

# *Faith, Family, and Friendship*

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Good morning, my brothers and sisters. Let me begin by telling you a little about myself. In the process I will share with you my testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ as well as the three key ingredients we need to ensure happiness and peace in this life and give us a taste of what life will be like in our heavenly home.

I grew up in the Queens borough of New York City. New York City is a wonderful place that is full of excitement and entertainment. As a youth I was heavily involved with rap music, and my brother and I belonged to a rap group called CBS. No, it was not the television station. The acronym CBS stood for Can't Be Stopped. We thought the name was cool.

We traveled throughout the city performing at wedding receptions, high school dances, and block parties. During the summer months different rap groups would visit the neighborhood park to perform free concerts. Most of the youth involved with rap visited the parks to listen and, at times, compete with the other rap groups. Often, however, these free concerts attracted drug deals and promoted random violence.

It was during the summer of my 14th year that a random violent event occurred—which

I will not go into—that provided me an opportunity to leave New York City and changed the course of my life forever.

During that time I was fortunate that my mother decided to send the family money and invited all of the children to come live with her in Hawaii. The money came at the right time, and that week I purchased a one-way ticket to Hawaii.

When I arrived in Hawaii, I quickly recognized its many differences from New York City—the ocean's clear blue water and the fresh cool breeze at night. I also recognized the many different nationalities and cultures. After my first day of attending Mililani High School, I came home and told my mother that it had felt like I was representing Africa at a United Nations meeting.

During the first few weeks of high school, the basketball coach noticed that I was one of the tallest young men on campus, and he invited me to try out for the basketball team. While living in New York I had not played much basketball. I enjoyed baseball and was

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on the bowling team, but I had never played on a basketball team. I believe it was because of my height that I started on the varsity team as a sophomore.

We won three basketball games that year, and everyone in the community was excited because it was three more games than the team had won the year before. In my junior year we won six games, and by the time I was a senior we had won 14 games and we became the Western Division champions, which advanced us to the Hawaii state play-offs. Because of my successful senior year, I was recruited to play basketball for BYU–Hawaii. All I knew about BYU–Hawaii was that it was a church school similar to Notre Dame or a St. Mary’s University.

At the start of the fall semester I was instructed by my academic advisor that I needed to take several religion courses to graduate from BYU–Hawaii. For my first semester I decided to take a New Testament course, and for the first time I began to understand in part the importance of a Savior. While living in New York I had been a converted Muslim. The Islamic faith regards Jesus Christ as a great man or prophet, similar to Moses or Abraham. I had not realized the importance of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice until I read about His life in the Gospel of Luke. I studied how the Savior healed the sick, raised the dead, and made the blind to see and the deaf to hear.

Imagine for a minute that we all lived during the time of the Savior and that we watched from a distance as He called His apostles and performed many miracles, including feeding the 4,000. Imagine that we also watched as He took upon Him the sins of the world.

In Luke 22:39 it reads, “And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him.” The word *wont* means “usually.” When the Savior wanted to be alone, He often visited the Mount of Olives and similar places to pray.

The scripture continues:

*And when he was at the place, he said unto [His apostles], Pray that ye enter not into temptation.*

*And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and [He] kneeled down, and prayed. [Luke 22:40–41]*

Picture in your mind the Savior instructing His apostles to pray to overcome temptation and then His withdrawing Himself “from them about a stone’s cast”—around 30 to 40 yards. He then knelt down to pray, saying, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42).

At this moment I believe the Savior knew that He would take upon Him the sins of the world; nevertheless, He asked the Father if there was another way that this sacrifice could be made. If not, His response was, “Not my will, but thine, be done.”

*And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.*

*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. [Luke 22:43–44]*

The Savior felt the pain of our sins. You know how it feels when you have made a mistake and your heart begins to ache. The Savior felt our heartaches and our feelings of guilt and anguish. He took upon Him the sins of all mankind—my sins, your sins, the sins of those who lived before us, and the sins of those who will live after us. The pain was so great that it caused the Savior, even Jesus Christ, to bleed from every pore of His body (see Mosiah 3:7, D&C 19:18). Well, you know the rest of the story. Judas betrayed the Savior with a kiss and Jesus suffered more pain before He was nailed to the cross. The Savior suffered death so that we might have life.

As the fall semester progressed, I was introduced to the missionaries. They visited my dorm room on a regular basis. I remember

playing my rap music on my boom box, and I would ask the missionaries if they wanted me to turn the music down. For a long time I thought my music was the reason the missionaries came by my dorm room so often. It was not until I served my own mission that I learned that missionaries are not allowed to listen to music.

