

Do We Really Believe?

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Many who speak at a Brigham Young University devotional make reference to their experiences as students at BYU and the insights they have gained by attending devotionals. I can't do that because I never attended BYU. I am a Utah State University Aggie, and my Aggie blue runs deep. I am a big Cougar fan, but even after twenty years of holding season tickets for BYU basketball and football, I still can't bring myself to sing, "Rise and shout."

In those same twenty years I have also attended devotionals as a faculty member and have heard the testimonies of many of my colleagues and felt the spirit of many students as they have borne testimony through music. I am particularly humbled by this opportunity to speak to you today in a place where prophets and apostles have taught and testified.

Do We Really Believe in the Resurrection?

I am the youngest in a family of four boys, and about twenty-two years ago I was encouraged to apply for a faculty opening here at BYU in the Department of Mathematics. At the time, I was a faculty member at Oregon State University, and my three older brothers lived in Iowa, Washington, and California, while my parents lived in Logan, Utah. In addition to this being a great opportunity for me to come

to BYU, it allowed me to be a little closer to my parents, because their health was failing.

My father did not want my decision to move to Utah to be based in any way on helping him and my mother. He was very proud of the fact that his sons were contributing to the kingdom outside of Utah. My wife, Shauna, and I felt that the move to BYU was the right decision, and we arrived here in August 1996.

Six months after our arrival in Provo, my father had surgery in Salt Lake City to repair a heart valve. Ten years earlier his original valve had been replaced with a pig valve, at which time he contracted hepatitis C. Because this pig valve was now failing, the doctors decided to replace it with a mechanical valve. During the surgery the doctors realized that the hepatitis C had wreaked havoc on my father's liver, which made the heart surgery very traumatic on his body. This was the beginning of a seventeen-day roller coaster ride.

At this time my mother's health was not good, so she was only able to visit my dad about every two to three days. Thus the responsibility of visiting my father and

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communicating with the doctors fell to my wife and me. One or the other of us would travel from Mapleton, about ten miles south of Provo, to the hospital in Salt Lake City every day. Many times my wife would visit in the afternoon, and I would spend the evening at the hospital, or vice versa. This was particularly challenging because we had four children ranging in age from three to nine.

I referred to this time as a roller coaster ride because on one day a particular doctor would be pessimistic and on the next day another doctor would be optimistic about the eventual outcome. These varied opinions and outlooks greatly affected my emotions as I went to visit my father.

I remember driving up State Street toward the hospital in Salt Lake City and feeling the dread of what I might hear from the doctors on that day and wondering to myself, “Am I afraid of my dad dying?” I also thought to myself, “I have a testimony of the Atonement of Jesus Christ and of His Resurrection. Am I afraid of death? Do I really believe I will see my father again?”

It is this question of “Do we really believe?” that will be the focus of my comments today. As I pose this question, I do not do so to introduce doubt, because when I was going through these trials associated with my father’s time in the hospital, I never really doubted my testimony. Instead I wondered why I was feeling this wide swing of emotions when I knew I did have a testimony that the Atonement of Jesus Christ would allow me to see my father again.

Moroni 7:41 says:

And what is it that ye shall hope for? Behold I say unto you that ye shall have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and this because of your faith in him according to the promise.

I believed this scripture, but this was the first time I had had to directly apply it in my life. We

don’t truly gain a testimony of many principles of the gospel until we exercise faith and apply those principles in our lives. I already had a testimony of the blessings of paying tithing, a testimony that Joseph Smith saw God and Jesus Christ, and a testimony of God’s presence in the temple because I had had many opportunities to test these principles and had had confirming experiences about them. Facing the death of my father, however, was my first opportunity to test my faith and understanding of the Resurrection.

On what gospel principles is your testimony based, and are there principles or doctrines about which you ask, “Do I really believe?”

As I faced this trial, I recalled something that my father had told me many times growing up: “Hold fast to the things you know are true, and the answers to the rest will come to you in time.”

When my father was a young man, he struggled to understand why worthy black male members of the Church could not hold the priesthood. He went to his bishop with this question and was given these words of advice: “Hold fast to the things you know are true, and the answers to the rest will come to you in time.” He heeded this counsel and often shared it with my brothers and me. For our family, June 8, 1978, was a day of celebration and a confirmation for my father that “the answers to the rest will come to you in time.”

Interestingly, I have heard this same idea shared many times in recent general conference talks. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland counseled us in April 2013 to “hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes” (“Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign*, May 2013).

Later that same year, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf admonished, “First doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith” (“Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, November 2013; see F. F. Bosworth, *Christ the Healer* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Chosen Books, 2008], 23).

