

“Press Forward with a Steadfastness in Christ”

DAVID L. KOOYMAN

Having a hope in Christ is a theme woven throughout the scriptures. The word *hope* can imply a simple wish, or it can suggest a declaration founded upon experience and knowledge. The Apostle Paul said, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The hope that Paul describes is much richer than and different from a mere wish. Rather, it is related to knowledge, and it leads to a life of diligence. If we take a difficult class and put forth little effort to study or prepare for exams and assignments, we might say, “I hope I get an A in this class,” but in reality that hope is nothing more than a wish—and, deep inside, we know it. If, however, we study effectively, monitor our progress, make corrections when necessary, and do all in our power to perform well in the class, we may be able to declare with assurance, “I have a hope that I will get an A in this class.” Such a hope will be well founded, and deep inside we will have confidence that it will come to pass.

According to Paul, if something exists that we cannot detect with the natural senses, then faith is the evidence that it is real. For those of us who have faith in God and His Son, Jesus Christ, that evidence, born of faith, is very real. Paul said that “faith is the substance of things

hoped for,” or, in other words, hope is made up of the things in which we have faith. Faith precedes a true enduring hope that motivates us to “press forward with a steadfastness in Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20; see also verse 19).

A life well founded upon faith in Christ, obedience to His commandments, sincere repentance whenever needed, humility, and meekness solidifies a true hope in Christ and naturally motivates one to demonstrate that faith and hope through diligent service. Following this course, we will experience joy throughout our lives. Elder Richard G. Scott declared:

True, enduring happiness, with the accompanying strength, courage, and capacity to overcome the greatest difficulties, will come as you center your life in Jesus Christ. Obedience to His teachings provides a secure ascent in the journey of life. That takes effort. While there is no guarantee of overnight results, there is the assurance that, in the Lord’s time, solutions will come, peace will prevail, and happiness will be yours. [Richard G. Scott,

David L. Kooyman was a BYU professor of physiology and developmental biology when this devotional address was given on 20 May 2008.

“The Atonement Can Secure Your Peace and Happiness,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 41]

In the Book of Mormon, Aaron, the missionary companion of Ammon, told King Lamoni’s father:

If thou desirest [to know God], if thou wilt bow down before God, yea, if thou wilt repent of all thy sins, and will bow down before God, and call on his name in faith, believing that ye shall receive, then shalt thou receive the hope which thou desirest. [Alma 22:16]

A life of repentance, obedience, and service that is motivated by a love of God and unshaken faith in Christ will generate a hope in Christ that will extend into the eternities. On the other hand, without “a perfect brightness of hope” in Christ (2 Nephi 31:20), we may desperately cling to the scriptures and living prophets without ever truly believing Christ (see 1 Nephi 8:24–25). When the storms of life blow, our faith may waver. The Apostle Paul declared, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Corinthians 15:19).

I have been fascinated for years with a portion of the vision of the tree of life recorded in 1 Nephi 8. In this vision Lehi described two groups of people who caught hold of the iron rod as they made their way to partake of the fruit on the tree of life. Remember that the iron rod represents the word of God and the fruit on the tree represents the love of God. One group pressed forward toward the tree, “clinging to the rod of iron” (verse 24), while another group pressed forward “holding fast to the rod of iron” (verse 30). The group that was clinging to the rod made it to the tree and partook of the fruit, but afterward, when the world mocked them, “they were ashamed” (verse 25) and fell away. The group that held fast to the rod as they pressed forward also partook of the fruit but then stayed. What was the difference?

To me, *clinging* suggests desperation—it’s what might be done if there was fear or a lack of hope in their lives. Perhaps they did not really believe Christ or accept the Atonement, so when the world pressed upon them, they became ashamed and fell away. The Apostle Paul taught the Saints in Rome: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: . . . and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. . . . And hope maketh not ashamed” (Romans 5:1–2, 5).

The group that Lehi saw holding fast to the rod endured to the end. They had an unshaken faith in Christ and a perfect brightness of hope because of the Atonement. When I read the words *holding fast* in Lehi’s description in his vision, I imagine individuals who stand firm against adversity or tribulation because of their hope in Christ. The Apostle Paul counseled the Saints to be “rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation” (Romans 12:12). We don’t rejoice if we hope it doesn’t rain tomorrow. We do rejoice, however, if we have a hope in Christ, and that hope helps us to be patient in tribulation.