After about a week of daily visits, the missionaries asked if I wanted to take the missionary discussions. My first discussion with them was in the library on the BYU–Hawaii campus, and they showed me the video *The First Vision*. The movie talked about Joseph Smith and how at the age of 14 he felt confused about the many different religions. He wanted to learn the truth and to understand Heavenly Father’s plan more fully. Young Joseph searched the scriptures and read in James 1:5 that “if any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God.” This scripture touched young Joseph, and he decided to exercise his faith and to ask God to direct him to the truth (see JS—H 1:9–13).

Joseph Smith went into a grove of trees and knelt to pray. As he prayed he saw a marvelous light, and in the midst of that light young Joseph saw our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ (see JS—H 1:14–20). As I watched this video, I felt in my heart it was true. Joseph Smith exercised faith, trusted in the Lord, and received the answer to his prayer.

The missionaries continued to teach me the remainder of the fall semester. It was fun and I learned a lot, but I had no desire to join the Church.

The next semester I again met with my college advisor and was again instructed to take a religion course. I decided to take the Book of Mormon course. I had no doubt about the possibility of additional scriptures because as a Muslim I had studied the Holy Koran.

My Book of Mormon instructor was Brother Gary Smith of the School of Business. As the course began I started to read about Nephi and how as a young man he listened to the Lord.

And when Father Lehi instructed his sons to return to Jerusalem for the brass plates, Laman and Lemuel complained whereas Nephi simply said:

*I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.*  
[1 Nephi 3:7]

Nephi exercised faith, trusted in the Lord, and obtained the brass plates.

I read about King Benjamin and how he served the people with all his heart, might, mind, and strength. He loved the people he served and, more important, he loved the Lord. During his last days upon the earth King Benjamin built a tower so he could teach his people many things pertaining to the kingdom of God. King Benjamin stated:

*I tell you these things that ye may learn wisdom; that ye may learn that when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.* [Mosiah 2:17]

King Benjamin served his people as we must serve one another. King Benjamin exercised faith, trusted in the Lord, and brought peace to an entire nation.

I read on in 3 Nephi of how the resurrected Lord visited the people on the American continent. The Savior was introduced by His Father:

*Behold my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, in whom I have glorified my name—hear ye him. . . .*

*And it came to pass that he stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying:*

*Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.*

*And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which*

*the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning.* [3 Nephi 11:7, 9–11]

The Lord told the people:

*Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.* [3 Nephi 11:14]

The Savior—my Savior, the resurrected Lord—extends His hands of mercy and love to all who will come unto Him. The Savior. My Brother. My Friend. I stopped reading.

It was near the end of winter semester. I completed my finals and was preparing to return home to the other side of the island. My scholarship did not cover the spring term, and I was prepared to work for the spring and summer to save some money for the fall semester. On the day I was prepared to leave campus, I received a note in my mailbox from Brother Gary Smith, my Book of Mormon teacher. He wanted to see me. I returned to my dorm room, where I received another note stating Brother Gary Smith wanted to see me. I thought to myself, “Why would he want to see me? Will Brother Smith give me an F grade for religion? No one ever fails religion.”

I dropped by his office, and the secretary mentioned that Brother Smith was at the Seaside, a mini-café on campus. I found him, and, as we talked, Brother Smith proceeded to tell me how I knew the Church was true and that it was time for me to join the Church. I looked at him amazed, and I wondered what he had been drinking.

He continued and said, “From what I’m about to tell you, either one of two things will happen. You will join the Church right away or

it will take you awhile.” He quoted a scripture in Ether that states:

*And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things; 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]

I thought, “What does this scripture have to do with me?”

Brother Smith explained that he believed I was waiting for some type of miracle or vision to take place before I would join the Church. He said, “You need to act upon what you already know to be true before you will receive a greater witness. ‘Wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial [or exercise] of your faith.’”

Brother Smith was right. I thought, “Why can’t I receive a vision like the Prophet Joseph Smith?” I wanted a greater witness. Well, it took me awhile to join the Church.

I returned to the other side of the island and started to hang out with my friends. Toward the end of the summer I began to feel somewhat empty, confused, and uncertain. I was missing school and the wonderful feelings I had felt at BYU–Hawaii. I knew something was wrong because I could not wait to return to school.

Two weeks before school was to begin, I received a phone call from Coach Ken Wagner. Coach Wagner was the assistant coach at BYU–Hawaii, and during that summer he had received the head coaching job at Dixie College in St. George, Utah.

He asked if I wanted to play for him at Dixie College. I said yes. That first year I did not play basketball; I redshirted. This gave me the time to watch the Mormons. As I watched, I noticed that at least three types of Mormons seemed to exist.

The first type is similar to you: students who attend institute and seminary and take religion classes on a regular basis. Their personalities glow, and they always seem to have smiles on their faces. When tough times come upon them, they know whom they can trust and that the Lord will help.