During a talk in October 2014, Elder Neil L. Andersen said, “We do not discard something we know to be true because of something we do not yet understand” (“Joseph Smith,” *Ensign*, November 2014).

And, similarly, Elder Kevin W. Pearson taught us in April 2015 that “when adversity comes, don’t let something you don’t fully understand unravel everything you do know. Be patient, cling to truth; understanding will come” (“Stay by the Tree,” *Ensign*, May 2015).

When I was on this trying journey of driving to the hospital each day and was facing the fact that my father might not recover, I held fast to the testimony I did have of various gospel principles, and I knew that someday I would better understand the Resurrection. One thing that I have since come to realize is that the main contributing factor to the swing in my emotions at this time was the fear of the temporary loss of association with my father.

One of the main things we enjoy about our families is spending time with them. My father never missed attending a game in which I participated as a young man. Whether it was church basketball or high school football or basketball, he never missed a game. We also attended many Utah State University basketball games together and even had a chance to attend a Jazz basketball game in the month before his surgery. I believe that one cause of my fears as I drove to the hospital was not a doubt of my testimony but the sadness I would feel in not being able to spend time with him.

After seventeen days in the hospital, my father passed away, and I was forced to consider the question “Do I really believe in the Resurrection and Atonement?” The fact that I never really doubted my testimony during this trying time is consistent with my patriarchal blessing, which states that I have been blessed with the gift of faith—the gift of a believing heart. This believing heart came, in part, from my mother. At her funeral, my older brother, Mark, quoted Alma 56:48: “We do not doubt

our mothers knew it.” All three of my brothers and I knew that there was no doubt in our mother’s testimony, and we are all the beneficiaries of her gift of faith.

Do We Really Believe That People Can Change?

Since all of us will be challenged at one time or another about what we really believe, I will now examine a few other places in our lives and in our testimonies in which the question “Do we really believe?” may arise.

My wife, Shauna, has listened to the radio talk show host Dr. Laura for many years. Dr. Laura Schlessinger is a marriage and family therapist who fields phone calls to help people deal with problems in their relationships. Perhaps some of you have listened to her show or maybe your parents have or maybe some of you have called her for advice with regard to someone you are dating right now. I have listened to this show many times while driving long distances with my wife, but because Dr. Laura is so confrontational with the people who call in, it makes me uncomfortable. This discomfort is a good thing for me, however, because it helps me stay awake while driving long distances.

One of the common types of phone calls Dr. Laura receives is a husband or wife calling in to describe a behavior or a problem regarding his or her spouse that the caller would like to change or fix. Dr. Laura often asks if the caller knew that the spouse had the problem while they were dating, and the answer is usually yes. Dr. Laura then says that she can’t help because the person knew about the spouse’s flaw before they got married, and now the caller has to deal with it. Although not necessarily intentional, I believe one underlying message of her counsel in these types of situations is that people can’t change. I have always been bothered by this message that people can’t change because it seems so inconsistent with my understanding of the Atonement.

Do we really believe that people can change? I believe they can. Intellectually I have known this for years, but I didn't gain a strong testimony of the principle until I served as a bishop. In this ecclesiastical role I had the opportunity to counsel with a man who was struggling with pornography and had been for many years. I also counseled with his wife about the emotions she was experiencing at this challenging time. Because he had hidden his addiction from her for so long, she didn't know if he could ever overcome this struggle. She didn't know if she could ever trust him again.

As we visited one evening, the following thought came clearly to my mind: "If you truly believe in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, you have to believe that people can change. If you don't believe a person can change, then you don't believe in the Atonement." In that moment I was taught by the Holy Ghost for the benefit of this sister. Simultaneously, my testimony of the Atonement's power to change people also increased.

Do We Really Believe in the Words of the Prophets?

Let us consider another example. In my current study of the Book of Mormon, I have been reading the student manual for Book of Mormon institute classes. For 1 Nephi 10 and 11 the manual poses the question "What principles for receiving revelation can you identify from Nephi's experience?" (*Book of Mormon Student Manual: Religion 121–122* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009], 25). With this question in mind, I gained some new insights as I read 1 Nephi 11:1–5, which states:

For it came to pass after I had desired to know the things that my father had seen, and believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me, as I sat pondering in mine heart I was caught away in the Spirit of the Lord, yea, into an exceedingly

high mountain, which I never had before seen, and upon which I never had before set my foot.

And the Spirit said unto me: Behold, what desirest thou?

And I said: I desire to behold the things which my father saw.

And the Spirit said unto me: Believest thou that thy father saw the tree of which he hath spoken?

And I said: Yea, thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father.

There were two phrases in these verses that really jumped out at me: "believing that the Lord was able to make them known unto me" in verse 1 and "thou knowest that I believe all the words of my father" in verse 5.

