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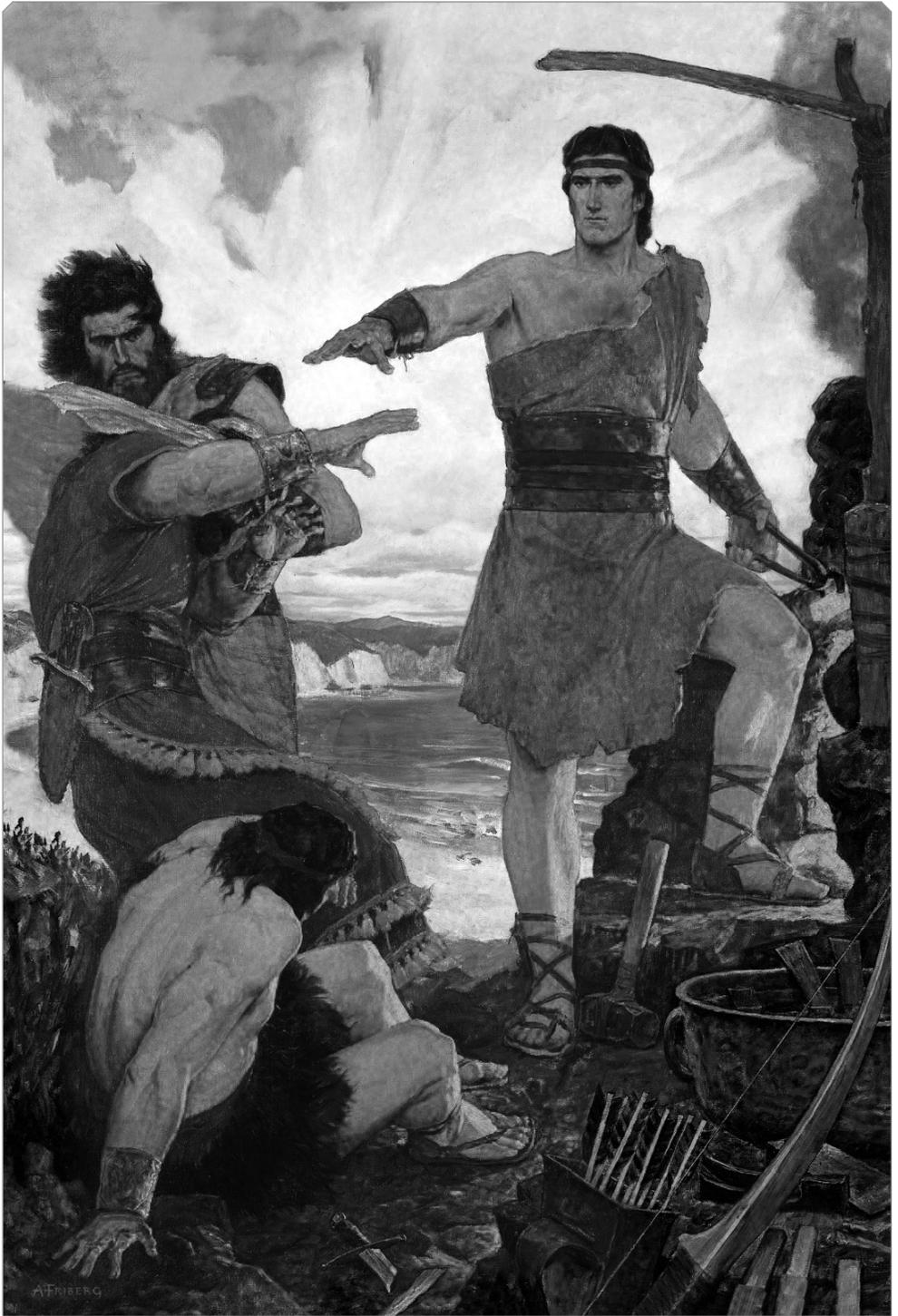
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We can draw some conclusions about Laman and Lemuel by the way they respond to chastisement. Rather than humbly listening and improving their character, they react violently.

