

“Daddy, Is Jesus Real?”: Overcoming Fear Through Faith in Christ

SCOTT C. ESPLIN

Thank you for that beautiful and calming musical number. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak today and for the support of family, colleagues, students, and friends who are here.

I invite you to reflect on the last time you experienced the feeling of fear. Was it while wondering if you would be admitted into one of the many competitive degree programs here at Brigham Young University? Or while waiting to see if the girl you asked out wants to go out again? Or, worse yet, while wondering what to do when she does? For me, the feeling is as recent as sitting on this stand, looking into the faces of so many and knowing that, through the miracle of technology, thousands more are watching this message. Like you, I can testify that the feeling of fear is real. Elder David A. Bednar taught about this powerful emotion in last April’s general conference: “Notably, one of the first effects of the Fall was for Adam and Eve to experience fear. This potent emotion is an important element of our mortal existence.”¹

Today I want to visit with you about overcoming the fears that are an essential part of our experience in this earth life.

Fear of an Unknown Future

One of my favorite classes to teach here on campus is the Doctrine and Covenants because

I find it highly relevant in my own life and in the lives of my students. In a well-known episode from the text, Oliver Cowdery, the primary scribe for the translation of the Book of Mormon, was offered the opportunity of a lifetime: to join Joseph Smith as a translator of that sacred book of scripture. Oliver was instructed:

*Ask that you may know the mysteries of God, and that you may translate and receive knowledge from all those ancient records which have been hid up, that are sacred; and according to your faith shall it be done unto you.*²

Shortly thereafter, when Oliver failed in his attempt to translate a portion of the Book of Mormon, the Lord explained the reasons for his failure. Outlining several causes, the Lord declared, “And, behold, it is because that you did not continue as you commenced, when you began to translate, that I have taken away this privilege from you.”³ Furthermore, He added, “Behold, it was expedient when you commenced; but you feared, and the time is past, and it is not expedient now.”⁴

Scott C. Esplin was an associate professor in the BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine when this devotional address was given on 19 January 2016.

I have long wondered what it was that Oliver feared that caused him to not continue as he had commenced. Knowing that the project was of eternal importance, did he fear making a mistake and thus marring the sacred publication?

I was the age of most of you when this scriptural episode came to have special meaning for me. I was in graduate school here at BYU, and I began asking out a particular girl. And, as things progressed, I became scared. Like Oliver Cowdery, fear caused me to “not continue as [I had] commenced.” I was afraid of making the wrong decision—one that I knew was important and, ideally, eternal. My poorly thought-out solution to this fear was to stop asking the girl out. As weeks turned into months, I buried myself in other things, all the while praying if I should pursue a relationship that I clearly wasn’t doing anything to nurture.

Finally, one Sunday I was at church here on campus when I made up my mind: I would pursue the relationship. What would be the worst that could happen? “Maybe I would get married,” I thought.

I called her apartment, only to learn that she had gone home that weekend. I left a message for her to call me when she returned, which, incidentally, is ideal for someone gripped by dating paralysis. The last thing a young man really wants to do is talk.

That afternoon my dad called. “Have you heard the news?” he asked. The girl was engaged.

She returned my call later that night. “Scott, I heard you called,” she said.

“Yes, I was just calling to congratulate you on your engagement,” was my response. Fear of the future had kept me from continuing what I had commenced, and the time had passed. During the next six years of my single life I thought often about that experience and the Lord’s instruction to Oliver Cowdery concerning fear.

During those frustrating years of learning to conquer my fears, I fell in love with another section of the Doctrine and Covenants—section 38. In December 1830, the month before this marvelous revelation was received, the Lord instructed Church members in New York, “A commandment I give unto the church, that it is expedient in me that they should assemble together at the Ohio.”⁵ Fear of the unknown must have gripped their hearts. What would they do about their homes, their loved ones, or their professions? What would the future hold for them as they moved into the unknown?

Understandably, when the members gathered for a Church conference in Fayette, New York, in early January 1831, they were concerned about the implications of this command. Describing the occasion, Church historian John Whitmer recorded, “The solemnities of eternity rested on the congregation, and having previously received a revelation to go to Ohio, they desired to know somewhat more concerning this matter.”⁶

Answering their question as to why they were to move to Ohio, the Lord began:

Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I AM, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made;

*The same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes.*⁷

The Lord appears to be saying to His Saints what I love to respond to my own children when they ask questions like “Why do we have to go to bed?” or “Why do I have to eat my vegetables?” or “Why can’t I hit my little brother back?” In essence, the Lord’s response, like mine, is, “Because I know best.” However, in this and all other cases He really does know best.

