

How Do We Increase Our Faith?

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Our women's conference theme reminds us that living in this day and age, and perhaps even where we live, is not an accident. Further, as we have been reminded regularly by President Gordon B. Hinckley, this is a wonderful time to be alive, arguably the best time in the history of the world and certainly the best time in the history of the Church. Problems and challenges abound among and around us, yet we are blessed in significant and unprecedented ways.

President Hinckley has also expressed, "Of all our needs, I think the greatest is an increase in faith."¹ I'm confident that none of us would dispute this assertion as we reflect on the obstacles and difficulties we each face. Likewise, it seems apparent to me that well-founded and grounded faith, like other cardinal virtues, is something that is never excessive or in too rich supply. The real question for most of us who accept that increased faith is both desirable and necessary is, "How do we gain more meaningful, sustaining and life-changing faith?"

As with most things of real worth or value, there are no significant shortcuts. The Apostle Paul's experience on the road to Damascus was dramatic and life changing. Although the book of Acts gives two detailed accounts of his unexpected conversion (see Acts 9; 22), we do not know the antecedent events or efforts that qualified him for this remarkable intervention by the Savior.

In the same vein, we may think the Prophet Joseph's First Vision experience was a similar, spontaneous event that occurred without special preparation or effort. Happily, we have the evidence and understanding that this was by no means the case (see Joseph Smith—History). In fact, by careful study of Joseph's early life, we recognize that sustained and arduous effort made by this very young man led him to the Sacred Grove and the world-changing events that occurred there. He listened, learned and was "quick to observe" much like another very precocious young boy, Mormon (see Morm. 1:2).

While the lad Joseph Smith was impressed and touched by the religious fervor in his surrounding

environs, he also quickly perceived the conflict and inconsistencies evident in the competing claims and assertions of the various existing churches. Although he was respectful of the views of others, he also recognized his personal responsibility to consider and search out answers for himself. He did not take these matters lightly. In fact, he admitted to significant distress and angst. Let me turn to his words.

“In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?” (JS—H 1:10).

Because most of us are so familiar with his account and history, it may be tempting to rush ahead rather than to consider carefully the circumstances and the process. First, we should acknowledge with gratitude that young Joseph was taught by his parents, before the Restoration of the gospel, to believe and have faith in God the Father and Jesus Christ. Further, we know he was already somewhat knowledgeable about the Bible and had an understanding that important answers and guidance are available in the scriptures. Without this background and the sustaining experiences of his physically impoverished but spiritually rich youth, it is highly unlikely that Joseph would have pursued the course that he followed. Let us return to his account.

“While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading in the Epistle of James” (JS—H 1:11).

Note that he did not say “while I was casually considering my religious responsibilities because I had nothing else to do or think about.” No, he admitted that he was working and thinking very hard about these issues and carefully studying to find answers. While we don’t have all the data, my guess is that this was not the first time he had read from the New Testament nor perhaps was this the first time he had read the words of James. These are the words he read:

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). Again, we return to Joseph’s narrative.

“Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible” (JS—H 1:12).

Think of how all of this must have weighed on this young man for an extended period of time. Sometime during this process of stretching and learning, he came to understand that while helpful and even essential, the scriptures were not enough in themselves. More was needed. The additional requirements included not only prayer, but faith of sufficient strength to pursue the answer sought and then the resolve and commitment to follow through on all the implications of the answers or instruction given.

Joseph's stretching was not only an essential prelude to the First Vision but was also an inescapable necessity for his role in the Restoration of the gospel, with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the organization of the Church, the building of temples, the establishment of missionary work, and all that we take for granted today in the Lord's kingdom. Not only did these things transpire "line upon line, precept upon precept" (D&C 98:12; 128:21), but each step of the way was arduous and difficult and Joseph often encountered detours.

As it was with the Prophet Joseph, so it is with us. I have come to believe that if life always seems to be perfect, we are likely missing some very important and essential lessons and experiences! I also believe that as wonderful as some days are, few if any of us ever go long without finding something we wished were different or easier.

With the permission of my wife and family, let me use a personal example which I believe in the microcosm of our circumstance illustrates the principle with both its attendant challenges and blessings. I hasten to add that what I share is not likely to be generally transferable to others with similar problems but is only an example of how our faith was strengthened and great blessings resulted from disappointments that we never expected nor welcomed. Knowing what we do today, I also gratefully acknowledge that we would not change our experiences even though they were tremendously challenging at the time. I believe it is an affirmation of the doctrine taught by President Spencer W. Kimball that "faith precedes the miracle"² and also affirmed by Moroni in his treatise on faith (see Ether 12).

When Sharon and I married over forty years ago, we were united in our desire for a family, preferably a large one. Both of us had had close to idyllic family lives in the homes in which we grew up. I hasten to add that neither was perfect except in the truly important things, but our parents loved each other and their children and the feelings were reciprocated. While we were aware that our favorable circumstances were not consistent with the experiences of everyone else, it frankly did not occur to us that we would ever have challenges in achieving the family for which we aspired.

