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MEETING PERSONAL CHALLENGES AND SOLVING PERSONAL PROBLEMS THROUGH THE WORDS OF CHRIST

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Presented at the AMCAP Convention
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Herein is presented a program designed to assist any person having a meaningful faith in God, the scriptures, and the prophets to successfully meet any personal-emotional problem that is psychogenic. It has and can be used by an individual working on his own, adjunctively with counseling, or in a group setting. The orientation instructions which follow were written to serve as a guide for an individual working on his own with a specific challenge or problem. However, they are also given to individuals using the program in the other two settings.

Meeting Personal Challenges
and Solving Personal Problems Through the Words of Christ

All of us have personal challenges that we need to meet and resolve effectively lest they become problems to us. How do we meet challenges most effectively? Heber C. Kimball stated, "We become degenerate when we receive principles that are less pure and perfect than the principles of God." (Journal of Discourses, 1966, 4:222) This suggests that an effective program to aid us must be built upon the principles of God. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated, "I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves." A program based upon correct principles facilitates self-government and enables one to be self-reliant rather than other-dependent. Nephi stated, "Feast upon the words of Christ (herein defined as the scriptures, the inspired teachings of modern day prophets [cf. D & C 68:4], and personal revelation), for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things ye should do." (2 Nephi 32:3) In commenting on this verse, Elder Neal A. Maxwell struck at the heart of Nephi's injunction with these thought-stirring words, "The living scriptures require that we feast upon them, not just nibble occasionally." ('The Living Scriptures from a Living God,' address given at BYU 3 March, 1980) The program described herein is built upon the idea that we can effectively meet personal challenges of life and solve life's problems by feasting on the words of Christ.

It is suggested that we best feast upon the words of Christ by meditating and pondering upon them. The prophet Joseph Smith stated, "...the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out." (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, compiled by Joseph Fielding Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1938, p. 137) The value of meditating in and pondering upon the scriptures is beautifully expressed in the following quotations:

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. (Joshua 1:8)

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. (Psalms 1:1-3. Cf. Psalms 119:130)

And while we [Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon] mediated upon these things, the Lord touched the eyes of our understandings and they were opened,..." (D & C 76:19)

The prophets have regularly counseled us to meet challenges and solve problems using Gospel truths. For example, "...but real as these challenges are, all of you need to drink in deeply the Gospel truths about the eternal nature of your individual identity and the uniqueness of your personality. You need, more and more, to feel the perfect love which our Father in Heaven has for you and to sense the value that he places upon you as an individual. Ponder upon these great truths, especially in those moments when (in the stillness of such anxieties you may experience as an individual) you might otherwise wonder and be perplexed." (Spencer W. Kimball, "The Role of Righteous Women," Ensign, November 1979, p. 103) "...It is irrational to hope to escape the lusts of the world without substituting for them as the subjects of our thoughts the things of the spirit..." (Marion G. Romney, Ensign, May 1980, p. 67)

Ponder means "to weigh mentally, think deeply about, deliberate, meditate..." Meditation has been defined as "a private devotion or spiritual exercise consisting in deep, continued reflection on a religious theme...study...reflection: continued application of the mind..." (Websters Third International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1971, p. 1403) As one reviews the scriptures, one notes often that the prophets therein commonly received additional personal revelation as they pondered and meditated on Gospel truths (see, for example, 1 Nephi 11:1-14). The suggested steps in this program to enable one to effectively meet personal challenges and solve personal problems are:

1. Determine a personal challenge, need, or problem--for example, to develop a stronger, more personal relationship with the Savior, to be more at peace with yourself, to love more fully, to find

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It is not only very important, but critical to have a correct understanding of the Savior, 2 Nephi 2:6-8, Psalms 23. To be specific is to facilitate success; to be general is to risk failure.

2. Locate scriptures and, as desired, thoughts from our modern day prophets and hymns (or other sacred music based on the scriptures), pertaining to your chosen challenge—for example, to develop a stronger, more personal relationship with the Savior, 2 Nephi 2:6-8, Psalms 23, Matthew 11:28-30, and John 3:16-17; to develop a more abundant love, 1 Corinthians 13; to increase self-confidence, D & C 121:45-46. Note also and extract pertinent portions of your patriarchal blessing. (For aid in locating appropriate scriptures, check the cross references in the scriptures, A Topical Guide to the Scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, ready references, and concordances as needed.)

