

"I Knew It, and I Knew That God Knew It"
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Does a blanket signify anything special to you? Perhaps a memory of being tucked in tight by your parents? Something you wrapped up in when you felt bad and needed comfort? The blanket you clutched as a toddler to give you courage? A collection of scraps combined together to make something better? A community offering of affection and well-wishing?

Universally, quilts and blankets are used for safety, warmth, and expressions of love. A blanket that keeps a person wrapped in it dry and warm is made of many strong threads woven tightly together, without any holes.

An unshakable faith is like a tightly woven blanket. It shelters us from the storms of life, from anger, rejection, fear, loneliness, and all the ills of the world. It gives us the courage and stamina to keep seeking for God's light when a path is misted in darkness. Father Lehi had such a faith when he exclaimed, "I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love" (2 Nephi 1:15).

Throughout all time, prophets of God have pled with us to seek for and partake of the most desirable of all things: to drink from the fountain of living waters, to come unto the arms of our Savior, and to be one with Him, encircled by and filled with the love of God.

How can we gain this faith?

I wish I could give you a checklist with a promise that, if you tick off each point, you will have this kind of unshakable faith, but I can't. The problem is that no one else is exactly like you; no one else is exactly like me. Our perspectives and beliefs have been shaped by our family, our culture, our genetics, our experiences, our knowledge, and our past choices. Not one of our checklists looks like another's. Something that might build my faith might not build yours. What might shake my faith might not shake yours. But, with the help of our Savior and the promptings of the Holy Ghost, we can each know what we must personally do to weave an unshakable faith that will withstand every challenge and allow our souls to be filled with the gospel's promised light and joy.

There are some universal principles that, if understood, can help us as we seek to strengthen our faith. The first such principle is that, just as a tightly woven blanket is

made of hundreds of threads, your faith is made up of many parts. Each thread of faith can be strengthened or unraveled, reworked or broken, repaired or removed, and new threads can be added.

Try this exercise. List all the parts and subparts of your faith. For example, a few threads of my faith are that God lives, I am His spiritual child, and God knows me personally.

After you list all the threads of your faith, evaluate how strongly you believe in each one. Think how long each has been part of your faith. Has your understanding of any thread of faith ever needed to be reworked--perhaps after you realized it was based on an incorrect assumption or understanding?

When you finish this exercise, look at the whole. Does your blanket of faith look like a loosely woven cheesecloth? A doll's blanket? Or is it a large and tightly woven blanket of felted wool?

The next principle is to look, look, and look again.

Jean Louis Agassiz was a professor of natural science who taught at Harvard in the 1860s--that's around the time the pioneers were settling Utah.

Professor Agassiz believed students should study nature itself rather than acquire facts through lectures or books. To effectively master such a study, a student needed to develop the critical intellectual tools of observation and comparison. An unforgettable lesson he used to develop this skill was jokingly named by his students "The Incident of the Fish." As I share with you a paraphrase of the words of one student's memory of his encounter with "The Incident of the Fish," I want you to think of how the fish might be like a thread of faith.

"Agassiz brought me a small fish, placing it before me with the rather stern requirement that I should study it but should on no account talk to any one concerning it nor read anything relating to fishes, until I had his permission so to do.

" 'What shall I do?' I asked.

"He replied, 'Find out what you can, and by and by I will ask you what you have seen.'

"I was disappointed. I concluded gazing at a fish did not relate to the study of insects--which was my desire. In ten minutes I saw all that could be seen in that fish. Half an hour passed, an hour, another hour--the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face--from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters' view--just as ghastly. I was in despair. So I decided it was time for lunch. For an hour I was free!

"On my return, I slowly pulled forth my mute companion, that awful fish, and with a feeling of desperation, I looked at it again. At last a happy thought struck me--I would draw the fish. With surprise, I began to discover new features in the creature. Just then the professor returned.

" 'That is right,' said he, 'a pencil is one of the best of eyes. So what have you seen?'

"He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the parts of the fish. When I finished, he waited, expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment said, 'You have not looked very carefully; why, you haven't even seen one of the most obvious features of the animal, and it's plainly before your eyes! Look again! Look again!' And he left me to my misery.

"I was mortified. Still more of that fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and I discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how correct the professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly, and at the end of the day, the professor asked, 'Do you see it yet?'

" 'No,' I replied, 'I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.'

" 'Well,' he said, 'put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning.'

"This was disconcerting. Not only must I puzzle over my observations of my fish all night when I didn't have it in front of me, but the next day I was going to have to give an exact account of my discoveries without verifying them, and I had a bad memory! So I walked home by the Charles River, pondering over my problem.

"After a sleepless night, I arrived at the lab the next morning. The professor seemed to be as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

" 'Do you mean perhaps,' I asked, 'that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?'

" 'Of course! Of course!' He said. He was thoroughly pleased.

"Then I ventured to ask, 'So what should I do next?'

" 'Oh, look at your fish!' he said. And so for three more long days he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else or to use any artificial aid. 'Look, look, look,' was his repeated injunction. Only later did I come to realize that this was not only one of the best lessons of my life but a turning point as well."

