

# Flashes of Light

STEVEN J. LUND

It is exhilarating to be here with you in this room today. In some ways it seems like we have been together here most of my life. I came here first as a freshman young single adult (YSA). I served a mission with YSA missionaries, then served in the military with YSA-aged soldiers. Then I came back to BYU as a twenty-four-year-old sophomore after a six-year summer vacation of mission and military to serve again with young single adults. I have served in presidencies of seven elders quorums of mostly YSAs, in a YSA bishopric, as a high councilor over a YSA ward, then a bishop of that ward, and in a YSA stake presidency. And then my wife and I were off to be mission leaders with a bunch of YSA missionaries. I came home again and served in a YSA bishopric. I was then called as an Area Seventy, and, of course, my assignment was to serve all of the YSA stakes here in Utah Valley.

It seems I am suffering from a state of arrested development. It is interesting to me that through all of those years and assignments, you BYU students have never changed. I don't know what you

see when you look at me, but I look at you and see contemporaries. It has been a great life, growing up in rooms like this with astonishing people just like you.

## To Walk by Faith

Let's talk about faith. Faith and belief are complicated things. My most recent work with the Children and Youth program has made me especially attuned to youth whose gospel moorings sometimes fray. And it is not only young people but many among us who find ourselves sometimes unsure of the doctrines or of the narrative. We cannot judge each other for what we do and do not know. Belief and testimony come only through gifts of the Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit are, after all, gifts. They are highly individualized and measuredly dispensed by a Heavenly Father who knows our hearts and needs and administers to them with divine precision.

Heavenly Father purposefully designed and ordered our world to require us to walk in faith.

---

*Steven J. Lund, Young Men general president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on September 20, 2022.*

He pressed into place the pieces of this sophisticated jigsaw puzzle of mortality but held back a few of the pieces, which He keeps in His pocket to ensure that faith is required as we come up against the gaps in this puzzle’s spiritual landscape. He has ensured that we will not be able to game the system by thinking our way to heaven—to discover Him through provable math or science, which would obviate faith and foreclose the purposes of mortality.

I have a struggling attorney friend who recently said of the gospel, “It just doesn’t add up.” Well, his is a fair observation, isn’t it? The puzzle is incomplete, so it does not always add up. This should not surprise us. Even in mathematics there are numbers—such as pi—that are irrational but reliably constant.

I once spoke at the Law School across the street about these themes, and I am borrowing from that talk today with permission. There is a principle of law called the doctrine of chances that applies by analogy to our mortal walk of faith here in life. The doctrine of chances is an exception to a rule of evidence. Normally, evidence of a person’s prior crimes or acts cannot later be considered in deciding a person’s guilt. Just because someone committed one crime doesn’t necessarily mean he committed another. But the doctrine of chances essentially asks, “What are the chances that a highly unlikely combination of such facts is mere coincidence?”

The doctrine of chances arose in a 1915 trial when a husband, Mr. Smith, was accused of drowning his wife in a bath. Smith claimed she had fainted and drowned. Normally, under the rules of evidence, a prosecutor could not have introduced evidence of Smith’s prior acts. But the judge was asked essentially, “*What are the chances* that it was just an innocent coincidence that Smith’s two prior wives had also drowned in bathtubs?” Suddenly Smith’s case went down the drain. He was summarily hanged.

When multiple overlapping sets of data form a pattern that decidedly points toward a certain conclusion, and no other explanations seem to make sense, the truthfulness of the conclusion must be considered. I hope to describe today how recognizing such patterns leads to powerful conclusions of faith.

### The Composition of Testimony

While serving as an Area Seventy, I was once presiding over a Saturday adult session of stake conference. During a question-and-answer session, a large man in blue coveralls stood up in the middle of the chapel and asked challengingly, “Have you seen God?”

There was an uneasy shuffle in the room. His question was inappropriate on so many levels. I thought, “Really, Korihor? In coveralls?”

My first impulse was to skirt the question and move on, but I felt the stirrings of the Spirit prompting me to consider it: What *does* it mean to be an “especial” witness?<sup>1</sup> I took a breath, and a memory suddenly flooded into my mind. So I proceeded to share an experience of which I had never before spoken:

Once, on a business trip, I landed in predawn darkness at an airport in Asia and wearily found a car and driver. The trip would take a couple of hours, so I used my overcoat as a cushion and positioned myself in the left corner of the back seat, planning to sleep for a while. But my attention became riveted on the moonlit landscape of that exotic place, with its mysterious wooded hills and shadowy open expanses.

