

The Process and Power of Hope

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Welcome to the new school year—one unlike any other we have experienced. As we start the year, we face some challenges and problems that have never been encountered before on this campus, as evidenced by the unique setting for this devotional. The circumstances in both the world and in our personal lives sometimes seem daunting and difficult, especially in the midst of a pandemic. Each of us may wonder from time to time why we have to deal with such challenges and problems.

Pandora's Box

Ancient Greek mythology includes a story intended to answer the question of why there are problems and evil in the world. It concerns the desire of Zeus, the king of the gods, to exact revenge on Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humans. In Hesiod's well-known version of the story, Zeus created Pandora¹ and presented her to Prometheus's brother Epimetheus. Pandora brought with her a jar, which, due to a translation error in the sixteenth

century, is now commonly referred to as a box. The jar contained what one ancient poet called "countless plagues."² Prometheus had warned his brother not to accept any gifts from Zeus, but Epimetheus ignored him and accepted Pandora, who immediately opened the jar, scattering its contents throughout the world. Thus, wrote the same poet, the earth and seas are "full of evils."³

I am not sure that this is the root cause of the present coronavirus pandemic, but this story—and the use of the term "Pandora's box" to refer to a multitude of problems and evils—is widely known today. What is less well known is that, according to the earliest written record of the myth, there was one item in Pandora's jar that did not escape. That item was hope. As one early version of the story put it, "Only Hope remained there . . . under the rim of the great jar, and did not fly out at the door; for . . . the lid of the jar stopped her, by the will . . . of Zeus."⁴

The early poet did not explain why hope remained in the jar, and scholars have vigorously

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debated that issue for centuries. Some have suggested that Zeus trapped hope in the jar because he was so angry with Prometheus that he wanted to make sure humans had no access to hope and he wanted to eliminate any thought that there was a chance things might improve.⁵ Others, including one leading twentieth-century scholar, believed just the opposite: that hope was kept in the jar so that it was always available to humans: “The general sense of the story . . . is that because of Pandora the world is full of ills, but we have one good thing to set against them, Hope.”⁶

That same optimistic view of hope finds expression in a variety of cultures and languages. In many English-speaking countries, we say, “Hope springs eternal,”⁷ reaffirming eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope’s belief that the impulse to hope against all odds is embedded deep in our souls.

A traditional Russian saying is “Hope dies last,” which, as one Russian explained, means that as long as you are alive, you have hope: “You live even if everything is very, very bad around you because if you have hope . . . you can survive.”⁸

Reflecting the same view from the opposite end of things, the Middle Ages poet Dante introduced his travelers to the gates of hell with the stern warning, “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”⁹ As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland recently observed, “Truly when hope is gone, what we have left is the flame of the inferno raging on every side.”¹⁰

An Anchor to Our Souls

Modern and ancient scripture,¹¹ along with modern and ancient prophets,¹² echo the central importance of hope in our lives. Indeed, scripture identifies hope as one of the three essential celestializing characteristics, firmly centered between foundational faith and exalting charity. However, despite its place in that elite company, hope often gets less attention in Church talks than do its surrounding compatriots. At times it seems that we view hope as more of a grammatical connector between the two better-known bookends of faith and charity than we do as an eternal empowering concept whose development is equally central to God’s plan for us.

So today, at a time and in a circumstance in which we might struggle to understand what hope looks like—and even more to know how to draw upon its power in our everyday lives—I would like to spend a few minutes talking about hope, with the hope that my remarks will enhance both our understanding of and our ability to draw strength from this key gospel concept.

Part of the reason why our understanding of the concept of hope seems less developed than other essential gospel characteristics is that the word *hope* has so many meanings in so many different contexts that its central significance sometimes gets lost. For many in today’s society, hope seems to be just a weak form of positive thinking. When answering such questions as Will I get a 4.0 GPA this semester? Will she accept my invitation for a date? or Will I realize my dream of being the first person on Mars? the common, usually hesitant reply of “Well, I hope so” seems more like a confession that whatever meager optimism we possess is justified and probably outmatched only by our naivete.

However, at other times—and in other settings, especially in the gospel context—hope takes on a much more affirmative and certain role. According to scripture, hope can be “an anchor to [our] souls.”¹³ It can make us “sure and steadfast.”¹⁴ The right kind of hope can purify us.¹⁵ Nephi informed us that “a perfect brightness of hope”¹⁶ is an essential part of the process by which we achieve eternal life. Hope is so central to our eternal progress that, according to Moroni, “man *must* hope, or he cannot receive an inheritance in the place which [Christ] hast prepared.”¹⁷

As Elder Neal A. Maxwell once observed, the hope described in scriptures—what he called “real” or “ultimate” hope—“is much more than wishful musing. It stiffens, not slackens, the spiritual spine. Hope is serene, not giddy, eager without being naive, and pleasantly steady without being smug.”¹⁸

So one step in better understanding hope is to focus on the gospel-centered concept of hope and not the more wishy-washy, weak form of Pollyannaish positive thinking to which the world sometimes limits its meaning.

But even then there is a challenge, because the scriptures themselves appear to convey somewhat inconsistent views of the role of hope in our eternal progress. Some scriptures seem to indicate that we have to have hope *before* we can have faith, while others—paradoxically—seem to indicate that we have to have faith *before* we have hope.

For example, on the one hand, the Joseph Smith Translation of the book of Hebrews indicates that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for,”¹⁹ suggesting that faith follows hope, with faith being the celestial affirmation that what one hoped for is in fact true. Mormon seems to suggest the same idea in his sermon in Moroni 7. Mormon asked, “How is it that ye can attain unto faith, save ye shall have hope?”²⁰ clearly implying that hope must precede faith.

On the other hand, in that same sermon, Mormon informed us that “without faith there cannot be any hope,”²¹ suggesting that hope comes *after* faith, confirming what appears to be the progress from faith to hope to charity that both Mormon²² and Paul²³ suggested is the proper order of celestial development.

So does hope come before or after faith? Is it a predecessor or a product of faith? Let me suggest that the answer to all of these questions is yes. Hope comes before and after faith. It is both a predecessor and a product of faith.

One possible resolution of this apparent dilemma is to consider the possibility that there are two types or manifestations of hope—one more developed than the other. The Guide to the Scriptures describes hope as both “the *confident expectation of* and *longing for* the promised blessings of righteousness.”²⁴ Let me suggest that “longing for the promised blessings” describes a pre-faith kind of hope, while “confident expectation” describes a post-faith kind of hope, the hope that is created after faith comes into the equation.

Let’s call this pre-faith longing for the blessings “nascent hope”—*nascent* being defined as something that is “beginning to form [or] grow.”²⁵ Nascent hope comes into being by our choice, by the exercise of our agency. We must first want to believe—or, to use the words of Alma, “desire to believe.”²⁶ If we choose to have at least this much hope—enough hope to desire to believe—God

can then engender faith in us by giving us an assurance that what we hope for or desire is truly possible. That spiritual assurance of the nascent form of hope is what Paul defined as faith in Hebrews 11: an “assurance of things hoped for.” This faith can then lead to a stronger kind of hope, a more mature hope—the “confident expectation” that the Guide to the Scriptures describes and that Moroni called “a more excellent hope.”²⁷ The process might work like this:

1. We begin with nascent hope, which comes into being when we exercise our agency to desire or long to believe.
2. Once nascent hope is formed, we can then receive the spiritual assurance or confirmation that what we desire is true, which is the essence of faith.²⁸
3. That confirmation of faith in turn creates a stronger, “more excellent” form of hope.

Aaron’s instruction to the king of the Lamanites in Alma 22 seems to outline this kind of process: Aaron said to the king, “If thou *desirest* . . . and call on [Christ’s] name *in faith, believing* . . . , then shalt thou receive the hope which thou desirest.”²⁹ First the king had to exercise his agency by desiring to believe—by choosing to hope that the joy and blessings about which Aaron had testified were really possible. He then needed to pray for spiritual confirmation. The spiritual assurance he received as a result of his prayer, which was faith, then engendered a deeper kind of hope, “a more excellent hope.”³⁰

This is not a one-time, linear process that we can perfect through a single event but a repeating pattern that builds on itself. It is an iterative process in which faith and hope combine over and over to increase both our faith and our hope. As this process repeats itself, the lines between the two concepts grow faint. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it, “Faith and hope are constantly interactive and are not always easily or precisely distinguished.”³¹

With this model in mind, it is important to remember that it is not faith in the abstract nor faith in general that turns our less developed nascent hope into the more mature, more durable, and “more excellent” hope. It is faith *in the Lord*

Jesus Christ. It is the constant exercise of faith in Christ that transforms what would otherwise be merely wishful thinking into the kind of hope that becomes an anchor to our soul. We have to plant our desires, our hope, in Him.

Christ Is the Author and Finisher of Our Hope

Because of His atoning sacrifice, Christ has the power to transform all our *righteous* desires into reality. Our role is to believe in Him and His gospel and teachings enough that He can work with us and that we allow Him to shape our desires so that our will aligns with His.

Thus, if we want to strengthen our hope, we must focus more on the Savior, especially when we feel hopeless. One of the simplest but most powerful ways we can do that is to follow His example by serving others. When we find ourselves struggling to find hope, we should reach out to someone in need, as the Savior constantly did. As we do so, our focus will shift from ourselves to others, and we will begin to have desires for their well-being. That hope can then be coupled with the assurance that Christ can help them and that He can do so through us. This addition of faith to our righteous desires can transform our small, nascent hope into an enduring, powerful, more excellent form of hope that can change us—and others. Christlike service is often the seedbed of hope, on both sides of faith. Thus, just as Christ is “the author and finisher of our faith,”³² He is also the author and finisher of our hope.

While we all ultimately want to develop the more excellent hope that comes from exercising faith in Christ, we should not ignore or underestimate the power and importance of the less mature, less developed form of hope that I have called nascent hope. Such budding hope is important both because it is the indispensable first step in the process and because, at times, it is all we can muster.

There will be times, maybe even in the year to come, when the gap between where we are and where we want to be seems so vast as to be unbridgeable. There will be times when our hope is so small that it appears to be of no significance. In those moments—when it feels like all we can

do is hang on to the last shred of hope we have—please be assured that that can be enough.

This is illustrated—literally—by a painting by the nineteenth-century English artist George Frederic Watts. The painting is entitled *Hope*. Prior to Watts’s painting of the subject, most illustrations of hope typically featured a lively young woman holding a flower or an anchor.³³ Watts’s portrayal of hope departed from that norm. Watts himself described the painting as “Hope sitting on a globe, with bandaged eyes playing on a [small harp] which has all the strings broken but one out of which . . . she is trying to get all the music possible, listening with all her might to the little sound.”³⁴ Her dress is threadbare; she appears to be exhausted, worn out. She is seemingly barely holding on. And yet she *is* holding on, trying her best to get music from what she has left: one single string.

Watts painted the picture shortly after his young granddaughter had passed away, which may account for this less glorified portrayal of hope.³⁵ While his exact intended message is somewhat ambiguous—and still somewhat debated today—the positive impact of the picture has been widespread. One of Watts’s biographers wrote:

*A poor girl, character-broken and heart-broken, wandering about the streets of London with a growing feeling that nothing [good] remained . . . , saw a photograph of [the picture of Hope] in a shop-window. She recognized at once its message. When she had saved a few coppers, she bought the photograph, and, looking at it every day, the message sank into her soul, and she fought her way back to a life of purity and honour.*³⁶

In the early years of the twentieth century, prints of the painting circulated widely. President Theodore Roosevelt displayed a copy at his home in New York.³⁷

