

STUDY NOTES

Lesson One: Introduction to Thematic Study of the Doctrine & Covenants

*Behold, this is mine authority,
and the authority of my servants,
and my preface unto the book of my commandments,
which I have given them to publish unto you,
O inhabitants of the earth...
That faith also might increase in the earth.
Doctrine & Covenants 1:6, 21*

*Oh earth, earth, earth, hear the **word** of the **Lord**!
Jeremiah 22:29*

FAITH IN THE WORD OF GOD

We live in an age that rejects the very idea of scripture. God's word has been thoroughly devalued by the humanistic culture of today. The ways in which this is done range from the critiques of atheists who mock the word of God as ridiculous to the watering down of doctrine by liberal theologians until the Christianity that remains is indistinguishable from modern social activism. An atheist writer summarized his view of the Bible thusly—"The Bible has caused more hate and persecution than any other book; more suffering than any other disease. And you know the Bible has always been the greatest enemy of human progress, of science, of culture and learning; the greatest enemy of morality, liberty, and justice in the world."¹ Modern liberal churches emphasize living out the compassion of Jesus, as they perceive it, through political and social activism, environmentalism, and/or mystical spirituality while rejecting to one degree or another the idea of sin, hell, judgment, the fall of man, commandments with consequences, and revealed scripture that should govern life. The Old Testament especially comes in for harsh treatment by both groups as a record created by people living in an unjust patriarchal society that reflected the harsh and cruel sensibilities of a primitive time. The atheist dismisses it with ridicule; the liberal theologian has outgrown it.

Knowing as He did that we would live in a day that devalues God's word and dismisses the idea of revelation, God sent us a remarkable argument for His own existence. In this, the last dispensation before His coming, He has sent us multiple books of scripture. First, He sent us the Book of Mormon, another Testament of Christ. This book is a powerful testimony that records God's dealings with people in the Americas hundreds of years ago. Additionally, He sent the Books of Moses and Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price to shed important light on pre-mortality and God's plan for mankind as well as His earliest dealings with the human race. But He also sent an additional witness that is not a record of an earlier day. This is our scripture, from our own day and to our own day: the Doctrine and Covenants. It has an immediacy and relevance unlike any other book of scripture. Its commanding voice thrills us as we realize that the God of scripture is not just a God of the past. The Doctrine & Covenants shows that He is a

¹ "Is the Bible the Word of God," Emmett F. Fields,
http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/emmett_fields/word_of_god_debate.html

God of the present and that His voice can be as real in our own lives as it can be to this modern age of mankind.

This testimony of the Doctrine & Covenants is an iron rod we can hang onto; it is a sword we can use to divide truth from error in these last days. Every book of scripture—the Old and New Testaments, the Pearl of Great Price, the Book of Mormon, and yes, our own Doctrine & Covenants, contains uses of the scriptural metaphor of God as a rock that we must build upon if we are to have a firm foundation. “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...it shall have no power over [us].” (Helaman 5:12) This echoes Jesus' own teaching:

“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.” (Matthew 7:24:-27)

If you read this passage carefully you will see that it points to a way of safety for those who hear and do the words of Jesus. It is our response to the words of God that determine our faith level and thus our status before Him. Faith is critical. “Without faith, it is impossible to please [God].” (Hebrews 10:23) Your faith is the amount of trust you have in God; both in His character and nature, and in the things He says—His words. Throughout scripture there is a close connection between our reaction to and relationship to God's word, and our faith. For faith “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith deals with things unseen. You and I do not see God. But do we believe that He lives and that his character is one of “lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness?” (Jeremiah 9:24) Do we have a settled trust in His reality and in His goodness? Do we believe that if we seek Him we will find Him? Through Jeremiah the prophet, God assures us, “Ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.” (Jer. 29:13) Unfortunately it is so much easier to seek for things that we can see, than to spend effort seeking for the things of the unseen world that God inhabits.

Constantly we have images flood across our consciousness from catalogs, from television and movies, magazines, and even while simply walking down the streets of our town. It is hard not to see and then seek after these things. They are the “reality” around us. It is up to you to decide which is the *more real* reality. Do you trust in man and what he does and produces? Or do you trust God? The choice you have made is the one you are living out day by day. You cannot pretend to love one but actually love the other. But though the world entices us constantly with its images, the word of God can become to us, as it was to Jeremiah, the “joy and rejoicing of my heart.” Jeremiah says in fact, of God's words, “I did eat them.” (both quotes from Jeremiah 15:16) Just as we put food into our bodies each day for energy and life, so we need to “eat” God's word, taking it in daily to provide nourishment for the spiritual woman that we are seeking to become. Ask yourself, what desires am I feeding on a daily basis?