Put simply, the first phrase indicates that Nephi believed that if he asked, God would answer. Maybe this seems obvious to many of you, but it jumped out at me in my recent reading because I am not sure I always believe God will answer when I pray. Rather, I believe He will answer, but I am not sure I am going to understand or recognize that answer.

I also find it significant that Nephi said he believed all the words of his father, because his father was also a prophet. Nephi's general mind-set was that he believed in the words of the prophet, but he wanted to understand those words better. To do this, he knew that he could ask God because he believed God would answer his inquiry.

In a world in which the beliefs of those in "the great and spacious building" (1 Nephi 11:36) get further and further away from the doctrines of the Church, it becomes more and more common for the words of the prophet to be at odds with the beliefs of the world. How do we respond when those conflicts exist? Do we believe, as Nephi did, in all of the words of the prophet and turn to God in prayer, believing that He will answer our honest inquiries, or do we doubt and turn to our peers or the Internet for reinforcement of the messages of the great and spacious building?

Do We Really Believe God Will Answer Our Prayers?

It is interesting to contrast Nephi with his brothers Laman and Lemuel on this same matter of understanding their father's dream. In 1 Nephi 15, Nephi returned to his father's tent after having been taught by an angel and by the Spirit. He found Laman and Lemuel arguing about the meaning of Lehi's dream. It is at this point that we have the following interchange, starting in verse 8:

And I said unto them: Have ye inquired of the Lord?

And they said unto me: We have not; for the Lord maketh no such thing known unto us. [1 Nephi 15:8–9]

Notice the contrast in attitude between Nephi and his brothers. Nephi *believed* that God would teach him about Lehi's dream while Laman and Lemuel said that the Lord wouldn't answer their prayers. Continuing on in verse 11, Nephi counseled:

Do ye not remember the things which the Lord hath said?—If ye will not harden your hearts, and ask me in faith, believing that ye shall receive, with diligence in keeping my commandments, surely these things shall be made known unto you.

Nephi reminded his brothers that if they believed they would receive an answer and "surely these things shall be made known unto [them]."

We see similar contrasting attitudes between Nephi and his brothers when they returned to Jerusalem to seek the plates of brass. In 1 Nephi 3:31 we see that Laman and Lemuel didn't believe that they could get the plates when they said, "[Laban] can slay fifty; then why not us?"

Nephi showed his believing heart in 1 Nephi 4:1 when he said that God "is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty?"

When we pray, do we really believe that we will receive an answer? When we are prompted to do challenging things, do we really believe that we can overcome obstacles to do so?

I know that I need to be more believing in these situations. What is your belief when you pray? Do you believe that God will answer your prayers and that you will understand those answers?

Does Our Behavior Testify What We Really Believe?

Another way to look at the question "Do we really believe?" is to ask ourselves, "Can the people with whom I interact see what I believe by the way I act?"

When I was young, my family was very active in the Church, but my parents struggled to hold family home evening or family scripture study. We did have the occasional family prayer, but it was not a regular habit. And yet my brothers and I have all served missions, have all been faithful in our testimonies, and have all served faithfully in various callings throughout our lives.

I have often wondered how my parents nurtured their sons' testimonies when they didn't do the basics of family prayer, family scripture study, or family home evening. I know we have been counseled by the prophets to do these things, and I believe they have had a positive influence on my children as Shauna and I have tried to do them in our home. This is why I was puzzled at my parents' success when they didn't do these basics. I have come to realize that my parents taught us the gospel by the way they lived.

Although my mother's health limited the callings she held, she never let her health struggles get in the way of my father's service. When I was a teenager my father was the bishop of our ward, but my mother was only able to attend church once or twice a month. Regardless of how she felt, she always supported my dad in his time-consuming callings, from Scoutmaster

to bishop to stake president. There was never any doubt of what she believed.

Some examples of my father teaching me what he believed were seen in his day-to-day actions. First, as a home teacher of an older sister in the ward, he spent many evenings working at her home breaking up concrete and laying forms so that she could have a new driveway. Second, as an Explorer Scout advisor, he organized the selling of eggs, lightbulbs, and candy to raise money to take the Explorers to Southern California. Third, as a deacons quorum advisor, he got up early every Sunday morning for a few years to help one of his deacons deliver newspapers so that this young man could make it to priesthood meeting on time.

One final example of how we saw my father's beliefs through his actions comes from my niece Amberly and her husband, Jason. When they were dating they went to visit my father in the month before his surgery. Since Amberly was attending Ricks College—now BYU–Idaho—in Rexburg, she would often go to Logan on the weekends to visit her grandparents, and she had seen my father's health deteriorate. On this particular visit she had brought Jason, who was then her boyfriend. Being the boyfriend, Jason slept on the couch, and there he witnessed my father restlessly wandering about the house all night trying to find a comfortable chair in which he could sleep.