Also, unlike my futile fatherly response to my children, the Lord followed up with a promise only He could fulfill:

But behold, verily, verily, I say unto you that mine eyes are upon you. I am in your midst and ye cannot see me;

*But the day soon cometh that ye shall see me, and know that I am.*⁸

Don't we all have times like this in our past—when we asked why, only to look back and recognize that God was with us and that though we couldn't see Him then, we do now? Don't we all have a job we desperately wanted, a major we wanted to get into, or a person we wanted to date—about which or whom we may have even prayed in earnest in the past? Aren't we all glad that God was in our midst during those “why” times, which we now gratefully see?

Though the Lord outlined that members should trust both His omniscience and His aid, in John Whitmer's history of these events he recalled:

*After the Lord had manifested the . . . words through Joseph the Seer, there were some divisions among the congregation, some would not receive [it] as the word of the Lord: But [held] that Joseph had invented it himself to deceive the people that in the end he might get gain.*⁹

Sadly, while some did see the hand of the Lord in the command, others, gripped by uncertainty and fear, did not.

So how do we overcome our fears, act in faith, and move forward toward an uncertain future?

Eleven years ago last fall I was dating my wife, Janice. The week before Thanksgiving I invited her to come home with me to southern Utah for the holiday weekend. She accepted. And then, once again, I became really scared. I had taken girls on road trips home before,

and, for those familiar with Interstate 15 between Provo and southern Utah, usually by about the town of Nephi these became the longest weekends of my life. I started to think of ways that I could uninvite Janice. With fears swirling in my head, I came to campus on the Monday before Thanksgiving. Preparing to teach my class that day, I stumbled across these words at the beginning of Doctrine and Covenants 67:

*Behold and hearken, O ye elders of my church, who have assembled yourselves together, whose prayers I have heard, and whose hearts I know, and whose desires have come up before me.*¹⁰

As a thirty-year-old elder, I had the desire and had been praying for a long time that I might find a spouse and begin an eternal companionship. I could relate to these early Saints.

The Lord continued:

*Behold and lo, mine eyes are upon you, and the heavens and the earth are in mine hands, and the riches of eternity are mine to give.*¹¹

While I was in my office in the Joseph Smith Building that morning, the thought struck me: “Maybe marriage is one of the riches of eternity, and maybe it is God's to give.”

The revelation then warned:

*Ye endeavored to believe that ye should receive the blessing which was offered unto you; but behold, verily I say unto you there were fears in your hearts, and verily this is the reason that ye did not receive.*¹²

I realized that if I didn't face my fear of an uncertain future, I might never receive the blessings the Lord had in store for me.

I took Janice home for Thanksgiving, and the weekend went wonderfully. While returning to Provo, however, my worst fears of carrying on an extended conversation with a girl were realized: a snowstorm forced the closure of

Interstate 15, and the two of us were stranded together in the car between the Utah towns of Beaver and Fillmore for several hours with no choice but to simply talk to each other. As our three-hour road trip home turned into seven, I realized that if we could survive this time together, maybe we also could face my fears of eternal marriage together.

I learned a valuable lesson from these experiences: as you exercise faith to overcome fears of future uncertainty, you will see God’s hand in your life. In fact, just a few short verses later in Doctrine and Covenants 67, the Lord promised:

*And again, verily I say unto you that it is your privilege, and a promise I give unto you that have been ordained unto this ministry, that inasmuch as you strip yourselves from jealousies and fears, and humble yourselves before me, for ye are not sufficiently humble, the veil shall be rent and you shall see me and know that I am.*¹³

I now look back on those years of post-mission single life and, like the Saints in the Doctrine and Covenants, realize that God was in my midst, and I couldn’t see Him. There were lessons I needed to learn—primarily about overcoming fear—coupled with experiences both my wife and I needed to have, that eventually prepared us for each other and for our future together. As I stripped myself of fear, the day came that I could see God’s hand and receive the riches of eternity. But they only came as I exercised faith.

