

Faith: An Essential Principle of the Gospel

LARRY L. HOWELL

A couple of years ago I was invited to be a keynote speaker at an international conference in London. This was a nice professional honor and a great opportunity to represent my lab and the university before an international audience. I was excited for the trip and made the typical preparations: I made my travel arrangements, prepared my talk, provided materials to people publicizing the keynote address, and even found directions on the London Underground so that I could attend Church and see interesting sites in London that I'd not seen before. The day came, my bags were packed, and I was on my way to London.

That is when I discovered that my passport was expired. My passport was expired!

The conference had been advertising my keynote talk on their website for months. When attendees registered at the conference, they received a program that included my picture and biographical sketch. But I wouldn't be there because my passport was expired. What I thought was going to be a nice honor instead became one of the most embarrassing events of my life. I had done a lot of things to prepare for the trip, but I had neglected one essential thing. And because I had missed that one essential thing, none of the other things mattered. The fact that I had counted out and packed just

the right number of pairs of socks for the trip didn't matter because I'd forgotten something essential.

It is easy in life to become busy with all kinds of things, even things that are important, but we have to be careful not to neglect those things that are essential; otherwise, none of the other things will really matter. I'd like to talk about one of the most essential things in our lives: the first principle of the gospel—"faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" (Articles of Faith 1:4).

Some of you may be rolling your eyes and thinking, "Faith? That's such a basic concept. I've had that down since I was six years old." Faith may be a simple concept in some ways, but every time I study it, I discover that there is still a lot that I don't understand. So I will confess that although I could choose any topic for today's devotional, I chose something that I don't fully understand.

What I do know about faith I have learned from both study and life. I'd like to illustrate some of the concepts of faith using personal experiences about how I became an engineer. I hope that these illustrations will help us

Larry L. Howell was a BYU professor in the Department of Mechanical Engineering when this devotional address was given on 7 June 2011.

understand the concepts and will also be relevant to those of you who are in similar situations at this time in your life.

I grew up in the wonderful community of Portage, Utah. I've heard some people refer to Portage as being "remote." I don't necessarily agree with that, but let me explain. The most recent census lists the population of Portage as 245. Portage is in Box Elder County, which is larger than the state of Connecticut but only has a population of 50,000, most of which is centered in Tremonton and Brigham City. So it's safe to say that there is plenty of room to roam. And that's exactly what my friends and I did growing up—roam in the mountains: hiking, backpacking, and camping. Often I would be with friends, but sometimes I would go alone to ponder, pray, and just enjoy God's creations. I remember times being miles away from any other person and stepping somewhere and realizing that I might have been the only person in the history of the planet to have ever stepped on that spot. It gave me a thrill to think that I had been somewhere where no one had ever been before. That same thrill is one thing I find appealing about being an engineer. In engineering—particularly engineering research and development—I get to do things that have never been done before, such as extend the boundaries of knowledge, create new technologies that will make a difference in the world, and, in a way, step where no one else has ever been before.

But there is a challenge with this: doing things that have never been done before requires that you step into the unknown. You can't just follow someone else or repeat what you have done before. Still, even though you don't have a perfect knowledge of the solution to the problems you are working on, there are things that provide substance of the outcomes hoped for. For example, mathematical models of physical phenomena help us to predict how something will perform before it is built. These models provide evidence of things not yet

seen. We can build and test prototypes to evaluate how parts of a future system will work. Plus, our past experiences provide trust that if we conform to certain physical laws, everything will work out as expected.

You can probably see the parallels between engineering research and faith. Paul taught that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). Although we may not have a perfect knowledge of all spiritual things, there are things that give us hope. For example, like mathematical models used by engineers, promises given in the scriptures help us predict the blessings that result from living certain commandments (see D&C 1:37; 82:10; 130:20–21). We can test spiritual prototypes by following the Savior's counsel in John 7:17 and living a doctrine and finding through our own experience if it is true. We can also reflect on the past influence of God's hand in our lives and find trust that He will continue to be there for us in the future.

But the first principle of the gospel is not just faith; it is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I would like to talk about five different things related to faith in Jesus Christ. These are paraphrased from *Preach My Gospel* (see PMG, 2004, 61–62).

1. *First, having a firm belief that Jesus Christ is the Only Begotten Son of God and the Savior and Redeemer of the world.* This belief is probably what we first think of when we consider faith. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

2. *Second, recognizing that we can return to live with our Heavenly Father only by relying on His Son's grace and mercy.* Nephi taught, "There is none other name given under heaven save it be this Jesus Christ . . . whereby man can be saved" (2 Nephi 25:20). We understand that it is essential to keep the commandments and receive the saving ordinances. But as mortals we simply do not have the power to save ourselves; it is only through Christ's

Atonement that we can be saved. Again, as Nephi taught, “We know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23). So there is no need for arguments between faith and works—we need both.

