

And Also By Faith

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It is both a privilege and an honor to speak to you on this occasion and to represent the faculty of this wonderful institution. I am conscious of the hope and faith that has brought you here this morning and of the obligation that is now mine to offer something worthy of your trust. My only request is that you listen actively, rather than passively, and become part of a silent dialogue that will invite you to make an honest appraisal of the nature of your commitment to the process of learning and a quiet review of your desires, experiences, and objectives in spiritual things. It is my hope that you will be encouraged to approach the learning process with fresh vision and enthusiasm and motivated to increase your understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ by striving to live according to its principles.

I have chosen to speak about learning by faith. It is a subject that is often mentioned but seldom discussed and frequently misunderstood. I am confident that it is appropriate and timely because of the manner in which I have been impelled to prepare it. It is especially appropriate at Brigham Young University, for those who choose to come here to teach or learn are expected to live and study in ways that conform with eternal principles.

In a revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Lord admonished his people to “seek learning, even by study and *also* by faith” (D&C 88:118; emphasis added). Let us reflect on this statement for a few moments. It begins with the word *seek*, instead of a word like *acquire*, *obtain*, *secure*, or *gain*—words that might seem on the surface to be just as appropriate. To seek, in its scriptural context, means to pursue an objective with a firm commitment to reaching it. Seeking is not an attempt that is easily abandoned; nor is it a desire that is placated for the sake of convenience. It demands devotion, direction, and dedication. “Seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7) is a wonderful promise. Those who seek objectives that are right, good, and expedient in the wisdom of God will be provided in time with the means to realize their desires (3 Nephi 18:20).

I also find significance in the use of the word *learning*, instead of a word like *education*, *knowledge*, *understanding*, *skill*, or *wisdom*. Learning is a process, not an objective. Rather than directing us to seek a predetermined

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result, such as a certain species of knowledge or a specific skill, we are encouraged by the Lord to seek the process through which these can be obtained. To engage in the process of “learning” is to immerse oneself in the means by which knowledge, understanding, skill, and wisdom are acquired. It is the way growth and development are nurtured and attained on a personal level.

We are comfortable with the idea of seeking to learn through study. This institution, like most others, assumes that those who “enter to learn” accept the necessity of study and have already developed effective study skills. Nevertheless, within the classroom environment it has been my observation that some students approach the opportunity of study with dread rather than with excitement. Interest and desire, those important qualities so essential to personal motivation and commitment, are often weak and sometimes entirely missing. Many seem to hope that class attendance, marginal participation, obedient completion of carefully guided activities, objectified tests, or other questionable trappings of institutionalized “learning” will provide an easier, friendlier substitute for the rigor and discipline of study. As a consequence, the mental exhilaration and quiet confidence that come only through genuine study are replaced by doubt and insecurity—all because of an incorrect assumption that learning can result from comfortable means. For many, study is a burden—an obligation to be satisfied as quickly and effortlessly as possible, a “requirement” one must satisfy to acquire the accoutrements of education.

The Lord has assured us that “it is [his] will that [we] should hasten to . . . obtain a knowledge of history, and of countries, and of kingdoms, of laws of God and man” (D&C 93:53). He has encouraged us to “study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people” (D&C 90:15). The apostle Paul counseled

Timothy to study so that he would be able to understand and teach the truth without perversion or distortion and not be ashamed before God (2 Timothy 2:15). Jesus Christ, himself, the perfect exemplar, studied the law and the prophets early in life. Luke informs us that thereafter Jesus “increased in wisdom and stature” (Luke 2:52). In Proverbs we are taught that “the heart of the righteous studieth to answer” (Proverbs 15:28), a clear reference to one of the methods of seeking and receiving revealed knowledge in which the Lord has instructed us to “study it out in [our] mind” before asking if it be right (D&C 9:8). We should, according to Paul in his instruction to the Thessalonians, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We are expected to study. If we wish to acquire knowledge, skill, understanding, or wisdom, we must apply the principles of effective study as we seek learning.

While learning by study is widely understood, accepted, and valued, learning by faith is often misunderstood, seldom applied, and generally ignored as a valid learning process. Why is this? Is it because we have been so thoroughly indoctrinated with the secular definition of faith that we fail to understand its real nature and value? When confronted with the Lord’s counsel to seek learning by faith, what do we assume he means? Is it an admonition to engage in a process that may be just as essential as study? Or do we dismiss it as a fuzzy invitation to believe those things that are difficult to explain or impossible to prove and get on with life?