Fear of a Failed Past

Facing fear in our lives isn’t limited to dramatic experiences involving unknown future events, such as relocating at the command of the Lord or finding an eternal companion. Indeed, the happiness of some is crippled by fears of past failures and by the foreboding worry that the present and future can never become bright again. I have been learning this lesson lately from my children.

To protect the not-so-innocent, I won’t name names, but this experience involved one of my children and a few of her friends getting sent to the principal’s office in first grade after an incident involving a secret club, a confrontation, and another girl getting tapped on the head with a stick. Though the situation was quickly resolved by missing recess and writing an apology to the girl who had been hit, the incident continues to haunt my daughter. Last fall, in the weeks before starting third grade, we often found my daughter in tears, worrying that her new teacher and friends would discover that she had been sent to the principal’s office in first grade and that her social life and academic future would be forever ruined.

In fact, just last week, when asked if she was happy, her response was, “I would be if I hadn’t been sent to the principal’s office in first grade.”

Worst of all, she often questions her worth and, most important, her ability to go to the celestial kingdom, because, after all, “no one else in our family has ever been sent to the principal’s office.”

How many of us allow fears from our own getting-sent-to-the-principal’s-office experience to paralyze us from moving forward with faith in our lives? Even after repenting, do we ever let our past mistakes impede us from enjoying happiness now and having hope for the future? Many of us fear falling short of our divine potential because our mistakes remind us that we are so far from perfect.

Author Gerald N. Lund, who also served in the Church as a member of the Seventy, offered this wise counsel:

Remember that one of Satan’s strategies, especially with good people, is to whisper in their ears: “If you are not perfect, you are failing.” This is one of his most effective deceptions, for it contains some elements of truth. But it is deception nonetheless. While we should never be completely satisfied until we are perfect, we should recognize that God is pleased with every effort we make—no matter

*how faltering—to better ourselves. One of the most commonly listed attributes of God is that he is long-suffering and quick to show mercy. He wants us to strive for perfection, but the fact that we have not yet achieved it does not mean we are failing.*¹⁴

Sometimes good people like you and my daughter become crippled by fear because focusing on past imperfections clouds the vision of how the Lord feels about us now and what our potential can be in eternity. We are keenly aware of what the apostle Paul taught the Romans: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”¹⁵ We feel so far from His majestic ideal and often fear that we will never reach our celestial destiny. In these instances, the wise counsel of Elder Neal A. Maxwell may be helpful:

*Our perfect Father does not expect us to be perfect children yet. He had only one such Child. Meanwhile, therefore, sometimes with smudges on our cheeks, dirt on our hands, and shoes untied, stammeringly but smilingly we present God with a dandelion—as if it were an orchid or a rose! If for now the dandelion is the best we have to offer, He receives it, knowing what we may later place on the altar. It is good to remember how young we are spiritually.*¹⁶

With my daughter and so many like her in mind, I have been impressed lately with the following verse of scripture, again in the Doctrine and Covenants. As part of the Kirtland Temple dedicatory prayer, the Prophet Joseph Smith pled, “O Jehovah, have mercy upon this people, and *as all men sin* forgive the transgressions of thy people, and let them be blotted out forever.”¹⁷

Part of becoming like and returning to our Heavenly Father, even when we feel so imperfect in relation to Him, includes believing in Him both as we repent *and* after. We typically, and rightly, recite in the fourth article of faith: “We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord

Jesus Christ; second, Repentance.”¹⁸ In doing so, we imply an order: faith comes first, then repentance. However, in many passages of scripture, belief also follows repentance.

In Doctrine and Covenants 20 we read:

*And we know that all men must **repent and believe** on the name of Jesus Christ, and worship the Father in his name, and endure in faith on his name to the end, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God.*¹⁹

To the Nephites, Christ taught:

*I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to **repent and believe** in me.*²⁰

And, finally, rejoicing in the success of his missionary labors, Ammon told his fellow companions:

*My joy is carried away, even unto boasting in my God; for he has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things, and he is a merciful Being, even unto salvation, to those who will **repent and believe** on his name.*²¹

Faith leads to repentance of our past mistakes. But all of us, including an eight-year-old girl who fears she isn’t perfect, need to follow up necessary repentance with belief—a belief in God and a belief that, though we all sin, the Atonement of Jesus Christ can and will save us. Such belief can replace our fears of the past with a joy in our present circumstances and a bright hope for our future. In the end, it is nurturing and acting on this belief that will do more than save us—it will perfect us.²²

