

# Comprehending the Character of God: A Key to Successful Relationships

*Kent R. Brooks*

*Kent R. Brooks is an associate professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.*

---

On a beautiful, warm Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1844, the Prophet Joseph Smith delivered the King Follett discourse. Many consider that April 7 general conference address, the last Joseph would give before his martyrdom less than three months later, to be his greatest. The sermon was given in “the groves” surrounding the Nauvoo Temple. Thousands heard the Prophet of the Restoration declare: “It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another.”<sup>1</sup> “If men do not comprehend the character of God,” he explained, “they do not comprehend themselves.” They cannot “comprehend anything, either that which is past or that which is to come.” They do not understand their own relationship to God. “Having a knowledge of God, we begin to know how to approach him, and how to ask so as to receive an answer. When we understand the character of God, and know how to come to Him, he begins to unfold the heavens to us.”<sup>2</sup>

The insight offered in those few sentences is profound, and the implications are myriad. Within those succinctly stated truths is found one of the most important keys to successful relationships—comprehending the character of God. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how our comprehension of the character of God facilitates the understanding of our own character, influences our personal relationship with God, and opens the door to better husband-wife relationships.

## Our Personal Relationship with God

*“If men do not comprehend the character of God they do not comprehend themselves.”*<sup>3</sup>

What is the character of God? In the Lectures on Faith, Joseph Smith taught that God is merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abundant in goodness, unchangeable, no respecter of persons, loving, a God of truth (He cannot lie), long-suffering, and forgiving.<sup>4</sup> “Such is the weakness of human nature,” he further explained, “and so great the frailties and imperfections of men, that unless they believed that these excellencies existed in the divine character, the faith necessary to salvation could not exist.”<sup>5</sup> We would be overcome by doubt and fear and give up all hope of salvation. Thus, it is true that “life eternal” is to know God the Father and Jesus Christ (John 17:3).

How does comprehending the character of God help us comprehend our own character? Only when we comprehend the character of God, and who He is, can we really understand who we are and what our character should become. The Council of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles declared: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the *image of God*. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a *divine nature* and destiny.”<sup>6</sup> Our divine nature is comprised of “the same capabilities, powers and faculties” possessed by our heavenly parents, “although in an *infantile* state.”<sup>7</sup> Through faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel, we can develop those embryonic attributes to maturity, become “*partakers* of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4; emphasis added), and have the image of God engraven upon our countenances (see Alma 5:19). It is our divine destiny to be heirs of eternal life, to become “priests and kings . . . [and] gods, even the sons of God . . . [and to] dwell in the presence of God . . . forever and ever” (D&C 76:56, 58, 62).

What is our relationship to God? “You are His child,” declared President Gordon B. Hinckley. “You are His child all the time, not just when you are good. You are His child when you are bad. You have within you . . . a portion of divinity that is real and tremendous and marvelous and wonderful.”<sup>8</sup> “What could inspire one to purity and worthiness more,” asked Elder Boyd K. Packer, “than to possess a spiritual confirmation that we are the children of God? What could inspire a more lofty regard for oneself, or engender more love for mankind?”<sup>9</sup> That assurance, noted Elder Dallin H. Oaks, can act as a “potent antidepressant. It can strengthen each of us to make righteous choices and to seek the best that

is within us. . . . [It can give us the] self respect and motivation to move against the problems of life.”<sup>10</sup> It allows us “to face trouble with courage, disappointment with cheerfulness, and triumph with humility. . . . We cannot sincerely hold this conviction without experiencing a profound new sense of strength and power, even the strength to live the commandments of God, the power to resist the temptations of Satan.”<sup>11</sup>

Jacob, the great Book of Mormon prophet, said, “The Spirit speaketh the truth and lieth not. Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are” (Jacob 4:13). In truth, we really *are* the literal spirit offspring of Deity, and we really *do* have a divine nature and the potential to become like God. Yet it is also “the truth,” when we are born into mortality, that we inherit a fallen nature. We are “cut off both temporally and spiritually from the presence of [God]” (Alma 42:7). We are subject to all the effects of the Fall, including disease, suffering, and death. The more we comprehend the character of God and come to a “knowledge of [His] goodness,” the more we are “awakened . . . to a sense of [our own] nothingness, and [to our] worthless and fallen state” (Mosiah 4:5). To the degree we yield to temptation, we “become carnal, sensual, and devilish” (Alma 42:10), and enemies to God (see Mosiah 3:19). When we comprehend that reality, we understand more clearly what our relationship to God must be and what we must do to become like our Heavenly Father and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

