

Wells of Trust Fueling Flames of Faith

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I am grateful to share this hour with my friend and colleague Steve Harper. He is both a scholar and a believing man of God. We had the chance to teach together in Religious Education for years here at BYU, and we shared, together with our families, one memorable year at the BYU Jerusalem Center, where we taught—and were taught by—wonderful students like the believing young man, part of whose story you heard today. Thank you for sharing that story, Steve. It reminds me of my freshman year here at BYU when, as a young seeker myself, I once bore an earnest testimony about what I believed and wanted to believe, only to be “corrected” afterwards by several well-meaning returned missionaries who told me that I really should say “I know” whenever I bore testimony. I am grateful to understand that it is enough to start with merely the desire to believe (Alma 32:27).

In the Easter morning session of General Conference earlier this month, Rosemary Wixom, General Primary President of the Church, told a moving story about a return to faith, but a return that occurred after much doubt, questioning, and pain. Relating one sister’s story, President Wixom reported that this friend had shared how she “did not separate myself from the Church because of bad behavior, spiritual apathy, looking for an excuse not to live the commandments, or searching for an easy out.” She felt that she “needed the answer to the question ‘What do I really believe?’”¹ That morning President Wixom taught us several important lessons, the first of which was that even if our own faith seems secure, it is incumbent upon us to provide a safe and nurturing environment for others to rebuild theirs. As President Uchtdorf has taught, “We are all pilgrims seeking God’s light as we journey on the path of

discipleship. We do not condemn others for the amount of light they may or may not have; rather, we nourish and encourage all light until it grows clear, bright, and true.”² Now of all times, we must lay aside the harmful stereotype, the all-purpose judgement, that somehow one whose faith flags is necessarily lacking either the spirit or a real desire to believe, or, even worse, is somehow sinning or unworthy.

But as I address today the vital issue of “fanning the flame of our faith” even as we acknowledge our questions and concerns, I would like to move the discussion beyond belief and knowledge, different points on the continuum that Professor Harper has noted can be either in dynamic, productive tension or seem to work against each other. For this you may need to indulge me in just a little Greek. *Pistis*, the Greek noun translated as both “belief” and “faith” in the New Testament, has a wide semantic range that includes additional meanings such as “faithfulness,” “trust,” and “confidence.” Thus a well-known passage such as Galatians 2:16, which teaches that a man is justified by the faith of Jesus Christ (*dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou*), can mean that we are “made right with God” not only by our faith in Christ, but, in fact, because of Christ’s faithfulness. In other words, because Christ was faithful, completing his atoning work, we can trust him that he will save us from our sins. In this regard, nurturing our trust in God can help us bridge the gap between questioning and believing, giving us the strength to cling to faith even without constant certitude.

To this end I would like to explore with you today the role of *trust* as a component of faith: first, trusting spiritual evidence as a legitimate source for belief. Second, as President Wixom has taught, focusing our faith by trusting Jesus even when all other elements fail. Third,

acknowledging our lack of faith as a precursor to finding greater faith. And fourth, believing in and trusting ourselves in times of doubt. By doing this we can find wells of trust in our souls that will fuel the flames of our faith.

Accepting Spiritual Evidence

Socrates is famously reported by Plato to have said, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (*Apol.* 38 B). Over the course of years of teaching history of civilization courses in the honors program here at BYU, I have had repeated chances to discuss this quote with bright, questioning students. Almost invariably, the discussion would shift from discussions of living and ethics to questions of belief. Is the unexamined *belief* even worth holding?

Often questions of belief can become debates about Platonic idealism versus Aristotelian empiricism. How can we “know” something for which we do not have physical, sensory evidence? In his Allegory of the Cave, Plato, in the course of laying out his Theory of the Forms, taught that apprehending the spiritual ideals that represented true reality could only be done by the philosopher; the attempt often left the average, mundane man or woman confused and bewildered. No, for most empirical evidence is the path to knowledge. And yet we know our senses can be deceived, or, as Professor Harper has noted, correct information can be misinterpreted without proper perspective or context. Sometimes intellectual honesty requires us to suspend judgment, to admit that something simply *seems* to be so.

But I would then hasten to remind my students, as I still remind myself, that we are composite beings, both spiritual and physical. And if we accept that proposition, then spiritual

evidence can be a legitimate source of knowledge as well. It certainly can lead us to belief—the acceptance that something beyond physical proof does, in fact, seem to be so. When coming to matters of faith, if we discount the possibility of spiritual evidence from the outset—if we write it off through premature doubt, or if we cloud our spiritual perception through sin or other interference—we might be depriving ourselves of the only possible evidence we might have on such matters. It is always appropriate to question, I would advise my students, but try not to start from a position of doubt. In a similar fashion, Elder Holland, in his April 2013 talk “Lord, I Believe,” taught “In moments of fear or doubt or troubling times, hold the ground you have already won, even if that ground is limited. . . . When those moments come and issues surface, the resolution of which is not immediately forthcoming, hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes.”³

Trusting Jesus

Sometimes, however, what we are left to hold onto is not much. In President Wixom’s address, “Returning to Faith,” she taught that when we find our faith in tatters, we should fall back to the basics, the foundations, of our beliefs. In the case of her friend, her “testimony had become like a pile of ashes. It had all burned down. All that remained was Jesus Christ.”⁴ But it is wrong to say that this “all that remained” is not much. It is *the* most important thing!

