

Fear Not

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It is a joy to join with Peggy in welcoming you to another school year. You are a wonderful sight, and this campus takes on new energy as you arrive here. We are grateful for that.

My message today focuses on one of the most oft-repeated and yet most oft-overlooked and ignored and maybe violated commandments. By my count this commandment is repeated seventy-six times in the scriptures.¹ The commandment was the first thing spoken by the angels who announced Christ's birth to the shepherds outside Bethlehem.² It was also the first thing spoken by the angels who announced Christ's Resurrection to the women at the empty tomb.³ The commandment was conveyed by the angels who informed Mary and Joseph about their roles in the Savior's mortal ministry,⁴ and it was part of the message of the angel who appeared to Zacharias to reveal the upcoming birth of John the Baptist.⁵ The commandment is repeated in at least two of our LDS hymns.⁶ It is a commandment that is found so frequently in the scriptures that we may not recognize its profound importance, especially for the times in which we live and the stage of life in which you students find yourselves. The commandment is a simple two-word injunction: "fear not."

Some may question whether the directive to "fear not" is actually a commandment. True, it is

not preceded by the familiar "thou shalt not," and it was not written on stone tablets. But it is clearly an imperative repeated often enough by divinely authorized sources, including many times by the Savior Himself,⁷ that it certainly seems like a commandment. More important, like all commandments, adherence to this two-word injunction will make our mortal journey both more productive and more joyful.

This is not a new topic. It has been preached over this pulpit⁸ as well as over the pulpit in the LDS Conference Center.⁹ But I believe it is one that is of particular relevance as we begin a new school year with all of its challenges in a world that seems increasingly full of fears. I firmly believe that if we increase our compliance with this important commandment, the coming year and the endless years that succeed it will be better.

With that belief in mind, let me first explore the meaning of this sometimes misunderstood commandment and then describe four things we can do to increase our ability to comply with its principles.

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on September 12, 2017.

What Is Fear?

To understand the commandment to fear not, we first have to understand what we mean by fear. What exactly are we supposed to avoid? According to one source, “fear is a feeling induced by perceived danger or threat that . . . ultimately [leads to] a change in behavior.”¹⁰ As this broad definition suggests, not all fear is bad. Were it not for this emotion, we would not flee from or avoid things that would actually harm us. The feeling that might arise when we hear the signature tail warning of a rattlesnake is one we should not ignore. It keeps us safe.

Similarly, the scriptures indicate that we are to “fear the Lord.”¹¹ Surely we should not avoid this kind of fear. As Elder David A. Bednar once explained, this “righteous fear” is much different from the fear we are commanded to avoid. Righteous fear is instead “a deep feeling of reverence, respect, and awe for the Lord Jesus Christ,” a feeling that induces “obedience to His commandments . . . and anticipation of the Final Judgment and justice at His hand.”¹² This kind of “godly fear dispels mortal fears”¹³ and thus aids in our compliance with the commandment to fear not.

So if fear of real danger and fear of God are not covered by this commandment, just what is it that we are commanded to avoid? The fear that the scriptural injunction directs us to suppress falls into the category of what some psychologists call “irrational fear” or “fear of the unknown,”¹⁴ a fear of future events that will not likely occur. Using the letters of the term itself, some refer to this as “False Evidence Appearing Real”—FEAR.¹⁵ It is this false-evidence-appearing-real type of fear that Satan seeks to induce in us and that the Lord commands us to avoid. It is a kind of fear that is debilitating, sometimes paralyzing, and almost always soul- and energy-sapping.

For some, this kind of fear takes the form of thoughts that you are not good enough to succeed here at BYU; for others, it takes the form of thoughts that you do not belong here because you are different from those around you. For some, it is a fear that you will never find an eternal companion; for others, it is a fear that the future

appears so ominous and dangerous that marriage and a family seem too risky. And, for far too many, this fear comes in the form of the false belief that you are not acceptable to God, that you are so flawed because of past mistakes or current inadequacies that you are beyond the reach of the refining and redeeming power of Jesus Christ.