There is obviously more to learning than mere study. Surely, none of us wants to be accused, as was Job, of opening our mouth in vain by multiplying “words without knowledge” (Job 35:16). Nor do we aspire to be “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7). Even though “truth is knowledge of things as they are” (D&C 93:24), it is difficult, given the limitations

of our temporal bodies and minds, to clearly perceive and accurately define reality. There are so many convincing counterfeits of truth. Well might we ask, as did Elihu:

Where is God my maker, who giveth songs in the night;

Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, and maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven? [Job 35:10–11]

Perhaps you have occasionally longed, as I have, for the relative certainty of a simpler time, a time long ago when the Creator himself “gave [our earliest progenitors] knowledge, in the day [that he] created them” (Moses 7:32).

Is there a key to learning, to perceiving things as they really are and understanding their significance? I believe a fundamental principle is found in two parallel statements in Proverbs. The first asserts that “knowledge of the holy is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10), and the second proposes that “knowledge is easy unto him that understandeth” (Proverbs 14:6). To know that which is holy one must commit to live the principles of holiness—those principles of living espoused by our Eternal Father, the Man of Holiness (Moses 6:57, 7:35). Experience will confirm that living by these eternal principles does result in a level of personal understanding that makes the process of acquiring knowledge easier in a certain sense. To seek holiness with a sincere heart is to invite the Spirit of Truth to “guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). As the Holy Ghost guides you into truth, you begin to understand and appreciate the quiet confidence of Ammon in the presence of King Lamoni—affirming that a portion of the Holy Spirit dwelled in him, which gave him knowledge (see Alma 18:35). The experience of receiving knowledge through spiritual means is not only informative, but sanctifying and enriching. It is knowledge that has wholeness because it is grounded in “the holy.” Alma

taught that knowledge received in this way is perfect knowledge (see Alma 32:34).

The person who is not inclined toward holiness, sometimes identified as the “natural man[,] receiveth not the things of the Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:14). In this mental condition he or she is impervious to knowledge of that which is holy and may be unable to understand the meaning of information gathered through study or experience. Without spiritual assistance, trying to acquire knowledge can be difficult. Learning and developing a skill may be complicated by fear, understanding might appear to be an elusive dream, and wisdom is a mystery.

Let us now approach the idea of learning by faith more directly. What is faith, and what does it mean to seek learning by faith? The author of Hebrews defines faith as “the substance [or assurance] of things hoped for, the evidence [or proof] of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). According to this definition, faith is characterized by substantial assurance and evidence that is absolutely convincing as proof of things that cannot be perceived through the physical senses or validated by common methods of inquiry. What kind of assurance is this? How does one receive it? If something cannot be seen, what kind of evidence would possibly convince one that it exists? The Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “Faith is the assurance which men have of the existence of things which they have not seen, and the principle of action in all intelligent beings”. (*Lectures on Faith* 1:9). In drawing a comparison between belief and faith, Elder James E. Talmage wrote:

Belief, in one of its accepted senses, may consist in a merely intellectual assent, while faith implies such confidence and conviction as will impel to action. [The Articles of Faith (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1975), pp. 96]

Clearly, both individuals are describing faith as a condition of absolute confidence that results from evidence that is convincing and assurance that is substantial.

What is the real substance of this assurance and evidence we call faith? According to the Prophet Joseph Smith, “Faith comes by hearing the word of God, through the testimony of the servants of God; that testimony is always attended by the Spirit of . . . revelation” (HC 3:379). We learn from this that it is the spirit of revelation that produces faith in the listener. What, then, is the nature of the spirit of revelation and how does it infuse the listener with faith? The Lord has given us a clear answer:

I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.

