

To Walk in the Light

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I am grateful the musical number could be delivered not only with talent, but with the Spirit. I appreciate Sister Glenna Woolf, the accompanist, and the duet by Gaye Beeson and her daughter Emily Galland. We hope, this morning, to be second and third and fourth witnesses of the testimonies borne at the just-concluded general conference. I thank Brother Williams for the spirit of his prayer.

We welcome those attending this morning who are a part of the Second Annual Family Expo Conference being sponsored by four BYU administrative units: the Division of Continuing Education, the Division of Religious Education, the BYU Alumni Association, and the College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences.

The theme of Family Expo is “Living After the Manner of Happiness,” taken from a phrase used by Nephi to describe the condition of the Nephites about thirty years after their arrival from Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:27). I wish to speak about how such happiness is possible and also about how, for many, the very idea of living happily is a problem. The title of my talk is actually “To Walk in the Light.” I intend to show that happiness and walking in the light inescapably go together. I hope to portray the truth of Moroni 7, that the Spirit of Christ is

given to each of us that we might know good from evil and that anything which invites and entices us to do good and to believe in Christ is sent forth by the power and gift of Christ (see verses 16–18).

Specifically, I hope to show that the gospel is a blessing. To do this I will speak of possibilities and problems. The prime possibility is, simply, that it is possible to live the gospel and to obey the commandments—and when we do, we experience happiness, which is the lot of those who live righteously. I have met not a few people who consider the idea that we can be happy if we are obedient a naive notion. Some people feel it is naive because we can’t be obedient all the time, and others feel it unrealistic to expect to be happy at all. Therein is the problem I must address.

The major problem is that we have abundant evidence that we do not always live according to the possibility of obedience and, consequently, are not always happy. If you want a quick example of what I mean, imagine the counsel to “love thy neighbor as thyself” as you make your way

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home in rush-hour traffic. Some observers, seeing what they call a mismatch between belief and behavior, assume that our behavior is not completely changeable. Therefore, they examine beliefs, especially religious beliefs, as a great threat to our happiness. Once the problem is cast this way, it requires us to choose between our beliefs and what is realistic. What a dichotomy! If we choose beliefs, we are doomed to guilt and inescapable feelings of inadequacy. If we choose being realistic, we sabotage the power of our beliefs to be meaningful in the real world. This trap has helped give true religion a bad name by discounting its value in everyday life. A classic example of this approach to the problem is the sarcastic definition of Puritanism that many of you have heard. “Puritanism—The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy” (H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949], p. 624).

How are we to handle ourselves when there is a difference between our beliefs and the way we live? Some think that because all of us have sinned and have “come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) that we must have an excuse. And some think that if we do not have that excuse, we cannot escape the gloomy feelings that come from never being able to measure up. We must then suffer these feelings, it seems, if not eternally, then at least daily, and especially whenever we get an inkling that we can relax or actually enjoy life. To escape such feelings, we often invoke explanations for our wrong behavior, such as “nobody’s perfect.” Rarely is that phrase spoken as a simple statement of fact. Often it is spoken as an excuse for wrongdoing, as when Jimmy is confronted in the morning by his failure to do the dishes and clean the kitchen as he had promised. A second ideal excuse is the phrase “Don’t lay a guilt trip on me,” which could be spoken by Jimmy as someone is about to talk to him about the dishes. The task here seems to be how to accept the Lord’s word that we can be obedient and

simultaneously deal with the evidence that we don’t do what is claimed by the Lord to be possible for us to do. How can the gospel be a gospel of hope or happiness in this scenario? Our choices seem to be between not being too hard on ourselves or not taking our beliefs too seriously.

An example of what I am talking about could be your feelings about the message of the song we just heard. Some of you, “ere you left your room this morning,” *did* think to pray (“Did You Think to Pray?” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 140). Others, as you listened to the song, found yourselves wishing you had done so, and in meekness resolved that tomorrow morning will be different than this morning. Still, a few others of you might have decided not only to continue to pray each morning but also to pray with full purpose of heart, with a desire to do good, with an interest in not being a stumbling block to others. Your thoughts might have included the plea of “More Holiness Give Me” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 131) or the recognition that the intensity of your prayers is often related to the various demands facing you on any given day, be they academic, familial, or related to your physical health or your spiritual well-being. I claim that responses such as all of these are symptoms of being meek and lowly of heart and of being uplifted when spiritual truths are told to you. You accept the song as affirming where your heart ought to be at the beginning of the day. You simply determine either to continue the practice or to do better and say a prayer in your heart that both tonight and tomorrow you will retreat in silent, secret prayer. In other words, for those of you who did not pray this morning, but who are willing to live after the manner of happiness or to walk in the light, rather than being guilty, despairing, or resentful that the song reminds you that you do not measure up, you accept the light and truth it offers and seek to live better tomorrow than you did today. These types of feelings are usually signs of being willing to

admit your shortcomings and to be heartened by a gospel that invites and entices you to do good. If there is guilt, it is guilt unto repentance and nothing more.