Nephi, who shared in Lehi’s vision of the tree of life and witnessed those who fell away after clinging to the rod of iron, expanded on this thought. He said:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. [2 Nephi 31:19–20]

Note that Nephi is telling us that after we have “gotten into this strait and narrow path” we “must press forward” with “unshaken

faith,” which leads to “a perfect brightness of hope” and “a love of God and of all men,” what we may also call charity. “Unshaken faith”—“a perfect brightness of hope” and “a love of God and of all men”—that is the key. What promise do we have if we follow this formula? Nephi goes on to say:

Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.

And now, behold, my beloved brethren, this is the way; and there is none other way nor name given under heaven whereby man can be saved in the kingdom of God. [2 Nephi 31:20–21]

A hope in Christ will motivate us to repent of our sins. Repentance will expand our capacity to receive and feel the Spirit and to enjoy the companionship of the Holy Ghost. It is through the power of the Holy Ghost that we “may abound in hope” (Romans 15:13). The corollary is also true. Sin causes the Spirit to withdraw—our faith in Christ diminishes, and we lose hope. If life seems hopeless, then we may want to at least consider our own personal worthiness, remembering that even such things as ingratitude constitute sin (see D&C 59:21). If we have fallen short, we can take comfort in knowing that Christ “is mighty to save” (2 Nephi 31:19) and that “he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42).

Attending the temple as frequently as our circumstances will allow is a great way to enter into this upward-lifting spiral of increasing faith and hope. I have considered that one of the great blessings associated with attending the temple is found in D&C 109, the inspired dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple. In it Joseph Smith blessed “all those who shall worship in [the temple]” (verse 14) that when they “transgress . . . , they may speedily repent and return [to God]” (verse 21). What a tremendous blessing to be given a desire to speedily repent

so that sin doesn’t have time to compound or fester.

Consider also the pleas of the prophet Ether:

He did cry from the morning, even until the going down of the sun, exhorting the people to believe in God unto repentance . . . , saying unto them that by faith all things are fulfilled—

Wherefore, whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world, yea, even a place at the right hand of God, which hope cometh of faith. [Ether 12:3–4]

The natural man, clinging to the word of God but lacking a foundation of sincere repentance, faith, and hope, lacks an eternal perspective and tries to get through the here and now asking “Why me?” when trials arise. As the trials persist or intensify, he is not “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him” (Mosiah 3:19) and is prone to murmur, saying, “It must not be true, or life wouldn’t be so hard.” Sons and daughters of God will humbly submit to adversity, knowing that ultimately God is in charge. They will have a hope that they will be better for the experience and that all will be well in the end. The Apostle Paul taught, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

C. S. Lewis put it this way:

When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well (in the sense that some of his bad habits are now corrected), he often feels that it would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly. When troubles come along—illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptation—he is disappointed. These things, he feels, might have been necessary to rouse him and make him repent in his bad old days; but why now? Because God is forcing him on, or up, to a higher level: putting him into situations where he will have to be very much

braver, or more patient, or more loving, than he ever dreamed of being before. It seems to us all unnecessary: but that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing He means to make of us. [C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 159–60]

This lesson has been taught to my wife and me in some profound ways. My wife has ancestors who were faithful Latter-day Saints going back to the early history of the Church. They were among the pioneers who traveled to the Salt Lake Valley in wagons and handcarts. The faith and dedication of her family have remained strong over the generations. Our two oldest daughters, Kristy and Laycee, were the fourth generation of sister missionaries in the family, following a pattern that started with their great-grandmother Cecil Vance Coombs. Our 14-year-old daughter, McKenziey, has expressed a similar desire to follow in their footsteps when she turns 21. I do not have a genealogical pioneer heritage, but with all members of the Church I share in the spiritual heritage the pioneers left us.

In our journey through life together, my wife and I have seen some parallels to the journey of the pioneers to the Salt Lake Valley. We started out with very little in the way of material possessions. We had great faith in one another, in our Heavenly Father, and in Christ, and we had a goal of an eternal family. Looking back from my current perspective, life was easy in the early years of our marriage. There were babies to be born, children to be raised, degrees to be earned, a career to be pursued, and callings to be fulfilled. For the most part, the course was a slow, steady, methodical journey across the great plains of life. There were occasional hills of adversity to climb, like the births of our third and fourth children, 10 years apart. Serious complications resulted in the babies being placed in the ICU for days. However, at the top of each hill of adversity we experienced a panoramic view on life, and then there

always followed the beautiful, peaceful valleys before we encountered the next hill. Life was good. The sense of progress toward goals was strong. Our love and faith in each other and God continued to grow in a steady, deliberate way, matching our journey.

As our journey through life progressed, the trail became steeper and the hills bigger, just as in the case of the pioneer trek. Occasionally the Lord provided us with experiences that greatly increased our faith in Him, increasing our understanding of how personally and individually we are each loved and nurtured.