The second type of Mormons are the ones who realize that they are away from home for the first time and no one will know what they are doing. They party and get involved in immoral relationships. They believe they are having fun when in their hearts they feel unhappy. They do not have the “glow.”

The third type of Mormons are the ones who “sit on the fence,” unsure about who they are. When the winds of temptation blow their way, they seem to follow in that direction. They look confused more than anything else.

As I noticed these types of Mormons, I thought, “Peter, what type of Mormon do you want to be?” I wanted to be just like Rick West, my first roommate at BYU–Hawaii and a returned missionary; Bob Barnes, a teammate at Dixie College and a great friend; and Coach Wagner, who had helped me to understand the importance of family. They had the glow.

I thought, “If I am going to be a Mormon, I must learn how they date.” So I enrolled in an institute class called Dating and Courtship. And I guess the other 28 male students in the class thought the same as I did.

Soon afterward, a good friend, Trudy Smith, began to take the missionary discussions. She invited me to attend with her. This time the sister missionaries taught me about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. As you know, sister missionaries teach the gospel differently than do the elders. After each discussion they would cry as they shared their testimonies, and they wanted so much to hug me but realized that it was against mission rules. Toward the end of the discussions they asked me to do something the elders had not. They asked me to fast and to pray

about the truthfulness of the gospel. I was familiar with fasting. As a Muslim, we fasted during the month of Ramadan, a sacred time for worship.

I fasted, and when I was done, I returned to my dorm room at Dixie College, knelt down on my knees, and simply asked, “Heavenly Father, is the Book of Mormon the word of God? And is Joseph Smith a prophet?”

No, I did not receive a vision or a visit from an angel. I felt warmth in my heart, a feeling I had felt many times before—a feeling I had felt when I attended BYU–Hawaii and took Brother Smith’s Book of Mormon class. It was the same feeling I had felt when I saw the movie about Joseph Smith. This time, however, the feeling of warmth came when I was by myself, and I knew it came from God. He answered my prayer. I had a testimony.

I told the missionaries that I wanted to be baptized, but first I wanted to return to Hawaii so my mother could witness my joining the Church. I thought that as soon as I got off the plane I would find the missionaries and join the Church. Well, that did not happen. I started to hang out with my old friends, and I returned to my old habits. Toward the end of the summer the old feelings of uncertainty and confusion returned.

In August 1986 I was at home in my room, and I decided to read the Bible. I read in John, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). I knew I loved my mother; she is a source of strength in my life. I knew I loved my family, but did I love God?

I knelt down to pray and told my Heavenly Father for the first time that I loved Him. Later that day I was on my way to the gym to play basketball when I noticed two missionaries riding their bikes. I almost ran them over! They pulled to the side of the road, and I asked them to come by my home that night. They thought it was a miracle. The next week I was baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I returned to Dixie College that fall and played my sophomore year. We had a great team. We won 32 games and lost only three. I was recruited by several NCAA Division I universities, but I decided to postpone my college education to serve a mission. I was called to serve in Alabama. In Alabama I met people and families who exercised their faith and trusted in the Lord. Because of their faith, their lives were blessed.

One such individual was Sister Eva Oryang from Uganda, Africa. While living in her home country she had held a top political office and served as a prominent member of the government. However, in the summer of 1988 government officials of Uganda received several death threats, and Sister Oryang feared for her life. She left Uganda and arrived in Tuskegee, Alabama, where her oldest son was attending Tuskegee University. After two weeks of living in the United States, she became discouraged and very depressed. She had left a few of her children and a husband back in Africa, and she was unsure as to when her family would be together again.

Sister Oryang had learned of God back in her country and had faith in Him. One night she prayed. She prayed all night until the next morning, and all she said in her prayer was this: “Heavenly Father, I know I need a church. Will you please send me the right church first?”

In the morning there was a knock on the door. Her daughter answered the door and returned to her mother’s room. “Mother, you have visitors.”

Sister Oryang thought to herself, “I am a stranger in this country. How can I have visitors?” Seeing the young men at the door, she thought, “America is a strange place. Parents send their children outdoors with names on their shirts.”

The missionaries introduced themselves. Sister Oryang told them, “I have just finished my prayers, and I asked the Lord to send me the right church.” Of course the missionaries

smiled with joy and stated that they *were* representatives of the right church.<sup>1</sup>

As Sister Oryang led the way into the living room, there was another knock on the door. It was a minister of another faith who lived across the street. He had been watching the family for the past week and thought this would be a good time to visit. Comparing this older gentleman to the missionaries, Sister Oryang wondered, “How can these young boys tell me anything about God?”

She led the minister into the kitchen. As he sat down, there was another knock at the door. Two older sisters of yet another faith had been proselytizing in the area and decided to knock on the Oryangs’ door!