Salvation is to be gained only on the terms God has set. The plan of the Father, accepted by each one of us in premortality, must once again be embraced in mortality. We must “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32), “relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19). “Please remember this one thing,” said President Howard W. Hunter, “If our lives and our faith are centered upon Jesus Christ and His restored gospel, nothing can ever go permanently wrong. On the other hand, if our lives are not centered on the Savior and His teachings, no other success can ever be permanently right.”<sup>12</sup>

The more we comprehend the character of God and seek to emulate that character, the more we love God, the more we know He loves us, and the more we love others. “We love him, because he first loved us. If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:19–20). “In order for us to love God,” taught President Harold B. Lee, “we have to learn how to . . . love our brothers and our sisters.”<sup>13</sup> Is that also true of having love for ourselves? Are we liars if we say we love God and hate ourselves? Satan, “a liar from

the beginning” (D&C 93:25) and “the father of all lies” (2 Nephi 2:18), “delights to have us put ourselves down,” said Elder Neal A. Maxwell. “Self-contempt is of Satan; there is none of it in heaven.”<sup>14</sup> Some people confuse self-hatred with humility. But “humility,” said Elder Maxwell, “is not the disavowal of our worth; rather, it is the sober realization of how much we are valued by God.”<sup>15</sup> Self-criticism and self-hatred may also, at times, be subtle forms of pride. If our motive for self-contempt is to make sure others do not *see* us as prideful, but to ensure that we *are seen* as humble, we are guilty of doing things to be “seen of men” (3 Nephi 13:5). We want others to be as proud of our humility as we are.

All of us do have occasions when we are disappointed with ourselves and feel a sense of personal failure. Even Nephi lamented, “Notwithstanding the great goodness of the Lord, in showing me his great and marvelous works, my heart exclaimeth: O wretched man that I am!” (2 Nephi 4:17). It is important, at such times, that we learn to “distinguish more clearly between divine discontent and the devil’s dissonance, between dissatisfaction with self and disdain for self. We need the first and must shun the second. . . . We can contemplate how far we have already come in the climb along the pathway to perfection; it is usually much further than we acknowledge. . . . [And] we can make quiet but more honest inventories of our strengths. Most of us are dishonest bookkeepers and need confirming ‘outside auditors.’”<sup>16</sup> When we comprehend the character of God, we know we can approach our Heavenly Father and find a loving and true Friend who recognizes and appreciates, more than anyone else, our strengths and how far we have come. From a voice familiar, we hear the whispered reaffirmation that we are his beloved sons and daughters. We are reminded, even when we struggle to see our own worth, that in the “sight of God” (D&C 18:10) we possess such redeeming value that the Savior, the “greatest of all” (D&C 19:18), was willing to give His life for us. “What greater witness can [we] have than from God?” (D&C 6:23).

Self-esteem is important to relationships. Our choice of companions can be a reflection of how we feel about ourselves and how we think God feels about us. The desire and willingness to draw near to others and to allow them to get close to us is often determined by our feelings of self-worth and self-confidence. Some people fall short of the mark of self-esteem (see Jacob 4:14). They succumb to self-hatred and relentless self-criticism and find it increasingly difficult to love their fellowmen or to receive love, praise, or appreciation from them. Other people go beyond the mark of self-esteem and are puffed up with prideful arrogance. They “elevate [themselves] above others and

diminish them.” They are guilty of “faultfinding, gossiping, backbiting, murmuring, living beyond [their] means, envying, coveting, withholding gratitude and praise that might lift another, and being unforgiving and jealous.” They become selfish and contentious, “are easily offended and hold grudges.” They “do not receive counsel or correction easily” and tend to “justify and rationalize their frailties and failures.”<sup>17</sup>

To establish healthy relationships, we must identify and reach the *mark* of self-esteem. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “Since self-esteem controls ultimately our ability to love God, to love others, and to love life, nothing is more central than our need to build *justifiable* self-esteem.”<sup>18</sup> *Justifiable* self-esteem is the mark we should strive for. What constitutes justifiable self-esteem? President Benson once taught, “If we love God, do His will, and fear His judgment more than men’s, we will have self-esteem.”<sup>19</sup> Those three keys, I believe, are the seeds of justifiable self-esteem. Each one finds its roots in our relationship with God and is nourished by our comprehension of His character. Let’s consider each key.