Like Professor Harper, I had moments of questioning and confusion as a teenager. I finished high school in western Tennessee, in the heart of the Bible Belt. Now I see that experience as a great blessing, one that was one of the truly formative parts of my current faith and spiritual identity. I shared very little with my friends in religious matters, but I had always

been taught by my parents that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. In one of the four most pivotal spiritual experiences of my life, I approached God in prayer on New Year's Eve 1982, determined to accept Christ as my personal Savior as my born-again friends had been urging. In a powerful moment of true revelation, God confirmed to me that Jesus Christ was his Son and that he had suffered and died for me—but in the same moment the Spirit affirmed that *this* was his Church.

My initial reverie was soon mixed with renewed questions, however. My friends had told me much, too much, about what *they* had heard about Joseph Smith and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. So I set out to read the Book of Mormon again and once more seek a testimony of its truthfulness. As I read it chapter by chapter, praying about its contents, I imagined a climax when I would reach Moroni's promise at the end. But I did not get past 2 Nephi 33 before the desired, sure testimony came.

As I read and prayed, the voice speaking to and through Nephi and Jacob seemed familiar. What it taught about Jesus burned true. And when I reached 2 Nephi 33:6, I was reduced to tears: "I glory in plainness; I glory in truth; I glory in my Jesus, for he hath redeemed my soul from hell." But it was Nephi's final words that opened the door to belief, to faith: "Hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And *if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words*, for they are the words of Christ" (2 Nephi 33:10, emphasis added). These were the words of Christ, and I could testify then, and now, that the Book of Mormon is the word of God. I did not claim then, and do not now, to know much about Mesoamerican or Great Lake archaeology; about genetics or DNA

evidence; or about the mechanics of translation or the nineteenth century mediation of ancient texts. But I knew the words of Christ because I already felt that I had come to know him.

Acknowledging Our Lack of Faith

In Elder Holland’s stirring April 2013 talk “Lord I Believe,” he began by quoting and then explicating a passage that has come to have great meaning to me. Recalling the story of the healing of the demonic or epileptic boy in Mark 9:14–29, he began by reciting the following stirring verses: “‘If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.’ Jesus said unto him, ‘If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.’ And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:22–24).

In May 2008, I spoke at another Women’s Conference. The topic that my co-presenter, Wayne Brickey, and I were assigned was how to better understand the New Testament gospels. It was done free-form, without teleprompters and prepared texts. Towards the end of the hour, Wayne turned to me and asked me to address the issue of faith in Mark 9. As I opened my scriptures and my eyes glanced at this very story, the spirit led me in a totally unexpected direction.

Just that week, our only son, Samuel, had been formally diagnosed with autism. At that point he was fairly severely impacted with severe Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), considerable communication handicaps, and a lack of emotional self-regulation. He was four-years-old but only knew and used about 20 words. The greatest challenge that he had at that point was communicating his frustrations and anxieties, and he was subject to frequent melt-

downs, throwing himself on the floor and screaming uncontrollably. As I read the story of the man who brought his son with a “dumb spirit” hoping that Jesus would heal him, I was constrained to tell the women there that day that, in a very real way, I was that father.

As Elder Holland related, the turning point of the story in Mark is when “the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.’” I consider myself to be a man of faith. I believe in Jesus and his ability to heal and change lives. But at that time of great sorrow in my life, I was in great need of deeper, stronger faith. Samuel’s autism diagnosis had been devastating to me and Elaine. Though we had long suspected what his challenge was, the psychologist’s official pronouncement struck us to our hearts, and in that moment our hopes and dreams for our son died.

Even those of us with faith can always use more faith—not always faith to receive a particular miracle in a specific way, but sometimes more of that faith that is simply trust and confidence in a loving God. My son was not healed that day, nor has he been completely healed since. But God has worked miracles in his life—none less than a miraculous teaching moment with Samuel on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, when, for fifteen minutes or so his autism seemed to be suspended and he asked me question after question about God, Jesus, the creation, the resurrection, and God’s plan for us. Or, most recently, when I was able to ordain my son a deacon and witness him pass the sacrament with a reverence and joy that I had never seen in any twelve-year-old before. But perhaps the greatest miracles have been in the lives of the rest of us as we have been comforted in times of discouragement and sadness and given the strength to accept our situation . . . and even find great joy in it.⁵

Plato taught that Socrates was “the wisest of all men” because he knew that he did not know everything. This intellectual humility allowed him to seek and learn that which he did not know, which made him wise. When we are spiritually humble, we realize that even if we may already believe, we can always use more faith—have more trust—in God and his plans for us.