Now, behold, this is the spirit of revelation.
[D&C 8:2]

The spirit of revelation influences the mind and the heart. It comes through the Holy Ghost and may dwell in our heart. More specifically, the Lord has said:

I will impart unto you of my Spirit, which shall enlighten your mind, which shall fill your soul with joy;

And then shall ye know, or by this shall you know, all things whatsoever you desire of me, which are pertaining unto things of righteousness. [D&C 11:13–14]

The Holy Ghost, through its enlightening influence on the mind and its joyful effect within the core of our being, provides the convincing evidence and compelling assurance that we call faith. The influence of the Holy Ghost has “substance” that can be perceived. Our perception of its powerful effect provides convincing proof of its existence. And because this experience is subjective in nature, there is no real need to seek evidence from another

source. As the Prophet Alma exclaimed in reference to this experience of spiritual enlightenment and pure joy, “Is not this real?” (Alma 32:35).

Faith, then, is a spiritual gift that is available through the agency of the Holy Ghost. How does one qualify for this gift? Moroni, quoting from the sermons and letters of his father, Mormon, provides us with a clear answer. A person, he writes, “cannot have faith. . . , save he shall be meek, and lowly in heart. . . for none is acceptable before God, save the meek and lowly in heart” (Moroni 7:43–44). To qualify for the gift of faith, one must first be acceptable before God, and only those who are meek and lowly in heart are acceptable. This being so, how does one acquire the qualities of meekness and lowliness of heart? Referring to repentance and baptism, Mormon answers:

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. [Moroni 8:25–26]

The process is simple. One is convinced of the truth, importance, and benefits of God’s ways while under the influence of the Holy Ghost. The convincing power of the Holy Ghost induces feelings of sorrow for sin that lead to a sincere desire for change that impels one to repent. The consequence of genuine repentance is remission of sin, which results in “meekness” or “lowliness of heart.” Another word more commonly used to describe this spiritual condition is humility. Because of humility the Holy Ghost is able to visit and abide, blessing the qualified individual with faith, hope, and perfect love. By “diligence unto prayer” this blessing may continue.

Is it any wonder that this institution requires higher standards of behavior than most other schools? Faith can only be acquired through personal righteousness, and learning by faith will not occur until that prerequisite is satisfied. For example, do you remember the promise of the Word of Wisdom? Those who abide by its principles “shall find wisdom and great treasures of knowledge” (D&C 89:19). We should be thankful for standards that remind us continually of the way we ought to live. We should more fully appreciate the opportunity of living in an environment where repentance is taught and valued. Only by grasping and living the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ will any of us be able to enjoy the gift of faith.

It should have become obvious by this point in our discussion that to seek learning by faith is to qualify to learn under the influence of the Holy Ghost. Though the way we must qualify is clear, it is not easy. Constant awareness, personal discipline, a willingness to change and grow, and humility must replace pride, behavioral rigidity, weakness of character, and a casual approach to life. Phrased in the vernacular, we must be willing to “walk the talk.”

As we seek learning by faith, we may be enlightened, edified, chastened, comforted, assured, strengthened, restrained, given peace of mind, or have conclusions reached through study confirmed or rejected. I will briefly identify, describe, and discuss each of the evidences or assurances that characterize learning by faith. In the words of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

A person may profit by noticing the first intimation of the spirit of revelation; for instance, when you feel pure intelligence flowing into you, it may give you sudden strokes of ideas . . . ; and thus by learning the Spirit of God and understanding it, you may grow into the principle of revelation.

[Teachings, p. 151]

A sensitive self-awareness is required to discern the difference between “pure intelligence flowing into you” and the normal functioning of your powers of logic, reasoning, or imagination. But there is a discernable difference.

“Pure intelligence” is always accompanied by feelings of peace and certainty, rather than hesitation and doubt. One has a confident sense of enlightenment. If we respond to these “sudden strokes of ideas” by pursuing them further through concentrated study and committed application, understanding and wisdom will result.

We know we are learning under the influence of the Holy Ghost if we are being edified. Edification is characterized by a perception of goodness, a noticeable enlarging of the soul, and enlightenment of the mind. Those who desire to learn by faith must continually reject darkness and seek light.

That which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness.

That which is of God is light; and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day. [D&C 50:23–24]

Those who seek to learn where spiritual darkness reigns will always seek in vain, and without spiritual assistance. Darkness is not in harmony with the nature of the Spirit of Truth. The sophistry of the world claims that one is free to plunge into any avenue of study without fear of harm. “After all, it’s only study,” we are told, only an intellectual exercise or experiment. But when darkness is chosen, the light of truth inevitably grows dimmer, and the learner enters a perilous mental environment. Learning by faith is centered in edification—the process of receiving light through continuing in God’s ways.

