

# *Harry Potter and the Five Gospel Truths*

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*Note: This devotional contains spoilers.*

Nineteen years ago, my husband and I boarded an airplane headed for a family vacation. I was twenty-seven weeks pregnant with our second child, and I buckled myself in, earnestly hoping that our four-year-old would let her exhausted mother relax for a couple of hours. I have no memory of how my daughter behaved on that flight, as everything was overshadowed by the onset of contractions shortly after takeoff.

Given today's audience, perhaps a short pregnancy refresher course is in order. Babies are considered full-term if born at forty weeks. As noted, I was twenty-seven weeks pregnant. For any number of reasons, being in labor at that time and in that place was less than ideal. While it would make for a dramatic story to have given birth 30,000 feet in the air to a premature infant, that thankfully is not what happened. We landed safely at our destination and rushed to the

hospital, where I was given medication to stop my labor and was put on bed rest for the next ten weeks.

For someone with a type-A personality, ten weeks of bed rest was a challenge, especially in the days before Netflix, Hulu, smartphones, and high-speed internet access. When the Relief Society called to offer help, I desperately pleaded for books. And so the women of the Westchester First Ward in the Chicago Illinois Stake did what they do best: they arrived on my doorstep bearing casseroles and books—food for my body and food for my soul.

Amidst the stack of reading material were the first four books in the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. I put them at the bottom of the stack, reasoning that they were children's books. But a few weeks later, when I had finished all of the other Relief Society literary offerings, the Harry Potter books were all that remained. I reluctantly started to read about the boy wizard with a

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lightning scar on his forehead, and in short order I was hooked.

I loved the alliterative names of characters such as Mad-Eye Moody and Nearly Headless Nick, the myriad magical creatures ranging from house elves to hippogriffs, and the tantalizing array of potion ingredients, such as boomslang skin and lacewing flies.

I loved the humanity of all of the perfectly imperfect characters—their fears and insecurities, their disappointments and misunderstandings, their anger and jealousy, their pranks, their sarcasm, and even their plots for revenge.

But most of all I loved the universal themes of the books: the power of love and of sacrifice, the fight of good against evil, and the quest to conquer death.

By the time the seventh and last book in the series was published, I was a devotee. At that point I was working at Harvard University. Every once in a while I would scan the course catalog to see if anyone was teaching a class on Harry Potter, but to no avail. I eventually discovered not a class but a book group of sorts that met weekly at the Harvard Divinity School. Although the group was called Harry Potter and the Sacred Text, the presumption of this group was *not* that the Harry Potter series is a sacred work but rather that there is great wisdom to be gleaned by rigorously engaging with the text as with works held sacred by various faiths.

I eagerly joined the group, and for the next year I approached the Harry Potter books through a different lens, not to be entertained but to think deeply about what I could learn from these stories. Not surprisingly, my faith informed this new reading of these books that I had long enjoyed as I recalled the admonition in Doctrine and Covenants 88:118: “Yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith.”

When I was invited to speak today, I wondered what gospel message I should share with you—the students of BYU—that might resonate with you and help in the struggles you are facing. My mind kept returning to five gospel principles that

have been reinforced for me as I have read and reread the tales of Harry Potter over the years.

### **Truth 1: “All Are Alike unto God”**

The central antagonist in the Harry Potter series is the evil Lord Voldemort, who conspires throughout the books to kill the boy Harry Potter, the only wizard known to have survived a killing curse—in Harry’s case, one directed at him by Voldemort when Harry was just a baby. In a world inhabited by wizards and witches and a whole host of magical creatures, Lord Voldemort views anyone, and anything, other than a pure-blood wizard as utterly dispensable and inferior.

Harry, on the other hand, is a wizard, but he grows up with no knowledge of this fact—indeed, with no knowledge at all of the magical world. This turns out to be a great blessing, because when Harry eventually learns he is a wizard, he is completely unaware of the prevailing prejudices of the witches and wizards around him.

At the end of the second book, Harry encounters the shadow of a younger Voldemort, known in this book by his birth name, Tom Riddle. Riddle takes Harry’s wand, leaving Harry without a weapon with which to defend himself against the deadly basilisk, a giant snake hiding in the Chamber of Secrets. While Harry awaits his fate, help arrives in the form of the headmaster Dumbledore’s pet bird, the phoenix Fawkes, who is carrying the dirty and ragged Sorting Hat.

Riddle looks at the motley crew of Harry, the phoenix, and the hat and taunts: “This is what Dumbledore sends his defender! A songbird and an old hat! Do you feel brave, Harry Potter? Do you feel safe now?”<sup>1</sup>

Riddle’s downfall in that moment is that he fails to appreciate the value of the magical power embodied in anything other than a pure-blood wizard. Only moments later, the healing tears of the phoenix will mend the otherwise lethal wound to Harry’s arm from the basilisk’s fang, and Harry will use the sword of Godric Gryffindor hidden in the Sorting Hat to kill the basilisk.

Contrast this with Harry's first encounter with the house elf Dobby, who mysteriously materializes in Harry's bedroom one summer's evening. Having no preconceived notions about the relationship between wizards and house elves, Harry invites Dobby to sit down.

The house elf is stunned by this magnanimous gesture, pronouncing, "Dobby has *never* been asked to sit down by a wizard—like an *equal*."<sup>2</sup>

Several years later, the goblin Griphook tells Harry, "You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter." "In what way?" asks Harry.

To which Griphook replies, "You . . . rescued a goblin. . . . You brought me here. Saved me. . . . You are a very odd wizard."<sup>3</sup>

More than any other character in J. K. Rowling's series, Harry shows an understanding of the principle described in Doctrine and Covenants 18:10: "Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God"—a God who, in the words of Nephi,

*inviteth . . . all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . and all are alike unto God. [2 Nephi 26:33]*

That we are all children of Heavenly Parents who know and love us individually is a fundamental and beautiful gospel truth. God loves each one of you, and He asks—indeed, He commands—that we show that same love for each other: "As I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34).

At the start of this new school year, I encourage you to strive to show a greater measure of Christlike love to all those around you. Cast a broad net as you build a network of friends for social activities and form study groups for your classes. Be sensitive to the needs of those in our community who are dealing with very real struggles, even if you do not understand them. And follow the counsel of a BYU colleague who said in a BYU Women's Conference address that "the greatest form of charity may be to withhold judgment."<sup>4</sup>

## Truth 2: The Lord Will Help Make Our "Weak Things Become Strong"

One scripture that has become particularly meaningful to me in the last several months as I have moved from Boston to Utah to take on a new role here as the dean of the BYU Marriott School of Business is Ether 12:27:

*And if men [and women] come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men [and women] weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men [and women] that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.*

In my experience, there are three ways that God helps "make weak things become strong unto [us]."

The first is by magnifying our concentrated effort to become better—we can acquire new skills and abilities and new strengths. For the Harry Potter fans out there, this would be Harry desperately practicing summoning charms before the first task of the Triwizard Tournament in book four. As a result, he is able to successfully call forth his broomstick when he needs it to aid in his defeat of the dreaded Hungarian Horntail dragon.<sup>5</sup> I will spare you the details, but I have weaknesses that I have been working very hard on overcoming with purposeful intent over the last few months since I arrived at BYU.

The second way that God helps make "weak things become strong" is by sending us people who have complementary strengths that offset our weaknesses. In the case of Harry Potter, this would be Ron and Hermione helping Harry in his adventures in all of the books, although my favorite example is in book one, when getting to the Sorcerer's Stone very much requires the individual strengths of all three. Ron leads the trio to victory in the game of wizard chess, Hermione solves the logic puzzle concerning which potion to drink, and Harry mounts a broomstick to capture the flying key that allows him to open the locked door

and proceed. Individually, none of them could have succeeded, but, collectively, they are able to keep the Sorcerer’s Stone from falling into the hands of Lord Voldemort.<sup>6</sup>

Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, Moroni in the last chapter of the Book of Mormon (see Moroni 10:8–18), and the Lord in the Doctrine and Covenants (see D&C 46:8–29) all described the variety of spiritual gifts bestowed on us by our Maker. “For all have not every gift given unto them; for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God” (D&C 46:11). This dispersion of the Lord’s spiritual gifts requires us to learn to work together to become the body of Christ referred to by Paul. One of the greatest blessings I have had since coming to BYU in January has been the opportunity to work as part of a team with members whose strengths offset my weaknesses.