Believing in Ourselves in Times of Doubt

Despite my teenage, and now adult, faith in Christ, notwithstanding continued affirmations of God’s existence and love for me in those moments when my faith sometimes flags, I still have one other source of doubt, one other great impediment to faith that I, like many of you, must struggle to overcome. This arises from a perennial lack of faith or confidence in *myself*. Is this a problem for any of you here?

As I close by addressing the topic of believing in ourselves in times of doubt, I am not speaking of some blithe positive mental attitude or rosy self-help strategy. Rather, when I say that faith is trust, this includes trusting God enough to believe that when the scriptures say he loved the world so much that he sent his Only Begotten Son, that means he sent him for *me* and for *you*. It means that Jesus thought of *me* and of *you* as his friends and loved us so much that he laid down his life, and then took it up again, for *us*. We must have confidence in ourselves as the intended recipients of God’ grace.

My most recent struggle with this began in September and continued through early February. It was an increasingly dark and lonely time. Devastated by the loss of my mother,

discouraged by unwanted changes and disappointments at work, disheartened by continuing challenges in my family and other relationships, but most of all disappointed at my own repeated failures, I slipped deeper and deeper into despair. I did not doubt God, nor Jesus, nor the gospel plan. But I doubted myself, not trusting that I was worth their love. I was again falling into the adversary's trap, one Nephi warned us about in his famous psalm when he lamented "why should I give way . . . that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul?" (2 Nephi 4:27).

Finally two of my best friends staged separate, uncoordinated interventions, telling me of their concern for me. My sweet wife, who had patiently and supportively watched my struggle, added her voice to theirs. I began to turn to the Lord more honestly in prayer, I began to talk with a friend who happened to be a professional in such matters, I began to review my life and count my blessings. I did not just believe that I was a child of a loving God, I felt it. I did not just believe that Jesus took upon himself my sins *and* my sorrows, I experienced it. And as I trusted them as well as those close to me here on earth, the darkness began to lift, hope once more filled my heart, and priesthood power again began to reanimate my worship and church service. I realized not only that I could not do it alone but also that I really was the beneficiary of love and grace freely proffered. As Adam Miller has written, "Grace is not God's back-up plan."⁶ No, it is God's key, as President Uchtdorf taught us Easter morning, lovingly given to open the windows and gates of heaven to us.⁷ But I not only had to trust that Jesus had made that grace available, I had to be reminded that it was meant *for me*.

Sisters, brothers, I am a witness that as assuredly as discounting spiritual evidence or

trusting in any source but the Risen Lord will sap our faith, so will depression, discouragement, or despondency. Not all lack of belief arises because of sin or lack of effort, although those factors can make our doubts worse. And poor self-esteem or lack of confidence need not always result from a lack of faith. We are complex and wonderful beings in whom nature, temperament, nurture, experience, and will combine with both positive and negative results. But Satan can, and does, exploit such factors in his desperate quest to separate us from God.

How grateful I am for the line in the Young Women's theme, "We are daughters, [and sons,] of our Heavenly Father, who loves us, and we love Him." How grateful I am for the values of Divine Nature and Individual Worth and wish that I had had them more deeply imprinted upon me as a young man! To fan the flame of our faith, let us believe—let us seek spiritual confirmation of truth, let us turn fully to the Lord Jesus, let us acknowledge our need for more faith, and finally let us trust that we are indeed children of Heavenly Parents and disciples of a loving Lord.

I close today with the first lines, with a few additions, of Orson Pratt Huish's lovely hymn:

Come unto Jesus, ye heavy laden,
Careworn and fainting, by sin oppressed.

*Come unto Jesus, ye sore discouraged,
Heart-torn and wond'ring, by doubts assailed*

He'll safely guide you, *with faith He'll fill you,*
Where all who trust him may rest.⁸

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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1. Rosemary M. Wixom, "Returning to Faith," *Ensign*, May 2015, forthcoming.
 2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Receiving a Testimony of Light and Truth," *Ensign*, Nov. 2014, 22.
 3. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign* May 2013, 93–94.
 4. Rosemary M. Wixom, "Returning to Faith," *Ensign*, May 2015, forthcoming.
 5. Eric D. Huntsman, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 84.
 6. Adam S. Miller, *Grace Is Not God's Backup Plan: An Urgent Paraphrase of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).
 7. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Gift of Grace," *Ensign*, May 2015, forthcoming.
 8. "Come unto Jesus," Hymn no. 117, text and music by Orson Pratt Huish (1851–1932), with additional lines by Eric Huntsman.