

Faith Unto Life and Salvation
Sacrament Meeting Talk 23 May 2004

Isn't she going to be a great missionary companion!! I do love her very much and appreciate her faith in accepting our mission call.

Today I want to talk about faith, or more precisely the process of developing faith. I will do this by reviewing my own life and how my faith has developed. This is not meant to appear boastful by any means. I hope you will find parallels regarding your own faith. As you will see, my process to date has been trial and error, and the conclusion is that developing faith sufficient to produce "Eternal life and salvation" is a life long process that is continuing for me.

Alma 32:21-43 teaches us that we are given "the word of God", and our desire to believe the word is compared to a seed. The seed sprouts, so we know it is good. We nourish the small plant, it becomes a tree, we continue to nourish and wait and the tree grows and matures and eventually yields good fruit. We partake of the fruit—note the parallel to Lehi's vision—which is "sweet above all that is sweet." Meaning that our faith can grow strong enough to produce the fruit of Eternal life for us. Now we know the bottom line, but how does this happen in real life?

About the time I was baptized I memorized the first 4 Articles of Faith, I had intended to learn them all, but somehow stopped after #4. Since #4 was the last one that I memorized, it kind of stuck in my brain for years.

We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ; second Repentance; third, Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, the Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost.

At age 8, I really didn't understand much about Faith. I did have a pretty good idea about repentance though. I had been baptized, and I had received the Gift of the Holy Ghost. My simple logic was that if I had done steps 2,3,&4, in a 4 step process, I somehow had step 1 covered. So I didn't think much about Faith, and continued in my state of ignorant bliss for several years.

By my mid teens, after experiencing the death of my Father and then a Grandfather that I had always been very close to, I had grown to really care about the gospel and had developed a simple personal testimony. I became very grateful to be alive at this time, in Utah surrounded by people of faith, and part of a family that was strong in the gospel. But as I pondered my blessings, I realized they were all gifts for which I had done nothing. What if I had been born in a different place or situation? If I hadn't been "given" the gospel at birth, would I have ever found it, or it found me? If it did find me, would I have had the faith to accept it?

I was testing the strength of my faith----which was not yet a strong tree yielding the fruit mentioned in Alma 32. These questions didn't cause me to abandon the faith that I had, only to wonder how to build it.

Immediately after High School graduation, in 1964, I had the opportunity to go to the Soviet Union for 2 months to study the language and history of Russia. This opportunity literally fell in my lap due to some Russian language classes I had taken.

This was truly a life changing miracle when viewed now from hindsight perspective. I was able to see a world I had only heard and read about. It was interesting and enlightening. When I returned to Spanish Fork, I found my whole value system was permanently altered---for the better. My appreciation for my heritage and the church was much stronger, and my love of the gospel was deeper.

As I really read the Book of Mormon for the first time, you know, following the ‘ponder and pray’ advice, I felt a real change in my faith. I was able to stand at my mission farewell several months later and declare that if I had been born without the gospel in my life, I truly believed I would have had the intellectual curiosity and spiritual sensitivity to find it and embrace it. I had a new level of spiritual self confidence I had never felt before. I liked the feeling---it was good. Maybe now my faith was capable of producing some fruit.

As I arrived in Japan as a missionary in March of 1965, the church was alive with excitement as 300 faithful saints prepared to fly to Hawaii that summer to visit the temple. Only a handful of the 9,000 members then in Japan had ever been to a temple. The economics were prohibitive. The cost of a single person making the roundtrip to Hawaii, was equal to the average annual income of a Japanese factory worker at the time.

I saw families making great sacrifice including selling their homes and their belongings to go to the temple; I saw other members actually donating all they could spare and more to help their brothers and sisters get to the temple; I saw a family of five trying to decide which one of their 3 children to take on this excursion, trusting in the Lord, that somehow a future opportunity would come to have the other 2 children sealed to them.

This was a level of faith I had never experienced first hand! I ask myself, “Would I have done this?” The answer came back, “I don’t think so.” Then an easier question, “Would I have even considered this level of sacrifice and risk?” The answer: probably not? I had flunked this test of my faith!

But this experience triggered a much stronger desire inside my heart to develop the faith I had witnessed in others. I felt somewhat like King Lamoni’s Father felt after he had witnessed the faith of his son Lamoni, and the missionaries, Ammon and Aaron. In Alma 22:15 the King asks, “What shall I do that I may have this eternal life of which thou hast spoken? Yea, what shall I do that I may be born of God, having this wicked spirit rooted out of my breast, and receive his Spirit, that I may be filled with joy, that I may not be cast off at the last day? Behold, said he, I will give up all that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy.”