When any of these false thoughts appears to be real to you, when such satanic lies cause you to lose hope in the future and maybe even in the present, please remember that God has repeatedly commanded us to “fear not.” That commandment falls clearly within the ambit of Nephi’s well-known and eternally true observation that “the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.”¹⁶

Four Things We Can Do

With that in mind, let me suggest four things we can do in such trying times to comply with the commandment to fear not.

First, recognize and remember that this kind of “fear comes not of God, but . . . from [Satan,] the adversary of truth and righteousness.”¹⁷ Indeed, as President Gordon B. Hinckley taught, “Fear is the antithesis [the complete opposite] of faith.”¹⁸ This is evident from the scriptures themselves. The scriptures define faith as “the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen,”¹⁹ “which are true.”²⁰ Faith is a real manifestation of what is really true. The polar opposite of that would seem to be the lack of substance or evidence of things that are false—or false evidence appearing real: fear.

We need to recognize that the feeling of despair and hopelessness that characterizes irrational fear is a tool of the adversary. Indeed, it is one of his primary tools. I am convinced that just as we have articles of faith, Satan and his minions must have articles of fear to aid them in their work. They might read something like this: “We believe that the first principles of despair and damnation are doubt God, doubt yourself, doubt others, and, most of all, be afraid—be very afraid of the future.”²¹

I am certain the adversary fully understands that fear and faith cannot coexist. If we fail to understand that truth, we are at a comparative disadvantage. On the other hand, if we remember that simple fact in the moments when we are gripped by irrational fear, we not only will be able to recognize the true source of what President Hinckley called the “gnawing, destructive element”²² of fear but also will understand the cure for those debilitating feelings. As President Russell M. Nelson has reminded us, “Faith is the antidote for fear.”²³ If we want to decrease the amount of fear in our lives, we need to increase the amount of faith in our lives.

But it is not faith in the abstract that is the antidote to such fear. It is, as the fourth article of faith makes clear, “faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.” If we want to decrease the amount of irrational fear in our lives, we need to increase our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So when fear threatens to overwhelm us, we should focus less on those fears and more on increasing our faith in Him who admonishes us to “look unto [Him] in every thought; doubt not, fear not.”²⁴

And how do we do that? By getting to know the Savior better. The more we know Christ, the more we will trust and love Him and the more faith we will have in Him. In that regard, I urge each of you as the new school year begins to spend time on a daily basis getting to know Him through daily scripture study and prayer. These simple acts of daily scripture study and prayer—especially with the intent to know the Savior better—will do more than almost anything else to strengthen your faith in Him, which, in turn, will decrease the amount of irrational fear in your life, no matter the particular cause of that fear. So set aside time on a daily basis—in the morning or in the evening—to strengthen your faith in Christ through daily scripture study and prayer.

Second, we can increase the amount of faith and decrease the amount of fear in our lives by serving others more. As the *Lectures on Faith* indicate, faith is a “principle of action.”²⁵ It grows and operates in our lives only when we are willing to exercise our agency in an active way. If we want to

increase our faith in a way that dispels our fears, we need to act. And often the best way to act is to serve others. Irrational fear causes us to focus on ourselves—on our own inadequacies and on our own inability to control things. When we focus on others and what we can do to help them, fear fades. This is just one way in which, as the scriptures teach us, “perfect love casteth out all fear.”²⁶

I learned this in a powerful way while serving as a missionary in Mexico. In the early part of my mission, I was hesitant to speak, both because I am by nature an introvert and because my Spanish was not very good. I greatly feared that I would be embarrassed. I was focused on myself.

One day as I walked down the street, I suddenly had a feeling overcome me that I can only credit to the Holy Ghost: it was a clear feeling that all of the people I saw bustling about me that day were literally my brothers and sisters and that all of them were sons and daughters of my Heavenly Parents, who were also their Heavenly Parents. Without any conscious effort on my part, I felt overwhelming love for each person I saw. At that moment I felt a great desire to speak to them. I was anxious to share with them words that would help them see their divine destiny, even if the words were not in perfect Spanish. I suddenly found that I cared more about them and their well-being than about my potential embarrassment. My fear of being embarrassed disappeared and was replaced by an almost consuming love for those people. As I shifted my focus from me and my inadequacies to others and their needs, my fear was cast out by the love that I felt.