## Love God

How do we demonstrate our love of God? “Obedience is the most genuine way,” declared President Howard W. Hunter.<sup>20</sup> Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments. . . . If [ye] love me . . . keep my words” (John 14:15, 23). Disobedience “pulls a man down into despondency and despair,” said President Ezra Taft Benson. “While a man may take some temporary pleasure in sin, the end result is unhappiness. . . . Sin creates disharmony with God and is depressing to the spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Service is another way we show our love of God. “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26–28). “The only measure of true greatness,” taught President Benson “is how close a man can become like Jesus . . . and those who love Him most will be most like Him.”<sup>22</sup> “[The Savior] demonstrated that man, through the love of God and through kindness and charity to His fellows, could achieve His highest potential.”<sup>23</sup> “Do you want to be happy?” asked President Gordon B. Hinckley. Then “forget yourself and get lost in this great cause. Lend your efforts to helping people. . . . You will come to know a happiness that you have never known before if you will do that.”<sup>24</sup>

In December 1831, Newel K. Whitney was called to be the second bishop of the Church when Bishop Edward Partridge was asked

to go to Missouri and preside over the Saints there. Newel was overwhelmed by the call. All he could see was his lack of experience and ability. He felt inadequate to answer the Prophet's call. He expressed his concerns to Joseph Smith, saying, "I cannot *see* a bishop in myself, Brother Joseph; but if you say it's the Lord's will, I'll try." The Prophet responded: "You need not take my word alone. . . . Go and ask Father for yourself."<sup>25</sup> He knew if Newel would take the focus off *his inadequacies and weaknesses, placing it instead on the Lord's adequacies and strengths*, he would learn for himself that God makes up the difference for those who are obedient and serve Him with their "heart and a willing mind" (D&C 64:34). Brother Whitney did just as the Prophet counseled. He took his problem to the Lord. As he knelt in prayer, he heard a voice from heaven, saying: "Thy strength is in me." He went to Joseph Smith and told him he was willing and ready to accept the call.<sup>26</sup> He was an exemplary bishop. His faithfulness endeared him to the Prophet, who referred to him as "chearfull and patient and a true Brother."<sup>27</sup> Years later, he said of Brother Whitney, "Thou art a faithful friend in whom the afflicted sons of men can confide, with the most perfect safety. . . . Thou knowest not how strong those ties are that bind my soul and heart to thee."<sup>28</sup>

If we "love God with all [our] might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient" (Moroni 10:32) and we will have *justifiable* self-esteem. "All things work together for good to them that love God" (Romans 8:28).

### Do the Will of God

The more we comprehend the character of God, the easier it is to know the will of God. In turn, the more we do His will, the better we know Him. "For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?" (Mosiah 5:13). How else can we know the will of the Lord?

We can know the will of the Lord by looking to the prophet. One of the purposes of a prophet is to seek the will of the Lord for his people (see Amos 3:7; D&C 68:4). President Hinckley testified: "I am satisfied that the peace and the progress and the prosperity of this people lie in doing the will of the Lord as that will is articulated by him who is the servant of the Lord—the President of the Church."<sup>29</sup>

We can know the will of the Lord by personal revelation from the Holy Ghost (see 2 Nephi 32:5). "Inspiration," said Elder Richard G. Scott "is to know the will of the Lord. Power is the capability to

accomplish that inspired will.”<sup>30</sup> Prayer is a key to personal revelation. Elder Boyd K. Packer said, “Prayer is so essential a part of revelation that without it the veil may remain closed to you. . . . Prayer is *your* personal key to heaven. The lock is on your side of the veil.”<sup>31</sup> “Answers to prayer,” taught President Benson, “come most often by a still voice and are discerned by our deepest, innermost *feelings*. I tell you that you can know the will of God concerning yourselves if you will take the time to pray and to listen.”<sup>32</sup>

We can know the will of the Lord by the callings that come through priesthood channels. Elder Packer taught: “The willingness of Latter-day Saints to respond to calls to serve is a representation of their desire to do the will of the Lord. . . . Our baptism is a call to lifelong service to Christ. . . . But the response to calls, to positions, is only a small part of the service given by members of the Church. I see two kinds of service: one, the service we render when we are called to serve in the Church; the other, the service we willingly give to those around us because we are taught to care.”<sup>33</sup>

We can know the will of the Lord by being temple worthy. Whether we have already been through the temple or are preparing to do so in the future, “temple worthiness,” said President Howard W. Hunter, “ensures that our lives are in harmony with the will of the Lord, and we are attuned to receive His guidance in our lives.”<sup>34</sup>