3. It is not only very important, but critical to have a correct understanding of the principle(s) related to your area(s) of need. To help insure this correct understanding, carefully and prayerfully read the scriptures and your other selections. Link the scriptures together. Also link statements of our modern prophets with those of past ages; the prophets support and sustain each other. As you prayerfully ponder your selections you will find a "conceptual coalescence" occurring, a unity of thought, new and fuller meanings, and spiritual insights being made manifest to you. Find out the meanings of any words not fully understood in your selections. Note antonyms and synonyms of key words to broaden your understanding. You may wish to check unabridged, expository and Bible dictionaries, and/or other reference works.

4. Memorize the quotations and musical selections most pertinent and meaningful to you.

5. In addition to having a correct understanding of the principle(s) involved, it is essential that this understanding be internalized so as to become functional in your life. Follow the example of Nephi, "... I did liken all scriptures unto us, that it might be for our profit and learning," (1 Nephi 19:23) and personalize and liken unto yourself your selections. In so doing you will find them having the greatest personal value and impact. Some suggested ways are:

   a. Prayerfully write out the personal implications/applications of each selected quotation. This is a very important and critical step. For example, to the statement "I am a child of God," one person gave as personal implications and applications: "I have a God-like destiny. I have an unlimited potential. My Heavenly Father loves me and desires to assist me always. I have unfailing support."

   b. Use the word "I" in appropriate places. For example, if you were utilizing 1 Corinthians 13 to develop a more loving spirit—"I suffer long and am kind...I am not easily provoked...I think no evil," etc. If you can't recite such statements with conviction, you may wish instead to affirm statements like, "I am becoming more long suffering and kind, I am developing to the point where I will think no evil," etc. Daily affirmation of who and what we are becoming enhances our ability to become as we desire. However, to be effective, affirmations must be based on goals to which we are truly and fully committed, striving earnestly towards, and in which we have at least planted the seed of faith. (cf. Alma 32:36-43)

   c. At the beginning of each day, review any forthcoming major challenges in your selected area of personal need. Make a commitment to yourself and/or to the Lord in prayer to practice the chosen true principles in meeting the challenge(s).

   d. Use personal imagery as desired to facilitate and expedite the learning process. Research evidence indicates that if we are able to vividly experience a potential behavior in our minds, we may learn that behavior virtually as rapidly and well through imagining ourselves engaging in it as through actually practicing it. By visualizing the achievement of our goals, we are practicing success; by visualizing failure we are practicing failure. In learning, the brain does not appear to differentiate between that which is experienced directly and that which is vividly imagined. In a relaxed state with your eyes closed, imagine yourself thinking, feeling, and acting in accordance with the truths of your selected quotations in future challenging situations. Use all of the vividness possible in the imagery including details of the setting, people involved, sound, color, odors, etc. As faith is built on evidence, healthy and constructive thought patterns are built more effectively and quickly by utilizing greater detail in imagery. You may also wish to visualize significant failures of the past that remain unresolved or from which you believe you can still learn. That is, imagine them not as they occurred, but as they might have occurred if the truths you are focusing on had been fully applied. However, imagery time is usually better spent focusing on future than past situations.

   e. Write out specific thoughts, actions, and attitudes related to your challenges that you intend to engage in during the day.

   f. At the conclusion of each day, review its events and see in which experiences you applied the spirit of your selections by thoughts, words, and/or actions. If you did not respond as well as desired in some situations, determine what thoughts, words, and actions would have been more in harmony with the messages of your selections. Recognize the successes of the day, gratefully accept these successes, and ascertain why you were successful. Record your insights, spiritual experiences, challenges, successes, etc. in your daily journal. Reviewing these periodically will help you attain your
goals.

5. Following your review, renew and strengthen your commitment and make additional specific plans to meet future challenges in the spirit of the messages selected. This may be done in conjunction with your prayers and/or in an evening planning session. (cf. Psalms 63:5-6)

6. After you have personalized your quotations, in a quiet, comfortable atmosphere, and preferably in a state of relaxation, recite your personalizations of the quotations and often also the quotations. Do this at least once a day and preferably more often. It is generally better to recite vocally. Ponder and meditate upon the meanings of your selections and their applications to your life. Let these meanings and any personal revelation accompanying them abide deeply within you. You may also wish to record your selections on a cassette tape and listen to the recordings at various times during the day. Your selections will be more deeply impressed upon your mind and heart if listened to while relaxing. If you select sacred music to assist you, memorize it and sing, hum, or recall it as appropriate and needed throughout the day. Some find the scriptures set to music more powerful than the scriptures alone.

7. Pray and fast as appropriate. "Desiring, searching, and pondering over "the words of eternal life"--all three of them together, as important as they are, would be inadequate without prayer." (President Marion G. Romney, Conference Report, April 1973, p. 119)

"For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he..." (Proverbs 23:7) As Christ's thoughts and words become our thoughts and words, our ways will harmonize with His, and we will experience true freedom (cf. John 8:31-32).

