

## *Some Lessons on Faith and Fear*

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I am humbled by the opportunity to speak to you today, and I pray that what I have to say will be helpful to you and pleasing to the Lord. I approach this opportunity with some fear—fear that I might not get the doctrine quite right, fear that you who know me will recognize the extent to which I don't practice what I am going to preach, and fear that because I have more questions about these matters than answers I won't have much to say that is useful. But I'll proceed upon faith. And that, really, is the point of my message today.

I am, primarily, a teacher of writing. And for me this speaking assignment has been, primarily, a writing assignment. It isn't finished, but time ran out and I had to stop. That's the way it is for me with important writing assignments.

It may be that the most important writing assignments are the ones we aren't able to finish. We aren't able to finish them because they engage us in a process of learning that doesn't have an end. I started this assignment with a plan for the finished product, but in the process of writing I learned things I hadn't anticipated, and now I'm going to say things that are not what I had initially planned. I had planned to say what I thought you needed to hear. But what I have ended up preparing to say today turns out to be what I need to hear. I think

that's what good writing assignments do—they teach the writers themselves the things *they* need to learn. So I'll be talking to myself today, but I hope there is something in what I have to say that will be helpful to you.

### **The Relationship Between Faith and Fear**

I have been learning about the relationship between faith and fear. I am beginning to think that the conflict between faith and fear—as much as that between good and evil—is the opposition that structures my experience in this life. Essentially, when I am living in faith, I don't fear change, or changing myself, for the better. But when I am living in fear, I find change and changing—for the better, at least—almost impossible. It is important to learn how to live in faith rather than in fear because the process of changing for the better is at the very foundation of the Father's plan for us. Changing for the better is what we are here in this life to do, and it is what the mission of His Son enables us to do.

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So I want to share with you today what I have been learning about faith and fear. The first lesson I have learned is that, at least in my life, fear works directly against faith. Fear pulls me away from the Lord. To understand why that is, I have been looking at the scriptures to learn more about faith and its relationship to fear, and I want to share with you what I have found there. But I have also learned a second lesson, one that is most important: how to go about the process of rejecting my fears and living my faith, day to day, hour to hour. I want to share that with you too.

### **Lesson 1: Fear Works Against Faith**

I have learned while writing this talk something about how fear works against faith in my life. I've realized that fear weakens my faith more than I had recognized. When my faith is strong, I am happy, confident, and even energetic as I approach each day. I am able to remain calm as difficulties arise, to keep the relative importance of things in perspective, and to feel the comfort and guidance of the Spirit when I most need it. But then there are the times when I am anxious about the problems I face and worried about what is coming next. Those are hard times, lonely times. I don't feel capable of handling what the day will bring. At times like that I am likely to choose badly and make small problems worse by my reactions. I have learned that these are times of fear.

I think fear works a little like a cold virus. Those viruses are all around us all the time. And fairly often I let one in and feel the early symptoms of a cold—a scratchy throat, a stuffy nose, a drop in energy, and telltale grumpiness. I've learned to pay attention to those symptoms, to take some vitamin C, and to get some rest. Most of the time the symptoms pass without slowing me down for very long. Sometimes, though, the virus pulls me down into a bad cold. When that happens I have to

work on getting well and wait for the cold to run its course.

When I was younger I tried to ignore even the worst colds and continued my usual activities. But then one cold developed into pneumonia. It took a lot of time in bed, a lot of penicillin, and about a year of my life to get my strength back. That is how I learned to take every cold seriously and to be on the lookout for the symptoms—pneumonia can be life threatening, you know.

In my experience, fear is like that cold. Fear is out there all the time, ready for me to let it in. I often find myself a little anxious and worried, a little discouraged and doubtful. I often have moments when I don't feel capable of solving my problems, of meeting my challenges, of overcoming my sorrows. Those are symptoms that need immediate attention. I have learned this as a result of a few extended bouts with fear—times when I was as disabled spiritually and emotionally as I was physically when I had pneumonia. Fear, too, can be life threatening.