As the morning sky gradually lightened, I saw evidence of an estuary on the left and an approaching bridge. As we drove onto the bridge, I was disappointed to find that the view was blocked on both sides by tall concrete-slab walls that apparently had been erected to contain the traffic noises of the expressway. I absently stared at the wall opposite me, wondering what was beyond as I whirred by it at high speed.

As we left the bridge and the barricade ended, I glanced back at the vista that I had not been able to see and noted that it was just as I had imagined: a large body of water with a forested far edge and a few boats coming and going.

I found myself leaning forward to see farther behind us to confirm that, through the morning fog, a large sailboat was approaching the seaway under the far end of the bridge. Suddenly my jet-lag-muddled brain snapped into a moment of clarity as I wondered, “How did I know to look for that sailboat?” I could not have known it was there, but somehow I did. Somehow I had been looking for it.

In fact, I realized, none of what I saw in the fully revealed vista had surprised me. I seemed to know where to find the wooded outline of the far shore, the barges, and the building on the distant rise. But how?

It dawned on me that the slabs of the massive concrete wall on the bridge had small gaps between them of a fraction of an inch. As we had sped across the bridge, my eyes had been fixed upon the blur of gray concrete punctuated by minute flashes of bright light from the morning sun through those narrow slits—slits too small for me to detect anything but bright flickers and flashes. Yet somewhere in my mind, undetected information had been transmitted in those bursts of light that was apparently compiled and subliminally stitched together into a latent vision of what lay beyond. I knew what was there before I knew that I knew. And I would have missed the marvel of it all if I had not turned back to look.

Back at stake conference, I finished telling this story, as much to myself as to anyone, and realized that the fellow was still standing with an arm looped through his front suspenders.

“Does that help?” I asked.

He shrugged absently and sat down, probably not completely satisfied.

But I was filled with wonder. The Spirit had just answered my own long-standing prayer about my ministry and about my witness. I knew more than I knew I knew.

As we drive through life’s journey, there will be flashes of light! The Lord promised Isaiah, “I will make darkness light before them.”<sup>2</sup> Think about this. Life often presents itself as an incessant gray wall stretching off into nowhere, but here and there, if you watch for them, flickering assurances of God’s love for us will become evident.

A poet once observed:

*Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries.*<sup>3</sup>

Clive Staples Lewis described a ride something like mine. At the time he was a young professor and atheist teaching at Oxford between the world

wars. J. R. R. Tolkien was among his best friends and was a devout Christian. Over time, as they spoke of religion, the Spirit worked with young C. S. Lewis. One day Lewis’s brother gave him a ride in the sidecar of his motorcycle to a zoo that was opening in a town some distance away. Lewis later wrote, “I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did.”<sup>4</sup>

St. Augustine, perhaps the greatest mind of his age, also spoke of sudden, unexpected inspiration. Steeped in classical philosophy, he attempted to reconcile his understanding of Christianity with the formal logic of his day. One day he had an experience connecting him with heaven that caused him to dismiss his entire life’s work of philosophy as so much hay.<sup>5</sup> Of this experience, St. Augustine said simply:

*[My mind] withdrew its thoughts from experience . . . in order to seek for that light in which it was bathed. . . . And thus with the flash of a trembling glance, it arrived at That Which Is.*<sup>6</sup>

I do not know what St. Augustine saw, but it was miraculous and compelling. The heavens emitted a charged glint of light that converted abstract theology into testimony.

How long does it take for a testimony to ignite? Apparently, somewhere between “the flash of a trembling glance” and the time it takes to drive to the zoo in Whipsnade. Sometimes, longer still.

### **A Few Bursts of Light**

These experiences of accumulating knowledge through flashes of intelligence are similes of my own spiritual life—and probably of yours. My testimony—the “reason of the hope that is in [me]”<sup>7</sup>—is a composite panorama of countless bursts of light through an otherwise impenetrable earthly veil. I speak here of such flashes in hopes that they may bring to your mind similar glimpses that have informed your testimony, so that in those questioning moments you might “remember, remember”<sup>8</sup> them. While these anecdotes do not amount to proof beyond a reasonable doubt, they do combine to remind me of a tangible

reality of “that which is” that is not always before my eyes.

### *Military Blessings*

After my mission to the Netherlands, I was preparing to return to BYU and spent a day with my temple-worker grandparents at the Oakland California Temple, seeking guidance about my future course of study and career. While sitting in a quiet ordinance room, a thought proclaimed to my mind that I should join the military.

