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The Journey of Lifelong Learning

Elder Robert D. Hales

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Today in this devotional I am honored to be addressing those committed to lifelong learning.

Our quest for knowledge and our journey of eternal progression began long before our mortal existence. We are given a clear understanding that during the Council in Heaven we used our agency, choosing to come to earth and participate in mortality. In choosing to come to this earth, we were choosing the opportunity to progress, to grow, and to gain more knowledge. And in that process of learning and coming to earth, taking upon us a mortal body to gain knowledge and to experience mortality is an essential part of our eternal learning and progression.

The theme of lifelong learning is important because for Latter-day Saints the lifelong pursuit of knowledge is not only secular but spiritual. We understand that gaining knowledge is essential to gaining eternal salvation. Brigham Young said, “Should our lives be extended to a thousand years, still we may live and learn.”¹

For most worldly and temporal possessions, the old adage is true: You can’t take it with you. However, the intellectual treasures of knowledge and spiritual values hold a promise of eternal significance. We read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resur-

rection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come” (D&C 130:18–19).

So while mortality is only a small moment in eternity, learning throughout our mortal lives is an essential part of our eternal education. Here on earth, as Brigham Young once observed, “we are in a great school.”²

When we see our learning here as part of our eternal education, we raise our sights for learning. As children, we might have begun learning because our parents coaxed or cajoled us. They wanted us to acquire a formal education with college degrees or technical labor skills, knowing that at the end of our labors we would be rewarded by being self-sufficient, productive, and able to survive in the real world. Some of us studied hard as we became interested in the stiff competition for grades and honors.

While these motivations for learning played important roles at different times in our lives, if they are our only motivations, we will stop learning when our parents or teachers are gone and our degrees are earned. Lifelong learners are driven by more eternal motives. One of the giant steps in maturing and acquiring knowledge and experience is when we learn for the joy of being edified rather than for the pleasure of being entertained. The goal of the wisest lifelong learners is not so much to impress others but to improve themselves and to help others. Their desire is to learn and to change their behavior by following the sound counsel and example imparted from great teachers around them.

Sometimes our learning is limited if we think of it as only one course at a time or getting one degree. But as we look to the scriptures, they give us the curriculum of the lifetime learner: “Things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms” (D&C 88:79).

The first verse of the Book of Mormon reads, “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father” (1 Nephi 1:1). Just as Nephi’s field of study was all that his father knew, lifelong learners know no disciplinary boundaries in their quest for greater knowledge.

Lifelong learners have an insatiable inner desire to acquire knowledge in a broad range of subjects and disciplines. Thus the reward for

lifelong learners is simply the joy of learning and acquiring knowledge in a wide spectrum of subjects that interest them.

Some may wonder whether it is possible to teach lifelong learning or if it is simply a genetic gift. Just as some are born with greater speed, some of us may naturally have a greater desire for learning. Yet just as wise coaches can improve anyone willing to pay the price, in like manner Heavenly Father is eager to bless us with the drive and determination to become lifelong learners if we are willing to pay the price.

Oftentimes it takes a great teacher to motivate us and to instill that desire in us. How can we improve our desire and increase the desire of others to gain more knowledge over a lifetime of learning experiences?

Attributes of Lifelong Learners

It is important to consider the attributes that one must acquire to become a lifelong learner. A few of the basic attributes needed to become a lifelong learner are courage, faithful desire, humility, patience, curiosity, and a willingness to communicate and share the knowledge that we gain. Let’s take a moment to pause and reflect in more depth how each of these attributes may contribute to our becoming a lifelong learner. And the other side of the coin would be to consider how we may be able to instill lifelong learning in those around us, especially our children.

Courage. “Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord” (Psalm 31:24).

Lifelong learners have the courage to overcome the fear of leaving the outer limits of their educational comfort zone and entering into the unknown and the unfamiliar. The scriptures say, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7).