One major hill we encountered came at about 11:55 a.m. on June 3, 2001. I had stood up to close our ward's fast and testimony meeting when I felt a sharp pain and a tearing sensation followed by the gushing of blood in my left pelvis. The thought came to me quite distinctly: "I just ruptured my femoral artery. I am going to bleed to death in a few minutes." I looked out over the congregation to my family, thinking that it might be the last time I would see them in this life. I debated whether I should say something but decided that I did not want to disrupt the spirit of the meeting. So, after announcing the closing hymn and prayer, I just sat down. Our sacrament meeting was last in the block schedule, and I knew that I had several interviews to conduct and other business that needed to be addressed after the meeting. I was still alive and decided to continue in my duties.

Nearly six hours later I finally took the time to go to the emergency room. I explained to the nurse at the reception desk that I thought I had ruptured my femoral artery at noon that day. She kind of chuckled and said, "No, you would be dead by now." She asked me to describe the pain and thought it was probably a kidney stone.

We sat in the waiting room for about 30 minutes. When we were finally taken back to an exam room and were able to see a doctor, I described the pain and said that I thought

I had ruptured my femoral artery at about noon that day. He gave a little chuckle and said, “You would probably be dead if that were true.” He also indicated that he thought it was a kidney stone. He ordered a differential CAT scan to look for the stone.

A few minutes after the procedure, the doctor came back into the room and said, quite soberly, “There is a large pool of blood in your lower left abdomen.” I was rushed to another hospital and prepped for emergency vascular surgery. It turned out that I had actually ruptured my left iliac artery, which is larger than the femoral. The reason I did not bleed to death is that shortly after the aneurysm, a flap of inner arterial lining folded over, occluding the artery above the rupture. Experiences like this provide evidence for the truth that God knows each of us personally. We are cared for as individuals. He knows exactly how to succor us.

We considered ourselves very blessed of the Lord. However, I remembered the words of C. S. Lewis:

*Little people like you and me, if our prayers are sometimes granted, beyond all hope and probability, had better not draw hasty conclusions to our own advantage. If we were stronger, we might be less tenderly treated. If we were braver, we might be sent, with far less help, to defend far more desperate posts in the great battle. [C. S. Lewis, “The Efficacy of Prayer,” in *The World’s Last Night and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 10–11]*

I chose to speak about hope today because I have learned a lot about it over the past several years. There were other serious health issues, other surgeries, and other miracles. However, our trudge up Rocky Ridge in the face of the icy winds of adversity began on the afternoon of February 1, 2006, when we received the shocking news from Kansas that our daughter Laycee was in a hospital in a coma. She died

the next day. We will be eternally thankful for the rescue parties the Lord sent in the form of loving family and friends. Truly they fulfilled the admonition of Alma “to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:9). We are especially thankful for the anonymous individual who allowed us to purchase a gravestone immediately after Laycee’s death. This brought a great deal of comfort.

It was months before I began to see color in a life that had become gray. I feared that I might forget how to laugh or that I might never feel genuinely happy again. A day still does not go by that I do not think about Laycee several times. She was too well loved to ever be forgotten. Gradually the road became less steep and rocky. However, real healing, for me, did not come until 18 months later, after I climbed one more section of our own Rocky Ridge.

To set the stage for this experience, I will start by telling you that I have kept a daily journal for years. Writing in my journal is somewhat therapeutic. I record my thoughts and feelings along with events in my life. I also need to tell you that my career has caused me to travel a considerable amount. These trips involved many airline carriers, both foreign and domestic, to nearly every continent in the world. During all of this traveling, I had never lost a bag until one trip about six months after Laycee’s death.

I was on a long trip that took me from Argentina to Chile to Ecuador, back to the U.S. through Miami, and then to Reno before I returned home to Provo. All of the bags made it through to Miami; however, somewhere between the nonstop flight from Miami to Reno, one bag was lost. I always put my journal in a carry-on bag so that it is with me at all times—I cherish my journals. However, for reasons that I cannot explain, I inadvertently packed it in a checked bag for the trip from Quito to Reno. As you might have guessed, my journal was in the checked bag that was

lost. Against high odds, that bag was never recovered by the airline.

At the time it was lost, that volume of my journal included daily entries for the six months following Laycee’s death. I was devastated. The loss consumed me for months. “Why did this happen?” I wondered. After my experience with the aneurysm, I had firsthand knowledge that God is very much involved in the details of our lives. I knew that God knew where that bag was, but repeated prayers, often accompanied with fasting, did not bring it back.