Please note: You may be wondering, "How long will I need to follow this program in order to effectively meet the challenge or solve the problem that is facing me?"
The only accurate answer, but a very unsatisfying one, is, "It will take as long as it takes." It depends on how faithfully you implement the program, how much time you devote to it, how close your thought patterns are now to those needed to meet your concern, whether or not you have destructive thought patterns and habits that first need to be removed, and if so, how long you have had these, etc. Still very imprecise, but perhaps a little more satisfying is the answer that one should plan on focusing on a given concept for a minimum of one week, although it may take several weeks and even many months to achieve your desired goal.

Either when used in conjunction with individual counseling, or in a group setting, the therapist serves as a motivator and also assists in personalizing the scriptures and clarifying their application to the individual(s) as needed and desired. The primary challenge that has been found in using the program for the past nine months is that of the motivation and time management required in order for the participant to devote the necessary time. It is suggested that a minimum of 3-5 hours a week is necessary to achieve prompt, meaningful results.

When the program is used as a general approach to life's typical challenges and in a basically preventive manner, a given Gospel concept is introduced each week, (in the group setting, or with an individual as the individual becomes ready for a new concept.) The author firmly believes that if a person truly understands and has internalized and made functional in his life 25-30 basic scriptural concepts, and lives to receive the necessary personal words of Christ through revelation, that there is no challenge or problem of a personal-emotional nature but what he can successfully cope with it. The concepts included to date are:

Adversity and Affliction
Authority
Commitment--covenant
Faith
Forgiveness
Free agency--freedom
Happiness--joy
Honesty, honor, integrity
Humility, meekness
Jesus the Christ: Savior, Redeemer, Exemplar
Living by the Spirit
Love
Meditation, thoughts, thinking
Motivation
Obedience
Peace
Prayer
Purity--sanctification
Repentance
Self-control
Service--sacrifice
Sin and temptation
Unity--oneness
Who I Am
Work

For each of these concepts a list of highly-selected scriptures, and in some cases also statements of the modern prophets, has been or is being developed. They are prepared in the format illustrated below:

### WHO I AM

**Thought/Scripture**
**I am a child of God**

*Abraham 4:26*
The Gods took counsel and said "... Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness; and..."
we will give them dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth . . . ." (cf: Moses 2:26, Genesis 1:26-28; Acts 17:26-29)

*Genesis 1:27, 31*

"So God created man in his own image . . . And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (cf: Moses 2:27, 31; D & C 130:1)

Participants are encouraged to add favorite scriptures and statements from the prophets and also to select appropriate supplemental sacred music as desired. Under the supervision of this author, two students are now making an analysis of LDS Hymns and other sacred music and categorizing them as to the basic concepts involved and determining the scriptures upon which they are directly or indirectly based. (This is being done since we have not been able to locate any previous work of this kind.)

For those desiring to use this program in a group setting the following format has and is currently (with two new groups) being followed:

1. Group members are given an individual selection interview wherein the program and the necessary time and action commitments are briefly discussed to assure availability of the minimum time needed for a successful experience and to determine adequate commitment.

2. The first group activity consists of group rapport-building exercises such as having each person give a very brief biographical statement, share a special inspirational experience with the scriptures or the Gospel, and learn the name of each other group member.

3. The first concept to be focused on is then presented, discussed briefly and illustrations of personal implications-applications given. (The first three concepts to be used in a group setting and also with an individual, if the individual is using the program in a preventive, growth sense rather than to work on a specific concern, are 1) Who I Am; 2) Meditation, Thoughts and Thinking; and 3) Jesus the Christ: Savior, Redeemer, Exemplar.

The rationale behind this is that knowing who one is, having a personalized sense of identity, and establishing a more personal relationship with the Savior are critical to all of life’s challenges. The Meditation, Thoughts and Thinking concept is introduced in the beginning because it is central to the basic methodology of the program and what we meditate upon determines our feelings and subsequently our actions. After these three concepts are introduced, the others may be introduced in order of greatest felt need and relevance to the person(s) involved. Each program participant is encouraged to devote a minimum of one week to each concept, and to concentrate on only one concept at a time. With some special concerns, it is recognized that a person may need to focus on a given concept for several weeks or even months and then may wish to return periodically to a given concept previously focused on.

4. Participants are encouraged to keep a daily journal on sheets given to them like the accompanying sample sheet and are given illustrations of meaningful journal entries.