Too often we dwell in the comfort of our educational strengths and avoid overcoming our educational weaknesses. Thus our greatest strengths can become our greatest weaknesses. We may dwell in the security of the past, unwilling to venture into the future because of the fear of ignorance or the lack of knowledge about a subject we desire to study or to research. We need the courage to take a long step of faith into a fearful darkness, not knowing how deep the educational cave is that we are about to enter.

Fear is only dispelled by the amount of intellectual light we are willing to shine on the dark educational abyss that is a void in our understanding. We must find the courage to go forward—to press on. We read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “There were fears in your

hearts, and verily this is the reason that ye did not receive” (D&C 67:3). Despite our fears, courage in acquiring new learning is essential for lifelong learners.

Faithful desire. “Seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118).

Next is faithful desire. Lifelong learners have an insatiable, unselfish inner desire to acquire a wide spectrum of knowledge across many disciplines for the mere joy of attaining and sharing the increased knowledge without any recognition or rewards. Oftentimes the motivation and desire for learning is stimulated by a perceived need to help others. For example, a concerned mother who feels there is a lack of a medical diagnosis concerning a family physical or mental health problem researches medical books and journals to assist in the solution.

A lifelong learner may have a desire for self-improvement to have a happier or more benevolent life. Lifelong learners have a desire for knowledge that will help them to be better helpmeets, better mothers, better fathers, better citizens, and better servants in the Lord’s kingdom so “that [they] may learn and glorify the name of [their] God” (2 Nephi 6:4).

Humility. “Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear” (D&C 136:32).

Next is the quality of humility. Lifelong learners recognize the source of all knowledge is a gift from God. “He that truly humbleth himself . . . , the same shall be blessed” (Alma 32:15).

Because lifelong learners recognize that intelligence is a gift of God, they do not dwell on it or become prideful about their personal intelligence quotient or accomplishments. Each new discovery of knowledge is metered out from on high in the Lord’s time and in the Lord’s way “line upon line, precept upon precept” (2 Nephi 28:30).

When we are truly humble, we remember that knowledge and wisdom are given to us by the Lord and that we are to use that knowledge and wisdom in lifting and strengthening others: “To every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God. To some is given one, and to some is given another, that all may be profited thereby” (D&C 46:11–12). We gain knowledge to better serve.

Patience. “Add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness” (2 Peter 1:5–6).

Lifelong learners acquire an inordinate degree of patience in their quest for learning. They understand through their diligent search for learning that it takes a great deal of energy and a great deal of time to find pure knowledge.

What a feeling! Have you ever sought for something—searched, pondered, and prayed—until *finally* there it was, right before you? Sometimes what we learn today may not seem valuable until months or even years into the future. We not only learn but we ponder that knowledge so that in the right place, at the right time, we can put it to the best use.

Curiosity. “I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things” (Ecclesiastes 7:25).

The next quality is curiosity. My sister used to say to me, “Curiosity killed the cat, but satisfaction brought him back.”

Lifelong learners are curious at heart. As children, our curiosity is instinctive, but our formal education is more confining and systematic. Lifelong learners develop personalized learning techniques that surpass what is taught in school. The key learning element is that they never lose their God-given inherent curiosity. They are simply detectives or sleuths in the image of Sherlock Holmes, solving a case by putting together the facts that they have gathered. They do it by asking the question “why” and then finding the answers. The thrill of investigating and researching a new concept or discovering the answer to something previously unknown to us is an exhilarating moment of joy and satisfaction.

Lifelong learners learn “line upon line” and “precept upon precept” but also have personal “aha” moments when they see all at once the larger picture. The lifelong learner does not give up. Thomas Edison was a lifelong learner. He was attributed as saying, “I have not failed, I’ve just found ten thousand ways that won’t work.”

Communication. “Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together” (D&C 50:22).

