

Fear Not

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I am grateful to be with you on this cold December morning. I pray that the warmth of the Spirit will bless us that we might be edified during our few moments together.

Today I want to talk with you about the greatest story ever told—and one of its less obvious but most important themes. You could probably recite much of this story by heart. It occupies little more than a page of scripture. It begins with the familiar duty of paying taxes. It continues with a journey that was not unusual for the time. The plot thickens when no room can be found “in the inns”;¹ it culminates when the Son of God is born of Mary, “a precious and chosen” virgin.²

We know little about the real people and few details regarding the true events. And yet, no matter how many times we read the story of the first Christmas, there always seems to be something new we can learn from it. That is because, as prophets have taught, “the word of God is quick,” or living.³ It takes on fresh and deeper meaning whenever we are spiritually ready to receive it.

Something that stands out to me in the account of the Savior’s birth is that on four separate occasions an angel appeared with the message “Fear not.”

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias with news that his wife would bear a son, the forerunner of the Messiah, he said, “Fear not, . . . for thy prayer is heard.”⁴

Later the same angel visited “beautiful and fair”⁵ Mary to tell her that she would be the mother of the Son of God, assuring her with similar words: “Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.”⁶

Shortly thereafter an angel appeared to Joseph the carpenter in a dream and said, “Fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife.”⁷

And then, on that holy night, as all eternity watched in reverent silence, the angel came upon humble shepherds keeping watch over their flock. The shepherds, who “were sore afraid,”⁸ heard the angel proclaim, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”⁹

So much of what happened during those pivotal moments in the nativity narrative depended upon the courage of people like Zacharias, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds.

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God had a monumental task for each of them; their lives were about to change forever. Imagine if they had let fear overcome them. What if they had pulled back, doubted, and failed to do what God needed them to do?

This less obvious theme from the account of the first Christmas intrigues me because I, like you, have fears, and I need to be reminded at times to fear not. I don't know what your fears are. Like Zacharias, who feared that he would never have children, you may have fears about your family. Or maybe your fear isn't that you won't have children but that you *will* have children, whom you will have to raise in a toxic world increasingly hostile to families. Like Mary, you may have an assignment or responsibility that seems far beyond your abilities. Like Joseph, you may fear getting married—or that you will never get married. Like the shepherds, you may be “sore afraid” when your peaceful and simple life is disrupted because God has plans for you that are bigger than what you have for yourself.

Life presents endless opportunities to fear. We may fear what people think of us. We may fear failure or rejection. We may be afraid of changes we know we must make in our lives. Or maybe we are just afraid of next week's final exams. We may experience failure or rejection and wonder if we have what it takes. We may have financial fears, educational and career fears, or fears of public speaking, snakes, or spiders. Yes, we live in a beautiful world—but it can be scary out there!

I fear that so many of you have come this morning to be edified and inspired, and now I have gone and frightened you! Well, I did not come here to frighten you, and you did not come here to be reminded of your fears. We all long for more of God's peace and strength in the midst of the stresses and difficulties of life.

The Lord's message to you today is the same message He sent through His angels so long ago: “Fear not.” He can say that because He knows more than we do. He sees what we

cannot see. He knows what is coming, and, in the eternal scheme of things, it is not as bad as we may think. He knows that we can handle it with His help because He knows how to strengthen and succor us.¹⁰

Most of all, He tells us not to fear because He knows that fear will paralyze us. It will keep us from knowing and doing His will; accepting His blessings, His love, and His light; and fulfilling His purposes. President Howard W. Hunter said:

Fear . . . is a principal weapon in the arsenal that Satan uses to make mankind unhappy. He who fears loses strength for the combat of life in the fight against evil. Therefore, the power of the evil one always tries to generate fear in human hearts. . . .

. . . A timid, fearing people cannot do their work well, and they cannot do God's work at all. Latter-day Saints have a divinely assigned mission to fulfill that simply must not be dissipated in fear and anxiety.¹¹

Satan wants us to give in to fear. God wants us to hold on to hope.

One of my favorite scriptures is 2 Timothy 1:7. It reads, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.” Using these words as a framework, let us explore together how power, love, and a sound mind serve as antidotes for fear.

Power

First, “God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power.”

This “spirit of power” is not the world's sort of power. The Lord and His covenant people do not work the way the world usually works. The world tells us that power comes of wealth or popularity and that life is a competition in which we advance ahead of others by acquiring more or by brandishing words or weapons of destruction.