Similarly, when you find yourself overcome by fear, I urge you to look for others who need your help. Focus on what you can do for them—on what they need. If you do this, I promise your fears will decrease because your love for God and His children will increase. And, as President Dieter F. Uchtdorf recently reminded us, perfect love is also a “divinely appointed antidote to fear.”²⁷

Third, we can increase the amount of faith in our lives if we understand that, as Elder Neil L. Andersen once observed, “Faith is not only a feeling; it is a decision.”²⁸ “Faith is a choice.”²⁹ There

will be repeated times during this semester and during the rest of your lives when you will have a choice whether to be governed by faith or by fear. I urge you to be quick to recognize when that is the choice you face, because it is not always immediately apparent. If you are more aware of the fact that you are making a choice between faith and fear, you will more often make the right choice. If you do not pause to recognize that fact, fear may overcome you without you even realizing it.

Let me illustrate with an example. A number of years ago I had an assignment on campus that involved athletics. In that role I was invited to attend a banquet for the women student athletes at which Sister Sheri L. Dew was the speaker. Any of you who have heard Sister Dew speak would understand how excited I was to be invited. She is a gifted speaker and a wonderful gospel scholar. I very much looked forward to hearing from her. Unfortunately, at the last minute a conflict arose, and, much to my disappointment, I was not able to attend.

As you can imagine, then, I was especially excited when I was invited to the exact same event the next year and learned that one of the speakers was again to be Sheri Dew. This time I was able to attend.

I was particularly thrilled when Sister Dew started off her remarks by saying that she was going to begin by telling the same story she had told the year before—allowing me to catch up. I was pleasantly surprised, thinking maybe she was doing this just for my sake. However, she quickly made clear that while she was going to tell the same story she had told the previous year, this year she was telling it to make an entirely different point from the one she had made the year before.

Sister Dew explained that she had begun her remarks the prior year by telling the women student athletes how thrilled she was to be invited to speak because she had long wanted to be a part of BYU athletics. She said something to this effect:

You will remember that I told you that when I arrived at BYU, I felt like I was the most ill-prepared,

socially awkward freshman who had ever set foot on this campus. I told you then that I was from a very small town in Kansas—a town much smaller than the student population of BYU—and I felt completely overwhelmed, wondering if I would ever fit in. But there was one thing I thought might provide an entry into the BYU community, and that was basketball. I had played basketball in high school in Kansas, and, quite frankly, I thought I was pretty good. So I decided I would try out for the women’s basketball team. I learned all I could about the team: who the coach was, who had left the team, who was returning, and when the tryouts were to be held.

Sister Dew then said:

You will recall that I told you last year how I summoned up all my courage and went to the appointed gym in the Richards Building where tryouts were to be held. Wanting to make sure I maximized my chances, I had arrived early. You will also remember how I told you that I opened the door to the gym with some confidence, and then I watched the girls who were playing there. I thought to myself, “Wow, they are really good.” You will remember how I told you that I closed the door and then spent the next three hours walking up and down the hallways of the Richards Building trying to muster up enough courage to go back for the tryouts but that I finally gave up and returned to my dorm room without making the effort to try out.

I told you that story last year so that you would understand that I truly meant it when I told you that I was thrilled more than you knew that I had been asked to speak to the women student athletes at BYU and to be made an honorary member of that group. I wanted you to know that it really was the fulfillment of a life-long dream.

But I am telling you this same story this year for a much different purpose because of what happened immediately after I spoke last year. After I had spoken last year, Sister Elaine Michaelis came up to me.

Now many of you here will know Sister Michaelis. She is one of the legendary figures in BYU athletics. She worked in the Athletics Department for more than forty years, serving

as women's athletics director for much of that time. She was such an impactful and successful women's volleyball coach that the volleyball court in the Smith Fieldhouse is named for her. During her coaching career at BYU, Elaine Michaelis at one time or another coached every single women's sport.

Now, with that background, let me share what Sister Dew went on to say:

Sister Michaelis had spoken after me last year, and she then engaged me in a conversation while we were still on the podium.

Sister Michaelis asked me, "Sheri, is that story true?"

"Of course it's true," I replied.