Lifelong learners are teachers at heart, reveling in the communication of learning and knowledge. They find joy when those whom they teach by sharing their knowledge are uplifted and strengthened. They communicate with God through prayer for guidance and knowledge. They communicate with God to give thanks and gratitude for the knowledge they have received. They communicate with other lifelong learners, listening intensively in a two-way exchange of learning that is mutually beneficial to all.

Great teachers are not only great communicators but also great listeners. When we are communicating, we can learn something from every individual we meet.

Great teachers produce lifelong learners. Great teachers do not provide all the answers to their students. They lead them to the fountain of knowledge and instill in them a desire to drink. Great teachers motivate students to seek knowledge.

One educator was in a meeting with President Packer in a question-and-answer period. President Packer was asked about his teachings on the Atonement. What did he teach? They wanted a testimony and a full dissertation from him on the Atonement. That's what they expected from this great teacher. His answer taught everyone there about lifelong learning. President Packer replied, "Read the Book of Mormon a few times, searching for teachings about the Atonement. Then write a one-page summary of what you have learned. Then, my dear brother, you will have your answer."

Scripture Study and Lifelong Learning

Scripture study is a lifelong learning experience. Perhaps nowhere can we see the need for lifelong learning more clearly than with scripture study. No matter how many times we may read the scriptures, through the power and inspiration of the Holy Ghost we learn new truths and gain valuable counsel and insights to meet life's challenges. President Ezra Taft Benson taught, "Yesterday's meal is not enough to sustain today's needs. So also an infrequent reading of [the Book of Mormon,] 'the most correct of any book on earth,' as Joseph Smith called it, is not enough."³

The primary purposes of scripture study are to gain gospel understanding and to strengthen us spiritually. One reason we need to continually feast on the words of Christ is that, like all learning, gospel understanding and spiritual insights come one precept at a time.

Scripture study is a unique form of learning. It requires literacy—the ability to read. King Mosiah taught his sons "in all the language of his fathers, that thereby they might become men of understanding; and that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the mouths of their fathers, which were delivered them by the hand of the Lord" (Mosiah 1:2).

Mosiah wasn't just teaching his sons how to read so they could get ahead in the world; he was teaching them to read so they could immerse themselves in the scriptures and become spiritually wise.

The brass plates were preserved and taken to the promised land so that Lehi's family and his posterity would not forget who they were, "a chosen people," and would be reminded how they were to live as children of God. It is for the same purpose that the scriptures have been preserved for us in this day and at this time.

But gaining knowledge through scripture study requires some attributes and actions that most formal educational endeavors do not: sincere desire, unwavering faith, prayer, and the will and obedience to follow the Spirit's promptings. Virtually all humans upon earth, no matter what their mental capacity, can experience the joy and rewards of lifetime gospel study.

Scripture study does not require years of formal education to gain an understanding of essential gospel principles. This is illustrated by Peter and John in the book of Acts. The Jewish rulers were surprised. They assumed that gospel knowledge required some exhaustive, formal course of training. The scriptures tell us: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

Unlearned and ignorant in the eyes of the world, Peter and John had gained great gospel knowledge from listening and hearkening to the words of our Savior. The same can be true for each of us and for every member of our family. In gospel study, a master's degree in theology is far less valuable than the degree of knowledge we can all obtain from the Master Himself.

A critical component in gaining knowledge from the Savior is acting upon the principles He taught. In order to gain the greatest insights the scriptures have to offer, our study will focus not so much on places and names as on principles and doctrines. It is not simply book knowledge we are after but insights that will change the way we live and that will actually make a difference in our lives. We must see the scriptures for what they are: an instruction manual for becoming like our Savior.

