



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 7 | Number 1

Article 7

4-1-2006

Building Lessons Filled with Light

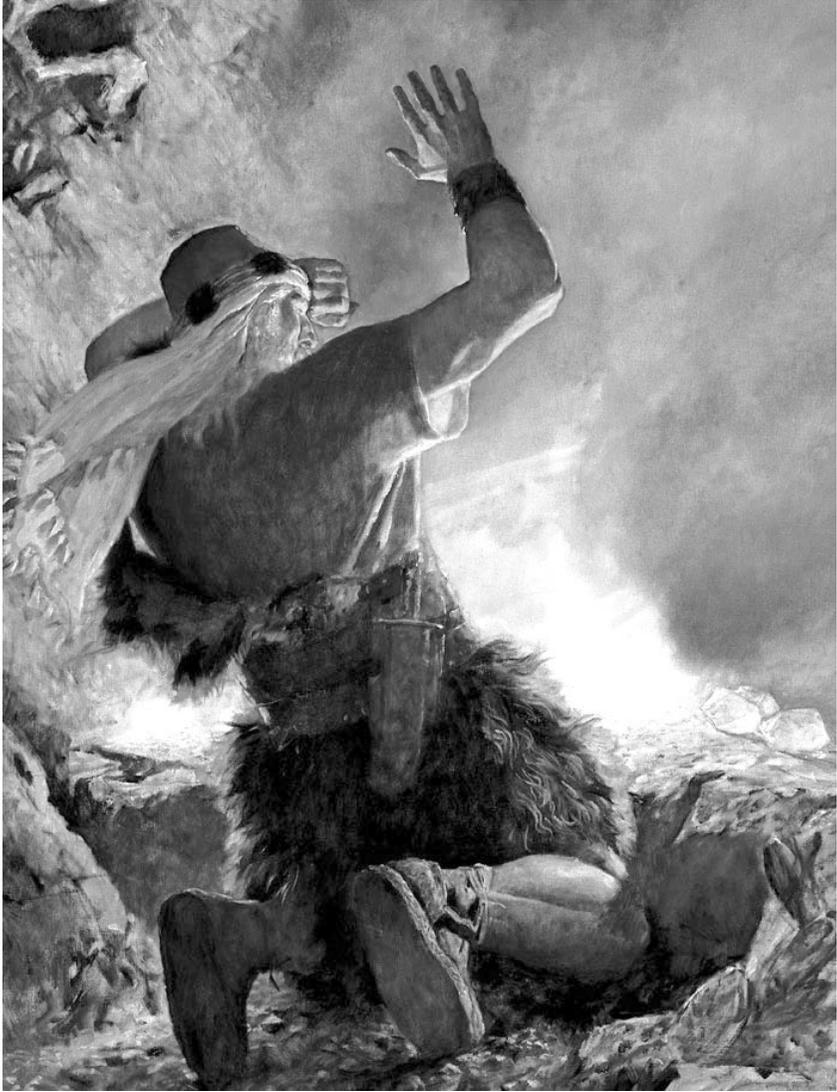
Robert R. Wallace

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Wallace, Robert R. "Building Lessons Filled with Light." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 7, no. 1 (2006). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol7/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



The Brother of Jared Sees the Finger of the Lord
Painting by Arnold Friberg

Courtesy of Visual Resources Library © by Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Building Lessons Filled with Light

Robert R. Wallace

Robert R. Wallace is a principal at the Twin Falls Idaho Seminary.

A land lover at heart, I have always been awestruck by the faith of the Jaredites during their journey to the promised land. In describing the drama on the sea, the account uses phrases like “furious wind,” “tossed upon the waves,” “buried in the depths,” “mountain waves,” and “terrible tempests” (see Ether 6:5–6). No doubt the trip was filled with peril and high adventure. Yet there was little fear in the small vessels. Surrounded by nothing but water and sailing in boats devoid of rudders, sails, or outboard motors, the Jaredite travelers were miraculously filled with assurance that “there was no water that could hurt them. . . . No monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them” (Ether 6:7, 10).

Bathed in light whether they were above the water or under the water, the voyagers did not spend their time in fear. Instead, “they did sing praises unto the Lord; yea, the brother of Jared did sing praises unto the Lord, and he did thank and praise the Lord all the day long; and when the night came, they did not cease to praise the Lord” (Ether 6:9). The Jaredites traveled not by fear but by faith in Christ, and He lighted their way.