I wrote about my feelings in letters to my family. That Christmas my sister sent me a copy of “Lectures on Faith”. These lectures were prepared and presented under the direction of Joseph Smith at the “School of the Prophets” in Kirkland. The stated purposed was to “prepare the Elders” who would be called to missions. That sounded like a fit for me!! As I studied these teachings I found explanations for many of my questions, and more importantly I found guidance as to what I could do to develop more faith.

The first few lectures teach (among other things) that the seed of faith is planted by hearing the testimony of others, often family. And that faith comes by hearing the word of God. As Paul taught in Romans 10:14, “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?” These teachings fit well for me, I had experienced them in my own life.

I also found clear answers to the questions I was pondering at the time. Paraphrasing from Lecture 6, “For a man to lay down his all-his character and reputation, his honor, his possessions, his family, and even his own life, for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ-requires more than mere belief or supposition that he is doing the will of God. It requires actual knowledge, realizing that when these sufferings are ended, he will enter into eternal rest and be a partaker of the glory of God.”

In my words, to be willing to let go of everything we have, that is, to consecrate all that we have to the Lord, requires personal knowledge that we are doing the Lord’s will.

Continuing in Lecture 6, we find the often quoted principle, “... a religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation...”

This is further clarified a few sentences later, “Those, then, who make this sacrifice will have the testimony that their course is pleasing in the sight of God. And those who have this testimony will have faith to lay hold on eternal life and will be enabled, through faith, to endure unto the end and receive the crown that is laid up for them....”

Here was a clear description for the process of developing the faith that I desired:
As we truly consecrate everything to the Lord, we receive personal knowledge of Him and His will. Then by aligning our wills to His, we gain the faith to endure to the end and lay hold of Eternal life. Simple process, right? But a life long effort for us!

Over the ensuing years I have pondered these teachings and principles in context of my own life experiences. Scripture stories like the widow’s mite (Mark 12:41-44) and the rich young man (Matt 19:16-22) have pricked my heart. But most poignant for me has been the way stories of my pioneer ancestors which I had heard from my youth, now have begun to take on deeper meaning and provide more valuable insight.

One example is Stephen Markham who was a close friend to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Stephen Markham joined the Church in the East, sold his property, and came to Nauvoo (by way of Missouri) with a bag of gold. He listened to the Prophet admonish the people that the Lord wanted them to complete the Nauvoo Temple and urge the people to give of their means, that the temple might be built. At the close of the meeting Stephen Markham came forward and put the little bag of gold upon the rostrum: "Use this for the temple," he said.

Stephen was a good cabinet and furniture maker. He started again from scratch and was able to build a fine two story brick home in Nauvoo. Two years later he heard that the Prophet Joseph was in debt. Joseph was running a store. The members of the Church were taking advantage of him. They were getting goods on credit and not paying their debts, knowing the Prophet would hardly sue them. Hearing this account, Stephen Markham sold his home, moved his family into a tent, and came and laid the proceeds in the Prophet's hands, saying, "Pay off your debts. We need you as a prophet of the Church."

I have many times asked, do I have the faith to do something like Stephen Markham did? Would I even consider it?

Another example is Jens and Elsie Nielson.

Jens and Elsie joined the church in Denmark in 1854 where he was a prosperous farmer. They immediately started preparations to immigrate to Utah. But the Conference President (Mission President in today's terms) told Jens that he had been warned and it was his duty to warn others. Though this counsel was opposite of Jens' own will, he states, "the Spirit whispered to me I must obey, for obedience is better than sacrifice." Jens served as a missionary and branch president in Denmark for two years, then was honorably released to go to Zion. He sold his property for an attractive sum and with his wife and only son left for America.

Upon arriving at the end of the railroad in Iowa, Jens and Elsie learned that many members there had no money to buy what was needed to get to Utah. At the request of Priesthood leaders, they shunned relative wealth and security and let all of their money and belongings go to the Church except enough to buy a handcart, and to stock it with 15 pounds of belongings per person. They could have obtained wagons, horses, stacks of food and other supplies and traveled west in relative style and comfort, not to mention leaving early enough to beat the winter. But instead, Jens and Elsie became part of the Willie handcart company in the late Summer of 1856.