Eventually I accepted the fact that the journal was not coming back and that there must be a reason for it. It wasn’t until a little over a year later, near the end of a sabbatical leave at the University of Iowa, that I learned the reason for the loss of my journal. I was telling my wise bishop, Val Sheffield, of the loss of the journal—pining over the experience again and wondering why.

He stopped me and said, “I know why. It’s because what you wrote following your daughter’s death wasn’t right. It didn’t accurately represent how you should respond to what happened.” He went on, “You need to write how you feel about her death looking back from the perspective you have now; it’s a more accurate one.”

I was stunned. He did not know that over the past year I had been engaged in diligent study, pondering, and prayer about faith and hope, but the Lord knew. I went back to my apartment and thought about that for most of the night. I did rewrite my feelings about Laycee’s death. It turned out to be a sacred and singular experience. Although I can’t recall what I originally wrote in my lost journal, I am confident that it contained much of bitterness and anger. I am now glad that it is gone.

As my wife and I journey on, the depth and vitality of our faith and hope in Christ grows. We believe Christ when He tells us He has the desire and power to save us. That steadfast

faith is the bedrock of our bright hope that through our temple marriage we will realize our goal of an eternal family, which includes Laycee. We have an assurance that the struggles involved in getting back home will seem “but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). We have cleaved together in a way that perhaps is not possible without the extreme heat and pressure of adversity. We can see that good can come from adversity if we have a hope in Christ. However, I think that Elder Neal A. Maxwell put it best when he said:

*Those who emerge successfully from their varied and fiery furnaces have experienced the grace of the Lord, which He says is sufficient (see Ether 12:27). Even so, brothers and sisters, such emerging individuals do not rush to line up in front of another fiery furnace in order to get an extra turn! [Neal A. Maxwell, “From Whom All Blessings Flow,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 11–12]*

In our most recent general conference, President Thomas S. Monson said:

*Mortality is a period of testing, a time to prove ourselves worthy to return to the presence of our Heavenly Father. In order to be tested, we must sometimes face challenges and difficulties. At times there appears to be no light at the tunnel’s end—no dawn to break the night’s darkness. We feel surrounded by the pain of broken hearts, the disappointment of shattered dreams, and the despair of vanished hopes. We join in uttering the biblical plea “Is there no balm in Gilead?” We are inclined to view our own personal misfortunes through the distorted prism of pessimism. We feel abandoned, heartbroken, alone. If you find yourself in such a situation, I plead with you to turn to our Heavenly Father in faith. He will lift you and guide you. He will not always take your afflictions from you, but He will comfort and lead you with love through whatever storm you face. [Thomas S. Monson, “Looking Back and Moving Forward,” *Ensign*, May 2008, 90]*

Things do work out in the end if we trust the Lord. We cannot control some events that cause us great pain, but we can always control how we respond to them. We have no lasting power over another's agency, but we can control our own for eternity. We can choose to live in a world of disappointment, frustration, and anger. We can choose to take counsel from our fears, let faith slip away, and allow our hope to diminish, but remember that "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love" (2 Timothy 1:7). Life is so much sweeter and richer if we have the humility "to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us]" (Mosiah 3:19), trusting that "all things shall work together for good to them that walk uprightly" (D&C 100:15).

Near the end of the book of Alma, there is a great lesson about the significance of how we choose to respond to difficulties. The Nephites and Lamanites had been through years of wars. There had been much loss of life on both sides and much in the way of trials and afflictions. Listen to this assessment of the people after peace was finally reestablished:

But behold, because of the exceedingly great length of the war between the Nephites and the Lamanites many had become hardened, because of the exceedingly great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility. [Alma 62:41]

Wouldn't it be better to be among those whose hearts were softened as "they did humble themselves before God"?

I wish to acknowledge that in the audience of people who are listening to my address today, or who may listen to or read it in the future, there are surely some, perhaps many, who have had far more difficult trials to endure than I have had. I do not wish to trivialize your trials if you fall into that category. I do pray that perhaps something of what I have learned from my experiences about hope may translate to your situation as well. We can all gain great hope and comfort from these words from the Lord:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye are little children, and ye have not as yet understood how great blessings the Father hath in his own hands and prepared for you;

And ye cannot bear all things now; nevertheless, be of good cheer, for I will lead you along. The kingdom is yours and the blessings thereof are yours, and the riches of eternity are yours.

And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more. [D&C 78:17-19]

It is my hope and prayer that we will all remain firm and resolute in following the Savior and developing a steadfast faith in Him, leading to a perfect brightness of hope for what lies ahead, including the eternities. I bear witness that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, that the fulness of the gospel has been restored to the earth, and that a prophet, even Thomas S. Monson, once again speaks on the earth. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.