We were not unduly concerned that our first baby did not arrive until we were just beginning the fourth year of our marriage. I was still in school with many years of education and training yet ahead and we thought, if we thought at all, that perhaps this was just a temporary blessing to a financially struggling young couple. Shortly after, however, we became aware of a medical challenge and the need for Sharon to endure several surgical procedures over the next few years. We were thus thrilled when our second child was born a little over five years after the first. We were advised that if we wanted further children, given the medical situation we were facing, it would be good to have them as soon as possible. We were grateful to have another pregnancy before too long. Sadly, that turned out to be an ectopic pregnancy that not only threatened Sharon's life but led us to the understanding that further pregnancies were highly unlikely.

While we were grateful for our two sons, we were saddened that our assumptions about our family size required this major adjustment. In addition to our own distress, however, was the

tenderness in dealing with the feelings of our oldest son. At the time his brother was born, he had, with the firm faith that a five-year-old can demonstrate, prayed for a brother *and* a sister. When he only got a little brother, as much as our firstborn loved him, he began to question why Heavenly Father had not answered his prayer. It turned out he was as naive about such things as were his parents, and I'm afraid our answers to him were not fully satisfactory in his young mind.

While we prayed about these things, we also understood that we had great blessings already and did not dispute with nor doubt the Lord. We asked a few timid questions about adoption, but were told by well-meaning and fair people to be happy with what we had and remember the many who had no children at all. Frankly, we had to agree that we had no business competing with them for the woefully short supply of babies available for adoption.

One day in early 1977, while fulfilling a new Church assignment, we were informed by an associate that it might be possible to adopt a set of twins that were to be born shortly in Guatemala. The birth mother was not able to keep them and was hoping that they might have a bright future with a family who would love them and care for them in ways she was not able to do.

Our two sons were then 9 and 4 years old and they were included in our family council about this frankly daunting and unexpected opportunity. Going through the process of study and faith and remembering the persistent prayer of a young boy for a baby brother and a baby sister, we determined that the twins, a little boy and a little girl, needed to become part of our family. Not knowing any better at the time, we did not find it unusual to have the legal and administrative details completed and have them home with us in the United States within two months of their birth.

Almost five years after the twins joined our family, we had the blessing of another baby, but this time she came in the usual way and proved again that doctors often are not as smart as they think they are!

As we fast forward in time thirty years, the twins, together with their three siblings, have all married very well and are starting their own families. Each has at least one child, albeit that several of them, in different ways, also have trouble getting babies to arrive in a timely fashion when they place the order for them.

We are very proud of our five children, their wonderful spouses, and particularly our seven exceptional grandchildren. But that is not the reason for this long, personal account. My purpose in sharing these details is to bear testimony of the blessings that come through the stretching of our faith. Many of these blessings—now recognized and appreciated, but years ago not expected nor anticipated—would not have been ours without the challenges and disappointments, the tears and the trials. In fact, our lives have been so much better, fuller and richer than we could have imagined in our early married life as we fantasized about our perfect future. We can now bear testimony to that wonderful principle articulated by Moroni:

“Faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after trial of your faith” (Ether 12:6).

As we all know, faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the first of the first principles because it is the foundation on which all other principles are built. President Hinckley has counseled that we need to increase our faith and, I believe by implication, gain a greater understanding of what our faith really is.

There are many definitions of faith. As we strive to strengthen our faith, we need to be sure exactly what we are magnifying. I like the definition in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Alma and other prophets give similar definitions (see Alma 32).

I worry that, on occasion, we may confuse our faith with certain knowledge. Certain knowledge about fundamental things is eventually essential but cannot occur without first developing and strengthening our faith. Likewise, just as knowledge does not come without effort, so is the situation with faith.

President Hinckley has made reference to the account of the ruler of the synagogue who fell at Jesus’s feet and pled with the Savior in his daughter’s behalf. You remember the words: “My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live” (Mark 5:23). As we know, Jesus went with him and the crowd followed along. On the way to the child’s sick bed, the poor woman who had been bleeding or hemorrhaging for twelve years, with no help or cure from all the physicians she had seen, pushed through the crowd and touched the Lord’s garment because her faith was such that she believed that act alone would result in healing her, an event that did transpire.

Jesus felt “that virtue had gone out of him” (see Mark 5:30) and stopped, turned, and asked who had touched him. Because they were in a crowd, the disciples and others were perplexed because they were surrounded by a “multitude” and likely had been touched, brushed, or jostled by many people. At any rate, the woman confessed and Jesus told her that her faith had made her whole or well.

We don’t know how long this interruption or delay took, but while this miracle was being accomplished and the attendant lessons were taught to strengthen the faith of the afflicted woman and the disciples, a messenger from the synagogue ruler’s house arrived. He announced that the little girl, so loved by her father, had died and suggested that it would not be beneficial to trouble the Master further (see Mark 5:31–35). Let’s return to Mark’s account:

“As soon as Jesus heard the word that was spoken, he saith unto the ruler of the synagogue, Be not afraid, only believe” (Mark 5:36).

