

Optimism and Joy in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

T. JEFFREY WILKS

I have imagined for the past two months what this would feel like, and my imagination doesn't begin to compare with reality. I stand before you in amazement and awe at who you are. I can't help but look at you and think of the days when I was a student at BYU. In fact, it was twenty years ago this month that I first met my dear sweetheart, Melinda.

I had been home from my mission for about four months, and I was attending my BYU ward for the first time. As the opening hymn began, I looked up at the person leading the music (as I should, right?), and she was the most beautiful young woman I had ever seen. That evening I saw her again at ward prayer, but I was way too scared to go up and introduce myself to her. Fortunately for me, Heavenly Father took care of that little detail by inspiring our bishop to assign us to the same family home evening group. They announced the new groups that very evening. We flirted for a few months before we finally started dating, and we were married the following June.

Since that time, every significant blessing that has come into my life I have shared with my best friend and eternal companion. I love every moment we get to spend together, and there are never enough of those moments!

Well, I know many of you are hoping for similar experiences sometime this year or maybe in the next few years. In fact, the beginning of a new semester or school year is filled with all kinds of hope and excitement for many different reasons. But, sadly, by the time we get to the end of the semester, with final projects and final exams, a lot of that hope has just plain vanished. I still remember the nightmare I used to have at the end of each semester in which I dreamed that I had forgotten to attend one of my classes for the entire semester. It was horrible! Funny enough, I had that same nightmare years later when I first became a professor, but that time I dreamed that I had forgotten to teach one of my classes for the entire semester. I just knew I was going to be fired.

What is it that happens between the beginning and end of a semester that drains us of our hope and excitement? Why is it so hard sometimes to be positive and upbeat? Well, I don't know all the answers, to be sure, but I was accused at a very young age of being too

T. Jeffrey Wilks was a professor in the BYU School of Accountancy when this devotional address was given on 25 September 2012.

positive, too upbeat, and even naïve sometimes about life. I can't remember exactly when those accusations began, but when I was sixteen years old, an inspired patriarch placed his hands on my head and said the following:

Jeffrey, this is a good world. You will be positive in your thinking. You will think positively, you will speak positively, you will act positively. With all the negativism in the world today, you will sort it out and you will be happy because you will do the things which are pleasant and worthwhile.

I have seen this blessing come true countless times in my life, and I can testify that this world is a good world. There is so much to be happy about in this world. And when we fail to see the world around us for the wonder and joy that it has to offer and when we refuse to see the hope and the light everywhere around us, we are not seeing the world as it truly is. We are not seeing the world as Heavenly Father sees it.

I have to tell you about something that happened to me just last Tuesday afternoon when I was writing down this very idea of needing to see the good in the world. I stood up for a moment to take a break from my writing, and I looked out my fifth-floor window in the Tanner Building, which has a perfect view of the walkway that rises from Helaman Halls up past the Tanner Building. As I looked down, I saw a young man in a wheelchair who was wheeling himself up that long, steep walkway. And just as I started thinking about how much effort that must take, I saw another young man just slightly ahead on the walkway turn around and notice this young man in the wheelchair. I don't know if they knew each other or if they were complete strangers, but in that moment the one young man walked quickly around and behind the wheelchair, and he pushed the other young man up the rest of that long walkway. In fact, he practically ran as he pushed him up that hill.

This simple moment in time—1:30 p.m. on a Tuesday afternoon—witnessed to me again how much light and goodness are everywhere around us if we will just look. So today I want to share with you five lessons that I have learned in my life about how to be positive in a world filled with negativism. Each of these lessons is based on experiences I have had as a husband and a father. Now, I am fully aware that Elder Steven E. Snow spoke two weeks ago from this very pulpit about optimism, but as much as I tried to steer my thoughts to another topic, the Spirit kept bringing me back to this one. So I can only trust that Heavenly Father thinks we could use a double dose of this particular topic—and perhaps even more at times.

Righteousness Does Not Mean Perfection

The first lesson about being positive in a negative world is that righteousness does not mean perfection. A humorous experience from when our family was younger taught me this lesson. I say humorous—it is now, but it wasn't then. When my oldest daughter, Ashlyn, was almost ten years old, we were camping at Palisade State Park in the mountains above Manti, Utah. With my kids so young, they weren't a whole lot of help setting up our massive tent with those flexible, fiberglass poles that you have to push through the sleeves in the tent and then try to lift all at once to get the tent to rise. While my wife was unloading our vehicle and setting up the rest of camp, I was struggling to get the tent off the ground on my own. Then, suddenly, with one of my pushes on the poles to get the tent to rise, I snapped the pole. I am ashamed to admit that at that moment I let slip from my mouth a colorful word that I dare not repeat here. Oh, it wasn't a horrible word, but my daughter clearly recognized it to be a swear word. I continued on in my battle to set up the tent and eventually succeeded with the help of some duct tape and other makeshift efforts to get the tent up.