The third way that God helps “make weak things become strong” is by putting us in situations in which our weaknesses are in fact our strengths, because they are two sides of the same coin. Harry Potter, in what many would perceive as a moment of weakness, shows compassion for Peter Pettigrew, the man who betrayed his parents, leading to his escape in book three and hastening the return of Voldemort in the flesh.<sup>7</sup> But Harry Potter’s compassion for others is also a strength that allows him to befriend Dobby the house elf, who proves instrumental in Harry’s success in finding and destroying horcruxes in book seven.<sup>8</sup>

For me, returning to BYU after thirty years at four very different universities is both an obvious source of weakness and a potential source of strength. It is a weakness because, after such a long time away, I often feel out of place back in this peculiar institution with its sometimes strange customs. It is a strength because my perspective, after having been gone for so long, occasionally allows me to see things in ways that people around me can’t.

I hope that you too are invoking the help of the Lord in identifying and making your own weak things become strong through practice, through collaboration, and by examining how your

weaknesses could, in appropriate situations, actually be your strengths.

### Truth 3: “We See Through a Glass, Darkly”

One recurring theme in the seven-book series is that Harry and his compatriots rarely have a complete understanding of the situations in which they find themselves. Sometimes—in fact, often—they are more wrong than right. In book one, they mistakenly believe that Professor Snape is trying to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone when, in reality, it is Professor Quirrell, who also happens to be sporting a vestige of Lord Voldemort hidden under his jaunty turban.<sup>9</sup> In book three, they, along with the rest of the wizarding world, are under the false impression that Sirius Black betrayed Harry’s parents, leading to their deaths, when in fact it was Peter Pettigrew.<sup>10</sup> In book four, nobody recognizes that Mad-Eye Moody is an imposter.<sup>11</sup> In book seven, they learn that Dumbledore had a somewhat checkered past, and Snape turns out to be a hero rather than a villain.<sup>12</sup>

Just like the characters in Harry Potter, we too have an incomplete understanding of many things in life. Paul told us in 1 Corinthians:

*For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.  
But when that which is perfect is come, then that  
which is in part shall be done away. . . .  
For now we see through a glass, darkly.  
[1 Corinthians 13:9–10, 12]*

God’s plan is that we *not* have a full understanding of all things during this mortal life. This partial understanding impacts us in many ways. Sometimes, as with Harry and Severus Snape, we misjudge others based on an incomplete knowledge of their circumstances or motivations. Sometimes our faith falters when we find ourselves in a situation we cannot make sense of, believing that our ability to reason is sufficient for complete understanding, when in fact we have but a very limited comprehension of things.

When Joseph was sold into Egypt by his brothers, could he possibly have foreseen the future blessings that would come to him and his family

many years later from what, at the time, must have seemed like a great injustice?

Our job in life is to go forward in faith despite not having a full knowledge of all things. We read in Alma:

*And now as I said concerning faith—faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.* [Alma 32:21]

The ultimate test of Harry Potter’s faith comes in the seventh book, when he must choose whether he should continue searching for horcruxes or whether he should instead redirect his efforts to tracking down the Deathly Hallows. The rationale for acquiring the Hallows seems compelling. But after much deliberation, Harry decides to persist in his quest for the horcruxes because that is the path that was prescribed to him by headmaster Albus Dumbledore before his death. Harry does not even know what all of the horcruxes are, let alone where they are. The task seems daunting, and Harry questions whether he can possibly succeed. And yet he persists.<sup>13</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, we know that he made the right choice. But at the time of the decision, the choice was not at all obvious based on reason alone.