3. *Third, trusting in Him and what He says.* This is where I feel that I turned the corner in my own understanding of faith. Faith in Jesus Christ is more than just believing in Him; it is trusting in Him that He loves us, that He knows what’s best for us, and that His commandments are for our benefit. Sometimes even the no answers to our prayers can help us strengthen our trust in Him, and we can better understand that His will is better than our own desires. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin taught:

*Faith exists when absolute confidence in that which we cannot see combines with action that is in absolute conformity to the will of our Heavenly Father. Without all three—first, absolute confidence; second, action; and third, absolute conformity—without these three all we have is a counterfeit, a weak and watered-down faith. [“Shall He Find Faith on the Earth?” *Ensign*, November 2002, 83).*

Conforming our actions to the will of our Heavenly Father comes from this trust.

Let me tell a story to illustrate the importance of trusting in God’s will over our own desires. I don’t know of a better place to build your faith growing up than Portage, Utah. It is a great LDS community with wonderful people. But it’s not what you’d think of as a path to the engineering profession. As a young man, I knew very few people who had graduated from college, and I don’t think I had ever met an engineer. To be honest, I thought engineers were people who drove trains. So at that time in my life there was no way for me to pray and ask God to help me on a path to what I now consider to be my dream job as an engineering professor at BYU. I could not have asked for that because I had no idea

that such a thing even existed or that I would like it. But God knew. It is likely that with my immature understanding I prayed for other things. I am now grateful that those prayers were not answered in the ways that I probably would have liked at the time. Looking back on such experiences helps me appreciate that my understanding today is still immature compared to God’s understanding and that I should trust in Him, even when the answers to my prayers are not what I hope for at the time.

But God’s hand is in our lives even when we don’t recognize it. Some of my understanding of God’s guidance on the path to my career was brought about in an unusual way. A few years ago Finland’s ambassador to the United States was visiting campus, and I was part of a group invited to have lunch with him. As he and I talked, the conversation naturally turned to my time as a missionary in Finland, and I mentioned some of the blessings that came from that experience. I told the ambassador that one of the blessings was that when I had completed my missionary service in Finland, I somehow knew that I wanted to be an engineer. That understanding came to me even though I’d been concentrating on missionary work and not worrying about my own future. I counted that as a fulfillment of the promise in the New Testament that as we lose ourselves in the service of God, we will find ourselves (see Matthew 10:39; 16:25). I still believe that is true, but the ambassador had an interesting addition.

He explained that while I was in Finland, I was exposed to a high-tech culture. He shared data that showed that an extraordinary percentage of Finns study science, math, and engineering in college. He further explained that as a young man, he and his friends, instead of following athletes and celebrities, could name the top scientific researchers in the country and what they did. He said I was exposed to that culture and it would have had an influence on my thinking. I reflected on this and thought

of the great people I had met and respected in Finland, and I knew they had made an impact on me. I came to the conclusion that the ambassador and I were both right. And I also realized that he had pointed out a blessing I had not appreciated before. In addition to fulfilling more important purposes with my mission call, God was putting me in the right place to have experiences that would help me find my future career. This insight made me wonder how many other tender mercies God had given me that I had not recognized before. Experiences like this help me remember to trust in God.

I returned from my mission and studied mechanical engineering here at BYU. I also had the extraordinary good fortune to marry my wife, Peggy. As my graduation approached, I had a desire to get an advanced degree. Peggy had graduated in accounting and had a good job at a local CPA firm, I loved BYU, and it made sense to continue here for a master's degree.

However, as we thought and prayed about it, we felt a clear impression that I should accept a job offer from an aerospace company in Texas. Although not as obvious at first, after some thought the advantages of this decision seemed clear. We already had our first child, Angela, and Peggy would be able to stay home with her. The company offered a program where they would pay my tuition to pursue an advanced degree part-time. Several local universities offered courses where the lectures were sent to the company by closed-circuit television. The company would allow me to attend classes during the day so long as I made up the time later. Another advantage of the job was that I would be an engineer on the design of the YF-22, the first prototype of what would become the U.S. Air Force F-22 Raptor. This was an unusual opportunity for a recent university graduate, and it was right in line with my love of doing new things.

Our family moved to Texas, and I had a great work experience. But it was also intense.

It was a secret defense project with a tight deadline, and I was required to work over 60 hours a week. After adding in the responsibilities of a Church calling and a growing family, taking classes just wasn't feasible.

I was disappointed and maybe even felt a little picked on. We were trying to do what we felt was right and follow the promptings we had received, but the goal of getting an advanced degree wasn't working out. It turned out once again, however, that God's plan was much better than my own. By taking this job, not only did I receive great work experience, but the long hours also came with overtime pay that we were able to save for a down payment on a house—or so we thought. Having those funds in the bank gave us the courage to eventually pursue graduate work full-time.

So our family, which by then included our son Travis, moved to Indiana, where I pursued an MS and a PhD at Purdue University. Having those doors opened gave me the educational experience that I needed to pursue my current career. By the time I finished my PhD, our third child, Nathan, had been born. And, as you might imagine, there were many other miracles and tender mercies required before I graduated. I wish I could say that I had the faith in Christ that helped this happen, but I can say that the experience, and others like it, provided opportunities to reflect and see God's hand in my life. Having those experiences strengthened my trust in Him. When things appear to not be going my way, I can reflect on those experiences and trust Him and His will.