The spiritual context of the last days—the days in which we live and teach—parallels the perilous voyage of the Jaredites. Elder Robert D. Hales said, “We are living through turbulent times. A great storm of evil has come upon the earth. The winds of wickedness howl about us; the waves of war beat against our ship.”¹ Recently, President Boyd K. Packer commented on the flood of evil sweeping the earth:

The world is spiraling downward at an ever-quickenning pace. I am sorry to tell you that it will not get better.

It is my purpose to *charge* each of you as *teachers* with the responsibility—to put you on alert. These are days of great spiritual danger for our youth.

I know of nothing in the history of the Church or in the history of the world to compare with our present circumstances. Nothing happened in Sodom and Gomorrah which exceeds in wickedness and depravity that which surrounds us now.

Words of profanity, vulgarity, and blasphemy are heard everywhere. Unspeakable wickedness and perversion were once hidden in dark places; now they are in the open, even accorded legal protection.

At Sodom and Gomorrah these things were localized. Now they are spread across the world, and they are among us. I need not—I will not—identify each evil that threatens our youth. It is difficult for man to get away from it.²

Whereas the Jaredites conquered the elements of nature with their faith, we are now called upon to conquer the appetites of the natural man in a world that caters to every carnal instinct.

As we seek to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ in these difficult times, we can pattern our efforts after the successful and courageous Jaredites. Specifically, by likening the principles the brother of Jared and his people applied in building ships to our efforts in building lessons, we will be able to plan lessons filled with light. This light will lead our students on, giving them hope and strength as they seek to cross the “angry deep . . . and rest on the blissful shore.”³

“Go to work and build, after the manner of barges which ye have hitherto built. . . . According to the instructions of the Lord” (Ether 2:16).

Just as the Jaredites were to build barges according to the instructions of the Lord, we have a great opportunity to be led by inspiration. But it is not enough merely to seek for inspiration without studying things out in our minds. “Teaching does not remove responsibility from the teacher for prayerful and pondering preparation,” said Elder Neal A. Maxwell. “Teaching by the Spirit is not the equivalent of going on ‘automatic pilot.’ We still need a carefully worked out flight plan. Studying out something in our own minds involves the Spirit in our preparations as well as in our presentations. We must not err, like Oliver Cowdery, by taking no thought except to ask God for his Spirit (see D&C 9:7).” Elder Maxwell then added, “Seeking the Spirit is best done when we ask the Lord to take the lead of an already informed mind, in which things have been ‘studied out.’”⁴

Teaching by the Spirit is a partnership and a sacred trust. The *Teaching the Gospel Handbook* states that teaching by the Spirit takes place “when the Holy Ghost is performing his role or functions with the teacher, with the student, or with both. This can happen during lesson preparation and lesson presentation. It can happen as teachers interact with students outside of class, or even while teachers are just thinking how best to help their students. In some cases, the Spirit may touch a student’s mind or heart long after class is over.”⁵ Simply put, without the influence of the Spirit, we will fail in our work.

“And they were small, and they were light upon the water, even like unto the lightness of a fowl upon the water. And they were built after a manner that they were exceedingly tight” (Ether 2:16–17).

The oceangoing vessels built by the Jaredites exhibited some interesting characteristics. First, they were small and light. This quality made them extremely buoyant. Second, Moroni points out they were “tight.” He mentions this element of design five times within one verse: “And they were built after a manner that they were exceedingly *tight*, even that they would hold water like unto a dish; and the bottom thereof was *tight* like unto a dish; and the sides thereof were *tight* like unto a dish; and the ends thereof were peaked; and the top thereof was *tight* like unto a dish; and the length thereof was the length of a tree; and the door thereof, when it was shut, was *tight* like unto a dish” (Ether 2:17; emphasis added).

With such a big, vibrant, and powerful ocean, it would seem logical for the Jaredites to build big ships to match. Yet it was the small, simple design that kept the people afloat. As religious educators, we should build lessons that have similar qualities of the Jaredite vessels. Our lessons should be small, light, and tight. As teachers, we will not find the power we need in complex, high-maintenance, emotion-manipulating lessons. On the contrary, by small and simple lessons will great things be brought to pass. Below are four ways we can follow the Jaredite ship design in building powerful, unsinkable lessons.