Knowing the will of God and doing it require faith and submissiveness. Elder Richard G. Scott said: “Our earnest prayers are answered when they conform to the will of the Lord. Since we cannot perfectly understand His will, we must walk with faith. He is all knowing, and His decisions are perfect. The fact that our finite capacity does not let us understand all of His dealings with man does not limit Him from blessing us. His will is our best choice in life, whether or not we fully understand it.”<sup>35</sup> We must let our will be swallowed up in the will of the Lord. “Pride,” said President Benson, “is characterized by ‘What do I want out of life?’ rather than by ‘What would God have me do with my life?’ It is self-will as opposed to God’s will.”<sup>36</sup>

William Smith, the younger brother of the Prophet Joseph, was known to have a willful and contentious spirit. It plagued him all his life. Still, he was a man of great capacity. He was ordained an Apostle on February 15, 1835. Often quick-tempered, William exploded during a council meeting when it was suggested that his actions were out of line. Over the next several days, his bitter feelings festered, and he again erupted in anger toward Joseph and Hyrum. The brothers meekly tried to calm him down, but the irate William stormed out of

the house saying he wanted nothing more to do with them or with the Church. For four days Joseph prayed for William. The Lord spoke to the Prophet, saying that if William would humble himself and repent, “I will yet make him a polished shaft in my quiver, in bringing down the wickedness and abominations of men and their [*sic*] shall be none mightier than he in his day and generation.”<sup>37</sup>

Joseph continued to reach out forgivingly to William. Nearly six weeks later, William wrote to Joseph, feeling too ashamed to face him in person. He said he felt unworthy even to be called his brother and suggested it would be best for him to resign from the apostleship. He said: “You know my passions and the danger of falling from so high a station.”<sup>38</sup> The Prophet replied: “God requires the will of his creatures, to be swallowed up in his will.” He told William it was not the will of the Lord that he resign from the Twelve and pleaded with his brother to make “one tremendous effort . . . [to] overcome your passions, and please God.” Forsaking his apostleship, he explained, was to be unwilling “to make that sacrifice that God requires at your hands and is to incur his displeasure.”<sup>39</sup> Sadly, William did not respond to the pleadings of the Prophet. Unwilling to do the will of the Lord, he was eventually dropped from the Quorum of the Twelve and was excommunicated from the Church.

President Harold B. Lee said, “All that is contrary to the will of God is as poison to your spiritual life”<sup>40</sup> and to your self-esteem. But “he that endureth in faith and doeth my will . . . [and] keepeth my commandments I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and the same shall be in him a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life” (D&C 63:20, 23). If we do the will of God, we will have justifiable self-esteem.

### **Fear the Judgment of God More Than the Judgments of Men**

Many today seek for self-esteem in physical beauty, popularity, youthfulness, money, possessions, power, or positions. Their pursuit of such things is often endless because no matter how much they acquire, or regardless of the amount of worldly acceptance or praise they receive, it is insufficient to satisfy their insatiable appetites. As someone once said, “You can never get enough of what you don’t need, because what you don’t need won’t satisfy you.” Jacob admonished the people of his day to “not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor your labor for that which cannot satisfy” (2 Nephi 9:51). President Ezra Taft Benson said: “The proud stand more in fear of men’s judgment than of God’s judgment. . . . ‘What will men think of me?’ weighs heavier than ‘What will God think of me?’ . . . Fear of men’s judgment manifests itself in competition for men’s approval. The proud love ‘the



praise of men more than the praise of God.’ (John 12:42–43.) Our motives for the things we do are where the sin is manifest. Jesus said He did ‘always those things’ that pleased God. (John 8:29.) Would we not do well to have the pleasing of God as *our* motive?”<sup>41</sup>

Following the loss of the 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon, the Lord chastised the Prophet Joseph saying, “And behold, how oft you have transgressed the commandments and the laws of God, and have gone on in the persuasions of men. . . . You should not have feared man more than God. . . . If thou are not aware thou wilt fall” (D&C 3:6–7, 9). Just over two years later, one of the Three Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, David Whitmer, received a similar rebuke: “Behold, I say unto you, David, that you have feared man and have not relied on me for strength as you ought. But your mind has been on the things of the earth more than on the things of me, your Maker, and the ministry whereunto you have been called; and you have not given heed unto my Spirit, and to those who were set over you, but have been persuaded by those whom I have not commanded” (D&C 30:1–2). Some of the early missionaries who were sent to tell the world of the Restoration and of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon would “not open their mouths . . . because of the fear of man.” The Lord told them he was “not well pleased” and that his “anger [was] kindled against them.” If not more faithful, he warned, even that which they had would be “taken away” (D&C 60:2–3).

