

A Faith That Preserves and Strengthens

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The first principle of the gospel is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. This principle is fundamental to the way we think and act. It defines the set of beliefs and motivations not only for members of the Church but for us as a university community. It explains why most of us have chosen to be here. It is the basis for the university code by which we try to live. Our faith pushes us to do our best not only for ourselves but to make this institution better. It provides the cohesiveness that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

Faith is both a principle and a process. It defines the path by which we build a relationship of trust with the Savior. In order for faith to develop, we must begin with a humble heart and contrite spirit, have a strong desire to know the Lord, and then be obedient to gospel principles. In return, the Savior rewards the obedient with spiritual confirmations of their actions (see Alma 32:16, 27–32). As faith grows, our vision of eternity expands, which increases our capacity to meet life’s challenges. As we become more familiar with the Lord’s plan of happiness, we understand that trials and adversity occur for many reasons and are a part of the testing and growth process.

Both ancient and modern-day prophets have taught that mortality is a probationary

state—a time of testing—and that the Lord gives us experiences to enable us to grow (see Abraham 3:25–26; Proverbs 3:11–12; Alma 42:4). Some events cause heartache and pain. If our faith in the Lord is weak, the probability is high that we will not learn the lessons intended. Elder Richard G. Scott spoke about the relationship between faith and adversity in the October 1995 general conference (“Trust in the Lord,” *Ensign*, November 1995, pp. 16–18). He suggested that when adversity strikes, there is a natural tendency to feel sorry for ourselves and to waste energy wondering why such adversity came upon us. In contrast, if our faith in the Lord and his plan is strong, we will accept the adversity and try to learn from it. This opens the door for the Holy Spirit to work within us, increasing our faith and bestowing upon us divine gifts. Elder Scott further stated:

This life is an experience in profound trust—trust in Jesus Christ, trust in His teachings, trust in our capacity as led by the Holy Spirit to obey those teachings. . . . To produce fruit, your trust in the Lord must be more powerful and enduring than

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your confidence in your own personal feelings and experience. [“Trust in the Lord,” p. 17]

As our faith in the Lord grows, we can put aside our own desires and feelings and submit to the Lord’s will. There are many accounts of faithful souls who have faced adversity and through faith in Christ have met the challenges and emerged victors. Today I wish to explore the meaning of the term *faith* as defined by the apostle Paul and the Prophet Joseph Smith and then illustrate the preserving and strengthening power of faith with three examples—the first two from the life of an ancient patriarch and the third from a modern-day story of a young girl and her family.

Paul’s Definition of Faith

Chapter 11 of Paul’s epistle to the Hebrews is devoted to the principle of faith. After defining the term in the first verse, the apostle cites a number of events from the lives of Old Testament prophets that exemplify faith. In particular, Paul uses these stories to teach the Jewish members of the Church about faith and how the faith of the ancient prophets was centered in Jesus Christ. Paul’s definition of faith is as follows: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

Although I used this scripture as a missionary to explain to investigators the concept of faith, I did not grasp fully the meaning of Paul’s succinct statement, and I suspect that many of my investigators wondered as well. Further, I did not appreciate the lessons of faith taught by the illustrations that followed his definition.

A few years ago I discovered that the Prophet Joseph Smith made a simple change in Paul’s statement when he translated the Bible. In the Joseph Smith Translation, the Prophet changed the word *substance* to *assurance*. Thus the JST definition reads: “Now faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the evidence of

things not seen” (JST, Hebrews 11:1). The word *assurance* provides insight as to the foundation upon which faith is built. It suggests that the underpinning of our faith or belief is an internal, spiritual witness. The word *substance* suggests something tangible. The word *assurance* indicates a spiritual affirmation of the “things hoped for.” As Moroni promised, belief and works will be followed by a witness of the Spirit (see Moroni 10:3–5).

In my early years I was confused by the fact that some individuals read the Book of Mormon, prayed about it, and received the witness promised, but others seemed to follow the same course but never received the witness. I have since learned that it is not God who is random but we mortals. Some individuals don’t believe they will receive a spiritual prompting even though they may pray. Others are not diligent in applying the truths they have been taught. An important lesson of life is to learn that the Father and the Son deliver on their promises.