The Lord's way is deeper, higher, and holier. His power is governed “by long-suffering,

by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge."¹² Where worldly power depends on dramatic demonstrations, the Lord's power distills upon us "as the dews from heaven"¹³—miraculously but quietly and humbly. Where worldly power is for the privileged few, the Lord's power is available to all. It is manifest in the ordinances of the priesthood.¹⁴ We access it through making and keeping sacred covenants. We nurture it through sincere prayer, fasting, and feasting "upon the words of Christ."¹⁵

Perhaps you know someone who has this kind of power and therefore seems fearless. It is probably someone who would not be judged powerful by worldly standards but whose spiritual power is undeniable.

My father, who died in an accident nearly thirty years ago, was such a man. Still today I meet people who say, "He was the kindest man I have ever known." He worked in a steel mill—not the most glamorous or prestigious of occupations—and I am embarrassed to say that when I was young, I wished he were smarter, cooler, richer. Thankfully I've grown up since then, and today there is no one I admire more.

I doubt any of you have ever spent a day at a steel mill, but let's just say that it is not the quietest or cleanest environment. Power, in that setting, is usually asserted through gruffness and crude language. And yet my father, in his more than three decades there, was never known to swear or to speak an unkind word. He never even raised his voice. After he died, his coworkers told us that they could always count on him to be pleasant and positive, regardless of the circumstances. We found curled up in his lunch box several Church pamphlets that he faithfully studied during his lunch break and often shared with his coworkers, many of whom became active in the Church because of his goodness and example.

That is fearless power. It is the kind of power that comes to those who trust God and have faith in Jesus Christ—faith to do things His way, even if it differs from the world's way. That faith is more than mere positive thinking or motivational rah-rah. As the Prophet Joseph taught, faith is power.¹⁶ Faith inspires and empowers us to do remarkable and courageous things that we would not be able to do otherwise. Truly, this kind of faith gives us the power and confidence that will "wax strong in the presence of God"¹⁷ and all people.

If you are fearful because you feel powerless, I invite you to turn to the Lord. Draw upon the power of the covenants you have made and are keeping. Trust in God's power, for it is mightier than any power on earth. God's words to ancient Israel are also His words to you: "I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee."¹⁸

Love

Next in Paul's list of fear-banishing virtues is love. As both Paul and Mormon taught, "Perfect love casteth out all fear."¹⁹ Anyone who has served a mission knows what I am talking about. A full-time mission, if you think about it, would be a petrifying experience if it weren't for love—love for God and for His children. But tens of thousands of young men and women, including many of you, serve every year because God has granted them the gift of Christlike love.

We all know young missionaries who couldn't even spell Guatemala—let alone find it on a map—when they got their mission call. But by the time they returned, they had the Guatemalan flag hanging on their bedroom wall and memories of beloved Guatemalan people in their hearts. Some missionaries receive this gift of love before they even leave; others don't find it until well into their service. But every missionary at some point or another

has to learn to love the people or else their mission will be miserable.

This was the greatest lesson I learned as a missionary in Argentina many years ago. Throughout my mission I did my best, and we were blessed with success, but my first year was different from my second year. The first year my motives were not completely pure. I wanted to lead the mission in baptisms, to move up the mission ladder, and to impress others. Thankfully, I was matched with a more consecrated companion, who showed me how to love and enjoy the people more, how to serve them with heart and soul, and how to forget myself and go to work with love. My focus and motives changed—I truly got a new heart—and I came home different than when I left.

Perhaps the most stunning example of the power of love to overcome fear comes from the sons of Mosiah and their remarkable mission to the Lamanites. I don't think we fully appreciate how courageous they were. The Lamanites weren't merely apathetic toward the gospel—they were openly hostile. They were sworn enemies who routinely killed Nephites just for being Nephites. They weren't exactly golden contacts! So why did the sons of Mosiah do it?

They were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble.²⁰

Their intense love was so powerful that they simply had to share the gospel with everyone. They couldn't bear not to. When we love with that kind of strength and sincerity, we overcome fear.

Of course, love conquers fear not just in missionary work but in all aspects of life. When young Gordon B. Hinckley and Marjorie Pay were engaged to be married, Gordon

began to worry about the economic realities of marriage during the depression-ridden 1930s. He called his fiancée and said they needed to talk. They agreed to meet over lunch.

"I think you should know," he told her, "that I only have \$150 to my name." He added that he only made \$185 a month.