But it is possible the song meant something different to a group of you. Some might have found the message painful. The reaction could have been more like this: “No, I didn’t pray this morning—are you trying to make me feel guilty about it? Besides, do you have any idea how impossible it is to get a moment’s peace in the morning with roommates flying about everywhere in the rush to get to school? And if I really did pray every morning, I risk being translated. That’s all I need—to leave school in the middle of the semester and have a bunch of UWs on my transcript.”

If any of you really were troubled by a musical invitation to pray, in the way I am illustrating, the case might be made that you would have been better off not to have heard the invitation at all. That would be an example of not wanting our beliefs to be confronted by our behavior, lest we be made to feel bad.

A more extreme case of how the truth can seem troubling is that of the responses of Laman and Lemuel to Nephi’s rehearsal of how the gospel would be restored to Lehi’s seed by the Gentiles in the latter days. Laman and Lemuel had been in dispute concerning the meaning of Lehi’s dream. In Nephi’s words:

For he [Lehi] truly spake many great things unto them, which were hard to be understood, save a man should inquire of the Lord; and they being hard in their hearts, therefore they did not look unto the Lord as they ought. [1 Nephi 15:3]

Nevertheless, after Nephi rehearsed many truths to them, including the restoration of the Jews in the latter days, Laman and Lemuel “were pacified and did humble themselves before the Lord” (1 Nephi 15:19–20).

This is not a story with a happy ending, of course, in either the short or the long run,

because as Nephi went on to answer their questions about the features of Lehi’s dream—giving them the meaning of the tree of life, the rod of iron, and the river, including how, through justice, the wicked would be separated from the righteous—Laman and Lemuel changed their hearts again. Their response to Nephi now was, “Thou hast declared unto us hard things, more than we are able to bear” (1 Nephi 16:1). Nephi’s response to them (I assume sorrowfully and not cheerfully) was:

I said . . . that I knew that I had spoken hard things against the wicked, according to the truth; and the righteous have I justified, and testified that they should be lifted up at the last day; wherefore, the guilty taketh the truth to be hard, for it cutteth them to the very center.

And now my brethren, if ye were righteous and were willing to hearken to the truth, and give heed unto it, that ye might walk uprightly before God, then ye would not murmur because of the truth. [1 Nephi 16:2–3]

This looks like a classic example of the problem we are addressing: How can we hold to our beliefs and still be at peace in the world? From Laman and Lemuel’s perspective, that probably is not possible. To them, Nephi is the source of their emotional misery. But if scriptural truths were taken seriously, another view is possible altogether. For example, from the Doctrine and Covenants:

And the Spirit giveth light to every man that cometh into the world; and the Spirit enlighteneth every man . . . that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit.

And everyone that hearkeneth to the voice of the Spirit cometh unto God, even the Father. [D&C 84:46–47]

We have been given a light, and living by it will lead us to God. More specifically, we know

about the author of that light, and the testimony of John is relevant:

In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God. . . .

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John [this refers to John the Baptist].

The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe.

He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.

That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. [John 1:1, 4–9]

The problem Laman and Lemuel face is not a burdensome gospel but a reflection of their own hard-heartedness—their refusal to come into or walk in the light.

The hope to be drawn from this situation is that it reveals our search for happiness as Latter-day Saints is not really a choice between having to excuse ourselves or discount the gospel. The solution is in repentance and obedience, which I claim is available to us in every moment. By repenting we take the gospel seriously. By obedience, we act as agents, capable of acting on the environment and not being acted upon. By choosing the right, we reveal we are not hard-hearted, so we don't have to excuse ourselves.

Now, we, as children of the Restoration, proclaim ourselves to be moral agents. But the meaning of being a moral agent is not so much a matter of free choice as it is a matter of free obedience. God will force no man or woman to heaven. Because of the Atonement of Christ, our future is in our hands, and that future is either liberty and eternal life or captivity and death (see 2 Nephi 2:27).

