer to God, that the way might be opened before us, how easy it would be for him to cause the ice to break away, so that in a moment we could be on our journey!*

Now, please observe here the great faith of Mother Smith—how she chose to trust in the Lord and how she asked that the Saints with her not lean unto their own understanding:

*“Now, brethren and sisters, if you will all of you raise your desires to heaven, that the ice may be broken up, and we be set at liberty, as sure as the Lord lives, it will be done.” At that instant a noise was heard, like bursting thunder. The captain cried, “Every man to his post.” The ice parted, leaving barely a passage for the boat, and so narrow that as the boat passed through, the buckets of the water-wheel were torn off with a crash, which, joined to the word of command from the captain, the hoarse answering of the sailors, the noise of the ice, and the cries and confusion of the spectators, presented a*

*scene truly terrible. We had barely passed through the avenue when the ice closed together again, and the Colesville brethren were left in Buffalo, unable to follow us.*

*As we were leaving the harbor, one of the bystanders exclaimed, “There goes the ‘Mormon’ company! That boat is sunk in the water nine inches deeper than ever it was before, and, mark it, she will sink—there is nothing surer.” In fact, they were so sure of it that they went straight to the [news] office and had it published that we were sunk, so that when we arrived at Fairport we read in the papers the news of our own death.”<sup>6</sup>*

“And with all thy getting get understanding,” or, said another way, “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.”<sup>7</sup>

I have personally observed the heartbreak and personal havoc wrought upon those whose focus is on the worldly “getting” and not on the Lord’s “understanding.” It seems that those who lean unto their own understanding or rely on the arm of the flesh are more likely to develop a disproportionate focus or obsession for material gain, prestige, power, and position. Keeping the “getting” in accordance with this scriptural guidance of “understanding” will temper your temporal appetite. This will allow the proper context for your activities as a student and as a productive member of society and of the Lord’s kingdom.

As a young student full of aspiration, I remember listening to a respected and successful mentor suggest that one appropriately manage ambitions by following an order of “Learn, Earn, Serve.” President Gordon B. Hinckley taught a pattern that leads to trusting the Lord and relying on Him rather than on ourselves. He taught:

*Each of us has a fourfold responsibility. First, we have a responsibility to our families. Second, we have a responsibility to our employers. Third, we*

*have a responsibility to the Lord's work. Fourth, we have a responsibility to ourselves.*<sup>8</sup>

We must have a balance, if you will. President Hinckley suggested that we fulfill this fourfold responsibility through family prayer, family home evening, family scripture study, honesty and loyalty to your employer, fulfilling your Church responsibilities, personal scripture study, rest, recreation, and exercise.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it."<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, Latter-day Saints never have to look very far to know what to do. This is now your time. With your knowledge of a loving Heavenly Father and the great plan of happiness, you all have rudders deep in the water. Now, put your oars in deeply as well and pull hard and even.

In a recent talk President Monson quoted from Proverbs, as he had done before: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths." He then said, "That has been the story of my life."<sup>10</sup> What a great life to emulate.

I have great expectations for each of you, as does the Lord. I finish where I began with the exhortation found in Proverbs: "And with all thy getting get understanding." Get real understanding. This will come to you as you realize the interdependence of study

and prayer, as you maintain a commitment to serve while learning and earning, and as you lean not unto yourself but rely or trust in the Lord.

I offer my testimony of the divinity of this, the Lord's work; of Jesus Christ; and of His role as our Savior and Redeemer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. See "BYU Presidents," [yfacts.byu.edu/Article?id=121](http://yfacts.byu.edu/Article?id=121).

2. Proverbs 4:7.

3. Robert D. Hales, "Making Righteous Choices at the Crossroads of Life," *Ensign*, November 1988, 10; emphasis added.

4. Alma 32:28; emphasis added.

5. Proverbs 3:5; quoted in Thomas S. Monson, "A Word at Closing," *Ensign*, May 2010, 112.

6. Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 195–205; emphasis added.

7. Proverbs 3:5.

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Rejoicing in the Privilege to Serve," *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, 21 June 2003 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 22; see also page 23.

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The American Scholar* (1837), section 3.

10. Monson, "A Word at Closing," 112; quoting Proverbs 3:5–6.