That impression could not have evoked a stronger allergic response in my soul. Two years earlier as a freshman at BYU, I had nervously watched the Vietnam War draft lottery play out on the dorm television and was relieved that my birthday did not pop up until the 346th draw. I would not be drafted. Had I been born a few hours later, my number would have been ten, and I would have been on my way to Vietnam. “Clearly,” I had reasoned, “the Lord doesn’t want me to be a soldier.”

But now I was sitting in the temple, trying to dismiss this impression as a random thought—but I had been a missionary, and I had come to know what inspiration felt like.

So, soon enough, after basic combat training, I found myself stationed first in Fort Stewart, Georgia, followed a year later by orders to Frankfurt, Germany. All the while I was bewildered and a little tortured. In Georgia I had lived in a large, unair-conditioned, cinder-block room in the middle of a thirty-mile swamp with thirty other soldiers. My work was unstimulating. I came to love some of my fellow soldiers, but they were living quite different lives from this newly returned missionary.

Church was my refuge. I longed for Sundays and for young single adult family home evenings. Those gatherings were the bright spots of my weeks in which I could recharge and be reminded of who I was.

One Monday in Frankfurt, I got hung up at work and arrived at the church just after the carpool of our group of young single adults had driven away to a distant apartment across town.

For me, this was a disaster. Some of you will know that the streets of Frankfurt are designed like a spider web that has been through a fire.

The streets wander through each other in random disorder, crossing rivers and tram tracks and back again. Someone seemed to go out at night to reverse one-way street signs so that even when you thought you knew where you were going, you could not go that way. I remembered that a couple of months earlier I had ridden through the dark to this same apartment, crammed in the crowded back seat of a car, but I remembered nothing of the route. I knew only that it was many miles of tangled streets away.

I drove home a sad, dejected soldier. I remember folding my arms, intent on grumbling a little, and saying, “Heavenly Father . . .” But before I could continue with “I am really trying here,” something of a map flashed in my head: a well-lit sequence of streets started at the church and traveled down Eckenheimer Landstraße, through a number of intersections, around a traffic circle, left, right, left, over a bridge, more turns, and onto a broad-bending street in front of an apartment building.

I was incredulous. There was not a chance I could drive to that place. But I returned to the church to make a faithless try and followed the route that had been impressed upon my mind. After driving perhaps twenty minutes (and making about forty uncertain decisions), I turned onto a broad street alongside an apartment building that filled the entire length of the long, bending city block. I was stunned to see that I was pulling up to what might be the right building.

Now I had a new problem. There were several narrow tunnels through the building into small parking areas behind that accessed stairwells to the four floors of apartments above.

“Impossible,” I thought. “I don’t know if any of those is the right drive-through, and besides, there are hundreds of apartments.” But it seemed to be a miracle that I had gotten this far, so I slowly drove past several drive-throughs and blindly turned into one.

Standing at the base of a dark, cold, four-story building, I thought, “Even if this is the correct stairwell in the correct building, they could be anywhere on any floor.” I started climbing the stairs, with little hope of a hint. Ultimately I stopped on the third floor. This way or that?

That way. Was the door on the left or right side of the hall? I walked past eight or ten doors, my feeble faith vaporizing by the moment. I thought, “I may not even be in the right building. Does my faith require me to just start knocking on random doors?” I stopped to contemplate that question and heard singing: “The Spirit of God like a fire is burning!”<sup>9</sup>

I opened the door, the most astonished twenty-three-year-old in the Church. Heavenly Father had sent a shaft of light that replaced my bewilderment with wonder. Later that night I couldn’t even find my way home without a guide.

*What were the chances?*

Eventually I returned to BYU, still confused about how it could have made sense for me to drop out of school for three long years. Subsequently, many reasons have become clear.

After returning to school, I started dating a girl I had met in Frankfurt, a girl from Tooele, Utah, whose father had taken a job in Germany—a girl so far beyond me in every way that I could never have gotten her attention at BYU in Utah if I had not known her first in Germany, where she was in a state of diminished capacity as a fellow stranger in a strange land. And so it came to pass that against all odds she agreed to marry me. *What were those chances?*

I have learned that the Lord sometimes withholds blessings from us to eventually deliver undeniably discernible miracles. I would serve one hundred army enlistments for that one stunning miracle that formed our family.

Now at BYU, I was serving in the bishopric of a singles ward and became friends with the ward finance clerk, who had just returned from a mission in France. He finished his finance degree at the same time I finished law school, and he invited me to help him build a company. Thirty-five years later, that company touches millions of people in fifty countries. I marvel that but for that burst of light in the temple years before, I would have come and gone from BYU and never met Blake Roney, who has enabled so many miracles in our lives.