Some where on the frozen plains of Wyoming, shortly after they had buried their only son in a shallow grave, having had no food for days, Jens gave up, laid down in the snow and asked to be left behind because he could go no further on his badly frozen feet. If you believe men have a monopoly on strength and courage, then listen to Elsie's response, "Get in the cart and ride, I can't leave you, I can pull the cart." There in the snow they made a commitment to the Lord, that they would continue and if they survived they would 'without question or hesitation', do whatever Priesthood leaders asked them to do for the rest of their lives. Jens had to suffer the humiliation of riding while Elsie pulled like an ox. She made it to the next campsite, which turned out to be where the help from Salt Lake reached the Willie company. For the record, Jens was about 6' 2" and well over 200 pounds. Elsie was 4' 11" and under a hundred pounds!!! Brethren, this is a good example of the need to marry a woman so devoted and good that she will drag your sorry carcass to the Celestial Kingdom!! I have followed that example.

Do I have the faith to do something like Jens and Elsie Nielson did? Would I even consider it?

Given the faith and sacrifice that these two men demonstrated, what reward did they get in this life? Stephen helped colonize Spanish Fork and was Bishop there for many of the last years of his life. Jens, who limped badly on permanently deformed feet, moved six times, helping to colonize six settlements in southern Utah. When Jens was older than I am now, he was called as a member of the San Juan Mission that made the nearly impossible trek through the Hole-in-the-Rock and across southern Utah to settle San Juan county. There he was the first bishop in Bluff, serving for 26 years.

Both Stephen and Jens died poor by material standards, and neither received any significant notoriety from the world or even the church in their lifetimes. However, they clearly had the faith to see beyond mortality in making their choices, and must have had assurances that their hearts and wills were aligned with Heavenly Father's will. They are real world examples for me of the process outlined in Lectures on Faith.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught in the 2002 April conference and reiterated in the Priesthood session last month: "In striving for ultimate submission, our wills constitute all we really have to give to God.

The usual gifts and their derivatives we give to Him could be stamped justifiably “Return to Sender,” with a capital S. ...”

He continued, “In pondering and pursuing consecration, understandably we tremble inwardly at what may be required. Yet the Lord has said consolingly, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Do we really believe Him? He has also promised to make weak things strong. Are we really willing to submit to that process? Yet if we desire fullness, we cannot hold back part!”

I believe Stephen Markham and Jens Nielson understood and practiced the principles taught in Elder Maxwell’s message. Am I there yet? No. Could I get there---I really want to, I am trying.

For the last several years, in my personal prayers, I have asked to recognize opportunities to consecrate with no part held back, then have the courage to do it. I can testify it does cause internal trembling. I feel the Lord has answered my prayers, our mission call is a good example.

For the last decade or more, my professional positions have exceeded what I ever expected or sought for. I worked with good people, I liked what I did, and I felt the world was a better place because of my efforts. My compensation more than met our needs. The accumulation that resulted allowed us to be charitable in many ways. At the same time, I held responsible callings in church and some of my home teaching assignments were with families that had unusual needs. My employer expected me to continue working for 5 more years. It would have been easy to continue as we were, doing good through donations, having time to play with grandkids, and contributing in our local ward. But the spirit has prompted me for many years that what would be of most worth to me would be to retire as early as possible and serve as missionaries.

After a few “false starts,” I was able to retire and we moved to Provo to get our personal affairs on “auto pilot” so we would be able to truly serve full time, as missionaries. As we completed the mission application forms, we both felt impressed to leave blank the “preferences” section. This does cause some internal trembling. For Julie, who does not have the experience of a previous full time mission, this was a tremendous act of faith, involving subduing her own will.

The details of our call were a surprise, not a location we had thought about, and not an assignment we even knew existed. But we both felt the spirit acknowledge to us that this was indeed “our call.” Subsequently, we have learned details about the process of our being selected for this specific assignment, and there is NO question we have been prepared for this calling at this specific time. Now I am the one with internal trembling. I believe the Lord has asked us to go to West Africa, identify some specific needs and develop and implement appropriate solutions to help facilitate the continued rapid growth of the church there.

My goal is to learn to serve with nothing held back, that I might be blessed to know the Lord’s will and be able to follow it. And thus, move forward with my eternal companion on the path to gain faith sufficient to produce life and salvation.

Brothers and Sisters, I appreciate the tolerance, support and love you have shown to me. I ask for your continued faith and prayers for us and the people of West Africa. I know that we have a loving, merciful Father in Heaven, and that His Son, Jesus Christ, through the atonement, is our literal Savior, and Eternal advocate with the Father. I leave you that testimony, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen