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On Faith

Our Nature

Let me tell you how I've wrestled a little with the opposing doctrines of humility and eternal worth inside me and where I stand today. I'm going to get a little personal today; please forgive me. I'm publicly hoping this is just me, but I will confide in you my friends that I am also secretly hoping that it isn't just me, but that we're all in this together and that we can talk about it and maybe come to a higher understanding of God and of ourselves.

Sometimes I really believe that I am a child of God. I feel powerful and good. I see myself as a noble prince in embryo—with super powers—and it makes me behave better. I feel that I have great eternal worth (D&C 18:10) and I know that God loves me.

And then other days I see myself as a worthless worm, as King Benjamin's people saw themselves: "less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2). I feel not just humbled by my weakness (Ether 12:27), but humiliated by it. I say the wrong words, do the wrong things, think the wrong thoughts, and feel the wrong feelings. I sometimes catch me hating myself, and that is wrong (which makes me feel even worse. I know—it's a bad cycle). I cannot believe that I am worth anything to anybody and would prefer to just disappear and rid the world of my stupidity and thoughtlessness.

In time however, I finally learned this: that God loves me in spite of my flaws. In fact, all of his children are flawed. But He still thinks I'm worth loving and rooting for. How do I know this? One day when I was in serious doubt of it, I asked him fervently if I was really worth anything, especially considering my weakness and sins. He answered my prayer, and his answer was "Yes! Yes Scott, I love you. You are my son." I learned what Nephi meant by "tender mercies" (1 Nephi 1:20). And then I imagined that He quoted Winston Churchill to me: "Scott: Never, never, never give up."

So I didn't then and I won't now. God loves me and I'm pretty sure he loves you too. If you're in doubt, why don't you ask him yourself?

Knowing that God loves me and I am his son gives me great power, but this didn't immediately change my nature: I am still flawed. But in those times when I am confronted, or rather, smacked in the head, with my mortal weakness, instead of hating myself for it, I've learned it's a good time to stop and turn to God in humility: "for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them" (Ether 12:27).

In this way, I can still occasionally feel like a worm for all the unsmart things I do, and know that God loves me and wants me to keep trying and he will help me. We really are God's offspring my friends. But there are some important differences between God's nature and our natures.

God's Nature

God we know is all-knowing and all-powerful. He does not make mistakes. He does not need to experiment to know something, unlike we who must rely on inefficient scientific methods to learn (and even then it's largely a process of subtraction, learning temporal truths only after we've brushed away as many errors as we can think of). God is not like that: his knowledge is complete and perfect and his power unbounded. God's Church is perfectly organized for the times, and his doctrine is true and consistent.

Mind the Gap

By studying God's nature we see clearly that there is a native distance between us and God. Part of the distance between us, the difference in our natures, came because of the Fall of Adam and it affects each one of us in unique ways. Though we do have in common that we commit sin because of our fallen natures. The Apostle Paul wrote, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

We also make quite a few—while not necessarily evil—astonishingly bad decisions. It seems to peak during the teen years, and never fully goes away. Whether it be financial ignorance, general gullibility, physical clumsiness, mechanical ineptitude, or (my personal favorite) selective incompetence with predictive memory loss, all of us make bad decisions. The difference

between sins and mistakes is illustrated in the Indian proverb: "Call on God, but row away from the rocks."

Even in the Church, leaders occasionally make mistakes. But when we begin to live by faith, our mistakes, or the mistakes of those we sustain as leaders in the Church can be turned into opportunities for us to draw closer to God through faith. God will make the most heavenly lemonade out of our lemons. He can even make this glorious lemonade from lemons we've used over and over.

The World's Plan Versus God's Plan

In the world, things work pretty much how Korihor described it: "every man fare[s] in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prosper[s] according to his genius, and ... every man conquer[s] according to his strength" (Alma 30:17). The really clever people make a lot of money or get a lot of power and so forth. But this is not how things work in God's plan.

In God's plan, there is no space in which faith cannot have power. A small, ignorant and powerless child can exercise faith, and God will work miracles for that child. I've seen that many times in my own family. An uneducated man or woman, filled with superstitions or incorrect knowledge of how the world works can exercise faith in Christ and be saved or have other miracles worked for him or her. Faith gives power to the weak things of the world, to the unlearned, to the despised. It equalizes power in the eternal scheme of things: salvation is not for the wise, the wealthy, or the learned, but to the humble seekers of truth.

The Lord tells us that "The weak things of the world shall come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones, that man should not counsel his fellow man, neither trust in the arm of flesh" (D&C 1:19). In this way, all of God's children have an opportunity to exercise faith and overcome the effects of the Fall and return to stay in God's presence.