Lifelong scripture study is an unending quest for spiritual insights and understanding and for the growth that results when we apply such insights in our lives. As Latter-day Saints, we understand that acquiring spiritual knowledge, having spiritual experiences, and developing our gifts and aptitudes are important to our mortal growth. In addition, we must develop our spiritual dispositions in relation to God, our Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ, and cultivate the qualities of faith and obedience that will invite the Holy Ghost into our lives. We also grow in

spirit as we serve and care for our neighbors and the world around us. All of these elements of lifelong learning have eternal consequences, and their rewards are the essence of our mortal goal to obtain spiritual qualities and achievements. The results of our most important lifelong learning are not reflected in grades or degrees or honors but in who we become. Our aim is to develop eternal character values such as knowledge, hope, faith, charity, and love. This is the most important quest we have in learning.

Studying the scriptures helps us develop and progress as individuals. The scriptures are uniquely suited for lifelong study.

As we increase our spiritual, emotional, and mental capacity through the years, we qualify to gain new insights from the scriptures. How many times have you paused and pondered on a passage of scripture that you have read and passed over many times before and then, in a *revelatory* moment, have a *new awareness*, a *new understanding*, brought to your heart and mind granting additional insight—and that added insight solves a question, a problem, or one of life's challenges? That, my brothers and sisters, is the sweet mystery of lifelong learning—a sweet instant in a blessed moment in time when you experience a leap of faith and understanding.

It is for this reason that we have prayer before and after scripture study. The prayer before scripture study is to prepare us spiritually to receive the *revelatory moments* and a spiritual uplift. The prayer after scripture study is to give thanks and gratitude for that which has been given us.

The knowledge of the truths of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is the most valuable knowledge we will ever possess. That knowledge is found in the word of God in the scriptures, through living prophets, and in the temple. The endowment is the eternal curriculum. In it we are taught where we came from and why we are here on earth, and we are even given the promise of achieving life eternal in the celestial kingdom if we obey the commandments and covenants we've taken upon ourselves.

Lifelong Learning—Past, Present, and Future

In addition to all the attributes we have talked about, lifelong learners see the connection between what we have learned in the past, what we are learning now, and what we can learn in the future. Lifelong learners are cumulative learners. They put together all that they have learned to help them. They will never dwell in the past because they are eager to explore the future. They will always be open to new

concepts, being blessed with inquisitive minds that seek new knowledge on a daily basis.

Lifelong learners spend their lives doing better than their best! Sometimes our best is not good enough. Being challenged to do better than our best may seem unreasonable or defy intuitive logic, but personal progress is just simply that! The reality is that sometimes our best of today is not good enough to succeed in tomorrow's world.

For example, in the 2004 Olympics, American swimmer Michael Phelps, who we've heard a lot about lately, won the bronze medal in the men's 200-meter freestyle with a time of one minute forty-five seconds. Four years ago that was his best. But he knew that to win the gold medal in that event in 2008 he would have to do better than his best, so he set about training to meet that goal. Millions have had the opportunity to watch the Olympic saga that has unfolded as he did better than his previous best, setting a new world record of one minute forty-two seconds and winning a gold medal. In Beijing he shattered his own previous world record by a full second and improved upon Mark Spitz's winning time of 1972 by ten seconds. Think how fast that is! In fact, he shaved off over a full minute from the gold medal winning time in 1904 of two minutes forty-four seconds. Just imagine, today in just a minute they swim two laps of the pool! That's how far he would have finished ahead of the winner in 1904. It is remarkable that of Michael Phelps's 2008 gold medals, seven of his times beat world records; they were not only his own records but world records. The other, his eighth medal, set an Olympic record. Can you imagine being able to do that, and doing better than your best? What an example for us!

The reality is that if we do not improve our efforts and our achievements each day, our best in yesterday's past will not meet the demands of tomorrow's future. This principle of doing better than our best each day applies to both spiritual and temporal demands in our mortal lifetime of learning as we prepare, covenant, and meet the requirements of eternal salvation.