Laman and Lemuel were miserable and found the truth to be hard only when they

were hard-hearted. In those moments when they humbled themselves, they began to seek meaning and understanding. When they walked uprightly before God, their murmuring against the truth ceased. But when they returned to living hard-heartedly, the truth was a hard thing. Laman and Lemuel found the gospel not to be what it is but what *they* were. Our own experience may teach us the same thing.

Here is an example from my own experience of how our attitudes change when we move from being hard-hearted (or walking in darkness) to being brokenhearted (or walking in the light). When we moved to Utah from New Mexico and bought a pine siding house, we didn't know that it would drink gallons of stain. Every year! I neglected it the first year. But by the second year the need for care was obvious, and I set out to complete the task in the month of July. I figured that if I began July first, scraping off the paint that was peeling, I could apply the rejuvenating, absorbent stain and be finished by July thirty-first. On August twenty-eighth I was finishing the last wall. It was a hot day—I was feeling martyred and had tripled my frustration level by occasionally getting the dark brown stain on the two yards of light buff brick at the bottom of the wood. I would break out the solvent-soaked rags from my rub-it-off-quick kit, wipe off the bricks, and then go back to rolling on the stain. Out of the corner of my eye I saw our station wagon come around the corner and remembered that my wife had taken our preschooler to the mall for a new outfit.

I knew two things about my daughter. First, she would come home wearing whatever they had purchased. Second, she would promptly show me. In that moment, I had a feeling consistent with living in the light. It was not necessarily a feeling born of rationality, although some of you would think that any rational person would have acted on this feeling. But the feeling and thought was a moral one and

consisted of the idea that I ought to lean the roller against the wood and walk so that I would be standing between the five-gallon bucket of stain and my soon-to-be-coming-around-the-corner daughter. That is exactly what a person walking in the light would have done. But I did a very Lemuel-like thing. I resisted the light within me. Immediately, my thoughts and feelings changed. The first thought was one that would get me off the hook for any future doom that might occur. The thought was, “I sure hope Karen has the sense to keep Cammie from running over here.” I also remember muttering to myself, “If I have one more interruption today . . .” Here comes Cammie around the corner. Now, remember, I am now living in darkness. The problem I am about to have is not a matter of IQ but of honesty—or should I say *dishonesty*. I am not being true to the light within me.

At this point I did what hard-hearted people often do instead of act. I talked. “Cammie, look out, stay back, don’t . . .!” I quickly rushed over and, still holding the stain roller away from her, was able to deftly push her away from a collision course with the stain bucket. I pushed her down. Her knee hit the only sprinkler head within about twenty feet. I asked (feigning concern), “Are you all right?” Real compassionate. I sent her in the house after being semi-relieved that though she had gotten a grass stain on her new slacks, she had not torn them. I sighed to myself about how hard life can sometimes be. A few minutes later I came to my senses. That is, I returned to the light—which is to say, I softened my heart. I then saw my role in creating and maintaining a problem. In fact, as Terry Warner has pointed out, for the hard-hearted, the very way I saw the problem was the problem. The way I saw was an expression of the condition of my heart. What I saw and felt was what hard-hearted people see and feel. I was blind to the reminder from the Lord that

if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things. [D&C 88:67]

In my hard-hearted moment I didn’t comprehend anything, not even the joy of a little girl wanting to share a joyful moment with her father.

So, to review briefly: To find invitations to truth either burdensome or beneficial may reveal more about us than about the quality of the message. The truths of the gospel are best understood when offered and received in love. To live after the manner of happiness is to seek the truth and to acknowledge what we could do if we only would. To find the truth burdensome may be the same as saying the gospel, in everyday life, is unrealistic. Alternatively, to find the truth comforting is a source of hope for our own improvement and future possibilities of peace and harmony. That is why my prayer is that we were all softhearted and willing to receive the light of today’s hymn “Did You Think to Pray?” If we receive the little things, I am convinced we are more likely to receive the big things regarding gospel truths. After all, it is out of small things that comes that which is great.

So let’s examine ourselves for a moment. Do we sometimes hold our beliefs in ways that discount their value to us in everyday life? Do we commit to faith or repentance or forgiveness or sacrifice in the abstract, but in the very situations that demand these activities of us do we find our beliefs unrealistic or too impractical or in some other way inadequate? Do we suspend our belief in them? Such an approach would be in contrast to what we do when attending a play that portrays a fantasy or when we go to a science fiction movie. We have heard that in order for us to enjoy such presentations that there must be a “willing suspension of disbelief.” With respect to the gospel in everyday life, I am afraid we sometimes

engage in a “willing suspension of belief” lest we actually have to live by what we espouse. In the very moment we need to live by our principles or beliefs we often abandon them.