Overcoming by Faith

I want to talk about the role of faith in bridging this gap between us and

God created by the Fall. Where the real power is, of course, is in the Atonement of Christ and in his grace. No matter what we do, we are saved by grace (2 Nephi 10:24, 25:23), but Christ's grace is enabled by our faith in him. We have the pivotal role in our own salvation because we are "free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:27).

One of our first big steps in exercising faith in Christ begins when we are baptized. Nephi calls this the "gate" (2 Nephi 31:17–18). And while it takes great faith to enter that gate, it takes even greater faith to stay on the path that leads to eternal life until the end of our mortal lives. There will come to each of us many times in our lives, an ironic situation, a spiritual paradox, or a temptation that will rock us to the core of our being.

The situation will be beyond our mortal power to overcome, no matter how strong our determination, no matter how strong our will power, no matter how advanced spiritually we may become. I am telling you that there will be trials in your life and in mine which will be more than we can bear alone.

But this is the message of the gospel: that we learn to live by faith in Christ and overcome by faith in Christ. It is *not* that we try to overcome all that we can without faith, and whatever is leftover we turn to the Lord for help with.

Christ's way of overcoming weakness and temptation and sin is the only true way by definition. The Lord doesn't want us to merely overcome, He wants us to overcome by faith in him. Our strength is at its peak when we humbly and meekly rely on Christ for our daily salvation. As the hymn teaches us: "My weakness in mercy He covers with pow'r, and, walking by faith, I am blest ev'ry hour" (Hymns, 89).

The Substance and Degree of Our Faith

Given that faith is crucial to accessing Christ's atonement and grace, I feel it's important to understand where faith comes from so we can go there and get more of it. First, faith is a gift. It is one of the spiritual gifts listed in the scriptures: "And to another [is given by the Spirit of God], exceedingly great

faith" (Moroni 10:11). From this verse and many others it is plain that faith is not a simple matter of "have it" or "don't have it". It is a matter of substance and a matter of degree also.

For example, many believe that Christ has power to forgive sins, but do not have enough faith to believe it can work for them. Many have faith that Christ has power to change hearts, but not enough faith to call upon God and receive that changed heart for himself. One man may believe that Christ can change his heart for some things, but may not have enough faith to overcome this one great thorn in the flesh for him.

What we pray for, how fervently we pray, and how frequently our minds are turned heavenward is our own personal benchmark for the substance and strength of our faith.

The Source of Faith

So how do we get more faith or make our faith stronger, now that we understand that it is a spiritual gift? We get it in the same way we get everything else we need for our salvation: we go to God and ask him for it.

But it begins with believing in his words. "Now, we will compare the word unto a seed," said Alma. This word, if we do not cast it out by our unbelief, will take hold in our hearts and enlighten us and become delicious. "Now behold, would not this increase your faith? I say unto you, Yea" (Alma 32:28–29).

By diligently searching the words of Christ, we'll be exposed to some powerful ideas. For example, we might read how a man received a forgiveness of his sins, or had "many mighty miracles" (Alma 26:12) worked for him, or how one was inspired by the Spirit of God to return to his house where someone would be waiting for him and would bless him (Alma 8:20). We might read that God answers all sincere and righteous prayers (Mormon 9:21). We might read how the Holy Ghost will teach us all things what we should do (2 Nephi 32:5). When we read God's word, we shouldn't just read it, we must choose to believe it also. When we can begin to believe God's word as He gives it to us, our faith will increase also. So feast upon the words of Christ (2 Nephi 32:3).

Now, once we have an idea of what is possible, the next step is to cry. Listen to what Alma the Younger said about crying:

And it came to pass that I was three days and three nights in the most bitter pain and anguish of soul; and never, until I did cry out unto the Lord Jesus Christ for mercy, did I receive a remission of my sins. But behold, I did cry unto him and I did find peace to my soul (Alma 38.8).

Finally, here's what Aminadab told the Lamanite guards:

You must repent, and cry unto the voice, even until ye shall have faith in Christ...; and when ye shall do this, the cloud of darkness shall be removed from overshadowing you. And it came to pass that they all did begin to cry unto the voice of him who had shaken the earth; yea, they did cry even until the cloud of darkness was dispersed (Helaman 5:41–42).

Many other scriptures use this word 'cry'. It's more powerful than just talking to the Lord. If you have a problem, *cry* unto God for help. If you don't have enough faith, you can pray for more faith. Christ's apostles asked of him in person: "Lord, increase our faith" (Matt. 17:5).

Stumbling-blocks

We should probably talk about a few of the most common things that get in the way of exercising our faith fully.

One stumbling-block we face is that we acquire "already-know-that" syndrome. Because we teach the same principles in the Church over and over, it is easy to hear a word, "faith" for example, and say, "Oh, I already know about that." The problem is that we only think we know. The Lord can teach us by the Holy Ghost new things with old words and old ideas. He teaches us line upon line as we are prepared for it (2 Nephi 28:30).