“For Our Profit and Learning”: One Method for Likening the Scriptures

CHARLES SWIFT

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One of the simplest things we can do to become more spiritual is to feast upon the scriptures every day.¹ I love the word *feast* when it comes to studying the scriptures, because it beautifully conveys what we really should do. When studying the scriptures, we take our time with them, savoring the words and their meaning, and allowing ourselves to be “nourished by the good word of God” (Moroni 6:4). We live in a fast-food world, where the emphasis is not placed on nourishment, enjoyment, or even taste but on the quickness with which we can scarf down the food and move on to something else. But with the study of the scriptures, there is no drive-through window. We are to feast and be filled. Nephi tells us to “feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3). It takes time and commitment to let those words work within our minds and hearts so they can tell us what we should do.

One word that may help us understand what it is to feast upon the word is *search*. Almost immediately after Lehi received the brass plates, “he did search them from the beginning” (1 Nephi 5:10). King Benjamin counseled his sons to search the scriptures diligently so they could profit from them (see

Mosiah 1:7). Even the Savior himself taught the importance of searching the scriptures, when he commanded the Nephites to diligently search the words of Isaiah in particular and the prophets in general (see 3 Nephi 23:1, 5). We all know what it means to search because we've all searched for some object we needed to find. When we search, we are *diligently looking for something in particular*. We search our cars for our wallets, or our houses for our keys. Perhaps we search our souls for remorse, or our lives for meaning. When people are lost in the mountains, we conduct a search to find them. Searching the scriptures helps us avoid approaching the word of God in ways that bear little fruit. If we search the scriptures, we won't read them just to be able to check that task off of our to-do lists. As Elder Robert D. Hales teaches, "When we want to speak to God, we pray. And when we want Him to speak to us, we *search* the scriptures; for His words are spoken through His prophets. He will then teach us as we listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit."²² There's nothing casual or inconsequential about a search.

Naturally, this counsel to search the scriptures begs a simple question: What are we supposed to be searching for? There is more than just one good answer to that question, of course, but one of the answers lies in one of the most oft-quoted scriptures in the Book of Mormon: we must "liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning" (1 Nephi 19:23). We are to search the scriptures for the meaning they can have in our lives. In other words, we search for ways to apply the scriptures in our lives. However, just applying them is not enough; we need to keep in mind that there is a particular purpose for the application: our *profit* and *learning*. I appreciate the combined use of those two words. We are to learn by the application of the scriptures and benefit from it. People can learn things without profiting from their new knowledge. For example, millions of people who know the extreme dangers of smoking cigarettes continue to do so. At some point they *learned* the dangers of tobacco, but they are not *profiting* from that knowledge. Remember, Joseph Smith did not claim that we would get closer to God by reading the Book of Mormon, but by "abiding by its precepts."²³ We are to live what the book teaches us. Of course, in order to live according to its teachings we need to read it, but reading it is not enough. Application is necessary.

How do we go about applying the scriptures? I have to admit that I am not big on formulas. Life is simply not that cut-and-dried. But I also believe that sometimes it can be useful to identify a pattern that can help us in life, especially if we keep our understanding of the pattern simple and are willing

to be flexible, to allow for others to see different patterns. So, while I think there are many good ways to apply the scriptures, I have often used a threefold approach in my study and my teaching that I have found worthwhile: “Know-Identify-Apply.” (The abbreviation *KIA*, like the car, may be an easy way to remember this approach, but I prefer avoiding the abbreviation and will refer to it by its complete name throughout this piece to help us remember these key words.) I readily acknowledge that this is not the only way to apply what we learn from the scriptures, but it is one good way that may prove very helpful. This approach involves a process of *searching* that leads to *likening* the scriptures to ourselves.

We should remember the most important component of this approach: having the Spirit with us so we can rely on him to help us learn from the scriptures. I don’t include that as a “step,” because it is not one part of the process; it is the central act that runs throughout the entire approach. One of the best ways we can strive to have the Spirit with us when we study the scriptures is the simple but profound act of pondering. As Elder Richard G. Scott teaches, “Pondering a passage of scripture can be a key to unlock revelation and the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Ghost. Scriptures can calm an agitated soul, giving peace, hope, and a restoration of confidence in one’s ability to overcome the challenges of life. They have potent power to heal emotional challenges when there is faith in the Savior. They can accelerate physical healing.”⁴

We need to prayerfully reflect on what we’ve read, seeking both understanding and wisdom. The prophet Abinadi teaches that there is a relationship between wisdom and applying our hearts to our understanding (see Mosiah 12:27); this is good counsel for how we should approach the scriptures, pondering their words in our hearts in ways that influence our understanding and help us gain wisdom.