President Hinckley once told of an Asian convert who exemplified what it means to fear the judgment of God more than the judgments of men. He said:

Mine has been the opportunity to meet many wonderful men and women in various parts of the world. A few of them have left an indelible impression upon me. One such person was a naval officer from Asia, a brilliant young man who had been brought to the United States for advanced training. Some of his associates in the United States Navy, whose behavior had attracted him, shared with him at his request their religious beliefs. He was not a Christian, but he was interested. They told him of the Savior of the world, of Jesus born in Bethlehem, who gave his life for all mankind. They told him of the appearance of God, the Eternal Father, and the resurrected Lord to the boy Joseph Smith. They spoke of modern prophets. They taught him the gospel of the Master. The Spirit touched his heart, and he was baptized.

He was introduced to me just before he was to return to his native land. We spoke of these things, and then I said, “Your people are not Christians. You come from a land where Christians have had a difficult time. What will happen when you return home a Christian and, more particularly, a Mormon Christian?”

His face clouded, and he replied, “My family will be disappointed. I suppose they will cast me out. They will regard me as dead. As for my future and my career, I assume that all opportunity will be foreclosed against me.”

I asked, “Are you willing to pay so great a price for the gospel?”

His dark eyes, moistened by tears, shone from his handsome brown face as he answered, “It’s true, isn’t it?”

Ashamed at having asked the question, I responded, “Yes, it’s true.”

To this he replied, “Then what else matters?”<sup>42</sup>

If we fear the judgment of God more than the judgments of men and desire to please God more than we desire to please men, we will have justifiable self-esteem. “I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end. Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory” (D&C 76:5–6).

### Husband-Wife Relationships

*“There are but a very few beings in the world who understand rightly the character of God. The great majority of mankind do not comprehend anything, either that which is past, or that which is to come.”*<sup>43</sup>

“The things of God,” the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out.”<sup>44</sup> President Spencer W. Kimball said:

One cannot know God nor understand his works or plans unless he follows the laws which govern. The spiritual realm, which is just as absolute as is the physical, cannot be understood by the laws of the physical. You do not learn to make electric generators in a seminary. Neither do you learn certain truths about spiritual things in a physics laboratory. You must go to the spiritual laboratory, use the facilities available there, and comply with the governing rules. Then you may know of these truths just as surely, or more surely, than the scientist knows the metals, or the acids, or other elements. It matters little whether one is a plumber, or a banker, or a farmer, for these occupations are secondary; what is most important is what one knows and believes concerning his *past* and his *future* and what he does about it.<sup>45</sup>

When we comprehend the “things of God,” including His divine character and plan of happiness, we are able to understand what has been revealed about our *premortal past* and our *postmortal future*. Further, and perhaps more important in terms of relationships, we are able to understand our *mortal* relationship *past* and our potential *mortal* relationship *future*. That understanding brings a change in perspective.

As we look to the *past*, we recognize more fully the guiding, protecting, magnifying hand of the Lord and are filled with gratitude for the goodness of God. We see purpose in the challenges and experiences of the *present* and humbly acknowledge our dependence upon the Lord. We look to the *future* with faith and hope and optimism, confident that the blessings, the powers, and the revelations of heaven will be unfolded to us. The more we come to know the character of God, the more we trust God, the more we desire to do His will, and the less unsettled we are about things we do not yet fully comprehend.

Thirty years after Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, Nephi recorded some key events that transpired between 600 and 570 BC. As he began his record of the *past*, he noted that he had “seen many afflictions” yet had been “highly favored of the Lord” (1 Nephi 1:1). Many of the afflictions he detailed came from within the family unit. But it was also within those same challenging, often disappointing, relationship experiences that Nephi recognized and most appreciated the favor of the Lord. His deepened comprehension of the character of God shaped his perspective of those memories. Nephi saw the *opportunity* in his difficulties. Laman and Lemuel saw the *difficulty* in their opportunities. Nephi desired to “see,” “hear,” and “know” the things of God, knowing they are made known to anyone who will “diligently seek” them (1 Nephi 10:17). Laman and Lemuel refused even to inquire of the Lord, saying, “The Lord maketh no such thing known unto us” (1 Nephi 15:9). Nephi “remembered the words of the Lord” (1 Nephi 4:14) and the great things God had done for their fathers. Laman and Lemuel repeatedly forgot them (see 1 Nephi 7:10–12). When commanded to return to Jerusalem to get the brass plates, Laman and Lemuel, who failed to comprehend the character of God, murmured, “It is a hard thing. . . . How is it possible?” (1 Nephi 3:5, 31). Nephi, on the other hand, knew the character of God and said, “I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them” (1 Nephi 3:7), “wherefore can ye doubt?” (1 Nephi 4:3). The more Nephi comprehended the character of God, the greater became his faith in God. He obeyed the Lord’s command with a “go and do” (1 Nephi 3:7) attitude, was “led by the Spirit” (1 Nephi 4:6), “received much strength of the Lord” (1 Nephi 4:31), and obtained the plates of brass.