Sister Michaelis then responded, "Do you know who the coach of the women's basketball team was the year you were a freshman?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "It was you. I knew everything about the team that year."

Then Sister Michaelis said, "I should tell you something, Sheri. In all my many years of coaching and of all the teams that I coached, there was only one year and one team that did not have a full roster. It was the women's basketball team that year. We were one player short."

Sister Dew then said, pretending to stab herself in the heart:

It would not have hurt any more to be stabbed in the heart than to have heard those words. There was a place for me on that team. God had prepared a way for me to fit in and had given me inspiration as to what I should do, and I let my fears keep me from that blessing.³⁰

Sister Dew's life turned out okay—we don't need to worry about her—and the women's basketball team survived without her as well. But that is just evidence that God truly can make "all things [including our own mistakes] work together for [our] good"³¹ if we will love and trust Him. But He will also bless us in the interim—in the short run and in the long run—if our choices are directed by our faith in Him rather than by

our fears about ourselves. Be alert to the times during which you must choose between fear and faith. Those times confront us more often than we usually recognize.

Fourth, even if we recognize that faith is a choice and that we are facing that choice, we may doubt our ability to make that choice—especially in pressure situations. Too many of us too often worry whether we are capable of choosing faith when it really counts. If that is a concern, I urge you to recognize that you already exercised incredible faith in Christ at a most critical juncture in your eternal journey.

You are all familiar with the scene. We were gathered together in a Grand Council in which our Father in Heaven described His plan for us to become like Him. Critical to that plan was the role of a Savior—someone who would live His life and give His life in a perfect way, thereby allowing Him to perform an atoning sacrifice that would enable us to gain the experience we needed to have in this fallen world without being condemned by the inevitable mistakes we would make.³²

But there was also another plan presented, one put forth by Lucifer. A war was waged between the adherents of these two plans. As recorded in the book of Revelation, we were on the winning side. It was not a physical war but rather a war of words, a war of concepts—a war in which faith was our main weapon. Listen to how we prevailed, as described in Revelation 12:

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. . . .

*And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and **by the word of their testimony.**³³*

It was the strength of our testimonies in Christ that allowed us to overcome Satan. It was our faith in Jesus Christ. Think about it. At that time the blood of the Lamb had not yet been shed and the Atonement had not yet been performed. All we had was the promise of our Heavenly Father and Christ that Jesus would perform His role perfectly. It all rose or fell on that. And we had the choice of whether we would believe in that promise in

those circumstances. All we had was our faith in Him. But in that critical time, we all chose to be governed by faith and not by fear.

If we sometimes doubt whether we really believe and whether we can act on that belief when it most counts, we can be emboldened by the reassuring fact that we believed before—and we believed with such certainty that the forces of darkness were compelled to flee from our presence. In your moments of doubt, despair, and fear, when you wonder if you can choose faith, remember that you already made that choice once when faced with that same decision in the pre-earth life.

As Elder Robert D. Hales once noted:

*The blessings we enjoy now are because we made the choice to follow the Savior before this life. To everyone hearing . . . these words, whoever you are and whatever your past may be, remember this: it is not too late to make that same choice again and follow Him.*³⁴

My dear brothers and sisters: fear not. Whatever the circumstances you find yourself in, know with assurance that you can succeed. You are more capable, more talented, and more faith-filled than you realize. More important, you are more loved by God than you realize.

God lives. He is our Heavenly Father. He has placed you on earth at this time and in this place because He knows you can succeed and that you can help others succeed in this particular setting. May the heavens open to give you glimpses of that truth and that destiny is my prayer as we begin this new semester. I ask it in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. The directive phrase “fear not” is found forty-four times in the Old Testament, thirteen times in the New Testament, six times in the Book of Mormon, and thirteen times in the Doctrine and Covenants:

Old Testament

Genesis 15:1; 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19.
Exodus 20:20.

Deuteronomy 1:21; 20:3; 31:6, 8.

Joshua 8:1; 10:25.

Judges 4:18; 6:10, 23.

Ruth 3:11.