Now, let’s take a step-by-step look at Know-Identify-Apply.

Step 1: Know What the Scriptures Are Saying

This may sound too simple to even bother mentioning, but it is an often-overlooked step in the process. Too often we rely on our far-too-fallible memories. One of the most common experiences I have as a teacher is listening to a student inaccurately paraphrase a verse of scripture and then ask me a question about it. I make it a practice to have the student turn to the actual text so we can read it together. Often, the question or concern the student has about the

verse melts away as we see what the text actually *says*. Simply put, we need to know what the scriptures are saying before we can begin to use them as part of changing our lives. We need to *read* the scriptures.

When I say “read the scriptures,” however, I don’t mean simply move our eyes across the page. Too many people are used to reading the scriptures in such a way so that they can feel justified in checking off that box. We don’t want to make reading the scriptures so complicated that no one can actually do it in a reasonable amount of time, but we don’t want reading them to be so simplistic that we really don’t know what they’re saying. I may need to look up a word or two every now and then, but that doesn’t mean I have to become a Greek (or Hebrew or Reformed Egyptian) scholar. It’s simply difficult for me to know what a verse is saying if there are important words I don’t understand.

Elder David A. Bednar teaches about how we must do more than simply *read* the scriptures, and about how studying them can be a significant means of coming closer to the Savior.

One of the best ways to draw near unto [Christ] and to both learn about and become more like the Lord Jesus Christ is to consistently study the holy scriptures—to daily “feast upon the words of Christ” (2 Ne. 32:3).

Please notice that I used the word *study* and not the word *read*. Studying and feasting suggest a focus and an intensity that reach far beyond casual reading or quick perusing. Studying and feasting, followed by sincere prayer and steadfast application of the truths and principles we learn, yield personal resolve, spiritual commitment, and the bright light of testimony. Studying, learning, praying, and appropriately applying gospel truths are all key elements in the process of coming unto the Savior.⁵

Before we continue with our discussion of Know-Identify-Apply, it will be helpful to select a passage of scripture that we can keep in mind. That will help us move from the abstract discussion of this way of likening the scriptures to the more concrete discussion of actually following the approach. I’ve chosen a very brief passage from 1 Nephi that tells the story of an experience Nephi had shortly after he chastised Laman and Lemuel:

And it came to pass that when I, Nephi, had spoken these words unto my brethren, they were angry with me. And it came to pass that they did lay their hands upon me, for behold, they were exceedingly wroth, and they did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life, that they might leave me in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts.

But it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even give me strength that I may burst these bands with which I am bound.

And it came to pass that when I had said these words, behold, the bands were loosed from off my hands and feet, and I stood before my brethren, and I spake unto them again. (1 Nephi 7:16–18)

Now that we’ve read the passage, do we feel we understand it? There is a basic storyline here that we ought to be sure we follow: Laman and Lemuel are angry at Nephi for chastising them, so they tie him up with the idea of leaving him in the wilderness so wild beasts can kill him; Nephi prays that, according to his faith, the Lord will strengthen him so he can burst the bands he’s been tied up with; then, right after his prayer, the bands are loosed from his hands and feet and he speaks again to his brothers. It’s good for us to review this basic story to make sure we know what the scriptures are actually saying. For example, before I wrote this I had forgotten that Laman and Lemuel had planned on leaving their bound brother in the wilderness to be killed by wild beasts; I’d only remembered that they’d tied him up. Through rereading this passage and making sure I knew the story, I saw an important part of the story that I’d forgotten. There is a significant difference between just tying up their brother and tying him up to leave him in the wilderness to be killed.