The contrast between Laman and Lemuel and Nephi was evident again when the commandment came to build a ship. Laman and Lemuel, who did not believe it could be done, murmured and complained. They called Nephi a “fool” (1 Nephi 17:17), said he was “lacking in judgment” (1 Nephi 17:19), and expressed doubt that Nephi had been

or could be “instructed of the Lord” (1 Nephi 17:18). Nephi reminded them of past miracles wrought among their ancestors—freedom from four hundred years of bondage, the parting of the Red Sea, deliverance from the armies of Pharaoh, manna from heaven, and water from a rock. They were led by day and given light by night (see 1 Nephi 17:23–30)—all seemingly impossible occurrences. “And now,” he asked his disbelieving brothers, “if the Lord has such great power, and *has* wrought so many miracles among the children of men, how is it that he cannot instruct me, that I should build a ship?” (1 Nephi 17:51; emphasis added). Nephi, who knew the Lord “loveth those who will have him to be their God” (1 Nephi 17:40), worked hard and did “pray oft,” and the Lord “showed unto [him] great things” (1 Nephi 18:3) whereby he could complete the ship and safely cross the sea.

As Nephi recounted those and other events, his comprehension of the character of God enabled him to see more than a past filled with an unceasing succession of problems and afflictions. Rather, Nephi became a witness of the goodness, the mercy, and the love of God while in the midst of those ordeals. His desire in preserving the memory of those experiences was to “show” future readers of the Book of Mormon “that the tender mercies of the Lord are over *all* those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith” (1 Nephi 1:20; emphasis added) and that “he inviteth . . . *all* to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth *none* that come unto him. . . . *All* are alike unto God” (2 Nephi 26:33; emphasis added).

Nephi recorded a tender interchange that occurred between Lehi and Sariah while the sons were in Jerusalem seeking the plates. Sariah was overcome by worry and feared that her sons had perished. Her mourning gave way to murmuring. She complained against Lehi. Lehi responded with words of consolation and reassurance, as he spoke of the past and the future. He said: “If I *had not* seen the things of God in a vision *I should not* have known the goodness of God, but *had tarried* at Jerusalem, and *had perished* with my brethren. . . . I know that the Lord *will* deliver my sons out of the hands of Laban, and [*will*] bring them down again unto us in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:4–5; emphasis added). Lehi’s testimony and words of comfort deepened Sariah’s understanding of the past and strengthened her faith to meet the challenges of the future. She testified: “Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them” (1 Nephi 5:8).

The faithful of Lehi's family did not naively believe the Lord would magically transport them directly to the promised land, allowing them to bypass the wilderness experience. Their understanding of the character of God was deep enough to prevent such a misreading of the divine plan. Still, they had faith that if they were righteous, a loving, merciful, gracious God could lead them into "the more fertile parts of the wilderness" (1 Nephi 16:16) and would, "in process of time" (Moses 7:21), lead them to their promised destination. So it is with each one of us. Mortality is a high-adventure wilderness experience—a time of testing and proving. It is not the promised land. As we make our way through that wilderness as families, we can all be assured that we will encounter many trials and afflictions—some of them the result of family life itself. Many of those challenges will leave us wondering and perhaps wandering to find the nearest exit. Our earthly experiences have the potential to draw us nearer to God and to one another in families or to drive us apart.

Comprehending the character of God makes it easier to have faith in Him and to recognize our absolute dependence upon Him. It also enables us to understand our *marriage past* and to have hope in our *marriage future*. As we glance backward, our thoughts and conversations focus more upon the *fertile* parts of the wilderness than they do upon the wilderness; more upon the good in our partners and in our marriage than the bad; more upon the many ways in which we have been highly favored of the Lord than they do upon the many afflictions we have had to suffer. We see blessings and miracles and one manifestation after another of the goodness, the mercy, and the love of God. Stirred by the pleasant remembrances of the *past*, we look forward to the *future* with faith and hope and optimism. We believe the best is yet to come, not that it has already come to pass. "The basis of all righteous hope," affirmed Elder John H. Groberg, "is the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In Him all hope has its existence. Without Him there is no hope. But because He *was* and is and ever *will be*, there *was*, *is*, and ever *will be* hope. . . . In Christ who lives and loves and works miracles now, there is always hope."<sup>46</sup> Those who comprehend the character of God know that to be true.