1 Samuel 4:20; 12:20; 22:23; 23:17.

2 Samuel 9:7; 13:28.

1 Kings 17:13.

2 Kings 6:16; 25:24.

1 Chronicles 28:20.

2 Chronicles 20:17.

Isaiah 7:4; 35:4; 41:13, 14; 43:1, 5; 44:2; 54:4.

Jeremiah 40:9; 46:27.

Lamentations 3:57.

Daniel 10:12, 19.

Joel 2:21.

Zechariah 8:13.

New Testament

Matthew 1:20; 10:28; 28:5.

Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10; 5:10; 8:50; 12:7, 32.

John 12:15.

Acts 27:24.

Revelation 1:17.

Book of Mormon

2 Nephi 17:4

Alma 7:15; 55:8; 61:21.

Helaman 5:26.

3 Nephi 22:4.

Doctrine and Covenants

D&C 6:33, 34, 36; 30:5; 35:27; 38:15; 50:41; 79:4; 98:1; 101:36; 122:9; 136:17, 30.

2. See Luke 2:10.

3. See Matthew 28:5.

4. See Matthew 1:20; also Luke 1:30.

5. See Luke 1:13.

6. See “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 85; also “Redeemer of Israel,” *Hymns*, no. 6.

7. See, e.g., Luke 5:10; 8:50; 12:7; 12:32; D&C 6:33, 34, 36; 98:1; 122:9; 136:17.

8. See, e.g., Scott C. Esplin, “‘Daddy, Is Jesus Real?’: Overcoming Fear Through Faith in Christ,” BYU devotional address, 19 January 2016.

9. There are many general conference talks on fear and faith. See, e.g., Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear," *Ensign*, May 2017; Quentin L. Cook, "Live by Faith and Not by Fear," *Ensign*, November 2007; Boyd K. Packer, "Do Not Fear," *Ensign*, May 2004.
10. Wikipedia, s.v. "fear." Also, "Fear is a negatively valenced emotion elicited in response to an impending threat that motivates a defensive reaction to protect the organism" (Kevin S. LaBar, "Fear and Anxiety," in Lisa Feldman Barrett, Michael Lewis, and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, eds., *Handbook of Emotions*, 4th ed. [New York: Guilford Press, 2016], 751).
11. E.g., Joshua 24:14; Psalm 33:8.
12. David A. Bednar, "Therefore They Hushed Their Fears," *Ensign*, May 2015.
13. Bednar, "Therefore They Hushed."
14. Wikipedia, s.v. "fear."
15. Wikipedia, s.v. "fear."
16. 1 Nephi 3:7.
17. Gordon B. Hinckley, "First Presidency Message: God Hath Not Given Us the Spirit of Fear," *Ensign*, October 1984.
18. Hinckley, "God Hath Not Given."
19. Hebrews 11:1; emphasis added.
20. Alma 32:21.
21. Compare and contrast with Articles of Faith 1:4.
22. Hinckley, "God Hath Not Given."
23. Russell M. Nelson, "Let Your Faith Show," *Ensign*, May 2014. Elder Bednar has similarly noted, "Fear is dispelled through a correct knowledge of and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" (Bednar, "Therefore They Hushed").
24. D&C 6:36.
25. *Lectures on Faith* (1985), 1 (1:9).
26. Moroni 8:16; see also 1 John 4:18.
27. Uchtdorf, "Perfect Love."
28. Neil L. Andersen, "You Know Enough," *Ensign*, November 2008.
29. Neil L. Andersen, "Faith Is Not by Chance, but by Choice," *Ensign*, November 2015.
30. See Sheri L. Dew, *No One Can Take Your Place* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2004), 196–99; see also Doug Robinson, "Sheri Dew: Living the Unexpected Life," *Deseret News*, 10 March 2002, deseretnews.com/article/375015072/Sheri-Dew-Living-the-unexpected-life.html.
31. Romans 8:28.
32. Speaking of Adam and Eve and of Cain and Abel, Elder Bruce C. Hafen said, "Because of the Atonement, they could *learn from their experience without being condemned by it*" ("The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign*, May 2004; emphasis in original).
33. Revelation 12:7, 11; emphasis added.
34. Robert D. Hales, "Preserving Agency, Protecting Religious Freedom," *Ensign*, May 2015.