Like Harry, we may find ourselves in circumstances in which our reason conflicts with the commandments of God, His prophets, or our own personal revelation. In these moments we must choose whether we will do what seems to make sense based on our partial understanding of things or whether we will have faith and follow the Lord’s plan for us, believing that, with His greater perspective, He will not lead us astray.

#### **Truth 4: The Lord Will Magnify Your Capabilities in Doing His Work**

My favorite scene in the entire Harry Potter series happens at the end of the third book, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. At the admonition of Albus Dumbledore, Harry and his friend Hermione go back in time to change the course of history and to do what is noble and good by

saving two innocent lives. But time travel is an endeavor fraught with danger, and they must be very careful not to let their time-traveling selves be seen by those in the past. And so they must wait and watch the narrative of the past unfold until they reach the exact point in time when intervention is needed.

Time-traveling Harry finds himself on the edge of a lake watching earlier Harry on the other side of the lake being attacked by the soul-sucking dementors. Because he has already lived through this, Harry knows that at some point someone from across the lake will cast a charm that will drive away the dementors. He waits, and waits, and waits and then starts getting quite anxious as the dementors get increasingly close to administering the dementor’s kiss and sucking out earlier Harry’s soul. And he wonders where the dementor-repelling Patronus is. And then, in a brilliant flash of insight, Harry realizes that it is he, time-traveling Harry, who must cast the charm from across the lake and save his earlier self.

Despite having struggled for months with this particular spell, once armed with this vision of what he could accomplish, Harry confidently declares, “*EXPECTO PATRONUM!*” and a luminous silver-white stag erupts from his wand, dispelling the dementors in a profusion of light. When asked by Hermione how he managed to accomplish this tremendous feat, he says, “I knew I could do it this time because I’d already done it.”<sup>14</sup>

The Lord has a great work for all of you to do: in your homes, in your communities, in your jobs, in the Church, and in the world. And right now, many of you, like Harry Potter, may be feeling inadequate for such a task. Maybe you got a B or a C or even a D on an exam or paper and wonder how you could possibly be qualified for greatness. Maybe you didn’t get a job offer after your summer internship. Maybe you haven’t been on a date in months—or even years. Maybe you feel like you are destined for mediocrity.

In President Russell M. Nelson and Sister Wendy Watson Nelson’s 2018 worldwide youth devotional, Sister Nelson said:

*I believe if you could see yourself living with your Heavenly Parents and with Jesus Christ; if you could observe what you did premortally and see yourself making commitments—even covenants—with others . . . ; if you could see yourself courageously responding to attacks on truth and valiantly standing up for Jesus Christ, I believe that every one of you would have the increased power, increased commitment, and eternal perspective to help you overcome **any** and **all** of your confusion, doubts, struggles, and problems. **All** of them!*<sup>15</sup>

If you, like Harry, are standing on the edge of your metaphorical lake, waiting for someone else to make the first move, to grease the skids, to invite you to the party, wait no more. Heavenly Father hasn't given us a perfect vision of our past or our future. But He has given us the ability, conditional on our worthiness, to receive personal revelation about what we can and should do in our lives. And when we are on the Lord's errand, He will magnify our capabilities to act in His service and to be the means of accomplishing great things.

#### **Truth 5: Jesus Christ Is the Author of Our Salvation**

The central theme in the Harry Potter series is the quest to conquer death. The single focus of the primary antagonist, Lord Voldemort, is to become immortal. To this end, he seeks to preserve his soul by splitting it into seven parts, or horcruxes; he conspires to steal the Sorcerer's Stone, which contains the elixir of life; he wrests the Elder Wand, or Deathstick, from the grave of Albus Dumbledore; and he repeatedly tries to kill Harry Potter based on a prophecy that he interprets to mean that only either Harry or Voldemort can live. Despite these efforts, he is unsuccessful and ultimately dies once and for all from a rebounded curse directed at Harry Potter during the Battle of Hogwarts. The cause of Voldemort's failure is simple: he is looking for life in all the wrong places.