Brigham Young testified: "If the Latter-day Saints will wake up to their privileges, and exercise faith in the name of Jesus Christ, and live in the enjoyment of the fulness of the Holy Ghost . . . there is nothing on the face of the earth that they could ask for, that would not be given to them. The Lord is waiting to be very gracious unto this people, and to pour out upon them [blessings]."<sup>47</sup> "The Lord, better than anyone,"

said Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “knows our *past* and what deprivations we may have experienced, but he also knows our *possibilities*; he will not let the *past* hold the *future* hostage. But we must trust him and ‘try the experiment’ of his gospel’s goodness. A mere ‘desire to believe’ is a ‘square one.’ But he will meet us even there!”<sup>48</sup> “By small and simple things [all *we* can do] are great things [what the *Lord* will do] brought to pass” (Alma 37:6).

Sometimes we fail to live up to our privileges in marriage because of fear. Fear, the enemy of faith, leads to doubt, pessimism, and even despair. Fear causes us to lose the faith to hang on or the faith to let go of an offense, hurt, or betrayal. Fear can paralyze us with the belief we can never measure up to all that is expected of us—never please or make our spouses happy. In some marriages, fear creates doubt and a loss of all hope that things could ever change and get better. “Hope cometh of faith” (Ether 12:4). Faith enables us to hope for things we have not seen (see Ether 12:6) and is the catalyst of miracles (see Ether 12:16, 18), including the miracle of making weak things (weak spouses or weak marriages) strong (see Ether 12:27). A recent national study found that 86 percent of the couples surveyed who reported being unhappy in their marriages but were determined not to give up and divorce described their marriages five years later as either “very happy” or “quite happy.”<sup>49</sup> “If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth” (Mark 9:23).

Some fail to live up to their privileges in marriage because they lack vision and understanding of what those privileges are or what is required to access them. “Such members,” noted Elder Neal A. Maxwell, “move out a few hundred yards from the entrance to the straight and narrow path and repose on the first little rise, thinking, ‘Well, this is all there is to it’; and they end up living far below their possibilities.”<sup>50</sup> Even when they believe they *are* living after the “manner of happiness” (2 Nephi 5:27) and *are* partaking of the fruit that is supposed to “make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10) and be “sweet, above all” (1 Nephi 8:11), they are disappointed by the blandness of it all. Disillusioned, they may become “weary in well-doing” (D&C 64:33) or may conclude that the joy supposedly available “in this life” (Moses 5:10) must, in reality, be meant for another time, for another place, or for some other couple. Feeling trapped, or even victimized by their circumstances, they slip into a survival mode, believing all they can do is try to make the best of a tough situation.

The Prophet Joseph Smith declared, “Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the

path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God.”<sup>51</sup> If we pursue that path of happiness, *hungering* and *thirsting* for that which is “most desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:22) and “the most joyous to the soul” (1 Nephi 11:23), it is our privilege, as sons and daughters of God and as husbands and wives to be happy, to experience joy, even “joy unspeakable” (1 Peter 1:8) in this life. We cannot come to know true joy without also experiencing misery (see 2 Nephi 2:23). “To suffer some anxiety, some depression, some disappointment, even some failure is normal,” said President Boyd K. Packer. But we must help our members understand, he said, that “if they have a good, miserable day once in a while, or several in a row, to stand steady and face them. Things will straighten out.”<sup>52</sup>

To “lay hold upon every good thing” (Moroni 7:19) in marriage or in relationships, we must be willing to let go of the bad and negative things that cause us to disbelieve and lose hope. “You can’t, you don’t, build out of pessimism or cynicism,” said President Gordon B. Hinckley. “You look with optimism, work with faith, and things happen.”<sup>53</sup> Personal repentance may be necessary to do that. Sin (of commission or omission) causes our hearts to become “past feeling” (1 Nephi 17:45), our ears to become “dull of hearing,” and our eyes to be unable to “see afar off” (Moses 6:27). Each step we take to repent and come unto Christ restores us to our senses. “In Christ [comes] every good thing” (Moroni 7:22), including “exceeding joy” to the “truly penitent and humble seeker of happiness” (Alma 27:18). President Harold B. Lee promised husbands and wives that if they would “resolve . . . [to] do everything in their power to please each other in things that are right, even to the sacrifice of their own pleasures, their own appetites, their own desires,” they would find great happiness in marriage.<sup>54</sup> Often, the “mighty change” of heart (Alma 5:14) most needed in marriage is the willingness to place the happiness of a spouse ahead of our own.