The list of blessings flying from that still, small spark of inspiration goes on and on. None of these things are coincidences. They are consequences of a string of unpredictable heavenly interventions

that have burst through the veil as flashes of light through what has at times felt like a drab, never-ending gray wall.

### *Relief for a Boy*

Years later, our nine-year-old son, Tanner, came home from a touch-football game with a pain that turned out to be cancer. He bravely endured three years of aggressive treatment, two bone marrow transplants, and at one point ten weeks on a ventilator hovering between life and death in a medically induced coma. When he was twelve, after about a year of remission, the cancer recurred with a vengeance and went into his bones and head.

One night he was so sick that we moved his bed into our bedroom, where we could be with him. He awakened in the middle of the night with severe head pain. We tried to comfort him, but to no effect.

Suddenly, in the silent, darkened room, he looked up with an incredulous look on his face and said, “They say I’m supposed to go in the kitchen and sit up on the couch.”

“What do you mean? *Who?*”

No response. Then, a little impatiently, “I’m just supposed to go sit up.”

He spoke with such unusual certainty that we helped him make his way into the kitchen, where he sat on a couch, pulled a blanket around his shoulders, and slept peacefully the rest of the night.

The next morning we had him admitted to Primary Children’s Hospital for what would be his last time. I told an oncologist of this exchange in the night. The doctor reasoned that Tanner’s head pain had likely been caused by pressure blocking a tube that drains cerebrospinal fluid away from the brain. The only way to get the pain to stop, he said, is to take the pressure off this area by sitting the patient up so things can equalize.

This made sense, but *what were the chances* that twelve-year-old Tanner could figure that out? And who were *they*?

### *A Miracle Diagnosis*

Kalleen and I were called as mission leaders over the Georgia Atlanta Mission. Miracles flashed through our mission with such regularity

that we came to think of it as having a front-row seat to the greatest show on earth in which the powers of heaven were wielded by heavenly agents with black name tags as they gathered Israel home. Kalleen called missionary service a “miracle-a-day program.”

She had the formal assignment of overseeing health care for our missionaries. If one of them got sick, they would call her. It is hard to diagnose problems over the phone, even if you have had medical training. Kalleen’s medical knowledge was basically from on-the-job training as a mom raising a family—but also from the practiced experience of discerning flashes of heavenly light.

Just a few weeks into our mission, she got a call from a missionary who had called a couple of times before with one issue or another. On this particular morning he complained that his stomach had been hurting, so she decided to ask a senior missionary couple that lived near him to go over and take a look, just in case. She later told me, “I opened my mouth to say that and heard myself say instead words that had never passed through my mind: ‘Elder, it is appendicitis. Go to the hospital. Go now.’”

In the emergency room, the doctors found nothing wrong and concluded that he must have overeaten—which was entirely plausible; he *was* a missionary. They ordered him home. But our elder told the doctor, “No, Sister Lund told me I have appendicitis.”

The doctor thought that “Sister Lund” must be a nun somewhere in the hospital. He said, “Then let’s run another test.” That test was also negative, and they started to send him home again, but he kept insisting that Sister Lund had diagnosed appendicitis.

Finally the problem revealed itself, prompting an immediate appendectomy, which the surgeon told us barely saved his life. “Five minutes later and we may have lost him.”

You might think Kalleen made a lucky guess, but she will tell you that she was only an innocent bystander as the Lord kept His promise to His missionary: “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, . . . and

mine angels [shall be] round about you, to bear you up.”<sup>10</sup>

In the kingdom of God, such stories of faith abound. But miracles rarely announce themselves. To see them, we might have to turn back and look.

### *Nowhere for Her to Go*

One flash of light memorialized in our family history involved my young mother driving alone in 1958 from California to her grandmother’s funeral in Arizona. As she drove through the desert passes in the black of night, she heard a physical voice: “Pull over and stop.” As she let up on the gas in confusion, she heard, this time with urgency: “Pull over and stop. Now.” She jerked the car onto the narrow shoulder, screeching to a stop just ahead of a narrow ravine bridge. In that moment, two semitrucks passing each other came around the blind bend toward her and onto the bridge, filling both lanes. There would have been nowhere for her to go.

### *Wisdom for a Law Student*

One fast Sunday I felt the confirming power of someone’s testimony that “in a flash of light, Saul changed to Paul, and Paul changed the world.”

I know from decades of experience with you that you have experienced what I have: that some flashes of spiritual light come most often when we are on the Lord’s errand. My journal is full of notes about doctrinal insights gained only in the moment I taught them during Church assignments.