Unbeknownst to me at the time was the conversation that followed between my daughter and my wife. Melinda later told me that my daughter approached her with a troubled look on her face and said, “Mommy, I thought Daddy was perfect.”

My immediate reaction was to feel horribly ashamed for having crushed my daughter’s perception of me. My second reaction was to think, “Wow, I managed to get my daughter all the way to ten years old convinced that I was perfect!”

But all humor aside, I felt pretty bad for what I had done. And then came the teaching moment. My dear wife said simply to my daughter, “Daddy is not perfect, but he is righteous.” It was one of those moments when I was profoundly reminded that I had married an angel, for who else could have come up with such a simple teaching in that moment?

Perfection can sometimes be the enemy of righteousness. When we get so caught up worrying about being perfect—about being a perfect spouse, a perfect son or daughter, a perfect parent, a perfect teacher, or a perfect friend—it’s easy to become discouraged, because none of us will ever be perfect in this life. Even though our Savior commanded us to be perfect like Him and our Heavenly Father (see 3 Nephi 12:48), He has no expectation that we will accomplish that in this life. It’s impossible. Remember, He taught Moroni that He gives unto us weaknesses so that we can be humble. And if we humble ourselves, His grace is sufficient to make those weaknesses become strengths (see Ether 12:27) but not perfections.

Keep Trying Anyway

The second lesson about being positive in a negative world is that life really is hard sometimes, and you’ve got to keep trying anyway. My son Tanner taught me this one day when he was eight years old. Tanner had decided to switch from skiing to snowboarding that year, and it was his first day on the slopes.

Now, those of you who have snowboarded know that the first day is typically horrible and painful. In fact, most instructors say that you can’t make a decision about whether you like snowboarding unless you’ve tried it three days, because most people still hate it after the first two days. I still haven’t tried snowboarding, and I’m not sure I ever will. But if I do, I will have to rent one of those giant sumo costumes with all the extra padding just to protect myself from all the falls! I haven’t done it yet.

Well, Tanner’s first day on the snowboard proved to be like most first days—very painful and frustrating. Initially he started down the mountain with his older brother, who knew how to snowboard. But every two or three feet Tanner would fall down, catching a toe and landing on his stomach or sliding his heels too far and landing on his rear end. He was crying and yelling the entire way down the mountain! He got to the point where he didn’t even want to try standing up anymore; instead he just slid down the mountain on his bum. And after what seemed like two hours, he finally reached the bottom of the hill. He was exhausted physically and mentally. He was in pain, and I was very tired of dealing with my cranky son.

Fortunately we were staying in a lodge at the base of the resort, so we decided to take a break. I figured Tanner was done for the day anyway. So, after a good lunch and sitting around a bit, I was surprised when Tanner said he wanted to go out again. I asked him if he remembered what the morning had been like. But he said he wanted to try again anyway. I don’t know what happened, but that afternoon his attitude was completely different. He kept getting up every time he fell, and by the end of the day he could butter down the hill pretty well. And today he can carve a line down any hill his older brothers can ride.

Life sometimes really is hard, and all we can do is get back up on the snowboard, even though we know perfectly well how easily that snowboard can slide out from under us. Some

of you know what it's like to struggle with addictions, and getting back up after falling off those particular snowboards can be very frustrating. You may wonder if you will ever be able to overcome that addiction. When you feel this frustration—the physical and mental anguish from trying and failing and trying again—please remember this wonderful counsel recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 123:

Therefore, dearly beloved brethren, let us cheerfully do all things that lie in our power; and then may we stand still, with the utmost assurance, to see the salvation of God, and for his arm to be revealed. [D&C 123:17]

When you're sitting there wondering if you can stand back up again, remember that sometimes the test is not about overcoming but about whether we will keep trying no matter how hard things seem to be. Never give up. Do all things cheerfully that lie in your power, and then stand still with the assurance that God will help you.

Keep Your Focus on Heavenly Father

The third lesson about being positive in a negative world is to keep your eyes focused on Heavenly Father. When my youngest daughter, Maleah, was nearly two years old, she was playing in the cultural hall of our church in New Canaan, Connecticut. You know those doors that open up under the stage where we store chairs and tables? Maleah was playing with those doors and accidentally closed both doors at the same time really hard with her thumb in between them. She just cried and cried, our sweet little girl. When she finally settled down, we noticed that her thumb was stuck in a bent position. After visiting the emergency room and then a hand specialist a week later, we learned that Maleah had what is called congenital trigger thumb, in which the tendon that flexes the thumb is stuck in its sheath, holding the thumb in a bent position.

We waited a few weeks at the doctor's recommendation to see if it might heal itself. And when that didn't happen, we scheduled a time for surgery.