What is the source of fear? I think it is rooted in the assumption (one that comes all too easily to me if I am not paying attention) that I must solve all my problems and face all my challenges alone, using my own resources. That is frightening, because deep in my heart I know how limited those resources are. So when I am fearful, I am also hopeless. And without hope, I find myself paralyzed. Knowing that I am not capable of changing myself or my circumstances for the better, I stand frozen in fear.

That fear is a failure of faith.

### *The Power of Faith*

So I have learned from this writing assignment to take very seriously the power of fear—to watch for its symptoms and to do what I must to address them directly when they come. Fear, coming on in little increments no more disabling than a nagging cough or stuffy nose, has the power to eventually cancel out

the faith that would enable me to move ahead with confidence, knowing that with the Lord's help I can indeed change myself and even the circumstances around me for the better.

But I have also learned to take very seriously the power of faith to overcome and even eliminate fear. I have been learning about that lately from the Book of Mormon, where I have studied some familiar and very concise definitions of faith.

First, this one from the prophet Moroni:

*I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith. [Ether 12:6]*

And this second one, from Alma:

*Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true. [Alma 32:21]*

These are clear and explicit definitions that demonstrate an important principle: faith is a choice. Specifically, faith is a choice to believe and then to act upon that belief. And it is a choice to believe and act without the assurance that would follow from what Alma calls "perfect knowledge." That is, faith is a choice to believe and to act upon that belief in the face of uncertainty.

But this last idea—that we choose faith in the face of uncertainty—prompts a question. At some special times in my life the Spirit has witnessed to me that the restored gospel of Christ is true. Yet day to day I find myself uncertain in the face of my challenges and difficulties and readily subject to doubt and the fear that follows it. I have a testimony of the gospel. Yet, as I try day to day to live that gospel, I find myself having consciously to choose faith. Isn't that a contradiction? Having been given my own witness of truth, shouldn't I be beyond faith?

Maybe I should be, but I'm not. Why is that?

I think I've found an answer in a Bible story we all know. On a boat in the dark on a very stormy sea, Jesus was awakened by His frantic companions:

"Master, carest thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38).

The Lord calmed the storm and then asked them in response, "Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?" (Mark 4:40).

Indeed, how is it?

Before we try to answer that, think about this: Why did they *need* faith?

They had the Savior present in the boat with them. How could they possibly fear anything? I think they were fearful because, at that moment, the only things they had perfect knowledge of were the intensity of the storm, the fragility of their boat, the depth of the water, and their distance from the shore. At that moment their mortal senses were filled with fear: They could see and hear and feel the threat of their circumstances.

They had, in days prior, witnessed for themselves the Savior's power. He had promised them the Father's blessings. Yet their memories of His works and His words and their hope in the future reality of His promises were not, at that moment, nearly so real to them as the storm.

This story helps me understand something important about faith. Faith is founded upon our memory of divine witnesses and blessings received in the past and upon our hope in divine promises for the future. Founded upon promises of the past and the future, our faith can be vulnerable when experiences in the present seem to contradict both. So even with knowledge of the truth, in the present moments of our day-to-day experience we remain subject to fear and must consciously choose again and again to believe, to remember, to hope, to have faith.

Here's the problem. I know the gospel of the Restoration is true. But I don't know what

today, and much less tomorrow, will bring to me and to those I love. I have felt directly the Lord's love for me, but I don't know how or when the seemingly impossible problems that occupy my thoughts and prayers will be resolved. I know the Lord has promised that He will take care of me and mine, but still, day to day, my life often seems uncertain and painful.