Now that we’re fairly confident about the story, are there observations we could make about the passage that would help us be even more thoughtful readers? After all, there is more to reading than just being able to repeat the basics of the story. For example, I think we can draw some conclusions about Laman and Lemuel by the way they respond to chastisement. Rather than humbly listening and deciding to improve their character, they react violently to their younger brother. They even want to kill him! Even the way they decide to kill him is in itself an interesting detail. They aren’t willing to look him in the eye and commit the horrible sin of murder; in a more cowardly manner, they’ll just tie him up and leave him for the wild animals to do the killing for them. Another important part of the story is to realize that, while the Lord immediately answered Nephi’s prayer, he didn’t give him the answer he wanted. Nephi asked for strength to break his bonds; instead, the Lord directly loosens the bonds himself. The text doesn’t make clear why the Lord chose to answer the prayer in that way—perhaps he wanted to reinforce in Nephi’s mind (or, later, in our minds) the reality that it was the Lord who was

delivering him, not his own strength—but it is still an important observation to make about the passage.

Before we discuss the second step of Know-Identify-Apply, it's worthwhile to mention here that this is the place at which many of us begin to make our mistake in trying to liken the scriptures to ourselves. We've studied the scriptures, we know what they are saying, and now we try to apply what they are saying to our lives. But when we read the story of a young man who lived over two thousand years ago, in a culture completely foreign to us, it is often difficult to fathom how what happened to him could possibly have relevance to our lives. After all, we may think, I'm not a young man traveling in the wilderness. I'm not with my two brothers who want to harm me—even kill me. I've never been tied up and left to be devoured by wild animals. How can I possibly apply this brief story of Nephi and his brothers to my life when their story has so little to do with my life?

This is why the next step is so important. The concept of studying the scriptures and applying them in our lives is much more difficult to do—and, perhaps, much less effective—if we ignore the second step.

Step 2: Identify Principles in the Scriptures

I know there are countless definitions of what a principle might be, but for our purposes let's keep it simple: a principle is a universal truth. A scriptural passage will likely have many different principles, and we will probably see some principles at one time in our lives and other principles at other times. That is part of the revelatory nature of studying the scriptures. And that is one reason why reading the scriptures once or twice is never enough—such a study is a lifelong pursuit.

It is important to remember that we're using the word *principle* in a specific way in this approach. It will help us to note a few characteristics of principles as we're using the term here.

A principle is true. In other contexts people talk about *true* principles and *false* principles, but for our purposes, a principle isn't a principle if it's false. This Know-Identify-Apply approach only deals with truths we find in scriptures, not falsehoods we might find elsewhere. "As you seek spiritual knowledge," Elder Scott writes, "*search for principles*. Carefully separate them from the detail used to explain them. *Principles are concentrated truth*, packaged for application to a wide variety of circumstances. A true principle makes decisions clear even under the most confusing and compelling circumstances.

It is worth great effort to organize the truth we gather to simple statements of principle. I have tried to do that with gaining spiritual knowledge.”⁶

A principle is universal. As we are defining it, a principle is always true for everyone. For example, a reader of the above 1 Nephi passage might conclude: “When you chastise people, you will make them angry.” However, that is not a *universally true* statement. It is certainly true that, sometimes, when you chastise someone, that person may get angry. That’s what happened in this passage, in fact. But it is not true that whenever you chastise people they will become angry.

A principle is supported by scriptural text. The somewhat open-ended nature of principles as we are defining them here does not mean that we can interpret the scriptures in any way we want. We cannot just read a passage and claim it contains any principle we want it to. We need to be honest about the first step, carefully and meaningfully reading the scriptures, and we need to hold to the definition of a principle as a universal truth. There may be a certain amount of subjectivity involved in this process, but that doesn’t mean the process is arbitrary. Arbitrariness would mean that no criteria are being applied, but Know-Identify-Apply requires the reader to derive principles from a careful reading of a text.