We should remember, however, that the Holy Ghost’s witness comes after the trial of faith and not necessarily on our time schedule (see Galatians 3:14; 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5; Ephesians 1:13–14; Ether 12:6). In Alma’s explanation of the process, the experiment of faith begins with a humble heart combined with a desire to believe. This is followed by the planting and nurturing of the seed, and then come the “swelling motions” and enlightened understanding (Alma 32:27–32). Alma does not specify how long the planting and nurturing process takes. For some it may be short. For others more time may be required for the lessons to be learned. Because of the internal nature of the witness, the evidence is not seen or seable by others except when they follow the same process.

When a witness is received, is that the end? No! There are still many lessons to be learned and fruits of the Spirit to be received. An investigator who has felt the first promptings

of the Holy Ghost does not know all there is to know about the gospel. But a foundation has been laid for his or her spiritual growth. Spiritual confirmation becomes an integral part of a person's faith; it becomes an anchor for a more sure hope (see Ether 12:4) and leads men and women to higher and deeper levels of faith as they continue to "nourish the word . . . with great diligence" (Alma 32:41). When we understand that faith matures over time through belief, obedience, and witness, Joseph's substitution of *assurance* for *substance* is meaningful.

Paul's Examples of Faith

In Hebrews 11, Paul cites many examples of faith from the lives of ancient prophets and patriarchs. The events taken from the lives of these great leaders illustrate the preserving and strengthening power of faith. Paul begins with Abel's sacrifice, followed by other examples from the lives of Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and others. Paul shows how each prophet's faith is rooted in Christ. In order to understand the centrality of Christ and the Atonement in the faith of the ancient prophets, it is instructive to ask two questions. First, what are the things hoped for by the prophet? Second, what is the evidence not seen? I have selected two events that illustrate Abraham's hopes, the evidence not seen, the importance of Christ in Abraham's life, and the power of his faith.

A Promised Land

The first event is described in Hebrews 11:8–10. In these passages Paul discusses the Lord's instructions to Abraham to leave his homeland and journey to a new land that would be given to him as an everlasting possession. The Lord called it a "strange" land, one unfamiliar to Abraham. Although not familiar with the route or with his destination, Abraham took Sarah and other family members and departed. Not only did Abraham's faith sustain him on the journey, but Paul states that it took faith for Abraham to stay in the

strange country. Paul also states that Abraham's faith caused him to look beyond Canaan "for a city . . . whose builder and maker is God" (Hebrews 11:10).

What were Abraham's hopes? The first was for a land of promise, or Canaan. The second was to be worthy of "the land of promise," or the heavenly city (see Hebrews 11:9). What was the evidence not seen? First, Abraham had never seen Canaan. Second, to enter the city whose builder and maker is God requires the Savior's atonement. Abraham lived 2,000 years before Christ. The Atonement had not yet occurred. He could only behold the Lord's sacrifice through eyes of faith.

This year is the 150th anniversary of the pioneer exodus from Winter Quarters to Utah. How similar Brigham Young's hopes were to those of Abraham. He, too, wanted a promised land in which the Saints could worship God and be safe from their enemies. He had never seen the Great Salt Lake Valley except through an eye of faith. When he finally reached the summit and looked down into the valley, however, he knew that it was the right place. However, the Saints' hopes included more than a safe haven. They, like Abraham, were looking for "the land of promise"—the heavenly city. Living almost 2,000 years after Christ, they also had to accept the Atonement through eyes of faith.