So I have learned that each day—and, on some days, each moment—I must choose to proceed on the basis of faith, remembering the Lord's past blessings and believing in and acting upon my hope in His promises. I have to do that even when the evidence of present trouble is almost overwhelming. I have to remind myself constantly to choose faith and keep choosing faith in the face of realities that seem to contradict it and to do that for as long as it takes. This is, I think, what Moroni means by a "trial" of faith. I have to remind myself that this choice of faith will, sooner or later, result in answers to my prayers and miracles in my life.

Here is another, more comprehensive definition of faith—this one from our Bible Dictionary:

*Faith is to hope for things which are not seen, but which are true . . . , and must be centered in Jesus Christ in order to produce salvation. To have faith is to have confidence in something or someone. The Lord has revealed himself and his perfect character, possessing in their fulness all the attributes of love, knowledge, justice, mercy, unchangeableness, power, and every other needful thing, so as to enable the mind of man to place confidence in him without reservation. [Bible Dictionary, s.v. "faith," 669]*

This definition makes explicit something else that is implicit in the brief definitions of faith given to us by Alma and Moroni: The object of our faith—that which we have faith *in*—is the capacity of the Savior's Atonement to bless us, to heal us, and, as Elder David A.

Bednar has emphasized, to enable us to act beyond our abilities (see "In the Strength of the Lord," *Ensign*, November 2004, 76–78).

As I have thought about this, I have begun to think that faith might well be the path that the power of the Atonement must travel if it is to transform our lives. It may be only in the moments when I am *filled* with faith, crowding out my fears, that I make myself available to the healing and enabling power of the Atonement. It may be only then that I can be comforted, restored, and made able to overcome my problems and to change for the better. Put another way, it may be that acting in faith to keep our covenants, sometimes directly in the face of fear, is the very transformation of our souls that the Atonement promises.

## **Lesson 2: How to Daily Choose Faith over Fear**

The second lesson I want to discuss is how to actually put those actions of faith into daily practice and how to live each day in a way that draws constantly upon the blessings of the Atonement to dispel fears and enable change for the better. I have learned while preparing this message something about how I can engage myself very actively in the ongoing process of choosing to live with that kind of faith.

As I said a moment ago, I think faith might open a divine channel through which we can receive the transformative blessings of the Atonement. And I think the opposite might occur as well: Fear closes that channel. To put it bluntly, choosing fear—and fear, like faith, is a choice—may well keep the blessings of the Atonement from reaching us.

For me, this life is beginning to boil down to an ongoing choice between faith and fear. We choose constantly between faith in the capacity of the Atonement of Jesus Christ to bring us happiness and peace in the Lord's way and in His own time and fear that the trials of this world will put peace, happiness, progress, and answers to our prayers out of our reach. I think

both these statements are true, by the way. The Atonement really does have the capacity to bring us happiness, peace, and power to change. And without our constant choice to keep the Atonement active in our lives, peace and happiness and positive change really are out of our reach.

In a way our situation is the same as that of the Savior's companions that night in the boat in the storm. We have in our experiences, in our scriptures, in our doctrines, and particularly in our covenants His promises of salvation in both this life and the next. But our problems, so insistently and empirically present to us in each moment, are almost always more real to us than those promises. If we choose that reality to live in, we choose fear over faith.

So what can we do about that? What, exactly, does it take—day by day, hour by hour—to choose faith over fear?

My youngest daughter and newest son-in-law are patiently therapeutic in their approach to my fearfulness. For my birthday last year they copied in calligraphy a quote from President Hinckley and framed it for my office. It hangs above my desk. This is what it says: "It isn't as bad as you sometimes think it is. It all works out. Don't worry." I read that every day. Multiple times.