This story teaches: First, at any given time we are limited by our perceptions. Second, it's necessary to analyze what we saw and then articulate what our conclusions are to help us figure out what we really saw. Third, by constantly refining and analyzing what we perceive, we can move closer and closer to a complete understanding of the truth. And fourth, we must come to our own understanding and not rely upon secondhand observations.

The Lord directs us to seek wisdom, and if we will ask Him, we will "receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge," and we will "know the mysteries and peaceable things" that bring joy and eternal life (D&C 42:61).

Look, look, and look again is also what Nephi heard when he sought to understand the meaning of his father's vision. Nephi first desired to know the things his father saw in a vision. He believed the Lord could make such things known to him. As he pondered, the Spirit of the Lord began to teach him. In Nephi's description of this wonderful experience, I counted that the Spirit of the Lord directed Nephi to either "Look!" or

"Behold!" 48 times (see 1 Nephi 11).

Periodically Nephi was asked to analyze and articulate what he saw. Because of this exercise, Nephi became able to see and comprehend the entirety of Christ's mission and conclude that the beautiful tree and the fountain of living waters that his father saw were representations of "the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things" (1 Nephi 11:22). Nephi sought, pondered, asked, and the Spirit taught him truth.

Once a thread of faith is gained, it can be strengthened by following the Lord's repeated admonition to learn of Him, listen to His words, and live according to the truths we have been given. With prayer and study, we can determine whether each thread of our faith is based upon truth or whether we have woven into our beliefs uninspired philosophies of men or incorrect assumptions. And as we rework our faith, we understand each thread better and better and better, and the Spirit confirms to us that it is true. I am realizing more and more that as we rework each thread of our faith, we will inevitably find that at the core or foundation of each thread is the love of God and the Atonement of Christ.

Luckily, we are not limited, as Professor Agassiz's students were, by the prohibition against the use of tools as we look, look, and look again. We have the scriptures, and we have prophets, and we have the Holy Ghost to help us see the truth. In fact, we are directed, "As all have not faith, seek ye diligently and teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). We also have the tool of prayer and the promise that if we ask Heavenly Father in faith, believing that we will receive, and keep the commandments diligently, the Lord will pour out His Spirit upon us and bless us with knowledge and understanding.

Remember that knowledge and faith do not distill upon us automatically with no effort on our part. The Prophet Joseph underscored the effort we must put forth when he said:

"The things of God are of deep import: and time and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out. Thy mind, O man! If thou wilt lead a soul unto salvation, must stretch as high as the utmost heavens, and search into and contemplate the darkest abyss and the broad expanse of eternity--thou must commune with God."

In other words: look, look, and look again!

The third principle is the realization that each thread of our faith, no matter how strong, is constantly being attacked by the great unraveler. Remember that the Lord beckons us to open our eyes and ears so He can fill our souls with light and joy, and Satan fights to blind us and fill our souls with darkness, fear, and anger.

A Chinese military theoretician, Sun-Tzu, wrote the *Art of War* around 400 B.C. His ideas about combat have been followed by successful military commanders ever since. He believed the way to win was to shatter cohesion, produce paralysis, and bring about the collapse of an opponent by generating confusion, disorder, panic, and chaos. That is why such strategies as surprise, deception, speed, and shaping the opponent's perception of what really is happening are so successful. In fact, a key focus he taught was to unravel the opponent before the battle even starts.

A commander must get inside the mind and the decision process of his opponent in order to make sure the opponent is dealing with outdated or irrelevant information and will thus become confused and disoriented and unable to function. The commander should look for gaps in the defense and not hit the strong points but go around them like water going downhill--bypassing obstacles, always moving, probing, and then, when an opening is found, pouring through it, pushing deeper and deeper, punching through the weaknesses, following the path of least resistance.

Don't Sun-Tzu's theories sound an awful lot like the list of Satan's tools given to us by Nephi? Nephi's catalog of the devil's strategies includes:

- Stirring us up to anger to rage in our hearts against that which is good,
- Pacifying us into thinking we don't need to nourish our faith because we are okay, "all is well in Zion,"
- Flattering us into believing that there is no hell nor is there a devil,
- Enticing us to follow the precepts of men and deny the power of God and the gift of the Holy Ghost,
- Letting our pride blind us to the truth and causing us to tremble with anger against the truth of God in fear that, if it is indeed true, then, perish the thought, we will be proven wrong, and
- Tempting us to lose patience and forget the principle that God teaches us line upon line so we conclude that, because we have received the word of God once, we have no need for additional revelation on that thread of our faith. (See 2 Nephi 28:20-31.)

Another strategy Satan seems to use is to magnify our doubts in one principle. Then he perpetrates the deception that this thread of our faith is the keystone. Then he tempts us to put all of our energy in justifying our doubts. The natural consequence of this strategy is that we are left without energy or motivation to nurture the other threads of our faith. The other threads will then weaken with neglect and break, and bit by bit our faith is all unraveled.