Say that someone reads the above passage we are discussing and claims this as a principle: “We should pray in the name of Christ.” This is a true principle, without a doubt, and it is a principle that applies to everyone, but the text of this story doesn’t support this principle. It is not a principle that this particular passage of scripture is teaching in that, although Nephi does pray, it is not recorded that he was praying in the name of Christ. There are plenty of other scriptures we can find that very plainly teach this principle of praying in the name of the Lord, but the three verses we are studying here do not. In other words, it is not enough for the principle to be true and universal; it also needs to be supported by the text we’re studying. If it isn’t, then we won’t be applying what we learn from the passage to our lives, but we’ll instead be applying something else.

Keep in mind, we’re not discussing all the possible ways to read the scriptures; we’re only talking about how to use Know-Identify-Apply. So a young woman might read the above story of Nephi’s being bound by his brothers and have an impression come to her mind that she needs to write her older brother because she feels that their relationship is weakening. This woman reading the Nephi account has every right to tell her husband, for example,

that she received inspiration while studying the verses that she should write her brother, but, in my view, she shouldn't stand in front of the Sunday School class and teach that that is the meaning of the verse. Writing her brother is not the *meaning* of Nephi's story; it is the inspiration she received while reading it. This inspiration is a sacred, vital, and awe-inspiring blessing that cannot and should not be ignored. However, it is not what we're talking about at this point. Right now, we are trying to see what principles are in the text we're studying; later, we'll explore what they may lead us to do in our lives.

A principle is more than just a topic. My experience has been that it can sometimes be difficult at first to distinguish between a principle and a topic. For example, upon reading this account of Nephi being set free, some might say that an important principle in the passage is "faith." Faith is definitely a principle of the gospel, but it is not a principle in the sense that we are using the term in this approach to applying the scriptures. Why not? For one thing, there is not much we can do with just that word. Faith? Faith in what or whom? Should I always have faith, or are there times when I might place my faith in the wrong thing or person? What am I supposed to do to get faith? What am I supposed to do with faith once I have it? Is the eventual goal to replace faith with knowledge? Saying that one word, as important as that word is to us, does not do as much as we would like it to in moving us closer to applying Nephi's story into our lives.

Also, if a principle is universally true, how can we call "faith" a principle in this context if it is so vague that we're not sure if it is true for everyone? If by "faith" we mean that if we pray in faith our prayers will be answered, then that's a principle because it's universally true. But if by "faith" we mean, "if you pray in faith then you'll somehow get whatever you asked for," then that's not a principle since it's not universally true.

A principle is concise. Others have the opposite problem when they try to identify principles in the text. Rather than saying one word, they say too many. "One principle we can learn from Nephi's story is that when the going gets tough, especially when it's made tough by members of your own family, you need to always turn to the Lord and ask for his help." This is a very good statement, but it is so long that it's difficult to make it useful in applying the scriptures. Not only is it difficult to remember, but the statement is complicated enough that it's not clear how it will help us. Does the principle only apply when family members are making your life hard? Does the statement to "turn to the Lord" mean prayer, or other things as well? There's no eternal

law that states that a principle should be concise; it’s simply a matter of stating the principle in such a way that it will be most helpful to our lives. If we state a principle that is so long that it is difficult to remember it, or that is so complex that it really contains more than one principle, it will be more of a challenge to understand the principle and change our lives for the better because of it. As mentioned earlier, Elder Scott calls principles “concentrated truth.”

Now that we’ve discussed what principles are, let’s search for principles in this passage. As I have mentioned earlier, there are many principles, and we will find different ones at different times in our lives. But let’s identify some of the key principles we can see now.

1 Nephi 7:16–18	Principles
<p>And it came to pass that when I, Nephi, had spoken these words unto my brethren, they were angry with me. And it came to pass that they did lay their hands upon me, for behold, they were exceedingly wroth, and they did bind me with cords, for they sought to take away my life, that they might leave me in the wilderness to be devoured by wild beasts.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Unrighteous people sometimes respond to chastisement with anger. 2. Anger can lead to violence.
<p>But it came to pass that I prayed unto the Lord, saying: O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even give me strength that I may burst these bands with which I am bound.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is good to pray when in trouble. 2. It can be important to be specific when we pray.
<p>And it came to pass that when I had said these words, behold, the bands were loosed from off my hands and feet, and I stood before my brethren, and I spake unto them again.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Lord may choose to immediately answer prayers. 2. The Lord may not always answer prayers in the specific way we want them to be answered. 3. It’s good to accept the Lord’s answer even if it’s not exactly what we asked for. 4. We shouldn’t let opposition stop us from doing the Lord’s will.

