I know, you saw the phrase "scriptural vocabulary" in the title and cringed. Memories of spelling bees and vocabulary tests filled you with shudders, and you are being held at gunpoint to read this article. That is not an uncommon reaction when being told you need to improve your vocabulary. Many people say they just cannot remember all those definitions. And heaven help us all if we have to actually spell a word that is more than five letters long. It is bad enough with regular vocabulary, but when it comes to improving our scriptural vocabulary people just outright swoon! But all fainting spells aside, there is hope.

When we read current articles we have to learn current vocabulary. After all, if you want to understand mortgage and interest rates on that new house or new car, it helps to know what a mortgage is and how interest works. And yes, mortgage is is one of those words having more than five letters. It probably smells funny too. Not to scare you off or anything, but did you know that the word "mortgage" literally means a dead pledge or promise? A mortgage means that you promise to pay back money loaned to you for something like a home. They probably called it a dead pledge because you had to promise to pay till you died. At least that should feel familiar to most homeowners. But I am off the subject.

Perspective

Let's get a little historical perspective on the vocabulary of the scriptures. Which is easier for a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to read, the Liahona, For the Strength of Youth, the Friend, or the Book of Mormon? Usually people will say the Church magazines are easier to read and understand. Why? Because they are written in modern language that is common to us. Which is easier to understand, the Book of Mormon or the New Testament? Most will say the Book of Mormon. Why? Because the language of the translator of the Book of Mormon is closer to our common language of today than to the translators of the New Testament. The King James version of the Old and New Testaments was published in 1611 C.E. (A.D.

for you old diehards). England was still living with Shakespearean English. We all know how easy it is to understand Shakespeare.

Learning new words

My point is this, that to understand something written by people from another era, it helps if we learn something of the vocabulary they used and understood. This is especially helpful if we are trying to understand a doctrinal point that is lost on us because of the vocabulary being used. Look at Psalms 119:71.

> 71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes.

My first thought when I read this line was, "Afflicted? What does he mean, afflicted?" I know that statutes are laws, but I was hung up on the word "afflicted." I think of the word afflicted as meaning to be punished, and made to feel sorrow or pain. To be afflicted generally carries the image that the suffering is not our fault, and that it comes either as a random event or tragedy or because someone does it to us on purpose to make us suffer. Presumably we are made to suffer just because, and not for a good reason. That is not necessarily true, but that is often how I viewed it.

As I thought about that line I determined that I would look up the meaning of the word "afflicted." Perhaps it did not mean what I thought it meant or it had another meaning I did not know about. That's almost always the case. When I looked up the definition I saw that in the dictionary the meaning of the word is to distress greatly, to cast down (throw down) or to humble.

When I looked in the footnotes in the scriptures I was met with another word I had to look up, "chastened." Now there's a great word. The dictionary definition describes "chasten" as to inflict suffering for the purpose of moral improvement, to subdue, or to purify. Now, instead of having just one word, "afflicted" that I was not sure about, I have a whole collection of words to choose from. Perhaps I can find meaning from some of these alternate words.

I now have a whole new question to ask myself. "How does being purified through suffering help me learn the laws (statutes) of God?" How can being subdued in my behavior, being cast down, help me understand how the Lord wants me to live? Does the Lord afflict me, chasten me, humble me, because he enjoys watching me suffer or

are there higher purposes to these experiences? Do I need to experience suffering or is my suffering just the result of some perverse pleasure to watch me squirm? Okay, so the first question was pregnant and gave birth to a litter of other questions.

Suddenly I started to get images in my head. What kinds of lessons do I learn when my pride is checked and I am made humble by the Lord? How do I learn to be more obedient to the Lord's commandments by the things that I suffer in this life? How does suffering and being subdued in my course of action affect my perspectives and my gratitude? Any one of these questions can lead to hours of thinking and pondering on my relationship with God and about my behavior and attitude.

I read one line in Psalms 119:71. That one line led to multiple hours of contemplation, research, learning, and understanding. If I had not been willing to go look up a couple of words I didn't understand, or hadn't been willing to look up those words on the off chance they meant something I didn't know about, how much understanding would I have missed? How long would I have gone on needlessly living a more shallow existence than I needed to live?

Final Thoughts

Vocabulary may not be your daily source of a thrill. New words may not consume your every waking hour. But avoiding learning to understand the language your scriptures were written in will hold you back and keep you from great discoveries of self, and of eternal importance. Ignorance may be bliss, but we cannot be saved in ignorance.

Which specific scriptural words have you discovered that have enhanced your understanding by knowing their definition and how to apply their meaning?

Click the link below to

print a PDF copy of the article.

The Importance of Scriptural Vocabulary