Marjorie put his fears to rest with her unexpected, optimistic response: "Oh, that will work out just fine; if you've got \$150, we're set!"

Reflecting on her thoughts that day, Marjorie said, "I had hoped for a husband and now I was getting \$150 too!"²¹ Sister Hinckley's love and faith empowered her to "fear not" as they started their lives together—a marriage that would become nearly seven decades of love and faith and service.

Love gives meaning to life, even amid life's uncertainties. It is what keeps us going when we feel like giving up; it can be what gets us up in the morning and what settles us into sweet dreams at night. Love is the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It has no end and no limits. It remains when all else fails. Love never quits and never runs out; it simply endures and overcomes. Indeed, it "never faileth."²²

We cannot look to the world for that kind of love. All you have to do is examine the ways popular culture uses the term *love* and it is obvious that Satan just doesn't get it. Always, love's counterfeits slip quickly into thinly veiled selfishness, lust, pride, and even hatred.

God, on the other hand, not only understands love, He *is* love.²³ In fact, our expressions of love are but echoes and approximations of the continuous and unlimited love of God. Our efforts to nurture love would fail were it not for infusions of divine love along the way. Ultimately, all love comes from God. The more we seek Him, the more we will feel His love working a mighty change in our hearts—and in the hearts of those we love. What could we fear when filled with such love?

Several years ago on a cold winter night, some of our extended family volunteered to

serve dinner in a homeless shelter during the Christmas season. At first some of the younger children were a bit frightened by the sights, smells, and sounds of the inner-city shelter. They had never been so close to such distress before. But in time a little Christmas miracle took place.

As we served the hot meal we all began to interact with the homeless residents. We exchanged smiles, laughter, and small talk. Then the singing started. No one really remembers who began to sing first—perhaps one of the residents or one of the children—but before long everyone was singing Christmas carols. The room filled with the sweet spirit of Christmas. It became like a great party, almost a family reunion. They were no longer strangers but brothers and sisters, children of the same God. It was powerful, personal, and poignant—a night never to be forgotten.

It reminded me of a passage from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, when Scrooge's nephew, Fred, rather boldly defends Christmas against his uncle's bah humbugs. He described Christmas as:

*a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people [around] them as if they really were fellow-passengers . . . and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.*²⁴

No heavenly angels sang that night at the shelter—at least not in the literal sense—but heaven seemed close. We felt love—love for God, each other, and all humanity. As the evening ended and we stepped back into the cold night, we each felt the joy and meaning of Christmas more deeply. The stars shone a little brighter, and we all felt a little closer to a few of our fellow passengers on life's common journey.

If you are fearful—whatever your fears may be—I invite you to turn to the Lord and trust in His love, His goodness, and His grace. It is mightier than any force on earth. His loving words to the early Saints are also His words to you: “Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world.”²⁵

A Sound Mind

Finally, in addition to power and love, God has given us the spirit of a sound mind to dispel fear. What does it mean to have a sound mind? The word *sound* means safe, secure, and reliable. How do we achieve a sound mind? By anchoring ourselves to the safest, most secure, and most reliable rock in the ocean: the Lord Jesus Christ and His restored gospel.

You and I and the rest of the world are in the midst of an intellectual storm, a hurricane of philosophies and ideologies, with winds of doctrine tossing many of us “to and fro.”²⁶ Groups and individuals who are antagonistic toward religion in general, Christianity in particular, and Latter-day Saints specifically are gaining in influence and spreading their deceptive messages. Their goal is simple: to destroy faith. Sadly, we all have friends or loved ones who have become their victims. In such circumstances it is not easy to keep a sound mind or to avoid becoming fearful. Only those who have anchored their lives firmly to the Savior will survive.

To use imagery that perhaps is more familiar in landlocked Provo than hurricanes and anchors, consider the beautiful mountains that stand just outside this building—the phrase “the shadows of the everlasting hills” comes to mind. They seem pretty stable and permanent, don't they? They don't look like they are going away anytime soon. But as reliable as those mountains look, I would never stake my spiritual safety on them. I think that may be in part what Isaiah was trying to say when he prophesied, “Every valley shall be exalted, and every

mountain and hill shall be made low.”²⁷ Isaiah continued: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”²⁸

Do you remember how green the grass used to be on campus just a few months ago? Do you remember the colorful flowers that once adorned the courtyards? It seems like a distant memory on a day like today, doesn’t it? Well, compared to the word of God, all of the dogmas, kingdoms, and institutions of man are about as permanent as the withering grass and the fading flower. If I had placed my trust in something so fleeting, I would definitely be fearful. That is certainly not the product of a sound mind. No, in this storm I would much rather take my refuge in the word of God.