We know the rest of the story. Jesus, along with Peter, James, and John, accompanied the sorrowful father to the home, corrected the loving but faithless household and took the girl by the

hand and commanded her to arise, which she did. He then commanded the witnesses to confidentiality with respect to these events and finally, ever practical even in the context of performing miracles, the Savior instructed that she should be given something to eat (see Mark 5:37–43).

President Hinckley has shared the experience of his early missionary days. We have heard him describe his discouragement and his father’s advice to forget himself and go to work. That is great advice for all of us as well. I think he was not surprised at his father’s counsel. On the day President Hinckley left for his mission, his father gave him a card with these words typed on it: “Be not afraid, only believe.”³

Our faith is essential to, and our fears are antithetical to, our faith. That is why we should always read the next verse in James that follows the one Joseph quoted. Let me repeat both for us now.

“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

“But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed” (James 1:5–6).

Think of another example involving faith and water. Peter walked on the water because he had faith, and he sank into the water when he wavered or his faith failed him (see Matt. 14:27–29). As with many of the Savior’s miracles, we likely do not understand all of His purposes and all of the lessons that might be learned from this event on the Sea of Galilee. It does seem useful and appropriate as we try to “liken all scriptures” to ourselves (see 1 Ne. 19:23) to think of this experience in our own context rather than as an example of Peter’s momentary weakness.

Like the disciples, while we yearn to have Jesus or His representative, the Holy Ghost, with us at all times, we too often have periods of separation. Almost always, in our day, such separation is a result of our individual actions or neglect. At any rate, Jesus had sent the disciples away in a ship as He went to pray in solitude. A windy storm came up on the Sea of Galilee, as it frequently does, and those on the boat were uncomfortable. As they scanned the horizon, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and they were understandably surprised and concerned. Let’s pick up the account from Matthew:

“But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

“And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

“And he [meaning Jesus] said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

“But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

“And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?”

“And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased” (Matthew 14:27–32).

We know that this event was not only instructive for Peter, but also to those with him. We understand that this experience strengthened the faith and testimony of all in the ship. Frankly, I wince whenever I hear someone be a little critical of Peter as his faith wavered and he began to sink. I’ve wondered if I would have been one of those never inclined to leave the boat in the first place.

It is clear that this was just one of the many tutorials that helped shape the courageous, confident, and ever-faithful leader Peter became as he presided over the Church in the years to follow. I suspect that the others present were also strengthened and prepared for their future responsibilities.

How might we apply these lessons to ourselves? Just as Jesus said to the grieving father from the synagogue, he might have also said to Peter and his crew, as well as to us, “Be not afraid, only believe.” As He did with the young girl and with the Apostle Peter, Jesus stretched forth His hand. He will help us in ways most appropriate to our circumstances just as He and His Father did for the young Prophet Joseph Smith. None of those helped had perfect faith, but all had some faith and were doing the best that they knew how to do. That applies to us as well.

How does Jesus reach out to us? It may be in ways described in the scriptures, but it is often through the ministrations of the Holy Ghost, who He promised would be given as a “Comforter” to the faithful when the Savior Himself would not be present (see John 14). Another frequent example of His reaching out to us comes through the tender service rendered to us by others, including His servants. Think of this example of the actions of the Apostle Peter in later years and how he likely learned to do what he was doing.

“Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.

“And a certain man lame from his mother’s womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple;

“Who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms.

“And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us.

“And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them.

“Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.

“And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength” (Acts 3:1–7).

All of this gives us added understanding of what the resurrected Jesus meant as He instructed His disciples in the Western Hemisphere as to their responsibilities. He said:

“Therefore, what manner of men [and women] ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Ne. 27:27). Likewise, as He prepared to “go unto the Father,” He invoked this blessing and this promise which apply to all of us as well in our own lives and challenges:

“Whatsoever things ye shall ask the Father in my name shall be given unto you.

“Therefore, ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you; for he [or she] that asketh, receiveth; and unto him [or her] that knocketh, it shall be opened” (3 Ne. 27:28–29).

It is in following Jesus and the pattern He has given for proper and faithful living that we find the secrets of increasing the faith that we so vitally need. It is in serving others and following the Savior’s prescriptions that we increase both the faith of others and our own as well. It is in so doing we realize that the Lord knows best what we really need and that our lives, including the unexpected twists and turns, are in His loving hands.

It is my witness that He lives and that our Father in Heaven knows us better than we know ourselves. He hears our prayers and answers them, not necessarily to our immediate preferences but to our ultimate benefit because of the Atonement and intercession of His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray and whose example we seek to emulate.

Notes

1. *Ensign*, November 1987, 51.
2. *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972).
3. *Discourses of President Gordon B. Hinckley*, vol. 2, 557.