For example, we may say we believe in forgiveness, but when confronted by injustice we refuse to seek the Lord’s help to forgive. We proudly proclaim our belief in prophets until they require something like lengthening our stride or daily reading of the Book of Mormon or being more gentle. Perhaps we believe we ought to love our neighbor as ourselves, but then put ourselves down in ways we wouldn’t think of doing to a neighbor. In hundreds of ways we excuse ourselves from living in the ways we affirm are the ways we believe we ought to, or we seem to find certain commandments as beneath us or as impossible. These excuses could extend to something as simple as morning prayer or giving your heart to a child or asking the Lord to help us understand the prayers of our fathers regarding a tree, a river, and a rod of iron.

And what are the consequences of excusing ourselves in these ways? Supposedly we are being realistic. We console ourselves that we are not rigid. We are pleased we seem not to be guilty of taking ourselves too seriously. Yet such rationalizations imply that it is the gospel we are not taking seriously; it is our beliefs we are reconsidering. Our realism comes at the cost of our commitments.

Counsel against such an approach comes from James, the brother of the Lord. His encouragement is particularly compelling since the evidence seems to be that none of Christ’s brothers or sisters came to accept him until after his crucifixion. They were hearers for a time and not doers. But James did eventually come into the fold and knew what life was like both before and after the gospel of Christ was delivered. James, having been converted, exhorts:

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. [James 1:22–24]

In the moment we cease being doers of the truths we know, we forget who we are. I forgot who I was when I resisted the prompting to put down the roller and go to my child.

Here is an example of the problem from a sixteen-year-old high school student in California who, not being a member of the Church, had only the Light of Christ to guide him. He reported a time when he was not a doer of the things he felt in his heart to do:

My mother sent me to the grocery store for avocados and lettuce with the counsel not to dillydally. As I was hurrying into the supermarket I encountered an older woman almost hobbling out of the store under the weight of two obviously heavy bags of groceries. I instantly felt I ought to help her with her burden, but in that same instant I stiffened and walked right by her. I made my way to the produce section and realized that my mind was not on avocados and lettuce but on the woman.

What I didn’t like was what kind of thoughts I was having toward her. I was mulling over feelings like “Dumb lady, hasn’t she ever heard of shopping carts?” or “Where are the boys who bag and carry out the groceries when you need them?” I realized at this point that I had intense feelings—negative feelings—about someone I didn’t even know. How could I be so resentful?

Then I paid attention to my belief that I should have helped the woman. Immediately my resentment dissolved into remorse. I don’t mean I wallowed around in guilt all afternoon or anything, but I saw clearly that not acting according to my conscience was what produced my feelings. Had I offered to help, I would have been the kind of person

I believed in being. But as soon as I went against myself, I was troubled.

By the way, this student's analysis was in response to a question we often ask as part of a high school citizenship curriculum we have developed. We had asked the class to report on a time when they felt something was right to do. We did not ask them the question in James' language, of being "doers of the word," but it was the same question nonetheless. And this student's answer gave us an example of how we think or feel when we are hearers only, for he told us of a time when he felt something was right to do and he didn't do it.

In scriptural terms, James described this act more boldly when he said, "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). This student might not understand having his behavior toward the woman described as "sin," but his own understanding of what he was doing when he was refusing to help the woman is consistent with what the curriculum was about to unfold. This high school student's description of what happened to him when he violated his conscience echoes Terry Warner's description of what happens when we betray ourselves, when we go against what we believe to be right. When we sin in this way, or when we walk in darkness, we transform our understanding of the situation so that we appear to be victims rather than agents. We see others as the source of our troubles. We deceive ourselves about the meaning of the events we are experiencing. John the apostle described our condition in such moments as, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

In other words, when we are only hearers of the words we believe in we are troubled, but we are deceived about the meaning of our troubles. Dr. Warner has described the act that produces self-deception as self-betrayal; that is, simply, willfully doing that which we believe

to be wrong. Or, as one of Dr. Warner's preschoolers once said, when asked to define self-betrayal, "It is when you know what is right but you don't do it, and you are fussed in your mind."

The California high school student who told us about the woman, the groceries, and his conscience didn't know our vocabulary; he didn't know the scriptures. But he described his experience in simple, honest, direct terms. He understood something about the way he was changed when he didn't honor his conscience. In the language we are using today we could say that, for a brief period, he went from living after the manner of happiness to living some other way. He went from walking in the light to walking in darkness. But then he gave up his deceived view of the situation (meaning he returned to the light), and, while explaining himself to us, honestly saw his role in creating his own resentments.