There is a marvelous working definition of faith in Paul's master sermon on that subject found in the book of Hebrews. He says, “Without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.” (Hebrews 11:6) Who is your “rewarder”? In order to have faith, you must believe that there is a “pay off” to seeking an invisible God. You must have faith in the things that God says—His words. You must value these words, even when the world puts no value or little value on them

The Psalmist has left us a remarkable testament to the power of God's word in the long hymn or poem known as Psalm 119. The phrase "thy word" appears 35 times in this one psalm (or hymn). Synonyms for the word of God, such as *the law* or *thy precepts*, appear in nearly every line. We learn from these verses that the word of God has the power to keep us from sin, provide light to our path, give us life, give us hope, order our steps, give understanding, provide deliverance, and cause us to rejoice. We learn that the unrighteous are defined by their failure to "keep thy word." (v.158) We learn that God's word is "settled in heaven" and "true from the beginning." (v. 89, 160) The psalmist's heart "standeth in awe at thy word." (v.161)²

So important was it to have a right relationship to God's word, to keep it always uppermost in one's thoughts so that it might provide spiritual life to God's people, that Israel was commanded through Moses to "lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. And ye shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates." (Deuteronomy 11:18-20) This is the origin of the "tefillin," small leather boxes containing scrolls from the torah worn on the arm and across the forehead by Jewish men during prayer.

What is the result of keeping the word of God "upon our minds" in this way? The Book of Mormon provides an interesting example. We read about the 2,000 stripling warriors of Helaman in Alma 56:47, "Now they never had fought, yet they did not fear death; and they did think more upon the liberty of their fathers than they did upon their lives; yea, they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them." In a quick reading of this verse it may appear that these young men thought the liberty of their fathers *was more important* than their own lives. But the verse doesn't say that. What if it means just what it says? They thought more about the teachings of liberty than they thought about their own lives. In other words, they spent more time thinking about the truths of eternity than about the needs of their own lives. Many of their fathers had given their lives rather than surrender their liberty in Christ by breaking their covenants. The time they spent thinking about the word of God as taught by their mothers and as manifest in the sacrifices of their fathers resulted in such a high level of faith in their lives that they were miraculously preserved in battle.

This reminds us of another group of young people—our own Mormon missionaries. Those of you who have had sons or daughters, brothers or sisters or friends who have been dedicated missionaries, know that for the first time in their lives, these young people are spending far more time thinking about the words of God, about His truths and about bringing people to Him, than they are spending thinking on "their own lives." We remember President Hinckley's father's advice to his missionary son to "forget yourself and go to work." The results of such thought patterns are amazing. Missionaries are filled with joy and strength and accomplish things they never dreamed they could or would before they became missionaries. When they come home, the images of the world crowd back in and without specific, purposeful effort, those images can crowd out God's word and all the precious blessings that go with it.

Jesus asked a plaintive question as he taught the crowds that followed him during his earthly ministry: "When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" This is a time in the earth's history when faith in God has grown cold. Section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants introduces this remarkable book by saying that the Lord, "knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth" gave these comings to the prophet Joseph Smith so that "faith also might increase in the earth." There

² The entirety of Psalm 119 is posted as a Vignette on the Sisters at the Well website with Lesson 1.

is no power of God manifest to men and women without faith and outside of God's Word, except for the power of judgment that will fall upon unbelievers. To have saving, transformative faith, that faith must be manifest by believing on, trusting in, and obeying God's word. This is the way we demonstrate to God that we trust more in Him, a being that we cannot see but in whom we have ultimate confidence, than we do in the things and forces that we can see around us.

The realities around us are sometimes "calamitous." We can be faced with realities of sickness and financial distress and broken relationships and loss. But faith is that power that reassures us that *realities* are different than *finalities*. These things may be real and happening to us, but God's promises are the more important reality.

It is hard to see how we can possibly generate the faith necessary to stand "against the wiles of the devil" or the "storms of life" without gripping the word of God with all of our hearts. It must have a place in our daily lives. It is what represents God to us. If we say we love God, and yet we do not treasure His word, then we have deceived ourselves. If we say we love God, but spend all of our "seeking time" seeking the things of the seen world, we will never reap the rewards of the unseen world. We will never grow in faith. And it is precisely for the purpose of building our faith, that the Lord gave us the book known as the Doctrine & Covenants.

The Doctrine and Covenants truly is an amazing book. This book draws from the combined well of all the scriptures. In it are the words of Isaiah, the words of Jesus to his apostles, the words of Paul and the words of John the beloved. All the truths of the new and everlasting covenant are drawn upon to give us exactly what we need in this critical period in Earth's history and to clarify the mission of the Latter-day church. The Lord has never spoken to a particular dispensation so clearly and directly as He has to us through this book.

And why do you think He re-emphasized so many important truths? Consider two reasons. First, the period of earth's history we are part of is going to be a wild ride. The last days will be unlike any other time, with great destructions upon the wicked and great manifestations of God's power upon His saints. Never have we needed a divine road-map more than now. The second reason grows out of the first. All that God is going to require of us and our children in this time of the last days must be done in faith. Remember, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God." (Hebrews 11:6) Faith is the currency of the Christian.

When the ride gets rough, no amount of money in the bank or clothes in the closet, popularity or fame will have any ability to help us. We are told that people who have depended upon these things will throw them away:

"And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day.

And the idols he shall utterly abolish.

And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth. In that day a man shall cast his idols of silver, and his idols of gold, which they made each one for himself to worship, to the moles and to the bats..."

(2nd Nephi 12:17-20)

But if, in that day, we have the treasure of *faith* we will be able to call upon God in our need, trusting that He "is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6) Determine this year as we study the Doctrine & Covenants together, that you will treasure God's word and think more on it than on the things of the world. Make time each day for the powerful realities of God's word to work on your mind and heart, so that, as Paul says, we will "[not be] conformed to this world: but ... transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) God's word truly has the power to transform our lives as we read it, believe it, and act upon it. That is the purpose of our study this year.