4. *Fourth, knowing that He has the power to keep His promises.* His promises are really quite extraordinary. For example, consider the Resurrection. Once someone is dead and buried, there is no power on earth that can bring them back. There's no science, there's no medicine, there's no engineering, and there's no physician that can get that done. Yet we know that through the power of Christ's Resurrection, our loved ones who have gone before us will be

resurrected, and we will have the opportunity to be together again. It gives us hope for the life after this life. As Alma taught:

The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame. . . .

Now, this restoration shall come to all, both old and young, both bond and free, both male and female, both the wicked and the righteous; and even there shall not so much as a hair of their heads be lost; but every thing shall be restored to its perfect frame. [Alma 11:43–44]

Now that’s an amazing promise.

While the Resurrection conquers physical death, Christ also promises that through His Atonement we can overcome the effects of spiritual death and that we can be forgiven of our sins. Sometimes it may be harder to believe that our sins can be forgiven than that our bodies can be resurrected. But Isaiah said, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool” (Isaiah 1:18). Some people feel that forgiveness applies to other people but not to themselves. But through faith, including knowing that Christ has the power to keep His promises, we can know that this power also applies to us. Someone here may be thinking, “You don’t know about this terrible sin, this secret or humiliating thing in the past.” But I can tell you that it too can be wiped away. I testify to you that Jesus Christ has the power to keep His promises.

5. *Fifth, accepting and applying His Atonement and teachings.* If we believe in Christ and trust in Him and know that He has the power to keep His promises—and He has promised that we can be forgiven of our sins if we repent—then we will repent. So we see that the first principle of the gospel leads to the second principle.

Faith is fundamental to our commitment to keep the commandments. For example, let’s

consider the law of tithing. If I pay ten percent of my income as tithing, it turns out I have ten percent less money to spend. The math is pretty easy. But we also know God’s promise in Malachi that if we pay our tithes and offerings, He will “open . . . the windows of heaven, and pour . . . out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it” (Malachi 3:10). So if we have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then we believe in Him and trust Him and know that He has power to keep His promises, including the promise of opening the windows of heaven when we pay tithing. Paying tithing, then, is not so much a matter of money as it is a matter of faith. So it is with the Word of Wisdom or any of the other commandments.

So faith leads to action.

Let me share another example from my path to becoming an engineer. As I mentioned before, when I completed my missionary service, I was determined to become an engineer. But there were a number of obstacles in my path, not the least of which was that I was woefully unprepared in math. I was missing two prerequisites needed to take calculus, which is the starting point for engineering studies. Fortunately I was moved to action by the feeling that I was being led in my career direction. I went to the closest university bookstore at Utah State University and bought textbooks for the prerequisites that I needed: college algebra and trigonometry. That summer I went to work during the days and in the evenings did math. Never having had a college math class before, I didn’t know what was expected, so I studied the books from beginning to end, working all the odd-number problems, comparing my solutions to the answers in the back of the book, reworking problems I didn’t get right, and using the chapter summaries as self-administered exams to test my understanding. When fall semester approached I was nervous about taking calculus because I’d not had official courses in the prerequisites. I made an appointment with a math professor, told him

what I had done that summer, and timidly asked if he thought I would be prepared to take calculus. He leaned back in his chair, gave me a curious look, and said, “I think you’ll be okay.”

Some of you, after hearing of a summer like that, are thinking that it is not as surprising that I became an engineer as it is that I got married. Fortunately not all of my summers were like that, and I am happy to report that not only did I eventually get married but I also did wonderfully well. So that should give some of you here hope.

There are a number of things that we can do to build our faith. Prayer is one of the key things in that regard. I take great comfort from the story in the New Testament about a father who brought his son to Jesus to be healed. Jesus explained to him the need for faith, and the man replied, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Another important way to build faith is to study the word of God in the scriptures and the teachings of modern prophets. As I mentioned earlier, we also strengthen our faith by living a commandment and gaining our own testimony of its truthfulness (see John 7:17). An important way to build our faith is to repent and feel the power of the Atonement in our lives. I encourage you to try one other thing: reflect on experiences in your life and search for the times when you could see the hand of God. Sometimes it takes a few years of perspective to see that influence; it is

not always obvious in the short term. But as you recognize the times that appeared to be challenges and trials, in the end you may see that those experiences helped you the most. Let that strengthen your trust in God and in His will.

We learn from *Preach My Gospel*:

As we obey God, He blesses us. He gives us power to meet life’s challenges. He helps us change the desires of our hearts. Through our faith in Jesus Christ, He can heal us, both physically and spiritually. [PMG, 2004, 62]

Just as my passport was essential for my trip to London, so is faith in Jesus Christ essential to our eternal salvation. It leads us to keep the commandments and apply the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Eventually I will stand before the judgment bar of God. No one there is going to ask me what I did for a living. No one is going to care how many papers I published or how many of my patents were granted; those things are going to be totally irrelevant. But faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, receiving the saving ordinances, and enduring to the end are essential, and if we don’t do those things, nothing else will matter.

I want to leave you my testimony that the Church is true, that Jesus is the Christ and our Savior and our Redeemer. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.