Comprehending the character of God is a key to happiness in marriage. When we are like God—merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abundant in goodness, unchangeable (constant), loving, truthful, long-suffering, and forgiving—we are happy and desire to bring happiness to others. The more we partake of the divine nature, the more we develop the mind of Christ and the greater becomes our desire to do the works of Christ. Although no one but the Savior can atone for the sins of another, we can, in a sense, “participate in an atonement,” said Elder Packer. “When we are willing to restore to others that which we have not taken, or heal wounds that we did not inflict, or pay a debt

that we did not incur, we are emulating His part in the Atonement.”<sup>55</sup> The Savior felt the weight not only of our sins but also of our pains, afflictions, sicknesses, and infirmities. He experienced those things, in the flesh, so that “his bowels may be filled with mercy” and so that He would know how to “succor his people” (Alma 7:11–12). To *succor* is to *run to*. In times of pain, affliction, sickness, and infirmity, the Savior runs to us—to comfort, to heal, and to lift. That is His character, and if it becomes ours, there will be “joy and rejoicing” (D&C 124:101) in time and throughout all eternity. **RE**

---

## Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 345.
2. Smith, *Teachings*, 343, 350.
3. Smith, *Teachings*, 345.
4. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 41–42 (lecture 3, paragraphs 12–20).
5. Smith, *Lectures on Faith*, 42 (3:20).
6. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102; emphasis added.
7. Lorenzo Snow, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 14:300; emphasis added.
8. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 160.
9. Boyd K. Packer, *Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 292.
10. Dallin H. Oaks, “Powerful Ideas,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 25.
11. Thomas S. Monson, “Yellow Canaries with Gray on Their Wings,” *Ensign*, August 1987, 2.
12. Howard W. Hunter, “Fear Not, Little Flock,” *1988–89 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1989), 112.
13. Harold B. Lee, *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 610.
14. Neal A. Maxwell, “Notwithstanding My Weakness,” *Ensign*, November 1976, 14.
15. Neal A. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 127.
16. Maxwell, *All These Things*, 127.
17. Ezra Taft Benson, “Beware of Pride,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 4.
18. Neal A. Maxwell, *A More Excellent Way: Essays on Leadership for Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967), 90.
19. Benson, “Beware of Pride,” 6.
20. Howard W. Hunter, *The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 21.
21. Ezra Taft Benson, “Do Not Despair,” *Ensign*, October 1986, 2.
22. Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City:



Bookcraft, 1988), 327–28.

23. Benson, *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 275.

24. Hinckley, *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, 597.

25. B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1948–57), 1:271n20.

26. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 1:223–24.

27. Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 239; original spelling retained.

28. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 5:108.

29. Gordon B. Hinckley, “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet,” *Tambuli*, October 1992, 5.

30. Richard G. Scott, “The Plan for Happiness and Exaltation,” *Ensign*, October 1981, 12.

31. Boyd K. Packer, “Personal Revelation: The Gift, the Test, and the Promise,” *Ensign*, November 1994, 59; emphasis in original.

32. Ezra Taft Benson, “To the Rising Generation,” *New Era*, June 1986, 8; emphasis in original.

33. Boyd K. Packer, “Called to Serve,” *Ensign*, November 1997, 6.

34. Howard W. Hunter, “The Temple of Nauvoo,” *Ensign*, September 1994, 62–63.

35. Richard G. Scott, “Obtaining Help from the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 86.

36. Ezra Taft Benson, “Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” *Ensign*, May 1986, 6–7.

37. Smith, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 71.

38. Smith, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 111.

39. Smith, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 115.

40. Lee, *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 264.

41. Benson, “Beware of Pride,” 5; emphasis added.

42. Gordon B. Hinckley, *Be Thou an Example* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 3.

43. Smith, *Teachings*, 343.

44. Smith, *Teachings*, 137.

45. Spencer W. Kimball, “Absolute Truth,” *Ensign*, September 1978, 5; emphasis added.

46. John H. Groberg, “There Is Always Hope,” *Hope* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), 48, 65; emphasis added.

47. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 11:114.

48. Neal A. Maxwell, *Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 49; emphasis added.

49. Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 148–49.

50. Neal A. Maxwell, *Men and Women of Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991), 2.

51. Smith, *Teachings*, 255–56.

52. Boyd K. Packer, “Solving Emotional Problems in the Lord’s Own Way,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 91.

53. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Words of the Prophet: The Spirit of Optimism," *New Era*, July 2001, 4.
54. Lee, *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 240.
55. Boyd K. Packer, "The Brilliant Morning of Forgiveness," *Ensign*, November 1995, 18.