There are some things that can only be learned through experience. In this Jesus Christ is the great exemplar. “Though he were a Son,

yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered,” reports the author of Hebrews (Hebrews 5:8). If it was expedient for him to learn the principle of obedience through suffering, should we be surprised if we are required, from time to time, to walk a similar path? The Lord has warned us that his “people must needs be chastened until they learn obedience, if it must needs be, by the things which they suffer” (D&C 105:6). There will be times when painful experience is the only effective teacher, especially if we have made unwise decisions or pursued unworthy objectives. During experiences of this kind, however, those who seek learning by faith will have access to “the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost,” to fill them with the strengthening substance of spiritual assurance (John 14:26).

It is instructive to note the Lord’s purpose in allowing the Prophet Joseph Smith to suffer injustice and personal tragedy. “Know thou, my son,” he spoke with perfect understanding, “that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). As part of the learning we seek, we may need to be chastened through experiences that require patience and endurance, but we will have no fear if we walk “in the comfort of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 9:31).

When one pursues a line of reasoning that is incorrect, or makes false assumptions, the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit will be perceived if sin has not dulled spiritual awareness. This restraint may be manifest as conflict or agitation in the mind, an absence of peace, or a sense of mental darkness. Further study and a flexible attitude of mind, together with humility born of repentance, will usually lead to the discovery of new direction and clarified vision. However, if we persist in an incorrect line of thinking or an unwise course of action because of pride or “the persuasions of men” (D&C 3:6), in spite of or in opposition to spiritual signals of restraint, our thinking will become muddled and unclear. In this mental

condition concepts are formed with difficulty and creative ideas lack integrity. When the influence of the Holy Ghost is lost, the mind becomes darkened (see D&C 10:2).

In contrast, as one follows a path of logic or imagination that is right and true, the subtle, confirming influence of the Holy Ghost is manifest. Most often this is perceived as a calm, peaceful mental condition or a fluent and agile imagination. “Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter?” the Lord instructed Oliver Cowdery. “What greater witness can you have than from God?” (D&C 6:23).

When we combine learning by study with learning by faith, a wonderful level of confidence emerges. I have always been grateful that Oliver Cowdery failed in his attempt to translate because his failure invited the Lord to give the following instruction about learning by faith:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. [Let’s pause here for a moment and reflect on how often we might have been guilty of taking no thought before asking.]

But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought. [D&C 9:7–9]

Notice here the precise requirement of study before asking for assistance, and the promise of a specific form of confirmation if your decision is right and another if it is wrong. What a marvelous gift this is! It is one of those precious methods of learning by faith that our Father in Heaven has provided for our use. But we must be careful how we use it. As he warned Oliver

Cowdery on another occasion: “Trifle not with these things; do not ask for that which you ought not” (D&C 8:10).

I believe we may profit by briefly considering one of the greatest benefits of seeking learning by faith—the gift of charity. The reason that faith, hope, and charity are so closely related in the scriptures is that they come through the same source. That source is the Holy Ghost. Do you remember the instruction quoted earlier from Moroni’s father, Mormon, promising that repentance will allow “the visitation of the Holy Ghost, which Comforter filleth with hope and perfect love” (Moroni 8:26)? Earlier in that section of scripture, Mormon teaches that “charity is the pure love of Christ” and exhorts us to “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ” (Moroni 7:47, 48). As we qualify for the gift of faith, the gift of charity follows.

And charity suffereth long, and is kind, and envieth not, and is not puffed up, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth . . . in the truth, beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. [Moroni 7:45]

It is a perfect way of living. “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth,” Paul taught the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 8:1). Do we fully understand why learning by faith is so important? Perhaps it is because doing so leads one to the pure love of Christ—the most important influence a person could ever desire.

Difficult temptations come as one aspires to acquire knowledge, skill, and understanding. Those involved in higher education, as we are, are surrounded by an enterprise that thrives on vain imaginations. On every hand we are encouraged to become a self-sufficient authority in some area of learning—gradually closing off our dependence on others, sometimes

including God, and lifting ourselves up as a source of light. The prophet Jacob put this tendency in proper perspective:

O that cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. [2 Nephi 9:28]

So, does the process of learning by faith help us overcome this temptation? Yes, I believe it does, because humility is a prerequisite. Let’s pursue this idea a little further.