Sometimes the magnificent vista of learning is not limited by the capacity of our mind but rather by the artificial limitations we place upon ourselves and our ability to learn. We must expand the capacity of our mind. Just think of what our learning limitations were before the computer became a universal tool for research, learning, and Internet communication. It is hard for our grandchildren to imagine how we were educated without computers. (Or, for that matter, how we lived without a cell phone or survived without pizza as a diet staple. The list is endless.)

I would like to share with you a unique personal learning experience spanning over thirty years that relates to the emerging computer technology benefits in family history research. In the 1970s I observed Elder Theodore H. Burton presenting the future concept of computers being used for family records and research. He was even bold enough to teach and proclaim that the computer technology was given to man for use to hasten the day of family history, genealogy, and temple work.

Elder Burton's initial computer proclamation was met with understandable reservations: "Computers will always be too big and too expensive for personal use." "There will never be enough Church members with computers." "So few of the members are able to operate computers." "The detail and explanation required and the examination required to make personal research compatible with temple records are too complex." All seemed reasonable reservations for their time, but what of the future computer developments?

Today we are embarking on a new era of family history computer technology. With the upcoming release of the new system—already available in half of the temple districts around the world—we will be able to prepare and submit names of our ancestors for temple work from our homes using a new Internet-based system. This new system will help you readily see which ancestors need proxy temple ordinances and make it possible to print a summary page with a bar code that when scanned in the temple will print out a card for use in temple sessions. After an ordinance is completed, a record of the completed ordinance is typically available on this secure Web site within twenty-four hours.

Now, why do I tell this story to you as lifelong learners? I have a simple message. Never dwell on the past or attempt to protect your comfort zone against the inevitable changes required to meet the future advancements that will be needed. When Jesus said "It is finished" (John 19:30) as He died on the cross, it was the end of only one mission—the Atonement. He then went on to see those in eternity to shore them up and to give them hope (see D&C 138). We read in 3 Nephi that in yet another mission experience He also visited the faithful at the temple in the New World as a resurrected being, blessing them for their faithfulness. In our lives, as in the Savior's example, our endings only usher in new beginnings. The ending of one era ushers in a new era. Lifelong learners do not dwell on the past.

Past learning creates a valuable foundation of experience upon which to build, not a comfortable place to dwell for a lifetime.

Sometimes when we reach a milestone we viewed as an ultimate goal, we may find ourselves once the elation has passed almost

depressed—for example, when you finish a mission or when the honeymoon is over. There is a moment of shocking, stark reality when you ask yourself, "What next? What do I do now?" At such times, remember the end is only the dawn of a new beginning.

As you stand atop any peak you have climbed, enjoy the moment of satisfaction in the present to look at the remarkable view and the progress you have made from the past. But then turn around to see what new peaks are now in sight and set a course to climb higher into the future. When you do this, the achievement of one goal set in the past will eventually pave the way to a higher goal of achievement in the future. As we contemplate the sacrifice and hard work that was required to achieve past goals, let us muster the confidence and determination needed to move on to greater heights.

Let me pause once again and talk to you from the depths of my heart about one of the unique experiences of learning. The real meaning of lifelong learning takes shape in the circle of past, present, and future—progressing as time moves on in its swift, inevitable pace. Time stops for no man. In fact, one of the few common possessions we all share is time. What we do with our time will determine the degree of lifelong learning and spiritual values we take to the eternities following our mortal test.

Also, let me spend a moment or two talking about a unique lifelong learning experience for a woman—*motherhood*.

Motherhood: The Ideal Opportunity for Lifelong Learning

Motherhood is the ideal opportunity for lifelong learning. A mother's learning grows as she nurtures the child in his or her development years. They are both learning and maturing together at a remarkable pace. It's exponential, not linear. Just think of the learning process of a mother throughout the lifetime of her children. Each child brings an added dimension to her learning because their needs are so varied and far-reaching.