Sister Oryang thought, “I have just finished my prayer, and I asked the Lord to send me the right church *first*.” She said good-bye to the minister and the two other sisters and listened intently to the missionaries. Within weeks Sister Oryang joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Other family members soon joined the Church as well.

Before the Oryang family joined the Church, the Tuskegee Branch had about 10 members attending each Sunday. Following Sister Oryang’s conversion—and through her example of faith and testimony—the branch grew in just nine months from 10 to more than 60 people attending church. And her son David became president of the Tuskegee Branch a few years later.

Sister Oryang, like others, was blessed with the fullness of the everlasting gospel—a gift she shared with many. She understood the influence and the power of the Holy Ghost and how it helps to change lives and bring people closer to our Heavenly Father. I worked with Sister Oryang following her conversion, and she helped me understand the three key ingredients necessary to ensure happiness and peace in this life and give us a taste of what life will be like in our heavenly home.

The key ingredients are faith, family, and friendship.

The first ingredient, faith, is essential for us to obtain the power necessary to understand the love that our Heavenly Father has for us and His desire for our success. Faith is the power that moves us to repent and instills in us the desire to improve. Exercising faith allows us to overcome discouragement and heartache as we recognize that the Savior suffered in the Garden of Gethsemane so that the suffering and pain we feel at times can be relieved and peace restored.

There is a difference between having faith and exercising faith. Having faith denotes a belief in the Savior; exercising faith requires action. When we exercise faith, we allow our belief to guide us to pray, to read and study the scriptures, to repent, and to keep the commandments of God. It is through exercising faith that our belief, knowledge, and love for the Savior grow and thereby strengthen us.

The second ingredient is family. Having a solid family relationship is imperative in helping us to understand the principles of forgiveness, service, and selflessness. President Spencer W. Kimball, our 12th president of the Church, suggested that it is through families that we master the teachings of the gospel of Christ. He stated:

*Spirituality is . . . nurtured in our actions of patience, kindness, and forgiveness toward each other and in our applying gospel principles in the family circle. Home is where we become experts and scholars in gospel righteousness, learning and living gospel truths together.<sup>2</sup>*

Families come in all shapes and sizes. Some children are raised in a single-parent home, some are adopted, and some are taught and raised by grandparents and other relatives. I was raised by a single parent. My mother always taught me to have faith, and she helped me to understand the workings of God in our lives.

Now I am married and have been adopted into Stephanie's family. I continue to learn a

great deal from my in-laws and how important grandparents are in raising and teaching our children.

The third ingredient is friendship. President Larry Gibson, president of the Highland Utah West Stake, defines a friend as "one who is attached to another by affection, by esteem, and by respect. It is these attributes that lead to a desire to be with a friend and seek to promote prosperity and happiness."<sup>3</sup> Good friends provide support and guidance.

In April 1997 general conference, President Hinckley, our beloved prophet, declared that every member of the Church needs three things: "a friend, a responsibility, and nurturing with 'the good word of God' (Moroni 6:4)."<sup>4</sup> Later he suggested that becoming a friend is probably the most difficult. To get outside our comfort zone and to extend a hand of friendship is challenging. It takes time to develop friendships—but this is the time we need to take.

At some point we will all be tested. It is a part of life. When those times come—and they will come—it is a great feeling to know you have a friend at school, at work, or in your ward to show you love, to listen to your concerns, to be an example of goodness, and to testify of truth. These are the attributes of friendship. The Savior called us His friends when He said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). And in Proverbs it states, "A friend loveth at all times" (Proverbs 17:17). We need to take the time to become friends. There are those whom you associate with who need your friendship and support.

Brothers and sisters, I know God lives. I know Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and the Only Begotten of the Father—our Redeemer, our Savior, and our Friend. I know we have a living prophet, even Gordon B. Hinckley, and this is the Lord's Church upon the face of the earth.

We have been given much; therefore we must give of ourselves and incorporate and

strengthen faith, family, and friendships. Doing so can ensure happiness and peace in this life and help us begin to understand, in part, what life will be like in our heavenly home.

My friends, take full advantage of the Lord's goodness. His arms of mercy and love are extended, and all are invited to come. For the Lord has said:

*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*  
[Matthew 11:28–30]

The Savior loves you and me. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. The missionaries who knocked on the Oryangs' door that morning were Elder David Steab and his companion. They taught and subsequently baptized the Oryang family in 1988. Peter Johnson served in Tuskegee, Alabama, from September 1988 to May 1989—after the Oryangs were members of the Church. It was during this time that the branch grew from 10 to more than 60 people attending sacrament meeting on a consistent basis.

2. Spencer W. Kimball, "Therefore I Was Taught," *Ensign*, January 1982, 3.

3. Highland 27th Ward Conference, Highland Utah West Stake, 14 January 2007.

4. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Converts and Young Men," *Ensign*, May 1997, 47.