A Promised Son

The second event concerns the Lord's promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a covenant son even though he was 99 and she was 90. Hebrews 11:11–12 indicate that Sarah and Abraham received strength through faith to conceive Isaac—their son of promise. Again, what were the things hoped for? Abraham and Sarah desired a son of promise so that their posterity might be as numerous as the sands of the seashore and the nations of the earth might be blessed through their seed. They also hoped for *The Son of*

Promise, and Isaac was a type for Christ. Paul states in verse 13 that Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and others “died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off.” Through eyes of faith they knew Jehovah would come to earth, take up a physical body, suffer in the Garden, die on the cross, and be lifted up the third day. The fulfillment of the blessings promised to Abraham were dependent on *The Son of Promise* as well as on *a son of promise*.

What was the evidence not seen? First, no woman past bearing age had ever conceived. Even Abraham’s body appeared dead as to procreative power (see Genesis 18:11–12, Romans 4:19). Only through faith in Christ could the promise of a son be realized. Second, with respect to *The Son of Promise*, a virgin would conceive. Again, Christ’s miraculous birth could only be seen through spiritual eyes.

How Abraham’s and Sarah’s faith must have been strengthened by Isaac’s birth! This was the son who would preserve the Lord’s promises to the ancient patriarch. Isaac’s birth must also have deepened his parents’ faith in the future birth of God’s Only Begotten Son. After all, the most important promise to all of us was given in the Grand Council before the creation of the earth when our Father promised to send his Firstborn Son, who would sacrifice his life that we might live forever (see Abraham 3:22–27).

A Faith Centered in Christ

Paul’s discussion of the events in Abraham’s life poignantly reflects the ancient patriarch’s belief in Christ. The Lord’s command to Abraham to sacrifice “his only begotten son” as a type for the Savior’s sacrifice highlights the focus of Abraham’s faith (see Hebrews 11:17). Paul states that Abraham believed that Isaac would be raised from the dead just as Christ would rise from his grave (see Hebrews 11:19). Abraham’s knowledge of the gospel and the Savior’s mission was

profound. His and Isaac’s trust in the Savior and the events that would transpire almost two millennia in the future carried them from Hebron to Mount Moriah believing that Isaac would be sacrificed. What sweeping joy and relief they must have felt when the angel stopped them.

We Can Trust Him

In closing, I wish to illustrate with a modern-day story the trust that we may place in the Savior. I know that faith in Christ and obedience to the principles of the restored gospel bring answers to prayers and divine help when the hour is darkest. The story that follows concerns a young girl, the fourth child in a family of six children. Her name is Heather. Three of the children, including Heather, suffer from a rare disease called glutaric acidemia. In each case, the onset of the disease occurred during the first year of life when an enzyme attacked the brain, causing paralysis. The disease results in acid forming in the muscles, similar to that which occurs following a period of intense physical activity. The problem faced by the children is that the acid never leaves and causes great pain. Cindy, the first child with the disease, died just over one year ago at the age of 23. She was one of the oldest living persons known with the disease. At death she weighed about 40 pounds.

Soon after Heather’s birth, the parents realized that she would be physically handicapped and that her spirit would be housed in a body with great restrictions. As she grew, she was confined to a wheelchair, unable to speak, and could only send messages with her eyes. A direct gaze and a smile meant yes. A blink meant no. Despite the handicaps, one could feel the vibrant spirit inside.

As Heather progressed, it became obvious to the parents that she was extraordinarily bright. She would play guessing games with the family using her limited means to communicate. When she was old enough, the

parents enrolled Heather in a special school to see if she could learn to speak. The teacher was a gifted therapist. One morning as Heather and the teacher visited about the prior weekend, the teacher learned that Heather had attended Primary. The teacher then sang for Heather "When He Comes Again" (*Songbook*, p. 82). The expression on Heather's face revealed the delight within her. When the teacher asked Heather if she had a favorite song, the young girl's wide eyes and engaging smile left little doubt. But what was the song? Through a series of questions, the teacher learned that Heather's song was one she had heard in Primary. She wasn't sure which songbook it was in, but it was about Jesus. The teacher sang all the songs she could think of, but to no avail. However, Heather was not about to quit—she wanted to share her favorite song. At the end of the day, the two were still searching. The teacher agreed to bring her Primary songbooks to school the next day.