Decades later, Martin Luther King Jr. referred to the painting in his “Shattered Dreams” speech, noting that it was an “imaginative portrayal” of the truth that we will all “face the agony of blasted hopes and shattered dreams,” reinforcing his main point that “in the final analysis our ability to deal creatively with shattered dreams and blasted

hopes will be determined by the extent of our faith in God.”³⁸

As Watts’s portrait of hope demonstrates, there is more power in our desires than we may think. In the long run, our desires will determine our destiny.³⁹ While it may not seem like much, the smallest form of hope—the smallest desire to believe—can be the first step in a miraculous process through which God can exalt us. So if at times you cannot see clearly or really not at all, if you can play only one note and that note sounds out of tune—if all you can do is hang on to one thread and hope it holds, then hang on and hope. That will be enough to start the process. If you then turn to the Savior and sincerely ask for His help, He will take what little you have to offer and turn it into magnificent, exalting hope, which can be an anchor to your soul.

As we begin this new school year, let me conclude by sharing four of my hopes for you in the coming year:

First, I hope that each of you stays safe and healthy. We are in the midst of a pandemic, and that requires that we do some things differently. Most important, we must be willing to adhere to the safety guidelines and directions to which each of us has agreed to comply. If we are to continue on with any face-to-face instruction, every one of us will need to be more vigilant in washing our hands, wearing a mask, social distancing, and avoiding gatherings where those things are not observed.

Second, I hope that each of you discovers or rediscovers the joy of discovery and that you more fully experience the enlightenment and energy that comes from learning truth through study and faith. As hard as it may be to believe at times, learning can be an exhilarating, edifying experience, even when—or maybe especially when—it is exhausting. It can be joyful, particularly when it is facilitated by the Holy Ghost.

Third, I hope that each of you feels fully a part of the BYU community and that every one of you feels you belong here at BYU. As I mentioned at the recent university conference, I hope that we can each develop “a loving, genuine concern for the welfare of”⁴⁰ all of God’s children, regardless

of their race, gender, sexual orientation, or other distinguishing feature, each of which is secondary to our common identity as “beloved spirit [children] of heavenly parents.”⁴¹ I hope we can learn to have difficult conversations without being difficult, because those kinds of conversations, held in love, will be necessary if we are to be a true Zion community.

Fourth, and most important, I hope that in the coming year each of you can feel in greater measure God’s love for you individually. At those times when you wonder if there is any reason to hope, when you wonder if anyone cares—or if anyone should care—I invite you to ask God what *He* thinks of you—what He *really* thinks of you. I know that can seem to be a frightening endeavor since you know that He knows better than anyone all your faults. But if you are truly sincere, you will be pleasantly surprised by His response, because He loves you much more than you can imagine.

You may feel that you do not have enough hope to generate faith, but I can assure you that the Lord has enough love to let you feel His charity. His love for you is perfect—not because you are perfect, not because you got admitted to BYU, not because you aced a test, and not because your parents are proud of you, but because you are you and you are His. If you feel that love more fully, you will find more hope in every circumstance and in all you do. My greatest hope for you is that you experience that kind of hope through God’s love in this coming year. That you may do so is my prayer and my hope for you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. The oldest surviving version of the Pandora story was written by Hesiod, without giving her name, in his poem *The Theogony* (c. 700 BC). He again told the story in *Works and Days* (c. 700 BC). In *The Theogony*, Zeus was assisted by Hephaestus and Athena in creating and preparing Pandora. In the later, more detailed version, other gods were also involved. See Wikipedia, s.v. “Pandora.”

2. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 100.

3. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 101.

4. Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 96–99.

5. Philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche argued:

Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man's torment. ["On the History of Moral Feelings," section 2 of *Human, All Too Human* (1878), paragraph 71; see also Wikipedia, s.v. "Pandora's box"]

6. Martin Litchfield West, commentary, in Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ed. M. L. West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 169. As one Renaissance poem put it:

*Of all good things that mortals lack,
Hope in the soul alone stays back.*
[Gabriele Faerno, "Spes," fable 94 in *Fabulum Centum* (1563); see also Wikipedia, s.v. "Pandora's box"]

7. Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man" (1733–1734), Epistle I, line 95.