Where then should we look for life? In the quest to defeat Lord Voldemort, Harry and his friend Hermione visit the graveyard of the church cemetery in Godric's Hollow, where Harry's parents are buried. On a snowy Christmas Eve, Harry reads the inscription on their grave: "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians

15:26).<sup>16</sup> This scripture comes, quite significantly, from the apostle Paul's lengthy and powerful sermon in 1 Corinthians on the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The title of the first chapter of the first book in the seven-book Harry Potter series is "The Boy Who Lived." Throughout the series, Harry, quite symbolically, repeatedly defies death to live again. His survival results first from the selfless sacrifice of his mother to save him and eventually from his own willingness to sacrifice himself to defeat Voldemort and save the wizarding world.

I testify to you that there is another, a greater One, who lived, who walked the dusty roads of Galilee, who atoned for our sins, who was crucified and resurrected, and who lives again. This Jesus is not the central character of some great work of literary fiction. He is the central figure in the great plan of redemption, and, in the words of King Benjamin, "there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ" (Mosiah 3:17). His sacrifice, born of love, enables us to be forgiven of our sins and live again.

To Martha, upon the death of her brother, Lazarus, Jesus said:

*I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:*

*And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? [John 11:25–26]*

I began this talk by appealing to the admonition to "seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom." While Harry Potter has for me been the source of many words of wisdom that have strengthened my faith, the apostle John has told us that Jesus Christ is the ultimate Word. In the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible we read:

*For in the beginning was the Word, even the Son, who is made flesh, and sent unto us by the will of the Father, And as many as believe on his name shall receive of his fulness. And of his fulness have all we received, even immortality and eternal life, through his grace. [JST, John 1:16]*

The promises of immortality and eternal life are given to us all “through faith on his name” (Mosiah 3:9), our willingness to repent, our diligence in trying to keep the commandments, and the grace of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Armed with this vision, I challenge you to show a greater measure of Christlike love.

I invite you to prayerfully ask the Lord to help you identify your weaknesses, that through His grace your weak things may become strong.

I implore you to hold fast to your faith, weak as it may be, as you navigate the uncertain terrain of this mortal life.

I encourage you to not lose sight of the great work that all of you have been called to do and can accomplish with the Lord’s help and with your faith.

Finally, I pray that you will earnestly strive to come unto Christ and drink of His living waters, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), book 2, chapter 17, “The Heir of Slytherin.”

2. Rowling, *Chamber of Secrets*, chapter 2, “Dobby’s Warning”; emphasis in original.

3. J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007), book 7, chapter 24, “The Wandmaker.”

4. Sandra Rogers, “Hearts Knit Together,” in Susette Fletcher Green, Dawn Hall Anderson, and

Dlora Hall Dalton, eds., *Hearts Knit Together: Talks from the 1995 Women’s Conference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 7; quoted in Jean B. Bingham, “I Will Bring the Light of the Gospel into My Home,” *Ensign*, November 2016.

5. See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (2000), book 4, chapter 20, “The First Task.”

6. See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (1997), book 1, chapter 16, “Through the Trapdoor.”

7. See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999), book 3, chapter 19, “The Servant of Lord Voldemort.”

8. See Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, chapter 23, “Malfoy Manor.”

9. See Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone*, chapter 17, “The Man with Two Faces.”

10. See Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*.

11. See Rowling, *Goblet of Fire*.

12. See Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*.

13. See Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, chapter 22, “The Deathly Hallows,” and chapter 24, “The Wandmaker.”

14. J. K. Rowling, *Prisoner of Azkaban*, chapter 21, “Hermione’s Secret.”

15. Wendy Watson Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” worldwide youth devotional, 3 June 2018, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng](http://churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng); emphasis in original.

16. Rowling, *Deathly Hallows*, chapter 16, “Godric’s Hollow.”