These are the first three sentences of a statement President Hinckley included in his wife's funeral program on a day that must have been one of the hardest of this good man's life. Here is the full statement:

*It isn't as bad as you sometimes think it is. It all works out. Don't worry. I say that to myself every morning. It will all work out. . . . Put your trust in God, and move forward with faith and confidence in the future. The Lord will not forsake us. He will not forsake us. . . . If we will put our trust in Him, if we will pray to Him, if we will live worthy of His blessings, He will hear our prayers.* [Gordon B. Hinckley, quoted in Latter-day Counsel,

"Excerpts from Addresses of President Gordon B. Hinckley," *Ensign*, October 2000, 73; see also "Put Your Trust in God," *Ensign*, February 2006, 63]

I think this is the answer to my question about how to go about the constant project of choosing faith. This is what faith looks like in daily practice. And if President Hinckley needed to remind himself daily to choose faith over fear, then I should probably be reminding myself even more often.

President Hinckley wasn't the only prophet who needed a reminder to choose faith instead of fear. Moroni did too. In Ether 12 he described his fear that he was not up to the Lord's assignment to write the gospel of Christ for his descendants. And he was right—he wasn't up to that task, at least not on his own. So he confessed his fears to the Lord and received this lesson in response:

*And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.* [Ether 12:27]

Could it be that when we find ourselves fearful—that is, when we find ourselves failing to choose faith—we should consider this a sign, a symptom even, of our urgent need to return to the Lord so He can strengthen our faith?

I think we should.

So how exactly do we return to Him? The Lord's lesson to Moroni suggests that humility is the way. It suggests that the first step in that turn to the Lord is to recognize that fear is a symptom of weakened faith. The second is to acknowledge this weakness (and our need for the Lord to help us overcome it) by renewing our trust in Him. As we begin to again trust the

Lord more than our own capacities, we become humble.

That is how it worked out for Moroni. He recognized in his fear a lack of trust in the Lord. What did he do? He took his fear to the Lord—precisely what we all should do with our fears. When he did that, the Lord comforted him, taught him, and empowered him beyond his capacity. In humility, Moroni exercised his faith, and that faith enabled him to write of the Lord’s plan with marvelous clarity and power.

Every time I find myself fearful, sooner or later I realize that I am not being particularly humble. I realize I have been trying to live my life and solve my problems on my own terms and with my own capacities—my own intellect, usually—and have forgotten to trust instead the power and plan of the Lord.

May I comment for a moment on the difficulty of being humble? As President Ezra Taft Benson taught us years ago, “Pride is a ‘my will’ rather than ‘thy will’ approach to life. The opposite of pride is humbleness, meekness, submissiveness . . . , or teachableness” (“Cleansing the Inner Vessel,” *Ensign*, May 1986, 6). Pride is reliance on our own judgment, our own capacities, and our own purposes, unsubordinated to the Lord’s.

And may I suggest that a university, even this university, can, if we are not careful, nurture pride? That is because a purpose of a university, even this university, is to enable people to achieve impressive feats of learning and expertise. That is why we are here—students and faculty alike—and these are goals that can, if not managed with humility, bring us to pride.

Perhaps that is why so many of us here struggle with fear. As we increase in learning and skill, as we compete with and compare ourselves with others, we begin to rely on ourselves rather than on the Lord. But deep in our hearts we know how limited we really are. So we work and live in fear.

The point is that, like faith and fear, humility is also a choice. It is an ongoing choice to be made every moment of every day, sometimes in spite of circumstances that persistently teach us pride.

Because I need to be reminded to choose humility, I am glad that our daughters gave my wife, Linda, and me a particular Christmas gift a few years ago. We are empty nesters. Our three daughters are married, and so far none of them has chosen to live with us. In fact, only one of them lives anywhere near our time zone. So as the time approached for them to leave us, our two younger daughters gave us dogs.

I read somewhere that departing adult children do such things out of concern for the parents they feel they are abandoning. They think their parents’ lives will be empty and void without them, so they try to replace themselves with pets for their parents to care for. May I suggest to you that this may be a misplaced concern?