This is what Jacob, the brother of Nephi, did. He feasted on the scriptures, delighting in them and cherishing them, so that when the charismatic and persuasive Sherem came along, seeking to “overthrow the doctrine of Christ,”²⁹ leading “away many hearts,”³⁰ and eventually targeting Jacob specifically, Jacob “could not be shaken.”³¹ He had simply had too many spiritual experiences with eternal truth to ever be deceived by any counterfeits.

If you and I can follow Jacob’s example and build our lives on the firm foundation of the word of Christ, we will receive an additional blessing beyond immunity to deception. In moments when we need correction or when serious questions and doubts arise or when further revelation is necessary to spur us to greater action, we will not become offended, upset, impatient, or deceived. In fact, we will rejoice to meekly receive more of the divine word we love so much.

When Jacob had to speak reproofing words to his people, he noted “that the words of truth are hard against all uncleanness; but the righteous fear them not, for they love the truth and are not shaken.”³² He observed that to those who “are pure in heart” the word of God

is “pleasing” and they “feast upon his love” because their “minds are firm, forever.”³³

Can you see how men and women with sound minds, anchored firmly to the gospel of Jesus Christ, have no need to fear? When testimony and true conversion burn in their hearts and in their heads, they are unfazed by the latest fads and philosophies of men because they recognize them for what they are. And they are unafraid to receive truth, even if it requires them to change. Nephi said of such humble yet rock-solid souls: “He that is built upon the rock receiveth [truth] with gladness [while] he that is built upon a sandy foundation trembleth lest he shall fall.”³⁴

Let us take courage in these vigorous words from a favorite hymn. They are written as if from the Lord’s own mouth:

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee
to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, . . . omnipotent hand.*

Truly, a firm foundation can uphold us as we face all kinds of difficulties in life—sickness, health, poverty, wealth, deep waters, fiery darts and fiery trials—for

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to
shake, . . .
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!*³⁵

The Lord stands ready to help. I invite you to turn to the Lord and build upon His firm foundation. It is mightier and more permanent than any foundation on earth. The world needs your spiritual strength and power, your love and light, and your sound mind and heart. The Lord’s words to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery are also His words to you:

Fear not, little flock; do good; let earth and hell combine against you, for if ye are built upon my rock, they cannot prevail. . . .

*Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not.*³⁶

Good Tidings

I don't know if I was part of the heavenly choir that sang "glory to God" on the night of that first Noel, but I certainly can add my humble witness to that of the angels: I testify that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And because "unto [us was] born [that] day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord," we have no need to fear, for He has indeed brought with Him peace on earth and goodwill toward men. I testify that these good tidings are for all people—including me and including you.³⁷ In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 2:7.
2. Alma 7:10.
3. Hebrews 4:12; see also Helaman 3:29 and D&C 27:1.
4. Luke 1:13.
5. 1 Nephi 11:15.
6. Luke 1:30.
7. Matthew 1:20.
8. Luke 2:9.
9. Luke 2:10.
10. See Alma 7:11–12.
11. Howard W. Hunter, "An Anchor to the Souls of Men," BYU devotional address, 7 February 1993.
12. D&C 121:41–42.
13. D&C 121:45.
14. See D&C 84:20–21.
15. 2 Nephi 32:3. President Ezra Taft Benson said: "There is a power in [the Book of

Mormon] which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid deception. You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path" ("The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign*, November 1986).

16. See *Lectures on Faith*, Lecture First, 9–16.
17. D&C 121:45.
18. Isaiah 41:13.
19. Moroni 8:16; see also 1 John 4:18.
20. Mosiah 28:3.
21. In Virginia H. Pearce, ed., *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 77–78; see also Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 115–16.
22. 1 Corinthians 13:8; see also Moroni 7:46–47.
23. See 1 John 4:16.
24. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), stave 1.
25. D&C 50:41.
26. Ephesians 4:14.
27. Isaiah 40:4.
28. Isaiah 40:8.
29. Jacob 7:2.
30. Jacob 7:3.
31. Jacob 7:5.
32. 2 Nephi 9:40.
33. Jacob 3:2.
34. 2 Nephi 28:28.
35. "How Firm a Foundation," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 85.
36. D&C 6:34, 36.
37. Luke 2:11; see also verses 10–14.