We should never believe that we've *finally* learned a doctrine, or that we *finally* understand a passage of scripture. To the humble seeker of truth, all

experiences continue to teach us or add an important nuance to something we understood only partially before.

Another hindrance to believing and exercising our faith is the case where someone close to us sets a bad example. This could be a church leader or a parent or a sibling or just someone we admire and think highly of. Do not let this trip you up. It is impossible for us to practice everything we preach, especially in the Church where we strive to preach the pure doctrine of Christ. There will always be gaps between the divine ideal and the mortal real. Do not be discouraged by a bad example! Do not let this hurt your faith. Rather, let it serve as a reminder of our inherent differences with God and our need of constant communion to stay in his grace.

The final stumbling block to our faith I'll discuss today is sin. I think this is pretty plain to anyone who has sinned, so I'll simply state that when you sin, the Spirit of the Lord withdraws itself from you. We know that God does not dwell in unholy temples (Alma 34:36). When the Spirit withdraws, a portion of the light he brings goes with him, along with a degree of the gifts he brings as well. Faith is a gift of the Spirit of God, and when he goes, he takes his gifts with him. To what degree those leave, I do not know, but I only know from personal experience that a portion of the gift of faith is among the first to be taken away. How can we stand before God and plead with him in boldness, knowing that our souls are stained and we have not kept his commandments (Alma 5:22)? We can't, and we must repent of our sins, exercising as much faith as we have to become clean and pure again.

When virtue garnishes our thoughts unceasingly, then our confidence will wax strong in the presence of God (D&C 121:45). This brings us to a description of some of the blessings one may expect when we live by faith.

What Faith Looks Like

Someone who is living by faith will look for ways to more fully keep God's commandments. As with all people, a person living by faith will have weakness. This weakness will manifest itself in unique ways in every child of God as I said earlier. Some may struggle with being completely honest. Some may struggle to control their anger and its manifestations such as holding grudges or not forgiving others. Some may struggle with an

addiction of some kind, or with unwholesome feelings inside them.

One example the bishop asked that I talk about was the payment of tithes and offerings. Elder Sheldon F. Child of the Seventy gave a talk about the faith required to pay tithing. He said, "I remember a faithful father in the Philippines telling of paying his meager tithing to the bishop one Sunday and then leading his children home from church, knowing full well that there was no food for them. As they were walking along, a huge breadfruit dropped from a tree right in front of them. He immediately looked up and thanked God for opening the windows of heaven and sending him a breadfruit to feed his children" (*Ensign*, May 2008, p. 80).

We express our faith by our prayers and obedience. If we don't have enough faith to keep a particular commandment, or we struggle in some particular way and just can't overcome with our existing faith, we can ask God for more faith. We can fast and pray and do all that we can until that faith comes, and it will come if we are determined. So be determined!

The End of Our Faith

When a man or woman consistently lives by faith, this man or woman naturally draws closer to God both in the strength of His presence with them, and in their own natures. Their natures will have changed because they have received enough faith to call upon God in the name of his holy Son, and by the power of the atonement they have been made new creatures in Christ (Mosiah 27:26), holy without spot. This is the objective of our faith: a changed and sanctified heart in this world, and the firm hope of eternal life in the world to come.

Many in this life have received a remission of their sins, who have become purified or justified, but they remain *unsanctified* because they will not yield their hearts to God and change their purpose (D&C 121:34–35). They cling to their own agenda for this life, unwilling to completely let the Lord have them for his own purposes.

The final step we take on this mortal journey toward godliness is yielding our hearts to God. Listen to this description of the Nephites:

They did fast and pray oft, and did wax stronger and stronger in their humility, and firmer and firmer in the faith of Christ, unto the filling their souls with joy and consolation, yea, even to the purifying *and* the sanctification of their hearts, which sanctification cometh because of their yielding their hearts unto God (Helaman 3:35, emphasis mine).

These humble people were not only purified of their uncleanness, but they were then made holy—sanctified—by the same power, but that power comes only after a higher expression of faith. This is the sacrifice Christ asks of us to obtain that faith:

And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost (3 Nephi 9:20).

Those who make this sacrifice are denying themselves of all ungodliness:

If ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; ... [and] then are ye sanctified in Christ by the grace of God, through the shedding of the blood of Christ, which is in the covenant of the Father unto the remission of your sins, that ye become holy, without spot (Moroni 10:32–33).

The *Lectures on Faith* teach it is vain for us to believe that we "are heirs with those...who have offered their all in sacrifice" unless we, "in like manner, offer unto [God] the same sacrifice, and through that offering obtain the knowledge that [we] are accepted of him" (Lecture 6:8).

Let us offer this sacrifice, my brothers and sisters. Let us increase our faith in the Lord Jesus and in his atonement and in his grace. That we may do so and "lay hold upon every good thing" (Moroni 7:19–25) and be saved in his kingdom at the last day is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.