Here is another example from my own experience. More than a decade ago I was watching an NCAA basketball tournament game. The house was quiet because the young children were asleep and the older children were waxing responsible and attacking their homework. I thought, This is great! A free night! No interruptions! Such are the feelings of one whose heart gets too easily set on the things of the world. The game was going magnificently. With 2:08 minutes left in the first half, one of my high school daughters came downstairs and made a request: "Dad, I'm stuck on this math problem. Could you help me?"

At that moment I was struck by a very human feeling. The feeling was inescapable. If put into words it would be something like "I believe helping her is the right, fatherly, responsible, loving, committed thing to do." I simultaneously betrayed that feeling. The next few moments were predictable. I looked pained. I whined some question to my daughter like

“Do you have any idea how often I get to watch a playoff game?”

She was unmoved: “Well, it shouldn’t take too long, if you would just . . .”

I interrupted her.

Terry: “Have you worked out the sample problem they give you at the beginning of the chapter?”

Daughter: “Well, no, but . . .”

Terry: “Well, how do you expect me to help if you haven’t even tried? Do you want me to do your work for you?”

Daughter: “Not exactly, I just . . .”

Terry: “When is this assignment due, Kathie?”

Daughter: “It’s due tomorrow, and . . .”

Terry: “How many times have I told you not to leave things until the last minute?!”

By this time her lower lip was starting to curl out in a sort of defensive martyrdom. She withdrew, haughtily enough that I could comfort myself by saying that if she really were responsible she would have tried harder before asking me.

Such are the feelings of the self-deceived. Like the high school student who couldn’t concentrate on lettuce and avocados anymore because of his violation of conscience, so I didn’t concentrate on the game much. My eyes were on the screen but I wasn’t seeing anything. I was muttering in my mind, something I’ve come to see is typical when we are hard-hearted or when we knoweth to do good and doeth it not. I was rehearsing thoughts about why I was right and why my daughter was wrong.

The apostle John had me pegged:

He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.

He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him.

But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither

he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes. [1 John 2:9–11]

I was as blind in that moment as I had been with my other daughter and the stain. Now, lest you think I walk in darkness all the time, and thereby give you an excuse to use my behavior as an excuse for when you do as I have done, I must say I also have seen, honored, and walked in the light—and did in both of these situations. I sought out my preschooler and asked her forgiveness. I went upstairs after my math daughter retreated and offered help and an apology. I have been informed in heart and mind, again by John:

This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

[1 John 1:5–7]

Also: “Whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him” (1 John 2:5).

Here are four implications of what I hope I have illustrated:

1. It is possible to walk in the light. Taking the Savior’s mission, atonement, and testimony seriously is always the beginning point.
2. The blessing of moral agency is not that it is a matter of free choice but of free obedience.
3. When we do walk in the light, we experience life differently than when we walk in darkness. The gospel of the Restoration is not a gospel of guilt and despair but of light and love and hope.
4. When we go against the light we are blind to the truth. It is a self-inflicted blindness that departs when we give up our hardheartedness. It is always possible to come out of the dark.

We began by addressing how we can take the gospel seriously and accept the idea that it is realistic to walk in the light. We have seen that when people abandon the light, life gets harder. We learned, perhaps, what Peter learned after the Savior's bread-of-life sermon at Capernaum. The Savior had testified that he was the Messiah, that he would be killed and be resurrected, that all who would come to the Father must accept him.

Many . . . of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? . . .

From that time many of his disciples . . . walked no more with him.

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?

[Peter's answer is the answer anyone walking in the light would give:] *Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.*

And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. [John 6:60, 66–69]

Truly, when we turn our backs on the light we find the sweet truths of the gospel to be bitter, for there is no place else to go. The sobering truth of the gospel is that there is no other way, and the comfort and hope of the gospel is that it is the way to happiness.

I pray that you will measure what has been spoken today by comparing it to the scriptures, to the living prophets, including what was delivered to us this past weekend, and to your own experience when walking in the light, sifting the wheat from the chaff. I pray we will turn our hearts to the Savior in everyday life, in the little things, and be willing to see how out of small things comes that which is great. I testify that Jesus is the Christ, that Joseph Smith is the prophet of the foretold Restoration, and that when we live by the light and truth we have, we find life a blessing and our yokes easy and our burdens light. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.