### Daily Journal

Please record each day any special thoughts, insights, spiritual experiences, feelings, behavioral changes, relationships changes, etc. that you think are related to the scriptures you have been pondering or other activities associated with the group. Also please describe the relationship/process involved between the two.

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5. In subsequent sessions, each individual is asked to share (a) the results of the week's activity, with any special, related inspirational experiences, and noteworthy successes and/or failures associated with the program; (b) illustrations of personal applications/implications. The latter are discussed to help make them as meaningful and helpful as possible. (Please note that individuals are not asked to share any special challenges or problems they are facing, but they often do.) Sometimes the facilitator also shares personal experiences with the program or anonymous experiences of others. If the program does not seem to be achieving the expected results with an individual, more care is taken to determine why and what procedural changes, if any, need to be made.

6. A new concept is then introduced, assuming that the individuals are ready to proceed to another.

This program is presently undergoing pilot testing, as has been the case since it was first developed. To date, the evaluative data available are basically anecdotal and clinical in nature. Individuals in the one group utilizing the program during the second block of Winter Semester 1980 at BYU gave the following evaluative responses at the conclusion of the group:

- What I Remember Most about this Group—the wealth of joyful insights and impetus for good in the scriptures—the "reaching upward" effect.

- In response to what effect the group had on me—desire and determination to ponder the scriptures and improve my life and my family's life by personalizing them.

- It amplified the problems I had, but this was good because it brought forth those things out in the open so that I could see them better and could resolve conflicts within myself by striving for the Spirit.

From the responses of individuals utilizing the program on their own, the following evaluative comments are given:

- Because of this program, I am resolved to meditate and apply the scriptures daily, involve my family, and then neighbors and friends in the same type of program.

- I became happier through the program and was able to pinpoint my problems. I can see that I can't blame everyone else for my problems.

- Not only have I learned more about the concepts that we have studied and have been helped with them, but I have learned how to use the scriptures throughout my life to solve my problems.

- As I have started the program, I have found that I have little time to think negative, degrading, and nasty thoughts because I always have a place to focus my thoughts on when I have nothing to think about. It has become richly rewarding.

An illustrative case study: A girl whom we shall call Nancy was referred to the author for counseling by her bishop because of a rather severe depression with accompanying suicidal thoughts. Among other unhealthy behaviors, the girl had tried to modify herself to fit into the groups in which she participated. That is, she would try to be like each different group was or like she thought they were. In the process she did not really enjoy her participation in groups, nor was she really well accepted. She further came to wonder who she really was, what she really believed, and what she could really call her own. In conjunction with counseling, Nancy started to ponder and meditate daily on statements from the scriptures and the prophets pertaining to "Who I Am." After three weeks of pondering and meditating, Nancy came in for her regular counseling session quite ecstatic. Among other things, she stated, "Since I was born a member of the church, I have known all my life that I was a child of God, but I have never really known that I was a child of God until now, and it makes all the difference." She stated that now she could go into a group and be herself and respond as she felt she ought to respond rather than as she felt group members were responding or desired to have her respond. This was a major breakthrough for Nancy. She had a few counseling sessions after that, but terminated her counseling at the end of the semester a markedly happier girl and functioning in significantly different ways. She also stated that she was ready to go home now and face directly some rather difficult family situations with her stepfather and also to be of greater assistance to some nonmember friends.

The participants in the group took the Symptom Check List-90-R both prior to the commencement of the group and immediately following the group experience. There are twelve scales on the symptom check list, nine independent clinical scales (e.g. depression, obsessive-compulsive, paranoid ideation, hostility, phobic anxiety, etc.) and three global scales. The group members averaged a positive change of one standard deviation over each of these scales, even though the group only lasted five weeks. This, of course, was a significant change. While there was no control group, members of another structured group, elimination of self defeating behaviors, and also counselees who experienced biofeedback training and a large group who experienced individual counseling also took the SCL-90-R, pre and post their treatment experiences. There were no significant differences in the mean change scores between the students receiving any one of these four treatment approaches. All made significant, positive changes. Hence, this brief study would suggest that this approach is not only supported by subjective evaluation data, but also by objective data.

The experiences with this program to date indicate that the Lord's promises to Joshua when he was charged to meditate in the scriptures day and night (Joshua 1:8) are being fulfilled in the lives of the participants: (1) his life would come to accord with the truths of the scriptures, (2) his way would be prosperous, and (3) he
would have good success.

If you use this program your notification of results would be very much appreciated as well as evaluative comments and suggestions for improvement—including the use of fewer, more, or different scriptures and statements from the prophets.