Notice how several of the principles are clearly connected to what is plainly written in the scriptural text. For example, the principle that “anger can lead to violence” is directly communicated by the story when Laman and Lemuel become angry and tie up Nephi, planning his death in the wilderness. Also, the way in which Nephi prays and is immediately freed from his bonds clearly teaches the principle that the “Lord may choose to immediately

answer prayers.” I purposely included specific words in some of the principles to make sure they are universal. It is not a true principle that the Lord always answers prayers immediately, but it is true that he may choose to do so. Wording the principle in such a way does not dilute it; it is very significant to remember that there are times when he immediately answers prayers. Remembering that truth can help us have faith that if the Lord feels we need an immediate answer, he will give us one. It is also significant because, if we assume he never answers prayers immediately, we may very well be unaware of his answer if it comes quickly because we have mistakenly assumed we have to wait longer.

There are also some principles that are not explicitly communicated by the text but are still supported by it. Such principles require us to exercise some interpretation on our part. We should not be afraid of doing that, so long as we remember, as we discussed above, that the principle needs to be a universal truth that is supported by the text. For example, this story teaches the principle that we should not let opposition stop us from doing what we are supposed to do. Nephi was speaking to his brothers, they got angry and bound him, the Lord freed him from his bonds, and Nephi immediately resumed speaking to his brothers. He did not let their angry actions stop him from doing what the Lord wanted him to do. While the text does not directly state that principle, it does support the principle through the story.

However, what if a reader comes up with a different, but seemingly related, principle? For example, “We shouldn’t stop what we’re doing, even if people get angry.” I do not believe that is a universally true principle. The text does not support the idea that we should never stop what we are doing. There may be times when we speak to people, sense that they are not responding well to what we are saying, and then decide to take a different approach, or perhaps even quit speaking altogether. But is that ignoring the principle that we should not let opposition stop us from doing what we are supposed to do? No, because we are stopping what we are doing not because there is opposition, but because we felt it was no longer what we ought to be doing. We admire Nephi for continuing to teach his brothers once he is freed, but he would have stopped teaching them if that is what the Lord had directed him to do. We need to test each principle we come up with, making sure that it is universal, true, and supported by the text.

Step 3: *Apply the Principles Found in the Scriptures*

Often, students of the scriptures are frustrated with trying to apply what they have learned because they feel there is no connection between their lives and the lives of the people in the scriptures. This problem arises when the reader attempts to apply the scriptures *themselves* to their lives. When we liken the scriptures to our lives, we do so by applying the *principles* they teach. We are not trying to apply the people or events or cultural practices or even the text itself—we are applying the principles.

This third step is meaningless unless we make it very personal. Unlike a principle, which needs to be *universally* true, the application of a principle is *particularly* true for us. The application may or may not be true for others. To come up with a universal application can keep the scriptures at arms' length, safely away from us so that we do not have to actually change our lives as a result of what we have learned. At best, it is likening the scriptures to ourselves for our learning but not for our profit. But if we apply the principles in personal ways to our specific lives, we are changed by what we have learned. Simply restating the principle is not the same as actually applying it. “I’ll apply this principle by remembering that sometimes the Lord doesn’t answer prayers in the specific way I want him to” may be an easy thing to say, but it will not go very far in helping us change our lives unless we learn to accept answers to prayer even when they are not exactly what we were hoping for.

Now, let’s take a couple of the principles we have identified and see how we might apply them. We are not trying to find every possible application, of course, but we can benefit from what we do find.

It is good to pray when in trouble. This principle sounds so obvious that we might wonder if it is even worth bringing up. However, as we try to apply this principle, we may find that we do not follow it as often as we should. Sometimes, when we have a big decision to make that we are confused about (a kind of “trouble”), we may spend all our time researching our options and discussing them with family and friends, neglecting to make it a matter of prayer as well. We also need to remember what the actual principle is, and not reword it in our minds. This principle is not saying, “It is good to pray only when in trouble” or “praying is the only good thing to do when in trouble.” We need to focus on the application of the actual principle, without increasing or decreasing the principle’s scope. Principles need to be universally true, but that does not mean they try to cover the universe in one simple sentence.