This restless night preceded a Sunday morning when my father was scheduled to teach a Gospel Doctrine class in his ward. As Amberly and Jason watched my father walk across the church parking lot, they wondered if he would make it because each step required great effort and concentration. Here is the rest of the story in Amberly's own words:

When it came time for his Gospel Doctrine lesson, he taught Alma 5. I knew he was dying. He had been dying for several years, and as I sat listening to one of my favorite people in the world

talk about being prepared to meet God, I was overwhelmed by the Spirit and my love for my grandpa. Personal preparation is a lifelong effort, and my grandpa was a living example of that preparation.

He ended his powerful lesson by saying, "I hope that when I leave this life and see God, I can say, as the Apostle Paul did: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'" [2 Timothy 4:7]. I knew what a fight he had made just to get into the building. And then he stood for fifty minutes to teach the lesson. He had fought a good fight, finished his course, and kept the faith that very day. My perspective on preparation and enduring to the end was forever changed by the faithful example of my grandpa that day.

On that day, my niece and her boyfriend saw the strength of my father's testimony and saw what he believed through the faithful way in which he magnified his calling.

I am currently serving in the bishopric of a young single adult ward in south Provo. A few weeks ago in elders quorum we were discussing Sister Bonnie L. Oscarson's recent general conference talk titled "Do I Believe?" (*Ensign*, May 2016). A member of the quorum made the following observation: "If your words don't match your actions, then you don't really believe."

Are your words consistent with your actions? Does your behavior testify what you really believe? Do your actions testify to your children what you believe, just as my parents' actions testified to me?

"Help Thou Mine Unbelief"

In the April 2013 general conference Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught us about a father who went to the Savior pleading for help with his son (see "Lord, I Believe," *Ensign*, May 2013). The father described a son who was possessed of "a dumb spirit" (Mark 9:17) and who was continually doing harm to himself. The family was at the end of their rope. To the father's pleading the Savior responded:

If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. [Mark 9:23–24]

The significance of this story for me is in the way the father responded to his unbelief. He had a belief in some teachings of the Savior and was seeking help with his unbelief. The father was likely asking himself if he really believed his son could be healed, but rather than turning away from the gospel, he pled for help with his unbelief.

All of us here have a belief in some principle of the gospel or have had a spiritual experience at some point upon which our testimony rests. Do we respond as this father did by seeking help with our unbelief, or do we “discard something we know to be true because of something we do not yet understand” (Andersen, “Joseph Smith”)?

So how should we respond when trials, doubts, or questions arise? Because they certainly will. How do we respond when we are faced with questions such as Do I really believe in the Resurrection? or Do I really believe that people can change? or Do I really believe that God will answer my prayers? Where do we turn for answers to questions like these? Do we follow the example of this father from the New Testament story that Elder Holland shared by remembering what we do believe and turning to the Savior to seek help with our unbelief, or do we forget what we believe and turn to Facebook or other social media for answers to resolve our unbelief?

Laman and Lemuel took the Facebook approach because they didn’t believe God would answer their prayers, and they murmured when understanding didn’t come. Nephi turned to God, believing he would receive an answer, and understanding came.

I conclude where I started by sharing an experience that happened to me several weeks after my father passed away. Sitting in an elders quorum class, I was asked to read Doctrine and Covenants 138:28–30, which states:

And I wondered at the words of Peter—wherein he said that the Son of God preached unto the spirits in prison, who sometime were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah—and how it was possible for him to preach to those spirits and perform the necessary labor among them in so short a time.

And as I wondered, my eyes were opened, and my understanding quickened, and I perceived that the Lord went not in person among the wicked and the disobedient who had rejected the truth, to teach them;

But behold, from among the righteous, he organized his forces and appointed messengers, clothed with power and authority, and commissioned them to go forth and carry the light of the gospel to them that were in darkness, even to all the spirits of men; and thus was the gospel preached to the dead.

As I read these verses in that elders quorum lesson, the Spirit powerfully testified to me that my father was one of those missionaries sharing the gospel in the spirit world. Do I really believe in the Resurrection and that I will see my father again? *Yes.* I followed my father’s counsel and held on to what I believed, and the answer did come.

When you are faced with the question of whether you really believe some principle of the gospel, I encourage you to hold fast to the things that you know are true because the answers to the rest will come to you in time. While you are waiting for your answers to come, live the gospel in a way that allows those around you to know what you really believe. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.