On the following morning, Heather and her teacher continued the quest. From the first hymn to the last, the little girl blinked her eyes indicating no. They were still unsuccessful. But Heather was not about to give up. She wanted to share her favorite song. Finally, the teacher told Heather that her mother would have to help her find the song and then they would sing it. The next day Heather arrived with the green Church hymnal tucked in her chair, but there was no marker. So they began with the first hymn. The teacher would sing the first part of each song and Heather would give her answer. After the first 100 hymns, there were 100 no's. After 200 hymns there had been 200 no's. Finally, the teacher began to sing "There is sunshine in my soul today . . ." (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 227). Heather's body jumped, and a big smile crossed her face. Her eyes gazed directly into the teacher's, indicating success after three days of searching. Both teacher and student rejoiced.

As the teacher sang the first verse and began the chorus, Heather mustered all her strength and joined in with a few sounds. After finishing the first verse and chorus, the teacher asked if she wanted to hear the rest of the verses, and Heather's eyes opened wide with a firm yes. The teacher began to sing:

*There is music in my soul today,
A carol to my King,
And Jesus listening can hear
The songs I cannot sing.*

Heather's reaction to these lines was so strong that the teacher stopped. As the reality and significance of the words pressed on the teacher's mind, she wondered if those lines were the reason Heather liked the song? The teacher asked: "Heather, is that what you like about the song? Is that what you want me to know? Does Jesus listen? Does he hear the songs you cannot sing?"

The direct, penetrating gaze was a clear answer.

Feeling guided by the Spirit, the teacher asked, "Heather, does Jesus talk to you in your mind and in your heart?"

Again, the child's look was penetrating.

The teacher then asked, "Heather, what does he say?"

The teacher's heart pounded as she saw the clear look in Heather's eyes as the little girl awaited the questions that would allow her to share her insights.

"Does Jesus say, 'Heather, I love you'?"

Heather's radiant eyes widened and she smiled.

After a pause, the teacher asked next, "Does he say, 'Heather, you're special'?"

The answer again was yes.

Finally, the teacher asked, "Does he say, 'Heather, be patient; I have great things in store for you'?"

With all her strength, Heather's head became erect and her eyes penetrated the

teacher's soul. She knew she was loved, she was special, and she only needed to be patient. (Story adapted from Jean Ernstrom, "Jesus, Listening, Can Hear," *Ensign*, June 1988, pp. 46–47.)

Two years later, Heather died because of the ravages of the disease. Her younger brother, Mark, also suffers from the disease but not to the extent of his older sisters. He can talk, although it is not easy. As the parents discussed Heather's passing and the funeral that would take place, Mark exclaimed, "No go Heather's funeral!" Heather was his best friend. As the parents tried to explain death to him, he would not be consoled. He was crushed and did not want to attend the service. For two days he could not be persuaded.

On the morning of the funeral, the father went to Mark's room to get him up. As he entered the room, Mark was sitting up in bed with a big smile on his face. His first words were: "Dad, go Heather's funeral!"

The father responded: "Mark, what has changed your mind?"

"Dad, had dream."

"What did you dream about, Mark?"

"Dad, dreamed about Heather."

"Mark, what was Heather doing?"

"Oh, Dad, Heather running and jumping and singing 'There is sunshine in my soul today.' Dad, go Heather's funeral." (Mark's part of the story was obtained through conversations with the parents and also from the book written by the family: Bruce and Joyce Erickson, *When Life Doesn't Seem Fair* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995]; see pp. 65–66.)

I ask each of you: Would the God of this earth who learned about Heather's pains and sufferings in the Garden listen to a little girl sing songs to him even though she could not speak? Would he tell her he loves her? Would he tell her to be patient, that he has great things in store for her? If a little boy did not understand death, would he give him a dream to help him understand that life does not end with death? As Alma teaches us, Christ experienced our pains and sufferings so that he would know how to succor us (see Alma 7:11–12). We can trust him. He earned our trust in the Garden and on the cross. If we exercise faith in him, he will respond. He will strengthen and preserve us in our time of need. May the Lord bless each of us as we develop faith in him, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.