When our view of God’s hand is obscured by “the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset [us],” we, like Nephi, need to “know in whom [we] have trusted.”²³ Counseling university students to apply this power of belief in their lives, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland instructed this audience more than thirty years ago:

I am not sure what your most painful memories might be. I'm certain there are lots of problems we could all list. Some may be sins among the most serious God Himself has listed. Others may be less serious disappointments, including a poor start in school, or a difficult relationship with your family, or personal pain with a friend. Whatever the list, it's bound to be long when we add up all the dumb things we've done. And my greatest fear is that you will not believe in other chances . . . , that on some days you will not believe in any future at all.

After summarizing Shakespeare's tragic story of Macbeth, Elder Holland continued:

Unless we believe in repentance and restoration, unless we believe there can be a way back from our mistakes—whether those sins be sexual or social or civil or academic, whether they be great or small—unless we believe we can start over on solid ground with our past put behind us and genuine hope for the future—in short, if we cannot believe in the compassion of Christ and His redemptive love, then I think we in our own way are as hopeless as Macbeth and our view of life just as depressing.²⁴

More recently, at a devotional like this one at the start of a new year, Elder Holland said:

There is something in us, at least in too many of us, that particularly fails to forgive and forget earlier mistakes in life—either mistakes we ourselves have made or the mistakes of others. That is not good. It is not Christian. It stands in terrible opposition to the grandeur and majesty of the Atonement of Christ. To be tied to earlier mistakes—our own or other people's—is the worst kind of wallowing in the past from which we are called to cease and desist. . . .

Perhaps at this beginning of a new year there is no greater requirement for us than to do as the Lord Himself said He does: "Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42).

The proviso, of course, is that repentance has to be sincere, but when it is and when honest effort is

being made to progress, we are guilty of the greater sin if we keep remembering and recalling and rebashing someone with their earlier mistakes—and that "someone" might be ourselves. We can be so hard on ourselves, often much more so than with others!²⁵

Gratefully, I recently had the chance to teach my fearful daughter that we can repent and move on in our lives rather than let our past scar and cripple us. As my father and I finished work on a playhouse for my kids this past fall, I came across the name of my daughter's friend scribbled on the side of the door. Though my nervous daughter wasn't the one who had written it, her anxiety kicked into high gear.

"Don't tell Grandpa," was her first plea, followed shortly thereafter by the question "Was that before or after I was baptized?" Her logical child's thought was, "Am I accountable for my friend's graffiti on the playhouse?" Her follow-up question to me was, "Can I be forgiven?" A past mistake—in this case not even one of her own doing—threatened to cloud her happiness in both the present and the future.

We then discussed her fears from being sent to the principal's office in first grade and how it was still affecting her life. We talked about the importance of repentance and how once we have repented, we need to believe in the power of the Atonement in our lives. Standing on the porch of that playhouse, I pulled up the following words on my phone from the final general conference address of President Boyd K. Packer:

Nowhere is the generosity and mercy of God more manifest than in repentance.

Our physical bodies, when harmed, are able to repair themselves, sometimes with the help of a physician. If the damage is extensive, however, often a scar will remain as a reminder of the injury.

With our spiritual bodies it is another matter. Our spirits are damaged when we make mistakes and commit sins. But unlike the case of our mortal bodies, when the repentance process is complete,

no scars remain because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

President Packer then added his testimony:

The Atonement, which can reclaim each one of us, bears no scars. That means that no matter what we have done or where we have been or how something happened, if we truly repent, He has promised that He would atone. And when He atoned, that settled that. There are so many of us who are thrashing around, as it were, with feelings of guilt, not knowing quite how to escape. You escape by accepting the Atonement of Christ, and all that was heartache can turn to beauty and love and eternity. . . .

. . . If you have something that is bothering you—sometimes so long ago you can hardly remember it—put the Atonement to work. It will clean it up, and you, as does He, will remember your sins no more.²⁶

Handing her my paintbrush, we repeated the words “no scars” as she painted over her friend’s name.

God Is Real

So how do we develop the faith necessary to conquer our fears resulting from an imperfect past or an uncertain future? As a parent I have thought long and hard about that lately—especially because I have young children whom I deeply want to have faith. It is important to note that both of these fears are rooted in the same thing: the unknown. Faith can displace fear because it is rooted in the knowledge of God. The *Lectures on Faith* teach:

Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation.