Knowledge may cause us to be critical of others less informed than we are in a particular matter. Having discovered something of value through our interests and efforts, it is tempting to make comparisons with others—assuming that our small piece of knowledge is essential, if not transcendent. Moroni counseled us wisely when he cautioned us against condemning him, his father, or his people because of their weaknesses. He said, “Rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been” (Mormon 9:31). Humility, meekness, and lowliness of heart invite charity, the pure love of Christ. And this pure love endows us with understanding and puts knowledge in proper perspective.

Nephi warns us of a practice he calls priestcraft—another temptation that follows educational success—and testifies that the Lord forbids it.

[The Lord] commandeth that there shall be no priestcrafts; for, behold, priestcrafts are that men . . . set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; but they seek not the welfare of Zion.

Behold, the Lord hath forbidden this thing; wherefore, the Lord God hath given a commandment

that all men should have charity, which charity is love. [2 Nephi 26:29–30]

Again, learning by faith can provide protection from the temptation to become a self-appointed authority or to seek gain and praise of the world, because it leads us into charity, which turns our efforts naturally toward service. In the words of the prophet Jacob, “To be learned is good if [we] hearken unto the counsels of God” (2 Nephi 9:29).

Self-sufficiency, arrogance, and priestcraft can surely prevent us from learning by faith. But there are a number of other impediments. If we transgress the commandments of God and go contrary to his laws, we withdraw ourselves from the Spirit of the Lord, and it no longer has a place in us to guide us in wisdom’s paths (see Mosiah 2:36). We must remember that “the Spirit of the Lord doth not dwell in unholy temples” (Helaman 4:24). The Holy Ghost is repelled if we seek those things that are wicked or evil (see Mormon 1:14), if we are unwilling to receive counsel (see D&C 63:55), if we are lustful in our desires (see D&C 42:23), if we contend against the spirit of revelation (see Alma 34:38), or if we try to use position or authority to manipulate others (see D&C 121:37). The Holy Ghost may visit briefly and not stay because things are amiss in our life (see D&C 130:23).

In an institutional environment, surrounded by power structures of our own making, one may succumb to temptations of a more subtle nature. Intellectual pride can replace honest inquiry, especially if praise becomes a subconscious objective. Contention, so destructive of spiritual means, may be easily justified as an essential learning behavior—a method of keeping others honest even if it might require us to sometimes be dishonest. Gratitude may be replaced by expectations of adulation and comfortable support. A focus on personal accomplishment, excellence, or professional advancement may replace a desire to serve

the needs of others. In these and a number of other ways we may distance ourselves from our Father in Heaven and his ways and slowly, almost imperceptibly, become hard in our hearts. When this condition exists, learning by faith is no longer possible.

Let us learn an important lesson from Amulek, a companion of the prophet Alma. After rehearsing his distinguished genealogy and the course of his comparatively successful life, he revealed a weakness that is probably quite common:

I never have known much of the ways of the Lord, and his mysteries and marvelous power. I said I never had known much of these things; but behold, I mistake, for I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power. . . .

Nevertheless, I did harden my heart, for I was called many times and I would not hear; therefore I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know. [Alma 10:5–6]

How often are we guilty of the same blindness? Are we not all prone to repeat Amulek’s mistake if we are not concerned and careful? Are we willing to accept the admonition to “seek learning, even by study *and also by faith*” (D&C 88:118; emphasis added), or are we content to follow the world’s ways? Will we continually soften our hearts, change our lives, and partake of the knowledge and understanding our Father in Heaven wishes to give us? Or will we confine ourselves to the safe, secure methods of the educational establishment and accept a lesser portion?

The invitation of the Lord is plain, for he has said,

Let him that is ignorant learn wisdom by humbling himself and calling upon the Lord his God, that his eyes may be opened that he may see, and his ears opened that he may hear;

For my Spirit is sent forth into the world to enlighten the humble and contrite, and to the condemnation of the ungodly. [D&C 136:32–33]

I know that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, and that the Holy Ghost enlightens those who are willing to qualify for that

blessing through sincere repentance. May each of us nurture a desire to live worthy of the opportunities that are available at this institution to learn by study and also by faith. I testify to the truthfulness of the principles that have been discussed this hour, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.