8. Anna, in Jarrett Zigon, "Hope Dies Last: Two Aspects of Hope in Contemporary Moscow," *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 3 (September 2009): 262. Jarrett Zigon, a contemporary anthropologist, concluded that there is in Russian identity "a definite and unbreakable relationship between living a human life and having hope" (Zigon, "Hope Dies Last," 262).

9. Dante Alighieri, "Inferno," *The Divine Comedy* (c. 1310–1320), canto 3, line 9.

10. Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Perfect Brightness of Hope," *Ensign*, May 2020.

11. See, e.g., Ether 12:4, 32; Hebrews 6:19; 1 John 3:2–3; 2 Nephi 31:20.

12. See, e.g. Ether 12:32; Holland, "Perfect Brightness"; Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "The Infinite Power of Hope," *Ensign*, November 2008; James E. Faust, "Hope, an Anchor of the Soul," *Ensign*, November 1999; Neal A. Maxwell, "Hope Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ," *Ensign*, November 1998.

13. Ether 12:4; see also Hebrews 6:19.

14. Ether 12:4; Hebrews 6:19.

15. See 1 John 3:2–3.

16. 2 Nephi 31:20.

17. Ether 12:32; emphasis added.

18. Maxwell, "Hope."

19. JST, Hebrews 11:1.

20. Moroni 7:40.

21. Moroni 7:42.

22. See Moroni describing his father's sermon "concerning faith, hope, and charity" (Moroni 7:1).

23. See Paul, who said, "Faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

24. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "hope," churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/hope?lang=eng; emphasis added.

25. *OED Online*, oed.com, s.v. "nascent." It is also defined as "in the act of being born or brought forth."

26. Alma 32:27.

27. Ether 12:32.

28. See Alma 32:21: "If ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, *which are true*" (emphasis added).

29. Alma 22:16; emphasis added.

30. While not necessarily agreeing with my analysis, Elder Holland may have been describing the same thing when he noted in his most recent general conference talk that through faith the pre-1820 "desires [of the righteous] began to be clothed in reality and became, as the Apostle Paul and others taught, true anchors to the soul, sure and steadfast" (Holland, "Perfect Brightness," paraphrasing Hebrews 6:19 and Ether 12:4).

31. Maxwell, "Hope."

32. Hebrews 12:2.

33. See Nicholas Tromans, *"Hope": The Life and Times of a Victorian Icon* (Compton, Surrey: Watts Gallery, 2011), 11; see also Wikipedia, s.v. "Hope (painting)."

34. George Frederic Watts, letter to Madeline Wyndham, 8 December 1885, now in the Tate Archives, Tate Britain, London; quoted in Mark Bills and Barbara Bryant, *G. F. Watts: Victorian Visionary: Highlights from the Watts Gallery Collection* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press in association with Watts Gallery, 2008), 220; also quoted

in Tromans, *Victorian Icon*, 70; see also Wikipedia, s.v. “*Hope* (painting).”

35. See Bills and Bryant, *G. F. Watts*, 220; see also Wikipedia, s.v. “*Hope* (painting).”

36. Henry William Shrewsbury, *The Visions of an Artist: Studies in G. F. Watts, with Verse Interpretations* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1918), 64.

37. See Wikipedia, s.v. “*Hope* (painting).”

38. Martin Luther King Jr., “Draft of Chapter X, ‘Shattered Dreams,’” 1 July 1962 to 31 March 1963 (based on a sermon preached in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama, 5 April 1959), Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University,

kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/draft-chapter-x-shattered-dreams.

39. See Alma 29:2: “God . . . granteth unto men according to their desire”; Enos 1:12: “The Lord said unto me: I will grant unto thee according to thy desires, because of thy faith”; and D&C 11:17: “According to your desires . . . , even according to your faith shall it be done unto you.”

40. *The Mission of Brigham Young University* (4 November 1981). See Kevin J Worthen, “How to Act While Being Acted Upon,” BYU university conference address, 24 August 2020.

41. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995). See Worthen, “How to Act.”