For example, in the process of rearing her children, a mother studies such topics as child development; nutrition; health care; physiology; psychology; nursing with medical research and care; and educational tutoring in many diverse fields such as math, science, geography, literature, English, and foreign languages. She develops gifts such as music, athletics, dance, and public speaking. The learning examples could continue endlessly. Just think of the spiritual learning that is required as a mother teaches about gospel principles and prepares for teaching family home evening and auxiliary lessons in Primary, Relief Society, Young Women, and Sunday School.

My point is, my dear sisters—as well as for the brethren, who I hope are listening carefully—a mother’s opportunity for lifelong learning and teaching is universal in nature. My dear sisters, don’t ever sell yourself short as a woman or as a mother.

It never ceases to amaze me that the world would state that a woman is in a form of servitude that does not allow her to develop her gifts and talents. Nothing, absolutely nothing, could be further from the truth. Do not let the world define, denigrate, or limit your feelings of lifelong learning and the values of motherhood in the home—both here mortally and in the eternal learning and benefits you give to your children and to your companion.

Lifelong learning is essential to the vitality of the human mind, body, and soul. It enhances self-worth and self-actuation. Lifelong learning is invigorating mentally and is a great defense against aging, depression, and self-doubt. When we stand still in seeking new knowledge, our forward learning progress ceases and mental stagnation begins.

Progress and improvement are the essence of lifelong learning. You will not be surprised to know that there is only one ultimate goal: living a faithful life and enduring to the end worthy of eternal salvation and glory. All other goals and achievements are corollary to faithfully enduring to the end. Indeed, it is the plan of life set forth in the scriptures for our eternal benefit.

The learning process taught by Solomon in the Holy Bible in the book of Proverbs is helpful to aid us in understanding the nature of lifelong learning. “Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding” (Proverbs 3:13).

To further explain, we start with basic intelligence, or an IQ, which is God-given as one of the gifts bestowed on mankind. “The glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36). To basic intelligence we add knowledge, which comes to us through learning and experience. The sum of basic intelligence plus knowledge and experience equals wisdom. “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7).

The world stops at wisdom’s level of learning, but the scriptures teach “The Lord by *wisdom* hath founded the *earth*; by *understanding* hath he established the *heavens*” (Proverbs 3:19; emphasis added).

Wisdom plus the gifts of the Holy Ghost provide an understanding in our hearts. When we truly have an understanding and our hearts are softened, we will “no more desire to do evil” (Alma 19:33).

We will have “an eye single to the glory of God” (D&C 82:19) and desire to return with honor into the presence of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

Here is a lifetime homework assignment for you! Ponder and seek to acquire the remarkable attributes of a lifelong learner: courage, faithful desire, curiosity, humility, patience, and willingness to communicate. These are desirable character qualities. Ponder and ask yourself these questions: “What is the meaning and value of each of these qualities to me?” “How do these qualities apply to me?” “How am I going to have each of these qualities be part of my life?” Then for a few minutes ponder these qualities and ask yourself what you can do to enhance them in your character and in your life. Even if you only take one of the qualities and seek to improve yourself, it will make a difference. The reward will be great in your future for you and for those around you.

I hope you can see the value of reviewing your ultimate goals with an eye to lifelong learning perspectives and to life’s cycle of past, present, and future. May your life be one of learning—growing in knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom while seeking spiritual values and characteristics that will bless you with the rewards of eternal life.

Seek to Know That God Lives

I give you my testimony that God lives and that we can learn not just to believe but to know that God lives. Seek that knowledge. It will be granted to you. Seek to know and to have those around you know, through your testimony, that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God and that in this last dispensation of the fulness of time we have had restored to us all that has ever been restored to mankind. Learn all that you can within our temples and our scriptures. Learn and conduct your life in such a way that you may return to the presence of our Father and His Son. I pray that our desires and goals will be to become lifelong learners to accomplish that end, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. **RE**

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Notes

1. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 9:292.
2. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 12:124.
3. Ezra Taft Benson, “A New Witness for Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 6–7; quoting Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1957), 4:461.