Early that morning at the hospital, our little girl—who normally bounces off walls, wrestles with her older brothers, and generally causes havoc wherever she goes—was pretty subdued. We dressed her in the cutest yellow hospital clothes they had and found some fluffy red socks to keep her feet warm. Then the nurse took us down to a closet where Maleah chose a cute pillow-soft teddy bear to take with her into the surgery prep room. Then I put on some scrubs, we said good-bye to Melinda, and I carried my sweet little girl down the hall to the prep room, her arms tightly around my neck.

I was so worried that she might not let go and that she would be scared to go into surgery. But when we arrived in the room, I gave her a big hug and then gently laid her down on the table onto a nice warm blanket. The nurse put another warm blanket over Maleah while I talked with her, kept her calm, and placed her little teddy bear—which she snuggled closely—under her arm. I looked at her right in the eyes, and she looked at me while I explained that the doctor was going to put a mask over her face and that she was going to fall asleep. While holding my hand and looking into my eyes, she watched the doctor place the mask over her mouth and nose. Shortly after, I whispered to her that I loved her, and I watched her little lips inside the mask speak the words “I love you too.” Then her little lips started to quiver, and she closed her eyes to sleep. My sweet little girl who bounces off walls had calmly gone into surgery listening to my voice and looking deeply into my eyes. It was one of the most sacred experiences of my entire life.

From this and many other experiences as a father and as a bishop, I have learned how deeply Heavenly Father loves each one of us. He is always nearby when we are going

through tough times, but it's up to us whether we will look into His eyes and listen to His voice. We look into His eyes and we listen to His voice when we immerse ourselves in the scriptures and we converse with Him in daily, meaningful prayer. I testify to you that by keeping our focus on Him and listening to His voice, we will see the goodness and wonder that surrounds us, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Heavenly Father's Approval Matters Most

The fourth lesson about being positive in a negative world is that Heavenly Father's approval is the only approval that matters. I was reminded of this lesson this past spring when I took my boys to a place called Snogression—an indoor practice facility in Salt Lake City for skiers and snowboarders. It has trampolines everywhere and a massive foam pit so that skiers and snowboarders can practice their tricks without having to worry about landing perfectly. The coolest feature of this facility is the practice ramp. A person stands up at the top, holds onto a bar, and, when ready, clicks a button. The bar pulls them down the ramp, accelerating them into the jump so they can go flying out into the foam pit. This foam pit is pretty huge too—it's about fifty by fifty feet. It's an enormous place. You're not going to get hurt, but you'll have a hard time getting out of it. It's really deep.

Dallin, my thirteen-year-old son, was the most excited to go to this facility. He wants to be a professional free skier someday, and he could probably spend every day at Snogression and never get bored. But on this first day he was a little bit timid. He'd probably be the first to tell you that he was worried about looking foolish to all the other cool kids who were there. Their approval mattered a lot to him. As a result, he hadn't tried anything really hard during the whole session. Then, on his last chance of the day, I yelled up to him from by the foam pit (where I was filming) that he

should try a backflip. I knew he could do it because I'd seen him do much more difficult tricks on our trampoline, but I wasn't sure he'd have enough courage to try with so many others watching him. Well, watch and listen carefully to this video clip to see what happened next. [A video of Dallin doing a backflip was shown.]

What you see here is Dallin jumping up and down, trying his best to relax and loosen up. Then he grabbed the bar and hit the button. I couldn't believe my eyes as Dallin completed a near perfect backflip. Everyone there was cheering with excitement—and no one louder than me. Dallin floated around on cloud nine for the rest of the day.

Why do we care so much about the approval of others? Why do we “aspire to the honors of men” (D&C 121:35) and forget that Heavenly Father's approval is all that matters in the end? When we allow our decisions to be influenced by the approval of others, we put ourselves at the mercy of fickle mobs, ever-changing fashions, and the devil's whirlwinds. If instead we seek our Heavenly Father's approval only, we build our foundation upon a rock that cannot be moved (see Helaman 5:12). And I can think of nothing that will bring us more stability and optimism than building our foundation upon the rock of our Redeemer.

When we got home from our trip to Snogression, we took out the video camera and watched Dallin's flip forward and backward, in fast and slow motion. And we listened as well. It was then that I realized what I had been when Dallin threw that trick. I was a little embarrassed at first, but later I thought to myself, “This has to be how Heavenly Father feels when we stop worrying about what others think of us and try to use the talents He has given us.” I think He is just as excited in celebrating our accomplishments as I was with Dallin's jump. I testify to you that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are our greatest cheerleaders and fan section. We will feel more joy

and hope in this world when we do our best to seek and obtain Their approval.

Look for and Remember the Joy in Our Lives

The last lesson about being positive in a negative world is that we must look for and remember the joy in our lives. When was the last time you felt true joy? How long ago was it? Do you remember the details of that moment, and do you think of it often? As my final story today, I want to tell you about a time this summer when I felt true joy, brimming over and impossible to contain.