Sometimes the Lord does not answer prayers in the specific way we wanted them to be answered. As we apply this principle, we may want to be open to the fact that sometimes we pray for something, receive an answer that is not what we were looking for, then assume that we must have asked for the wrong thing. That may be the case at times, but I believe Nephi's experience teaches us that sometimes it is not a matter of our being wrong—the Lord simply decides to answer our prayers in his own way. This principle also teaches that we need to keep our eyes open to the answers we are given. If we are expecting a certain answer and are not open to how the Lord is interacting with us at the moment, we may conclude that he did not answer a prayer of ours. In addition, applying this principle may actually help us interact with others differently. For example, a young man who had made it a habit not to pay attention to his mother's counsel may realize that what she has been saying is the very answer he has been looking for in his prayers. He has been expecting a still, small voice—not his mother's voice—and now he realizes that the Lord is trying to help him through her.

Other Applications

We can use the Know-Identify-Apply approach in any type of learning, not just in reading the scriptures. When a General Authority gives a talk about tithing, for example, we might be tempted to let our mind wander because we feel there is nothing to learn from such a talk if we already pay a full tithe. However, if we listen closely to *know* what he is saying, we may be able to *identify* a number of principles that are relevant to our life that we can *apply* in a personal way that will make us a better person. This approach can even help in secular learning. If students can know what their physics text is saying, for example, identify the principles in the text, and then apply them in the context of physics, they will have gained much more from the text than if they had merely read the words on the page.

I often use the Know-Identify-Apply approach when I teach my students. It helps them realize how important it is to read the text closely enough that they actually know what it is saying. When I invite them to identify principles, they realize that the text is saying much more than just the words, but also that they have to be able to support the principles by the text. And when we apply in class the principles we have learned from the text (without getting too personal, of course), students realize that the scriptures are completely relevant to their lives and an amazing source of wisdom and truth.

Conclusion

Once again, I realize there are many ways to liken the scriptures to ourselves. This is just one way, and it can be helpful to many of us because of its simplicity. The important thing, however, is not the method but rather the practice of searching the scriptures and likening them to ourselves. Know-Identify-Apply can open up a common ground on which we can explore the scriptures together in our classrooms and in our families, growing in our understanding of those sacred texts.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf brings together what we have been saying about the importance of scriptures, principles, and application in a powerful summary:

The holy scriptures and the spoken word of the living prophets give emphasis to the fundamental principles and doctrines of the gospel. The reason we return to these foundational principles, to the pure doctrines, is because they are the gateway to truths of profound meaning. They are the door to experiences of sublime importance that would otherwise be beyond our capacity to comprehend. These simple, basic principles are the key to living in harmony with God and man. They are the keys to opening the windows of heaven. They lead us to the peace, joy, and understanding that Heavenly Father has promised to His children who hear and obey Him.⁷ **RE**

Notes

1. There are obviously a number of ways to “feast” on the scriptures. Many of them can rely heavily on scholarship, such as depending on research to determine original wording or historical context. However, this article is not focused on how we can best understand what a scriptural text means through the use of various academic tools; rather, it deals with how we as typical readers might apply what the scriptures have to teach us. In this article, I am concerned with application rather than theory—helping teachers guide students as they change their lives by what they learn from the scriptures rather than helping scholars apply critical tools to the text.

2. Robert D. Hales, “Holy Scriptures: The Power of God unto Our Salvation,” *Ensign*, October 2006, 26–27; emphasis added.

3. “Introduction,” Book of Mormon.

4. Richard G. Scott, “The Power of Scripture,” *Ensign*, November 2011, 6.

5. David A. Bednar, “Because We Have Them before Our Eyes,” *Liabona*, April 2006, 18.

6. Richard G. Scott, “Acquiring Spiritual Knowledge,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 86; emphasis added.

7. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Of Things That Matter Most,” *Ensign*, November 2010, 20–21.