First, we should make sure that our lessons are doctrinally “tight.” Elder Paul V. Johnson shared Elder Jeffrey R. Holland’s counsel on this subject at a CES conference:

Brethren and sisters, please be cautious and restrained and totally orthodox in all matters of Church doctrine. This is, as you might suppose, of great concern to the Brethren, our employers in this great work. And while they love us and help and trust us individually and collectively—and they do—they cannot fail to respond to some anxiety

expressed by a member of the Church who feels that some inappropriate doctrinal or historical position has been taken in the classroom. It is in light of this rather constant danger always before us . . . that I give you these cautions and reminders. . . .

With this appropriate restraint, what we then teach must be in harmony with the prophets and the holy scriptures. We are not called upon to teach exotic, titillating, or self-serving doctrines. Surely we have our educational hands full effectively communicating the most basic and fundamental principles of salvation. . . . Continue to study for the rest of your life, but use caution and limit your classroom instruction to what the Brethren prescribe. Listen carefully and see what they choose to teach at general conference—and they are ordained.⁶

President Harold B. Lee also stated, “You’re to teach the old doctrines, not so plain that they can just understand, *but you must teach the doctrines of the Church so plainly that no one can misunderstand.*”⁷

Second, we should use simple but memorable methods in our teaching. In a recent address to mission presidents, President Packer suggested:

The way the Savior taught, and the way you can teach, is both simple and very profound. If you choose a tangible object as a symbol for a doctrine, you can teach just as He did. A teacher can associate the doctrine with an object already known, which *can* be seen with physical eyes. . . .

Now faith is not really exactly like a seed, nor is the kingdom of heaven exactly like a net or a treasure or leaven (see Luke 13:21) or “a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls” (Matthew 13:45). But with these illustrations, Jesus was able to open the eyes of His disciples—not their natural eyes but the eyes of their understanding (see Matthew 13:15; John 12:40; Acts 28:27; Ephesians 1:18; 2 Nephi 16:10; D&C 76:12, 19; 88:11; 110:1).

With the eyes of our understanding, we see things that are spiritual. With our spirits reaching out, we can touch things that are spiritual and *feel* them. Then we can *see* and we can *feel* things that are invisible to the physical senses. Remember, Nephi told his rebellious brothers, who had rejected a message from an angel, “Ye were past feeling, that ye could not *feel* his words” (1 Nephi 17:45; emphasis added). . . .

Ordinary teachers responsible to teach the doctrines and to testify of spiritual things have within their own personal experience everyday things which can be likened unto things which are spiritual.⁸

Third, we should have faith in the word of God. The *Teaching the Gospel* handbook reminds us:

Satan would have teachers believe that students will not like studying the scriptures, or that one cannot teach the scriptures day after day and

be successful. But the power of the Lord's word is sure. The scriptures contain "the words of life" (D&C 84:85). The prophet Alma said that the word has a more powerful effect upon the mind "than the sword, or anything else" (Alma 31:5). The word of God "healeth the wounded soul" (Jacob 2:8) and "will tell you all things what ye should do" (2 Nephi 32:3). The scriptures can give the youth the power to resist the "fiery darts of the adversary" (1 Nephi 15:24) and help them become "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:17).⁹

Elder Henry B. Eyring taught that having faith in the word of God is essential if we are to succeed in helping students become converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ:

Whether the miracle comes in a moment or over years, as is far more common, it is the doctrine of Jesus Christ that drives the change. We sometimes underestimate the power that pure doctrine has to penetrate the hearts of people. Why did so many respond to the words of the missionaries when the Church was so young, so small, and seemingly so strange? What did Brigham Young and John Taylor and Heber C. Kimball preach in the streets and on the hills of England? They taught that the Lord had opened a new dispensation, that He had given us a Prophet of God, that the priesthood was restored, that the Book of Mormon was the word of God, and that we had a glorious new day. They taught that the pure gospel of Jesus Christ had been restored.

That pure doctrine went down into the hearts then, as it will now, because the people were starved and the doctrine was taught simply. . . .