First, the idea that he actually exists.

*Secondly, a **correct** idea of his character, perfections, and attributes.*

Thirdly, an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to his will.²⁷

I am committed, in my own life and in the lives of my children, to develop faith by coming to know God. Elder Bednar taught, “Correct knowledge of and faith in the Lord empower us to hush our fears because Jesus Christ is the only source of enduring peace.”²⁸ Furthermore, our prophet, President Thomas S. Monson, has promised:

Though the storm clouds may gather, though the rains may pour down upon us, our knowledge of the gospel and our love of our Heavenly Father and of our Savior will comfort and sustain us and bring joy to our hearts as we walk uprightly and keep the commandments. There will be nothing in this world that can defeat us.

My beloved brothers and sisters, fear not. Be of good cheer. The future is as bright as your faith.²⁹

A few years ago our children watched for the first time the movie *Shrek Forever After*. The story features the hero, Shrek, and his conflict with Rumpelstiltskin and an army of witches. That night my wife and I were awakened by the cries of our then four-year-old little girl, whose bad dream had her screaming in fear, “The witches are going to get me! The witches are going to get me!”

Entering her bedroom, I sought to reassure her. On the wall in her room hangs a picture of Jesus comforting a little child. Hoping for a quick return to sleep for her and for me, I told her, “You can pray. Jesus loves you and will protect you. And, by the way, witches aren’t real.”

She looked up at me with questioning eyes and asked, “Daddy, is Jesus real?”

The logic of a four-year-old at two in the morning was clear: if witches aren’t real, then what about this Jesus you tell me about? We had a good, long talk.

As I testified to her, I testify to you: God, our Father, is real. His Son is real. Our faith in Them will be strengthened as we learn more completely about Them and have sacred

experiences with Them. As we do, we will feel of Their love—a “perfect love [that] casteth out all fear.”³⁰ Of that I testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. David A. Bednar, “Therefore They Hushed Their Fears,” *Ensign*, May 2015.

2. D&C 8:11.

3. D&C 9:5.

4. D&C 9:11.

5. D&C 37:3.

6. John Whitmer, “History, 1831–Circa 1847,” josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847#!/paperSummary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847&p=10; in Karen Lynn Davidson, Richard L. Jensen, and David J. Whittaker, eds., *Histories, Volume 2: Assigned Histories, 1831–1847*, vol. 2 of the Histories series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, and Richard Lyman Bushman (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2012), 18.

7. D&C 38:1–2.

8. D&C 38:7–8.

9. Whitmer, “History,” 9, josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847#!/paperSummary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847&p=13; in *JSP*, H2:21.

10. D&C 67:1.

11. D&C 67:2.

12. D&C 67:3.

13. D&C 67:10.

14. Gerald N. Lund, in “I Have a Question,” *Ensign*, August 1986; emphasis in original.

15. Romans 3:23.

16. Neal A. Maxwell, *That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 100.

17. D&C 109:34; emphasis added. In the same prayer, the Prophet also asked, “And *when thy people transgress*, any of them, they may speedily repent and return unto thee, and find favor in thy sight, and be restored to the blessings which thou hast ordained to be poured out upon those who shall reverence thee in thy house” (D&C 109:21; emphasis added).

18. Articles of Faith 1:4.

19. D&C 20:29; emphasis added.

20. 3 Nephi 11:32; emphasis added.

21. Alma 26:35; emphasis added.

22. It is important to note that Doctrine and Covenants 76, when speaking of those who will receive celestial glory, uses the word *perfect* only twice, both times in verse 69: “These are they who are just men made *perfect* through Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, who wrought out this *perfect* atonement through the shedding of his own blood” (emphasis added).

23. 2 Nephi 4:18–19.

24. Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Robe, a Ring, and a Fatted Calf,” BYU devotional address, 31 January 1984.

25. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Remember Lot’s Wife,” BYU devotional address, 13 January 2009.

26. Boyd K. Packer, “The Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, May 2015.

27. *Lectures on Faith* (1985), 38 (3:2–5); emphasis in original.

28. Bednar, “They Hushed Their Fears.”

29. Thomas S. Monson, “Be of Good Cheer,” *Ensign*, May 2009.

30. Moroni 8:16.