Anyway, Linda and I have come to love these dogs. Each morning and afternoon they greet me with happy anticipation of a walk. So we walk. And as we walk, the dogs teach me lessons about humility. Tommy (a border collie mix) stays with me, but Lucy (a yellow Lab) is a wanderer. She frequently follows her nose off on a trail of her own. It’s not that she wants to get away from me. It’s just that when she finds an interesting scent, she forgets about me. Sometimes she comes back when I call, but at other times I have to go after her. When I catch up, she stops, wags her tail, and smiles at me. Dogs do smile, you know.

Tommy, however, is entirely reliable. He walks with me, sometimes going ahead but turning back constantly to be sure he is with me. He always comes when I call. When I need him to stop, like when we come to a busy road, I say “wait” and he waits, no matter how excited he is to proceed. Only when I say “okay” does he rocket ahead with a joyful bark.

I know people aren't, and shouldn't be, like dogs. So I'm not going to take this analogy very far. But I do learn from these dogs daily lessons in humility.

Here is one: A trainer once told us that dogs are happiest when they understand clearly their relationship to their master. I think that we, too, are happiest when we understand clearly our relationship with our Master—our Savior—and give our hearts and wills entirely to Him.

Here is another lesson: I should be like Tommy, staying close to my Master at all times, learning His language, keeping Him in sight, obeying His commandments without hesitation, and always coming when called.

Here is a third lesson: I should be like Tommy, but I'm more like Lucy. I get distracted by my own agenda and follow my nose off the Lord's path. But when He comes to get me, I should respond to Him as Lucy responds to me when I catch up to her. She is glad to see me, glad to turn and follow me. I should smile when I see Him coming.

So here is a summary of that second lesson I have learned from this writing assignment—a lesson on how to go about choosing faith instead of fear: If I am humble, if I work constantly to choose attitudes and actions of humility before the Lord, then He will be able to strengthen my faith and eliminate my fears. The healing and enabling power of the Savior's Atonement—of His love, really—will become more real to me than the threats carried by any storm I might otherwise fear. I have learned, simply put, that active and practical humility is the way we choose faith.

### **Staying Humble and Choosing Faith**

So what, exactly, do I need to do each day to be humble enough to fully choose faith? A few years after I began teaching here, President Henry B. Eyring—then Elder Eyring—spoke to the faculty here in the de Jong Concert Hall, and at the end of his remarks he directed us

to a scripture. It is a profoundly simple one that I hadn't noticed before but that has since remained very present in my mind. I think this scripture, in words spoken by Mormon and recorded by Moroni, may say all that needs to be said about how to live in humility and choose faith:

*And the first fruits of repentance is baptism; and baptism cometh by faith unto the fulfilling the commandments; and the fulfilling the commandments bringeth remission of sins;*

*And the remission of sins bringeth meekness, and lowliness of heart; and because of meekness and lowliness of heart cometh the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love, which love endureth by diligence unto prayer, until the end shall come, when all the saints shall dwell with God. [Moroni 8:25–26]*

I think that's the answer—that's how we stay humble and choose faith. It's a process we should practice throughout all our lives, as regularly as the process of waking and sleeping. By choosing to live our lives within the context of this ongoing process of repentance and renewal, we keep our covenants. And through keeping our covenants we change, and are changed, for the better.

What about fear? Fear is the primary target of this repentance and renewal process. And fear is the prompting to turn, and return, to the Lord—a process that begins in an act of humility. In humility we choose faith, and faith becomes the channel through which the Lord blesses us with hope and miracles and perfect love.

So that is what I have learned about faith and fear. Maybe these lessons apply to some of you too. In faith, we are free of fear. In faith, we are blessed with peace that comes in the form of confidence—confidence that as bad things happen, as problems arise, as confusion confronts us, as people hurt or disappoint us, and as people we love suffer, in the midst of all

the storms of this life, *all is well*, as our carillon bells remind us every hour on the hour.

I am grateful for the peace and the confidence and the strength that comes when my faith refutes my fears. I am grateful for the

blessings of the Atonement that strengthen my faith when I turn, and return, in humility to the Lord. I pray that we may each be more humble and so choose greater faith, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.