Most of those early converts in England had known they were hungry for the true word of God. Our students may not know that they are fainting from famine, but the words of God will slake a thirst they did not know they had, and the Holy Ghost will take it down into their hearts. If we make the doctrine simple and clear, and if we teach out of our own changed hearts, the change for them will come as surely as it did for Enos.¹⁰

Sometimes in the earnest desire to catch students' attention, I have neglected the scriptures and used a time-consuming object lesson, video clip, or other method that captured the attention I was seeking but lost the Spirit. Instead of trusting the small, tight, pure power of the word of God, I was trying for the "safety" of a big ship. Elder Eyring's counsel has been helpful to me:

Now, there may be times when we feel that we must add some enrichment to our curriculum. . . . Our first thoughts for something to add usually turn to something we know has held [the students'] interest in some other setting. Our students increasingly have been exposed to and attracted to various forms of worldly entertainment. President Clark's message ["The Charted Course"] suggests how to make that choice of

what to add, what enrichment to bring, how to make that choice wisely. He seemed to anticipate the media-soaked world in which we and future generations would live. He promised that we would know, if we will inquire, what experiences will invite the Spirit and what will repel the very influence of the Spirit we seek. Here is his prayer for us in that talk, and I now make it to you my promise:

“May God bless you always in all your righteous endeavors. May He quicken your understanding, increase your wisdom, enlighten you by experience, bestow upon you patience, charity, and, as among your most precious gifts, endow you with the discernment of spirits that you may certainly know the spirit of righteousness and its opposite as they come to you. May He give you entrance to the hearts of those you teach and then make you know that as you enter there you stand in holy places that must be neither polluted nor defiled, either by false or corrupting doctrine or by sinful misdeed. May he enrich your knowledge with skill and power to teach righteousness. May your faith and your testimonies increase, and your ability to encourage and foster them in others grow greater every day—all that the youth of Zion may be taught, built up, encouraged, heartened, that they may not fall by the wayside, but go on to eternal life, that these blessings coming to them, you through them may be blessed also” (Charted Course, 12).

With that blessing of President Clark, we will never choose to enliven our seminars and institutes with music, or performances, or speakers, or humor which might offend the Spirit.¹¹

Fourth, we should avoid trying to cover too much ground. Our lessons should be focused like a laser instead of a vast collection of doctrines given with the hope of hitting something. This shotgun approach to preparing and giving lessons is burdensome and ineffective and was among a list of dos and don'ts given in a talk by Elder Maxwell: “Don't . . . present a ‘smorgasbord,’ hoping someone will find something of value. The lack of focus leaves the receivers uncertain. . . . Know the substance of what is being presented. Ponder and pray over its simple focus.”¹²

Similarly, we should be conscious that students will have more than this lesson to hear the truths presented. Therefore, we should follow the Lord's pattern for instruction and teach a little at a time, line upon line and precept upon precept. Again, Elder Maxwell commented, “We worship a Lord who teaches us precept by precept, brethren, so even when we are teaching our children the gospel, let's not dump the whole load of hay.”¹³

As we apply the pattern of Jaredite boatbuilding to lesson preparation, we will seek to keep lessons simple, doctrinally pure, focused, and connected to the word of God. Following these principles will prevent us from “looking beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14). Although the excitement of “fire, wind, and earthquake” methods may seem to be what

our students are used to, our students will find the Lord in the still, small voice associated with teaching the pure gospel, and that is what they truly need (see 1 Kings 19:11–12).

“And I know, O Lord, that thou hast all power, and can do whatsoever thou wilt for the benefit of man; therefore touch these stones, O Lord, with thy finger, and prepare them that they may shine forth in darkness; and they shall shine forth unto us in the vessels which we have prepared, that we may have light while we shall cross the sea” (Ether 3:4).

After all the effort and work of the brother of Jared and his company, their vessels were dark inside. The brother of Jared was required to come up with a solution. He had to melt the stones, climb the mountain, and importune the Lord for light. Light did not come until his efforts were touched by the finger of the Lord.

In teaching the gospel, we should also follow this pattern. It takes hard work to prepare interesting, variety-filled lessons that will appeal to students. It takes knowledge of the scriptures and the words of the prophets. It requires an understanding of our students—who they are now and their potential for the future. It takes humor, creativity, and insight. But after all the work we bring to the lesson, if the Lord does not touch our efforts, there will be no light.