We shouldn't ignore our feelings or doubts, nor should we fail to acknowledge the fact that one part of our faith is unraveling or is broken. And we *need* to put energy into figuring out the reasons for such trauma. But rather than *embracing* a doubt, we should put energy into *doubting* the doubt. Examine the source and soundness of the information that led to the doubt. Hopefully, we will then realize that our understanding of a principle or a source of doubt is too limited to justify giving the doubt the power to unravel the entire blanket of our faith. It is critical that while we sort out a faith-shaking doubt, we spend an equal if not greater amount of time and energy embracing, reinforcing, and nurturing those threads of our faith that *are* strong.

It is clear that, while the Savior helps give us the threads of truth to weave a protective blanket of faith, Satan gives us a flaxen cord that grows into an awful chain with which he binds us and happily drags our souls down to his "gulf of misery and endless wo" (Helaman 5:12).

A personal example of the kind of unraveling confusion Satan can cause is given by Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Listen to how he describes the continual attack on his belief that he is a beloved child of God.

"The same voice that speaks to all the children of God and sets them free to live in the midst of a dark world while remembering the light . . . is the never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity and giving life and love whenever it is heard. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God and have nothing to fear.

As the beloved of my Heavenly Father, . . . I can confront, console, admonish and encourage without fear of rejection or need for affirmation. As the beloved, I can suffer persecution without desire for revenge and receive praise without using it as a proof of my goodness. . . . Yet over and over again I have left home. I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places looking for love . . . and the true voice of love is a very soft and gentle voice speaking to me in the most hidden places of my being. It is not a boisterous voice, forcing itself on me and demanding attention. . . . It is a voice that can only be heard by those who allow themselves to be touched. . . .

"But there are many other voices, voices that are loud, full of promises and very seductive. These voices say, 'Go out and prove that you are worth love by being successful, popular and powerful. . . .' They are always there and always reach into those inner places where I question my own goodness and doubt my self worth. They suggest that I am not going to be loved without having earned it through determined efforts and hard work. They want me to prove to myself and others that I am worth being loved, and they keep pushing me to do everything possible to gain acceptance. Almost from the moment I had ears to hear, I heard those voices, and they have stayed with me ever since. They have come to me through my parents, my friends, my teachers and my colleagues, but most of all they have come and still come through the mass media that surround me. And they say,

" 'Show me that you are a good boy.'

" 'You had better be better than your friend!'

" 'How are your grades?'

" 'What are your connections?'

" 'Are you sure you want to be friends with those people?'

" 'These trophies certainly show how good a player you were!'

" 'Don't show your weakness, or you'll be used!'

" 'When you stop being productive, people lose interest in you!'

"As long as I remain in touch with the voice that calls me the beloved, those questions and counsel are quite harmless. Their warnings and advice are well intentioned. . . . But when I forget the voice of the first unconditional love, then these innocent suggestions can easily start dominating my life and pull me into a distant country. It is not very hard

for me to know when this is happening; anger, resentment, jealousy, desire for revenge, lust, greed, antagonisms, and rivalries are obvious signs that I have left home. . . . Before I am even fully aware of it, I find myself wondering why someone hurt me, rejected me, or didn't pay attention to me. Without realizing it, I find myself brooding about someone else's successes, my own loneliness and the way the world abuses me. Despite my conscious intentions, I often catch myself daydreaming about becoming rich, powerful and very famous. All of these mental games reveal to me the fragility of my faith that I am the beloved one on whom God's favor rests."

Nouwen gives us a barometer to *signal* us when our faith is being shaken. He tells us our faith is somehow being shaken when we have feelings of anger, resentment, antagonism, and other feelings that aren't compatible with the feelings of love, joy, and peace that you feel when filled with the Spirit .

How do we combat the assaults on our faith? The answer is also found in Nephi's interpretation of his father's vision, when he identifies the meaning of the rod of iron:

"Whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction.

". . . Give heed to the word of God and remember to keep his commandments always in all things" (1 Nephi 15:24-25).

The last principle I would like to highlight in our individual quest for an unshakable faith is to live patiently according to the light you are given and more light will be given to you.

Alma admonishes us to "worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and in truth" (Alma 34:38).

I think Alma was referring not only to the physical places we can worship, he also was referring to whatever place you have reached in your spiritual journey. In other words, you don't have to have the faith of Joseph Smith or of Enoch to worship or to have effective faith. You need to pray to Heavenly Father with whatever faith you do have and ask for more truth. If we do this, our seeking will be answered with truth and our knowledge and understanding will be added upon.

The Prophet Joseph taught: "We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith, where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker, and is caught up to dwell with Him. But we consider that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment."

I pray that these four principles I've discussed ring true to you. First, have many strong threads. Second, look, look, and look again. Third, beware of the great unraveler. And fourth, live and worship according to the light you are given.

May we heed the admonition of the prophet Nephi, son of Helaman, to "remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall" (Helaman 5:12).

Then together we can sing in faith Nephi's psalm: "O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness!" (2 Nephi 4:33). And we will know for ourselves that it is the most precious of all things. I leave these things with you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.