A young woman asked me in a conference setting something akin to a question many of you have this morning: How was she supposed to succeed in her first semester of law school *and* be a new Relief Society president too?

I started to say, “Good luck with that,” but, following an impression, I asked, “Who called you to do this impossible thing?”

“Heavenly Father.”

“Why?”

“Why did He call me? I suppose because I am just home from a mission and know how to work. Because He knew I would say yes. Because I can accomplish things, even under stress.”

I told her, “All, no doubt, true. But there is another reason”—which was a presumptuous thing for me to say since I did not yet know the reason.

But I said, “He may have called you to save you from law school. They are changing your mind down there, mostly in good ways. But while they are causing you to be able to defend every side of every argument, Relief Society will be reminding you that eternal truths are immutable.

“Law school teaches you that passion for your profession is critical to success. Relief Society service teaches you that the world is too much with us and that real joy is centered in Him.

“Law school will teach you to love ideas and to respect brilliant shapers of thought and theory. Relief Society will remind you that some ideas are better than others and that the philosophies of men pale alongside the ennobling intelligence dispensed through prophets.”

I saw that she was taking notes through misty eyes, weeping and nodding. Maybe I had simply guessed her needs and responded with words I had never before formed in my mind, but you would have to be me to understand why that explanation simply *doesn't add up*. *What are the chances?*

In any event, those insights hold true whatever your major and whatever your calling.

### **The Loving God Just Beyond the Veil**

Sometimes we can become diverted from the majesty of the gospel because hard things happen. University life is designed, especially here, to take you to the wall, where you will have to fight your way to growth. Church doctrines and practices—and, for that matter, our life's challenges—don't always come with explanatory footnotes. But if we will be faithful observers of the workings of the Spirit in our lives, we can come to even better respect the miracles that illuminate the tapestries of our testimonies and find courage to move forward in enlightened faith.

One of the times that Nephi was defending his faith and his very life in the wilderness, he essentially asked his family our same question: Given

what has happened to our people, what are the chances that, without God,

- the children of Israel were led out of Egypt?
- the Red Sea was divided?
- the children of Israel were fed by manna?
- Moses was able to bring forth water from a rock he smote?
- the children of Israel were led by day and given light by night?
- they were made mighty to conquer the land?
- they were saved from poisonous serpents with a raised symbol of the Messiah?<sup>11</sup>

Nephi might then have added, “And what about that business with the angel who spoke to you with a ‘voice of thunder’?”<sup>12</sup>

Nephi used the lightning-bolt incandescent flashes of his family history and heritage to reveal to his people the loving God who is just beyond the veil.

Our experiences with the Spirit may seem best measured in micro-lumens rather than lightning bursts, but, especially in our darkest hours, the Spirit can amplify them to clearly light our way along the covenant path.

To keep us connected to the central truth of mortality, the Lord proffers us a renewal of covenant almost every week. The sacrament prayers are not poems we recite nor anthems we rehearse. They are ordinances. They are words spoken to Heavenly Father by holders of keys over the very ministering of angels, bearers of the priesthood who implore the heavens that, then and there, the power of the Atonement may cleanse and purify and sanctify lives. Every week miracles happen as young boys stand in the stead of the Savior and present us with the emblems of His Atonement, inviting us to be cleansed of our pain and sorrow and mistakes and sins.

The soft, salvific flashes of healing light that warm our souls in sacrament meetings constitute a miracle more profound than even the parting of the Red Sea, a soldier being guided to sanctuary, an angel commandeering a telephone to save a missionary, a holy whisper leading a child

from pain, Saul finding the Savior on the road to Damascus, an Oxford don finding the Savior on the road to Whipsnade, or even the divine hurling of the stars and the planets into their ordered rotations. All evidence a pattern of the veil leaking light as the Savior relentlessly pierces it to bless His own.

I bear this testimony, informed as it is—and very probably like yours is—by the accumulated weight of a thousand flashes of light, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 107:25.
2. Isaiah 42:16.
3. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Aurora Leigh” (1857), book 7, lines 820–23.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 229; chapter 15, paragraph 8.
5. See the similar experience of St. Thomas Aquinas: “All I have written seems to me so much straw,” as quoted in note 63 of section 1 in *The Life of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Biographical Documents*, trans. and ed. Kenelm Foster (London: Longmans, Green, 1959), 73; see also page 46.
6. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 7, chapter 17.
7. 1 Peter 3:15.
8. Helaman 5:12.
9. “The Spirit of God,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 2.
10. Doctrine and Covenants 84:88.
11. See 1 Nephi 17:23–46.
12. 1 Nephi 17:45.