My son Tate is fifteen years old, and he practices the piano about three to four hours per day on school days and closer to six hours per day during the summer. This past spring he set a goal to play with the Utah Symphony in their Salute to Youth Concert, which is held each fall. It is a statewide competition that draws some of the best young pianists each year. Tate spent countless hours practicing and refining a fifteen-minute Chopin concerto and eventually submitted his best recording to the judges in late June in hopes that he would be selected to play in the final round of the competition later that summer. The finalists were to be announced the morning of July 20, which happened to be the day that our youth would be pulling handcarts up Rocky Ridge in Wyoming.

Time went by slowly, and we prayed as a family every day that Tate would make it to the final round of the competition. Eventually the youth trek began, and Tate seemed to forget the impending announcement amidst the excitement of pulling a handcart in the 95-degree Wyoming sun, crossing rivers, square dancing, and singing songs with his handcart brothers at the tops of their lungs.

On that Friday morning, soon after we sent our handcart company off toward Rocky Ridge, I received an unexpected text message from Melinda out in the middle of nowhere in Wyoming. Tate had been selected to play in

that final round of the competition. I couldn't wipe the smile from my face, and I couldn't prevent the tears that came with it. That has to be one of the greatest emotions in the world—tears and smiling at the same time. I still remember the sweetness of how that moment felt and how I couldn't wait until noon, when I would be able to tell Tate personally. Here's what I recorded in my pioneer journal that evening about the events of that day:

Because I was taking lunches to the trekkers today, I got to catch up to Tate after he hiked Rocky Ridge. He looked so good coming into the break area, so strong and pure. After he had eaten [lunch], I asked him to come talk with me. I walked with him just a little ways from everyone so we could be alone, and I asked him if he was ready to hear the decision. He looked [very] concerned, and he said he wasn't sure he wanted to know because he didn't want to ruin the rest of his trek. I just looked at him in the eye, and I said, "You won't be disappointed." His look registered complete disbelief at what he had just heard. So I clarified, "Tate, you get to play in the final round of the competition." His face was an expression of pure joy, and he couldn't contain it. He reached out to me and hugged me like he has never hugged me before. He was in tears with joy. He even picked me up and swung me around, he was so excited. He walked off a little ways and just looked over the plains. He couldn't contain all that joy. He was so adorable to watch with his friends as they found out. Tate just kept smiling and crying. I experienced true joy for those precious minutes.

All of the stories I have shared with you today came from my personal journal. I have learned from my own experience that I feel greater joy and optimism in my life when I am keeping a daily journal. Now, I know that keeping a journal is an overwhelming challenge for most people. As one of my friends told me, he doesn't like keeping a journal because he writes too much about each day, and that ends up taking too long, and

eventually he stops again. So, I have a recommendation for you to help you with this fifth and final lesson.

In October 2007 President Henry B. Eyring told of how he kept a journal for years by asking himself a single question every day. He said:

I wrote down a few lines every day for years. I never missed a day no matter how tired I was or how early I would have to start the next day. Before I would write, I would ponder this question: "Have I seen the hand of God reaching out to touch us or our children or our family today?" As I kept at it, something began to happen. As I would cast my mind over the day, I would see evidence of what God had done for one of us that I had not recognized in the busy moments of the day. As that happened, and it happened often, I realized that trying to remember had allowed God to show me what He had done. ["O Remember, Remember," Ensign, November 2007, 67]

This final lesson is perhaps the most important lesson of them all. To look for joy in our lives we need only look for the ways in which God's hand has touched us or our family or our friends that day. Sometimes He touches us through tender mercies. Other times He touches us with wonderful humor. And frequently we will see His hand in our lives by the way in which He prompts us to serve someone

that day or to lift someone else who is struggling. We don't have to write lengthy, mundane journal entries about our days. Instead, we can simply write one or two lines in which we identify the hand of God in our lives that day. As we do this, we will see more clearly how blessed our lives really are. We will be filled with gratitude and optimism. We will see the world more in the way our Heavenly Father sees the world. We will see the world as it really is and be filled with joy and hope.

Conclusion

I testify to you that this world is a good world and that Heavenly Father sees it that way. He is a God of hope, of joy, of excitement, of enthusiasm, and of optimism. With all the negativism in the world, we can sort it out and see the world as Heavenly Father sees it. Let us not confuse righteousness with perfection. Let us get back up every time we fall. Let us keep our focus on Heavenly Father and listen to His voice. Let us seek His approval and not the approval of the world. And let us look for and remember the joy and the touch of God's hand in our lives every day. After all, the gospel is good news. The Savior has overcome the world, and He has prepared the way for us to do the same. That we may we feel the optimism and joy of His gospel every day of our lives is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.