We need to prepare solid lessons, and then it is incumbent upon us to live and teach in such a way that the Lord may touch our efforts and make them come alive in the hearts of our students. President Brigham Young taught, “When an individual, filled with the Spirit of God, declares the truth of heaven, the sheep hear that [see D&C 29:7], the Spirit of the Lord pierces their inmost souls and sinks deep into their hearts; by the testimony of the Holy Ghost light springs up within them, and they see and understand for themselves.”¹⁴

President Gordon B. Hinckley taught:

I thought of what a great challenge this is for you to teach in such a way as to not only instruct but, more importantly, to inspire. . . .

Yours is the tremendous challenge to give courage, and inspiration, and faith to those willing to accept, and to try with all the capacity that you can possibly have to hold on to those who are pulled with such pressure into those activities which will separate them from you and your better students. . . .

I hope that you will plead with the Lord to give you strength, to give you capacity, to give you inspiration in teaching those who come before you for instruction. Your example will count for more than all of your words concerning Church history and doctrine. . . .

May heaven smile upon you, my dear friends in this great work. Just do the best you can, but be sure it is your very best. Then leave it in the hands of the Lord.¹⁵

Just as the Lord touched the rock that was molten by the brother of Jared and made it shine forth in the darkness, if we are humble, if we live the gospel, and if we “do the best we can and then leave it in the hands of the Lord,” He will touch our lessons and make them shine forth in the hearts of students.

As a coordinator, I had the opportunity to visit several early-morning classes. One morning while visiting a class with a volunteer teacher, I felt the Spirit very strongly. The teacher led the class in a discussion about some verses in the Old Testament. Before too long, the students began asking questions and making comments, and quickly the lesson had a life of its own. What I witnessed was humbling to me. A teacher with limited time and resources, doing the best job she knew how to do, was embraced by the classroom response of her students, and they literally helped her teach the lesson with their unsolicited comments and questions. I humbly realized that on my best days I seldom accomplish in my classroom what she had accomplished in hers. That day I witnessed a lesson touched by the finger of the Lord.

Conclusion

Building gospel lessons based on Jaredite boatbuilding principles will enable us to successfully bring light into the classroom. We should build according to the instructions of the Lord—small, light, and tight—and we should live in a way that the Lord can touch our efforts and fill them with the light of His Spirit. When this happens, we will feel as the Jaredites did upon arriving at the promised land: “And they did land upon the shore of the promised land. And when they had set their feet upon the shores of the promised land they bowed themselves down upon the face of the land, and did humble themselves before the Lord, and did shed tears of joy before the Lord, because of the multitude of his tender mercies over them” (Ether 6:12). **RE**

Notes

1. Robert D. Hales, in Conference Report, April 2003, 14.
2. Boyd K. Packer, “The One Pure Defense,” address to religious educators, February 6, 2004 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 4; see also *Religious Educator* 5, no. 2 (2004): 7.

3. Mary Ann Baker, “Master, the Tempest Is Raging,” in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 105.

4. Neal A. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit—‘The Language of Inspiration,’” in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 58–59.

5. Church Educational System, *Teaching the Gospel: A Handbook for CES Teachers and Leaders* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 1.

6. Paul V. Johnson, “The Dangers of Priestcraft,” address to religious educators, August 12, 2002 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002), 2.

7. Harold B. Lee, “Loyalty,” in *Charge to Religious Educators*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1994), 119; emphasis in original.

8. Boyd K. Packer, “The Light of Christ: What Everyone Called to Preach the Gospel, Teach the Gospel, or Live the Gospel Should Know,” address to new mission presidents, June 22, 2004 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 3–6; see also *Ensign*, April 2005, 6–7.

9. Church Educational System, *Teaching the Gospel*, 19.

10. Henry B. Eyring, “We Must Raise Our Sights,” address to religious educators, August 14, 2001 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001), 3–4; see also *Religious Educator* 2, no. 2 (2001): 5.

11. Henry B. Eyring, “The Lord Will Multiply the Harvest,” address to religious educators, February 6, 1998 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 5–6.

12. Maxwell, “Teaching by the Spirit,” 60.

13. Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, April 2004, 47.

14. Brigham Young, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997), 319.

15. Gordon B. Hinckley, “A Challenging Time—A Wonderful Time,” address to religious educators, February 7, 2003 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 1–5.