

Signs and Mechanisms of Faith

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A man fell off of a cliff and was hanging precariously from a tree branch. He cried out “God, please help me!” God answered, “Have faith and I will protect you. Let go off the branch.” The man, stunned, cried out, “Is there anyone else up there?”

What is faith?

Faith is possibly the single most important thing to understand and unlock the mysteries of. Without it, the whole Plan of Salvation as made possible by Jesus Christ becomes void. It is the Ultimate Prerequisite. There are many critical and eternally valuable passages in the Bible that have guided the world on faith in Jesus Christ for millennia. Yet, there has never before been any single book that provides as high a level of detail and clarity on the subject as does the Book of Mormon.

Several different verses therein converge to a particular conception of faith. In Ether 12, Moroni begins a lengthy discourse surrounding the power of faith. In verse 6, he begins by defining faith as, “things which are hoped for and not seen.” He goes on to specify, “Dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.” In Alma 32:21 a very similar definition is given: “therefore, if ye have faith, ye hope for things which are not seen, *which are true*” (emphasis added).

Thus, true faith is that which seeks the truth; the type of faith that ought to be pursued must presuppose that there is such a thing as objective truth. In the immortal words of President Russell M. Nelson, “Truth is truth. Some things are simply true. The arbiter of truth is God.”¹ The late President Spencer W. Kimball has written that, “If men are really humble, they will realize that they *discover*, but do not *create*, truth” (emphasis added).² In *Mormon Doctrine*, Bruce R. McConkie echoed a

¹ <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/russell-m-nelson/love-laws-god/>

² <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball/absolute-truth/>

similar sentiment: “Faith and truth cannot be separated; if there is to be faith ... there must first be truth.”

Sign Seeking versus True Faith

Humility is a necessary prerequisite of faith. The lack of humility has proven reliably to impede and destroy faith. One oft-cited example of this in the scriptures is known as *sign seeking*. What is sign seeking, and what can be done to circumvent it?

Ultimately, sign seeking is a symptom, or manifestation, of an attitude of unwillingness. Sign seeking does not enable you to work towards any understanding. Sign seeking does not require one to acknowledge one’s shortcomings in humility. Sign seeking does not build a relationship with Heavenly Father through faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, the very mindset of sign seeking is contradictory. Even if a sign were to be given to a sign seeker, every reason could be concocted to discredit the legitimacy of the sign. Sign seeking produces an outlook that reduces the most powerful of angelic visitations to a mere hallucination. It cheapens the Word of God, and falsely relegates it to the minds of madmen. Certainly, a gift cannot be bestowed upon the unwilling.

There are many examples of sign seeking in the scriptures. In Alma 14, Alma and Amulek are being held trial to be executed for believing in God. The following exposition is given in verse 24:

24 And the chief judge stood before them, and smote them again, and said unto them: If ye have the power of God deliver yourselves from these bands, and then we will believe that the Lord will destroy this people according to your words.

A similar scenario can be found, in Alma 30. The text introduces an anti-Christ figure named Korihor that is having great success in leading people away from the Gospel. In verses 33 and 34, we find the following dialogue between him and Alma:

33 And now Korihor said unto Alma: If thou wilt show me a sign, that I may be convinced that there is a God, yeah, show unto me that he hath power, and *then* will I be convinced of the truth of thy words.

34 But Alma said unto him: Thou hast had signs enough; will ye tempt your God? Will ye say, Show unto me a sign, when ye have the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets? The scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator.

Why is it that this attitude of sign seeking is so destructive? In *Doctrinal Commentary* by Robert L. Millet and Joseph F. McConkie, the following perspective on the issue is brought to light:

Of one thing we have perfect assurance—the last thing wanted by those who demand signs is signs; the last thing wanted by those who demand evidence is evidence. A world of signs and evidences would not soften their hearts. The leaders of the Jews sought signs and Christ gave them signs sufficient to convince any people, yet they rejected him.

Finally, Alma addresses the root of this problem in Alma 32:17-18, 20-22 (emphasis added):

17 Yea, there are many who do say: If thou wilt show unto us a sign from heaven, then we shall know of a surety; then we shall believe.

18 Now I ask, is this faith? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for if a man *knoweth* a thing he hath no cause to believe, for he *knoweth* it.

20 Now of this thing ye must judge. Behold, I say unto you, that it is on the one hand even as it is on the other; and it shall be unto every man according to his work.

21 And now as I said concerning faith—faith is *not to have a perfect knowledge* of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.

22 ... I would that ye should remember, that God is merciful into all who believe on his name; therefore he desireth, *in the first place*, that ye should believe, yeah, even on his word.

Alma clarifies that the reason why a direct, unmistakable revelatory experience (“a sign from heaven” as phrased in verse 17) cannot produce faith is because it is antithetical to the definition of faith itself. In other words, if the fullness of the Gospel and every mystery of God were unfolded, it would remove any necessity to exercise trust in God. The strength of one’s faith is stringent upon their willingness to trust in what is unknown and accept what is known. Thus, seeking to understand the *mechanisms* through which a legitimate testimony could be obtained is far superior to seeking signs.

All Faith Necessitates a Preparation

A foundational concept expounded upon in the Book of Mormon is how there must be a “compelling,” or agent of compelling, for faith to come about in the first place. Careful study of one particular chapter, Alma 32, unlocks supremely powerful truths about faith and its mechanisms that can be powerful instruments in building a testimony of the Restored Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Leading up to this chapter, Alma and his missionaries entered into the land of Antionum. When they first arrived they are astonished at the extent of the Zoramite religious practices, which mostly consisted of climbing a tower and reciting a vain and hypocritical prayer. Much like the Pharisees, these Zoramites drew near to the Lord only with their lips and not with their hearts.³

This very tradition induced the Zoramites into a state where they were in no wise ready to receive the Gospel; the presence of faux religiosity is in many ways far more damning than the lack of religiosity. It deceives practitioners into staking their beliefs in that which is phony or counterfeit. Conversely, a lack of genuine religiosity in times of trial is more likely to provoke a person to seek a genuine form of religiosity. “Carnal security” is an ever-pervasive hindrance to feeling the spirit.⁴ While in this feeling of comfort, it is incredibly difficult to remember the Lord and do what is right. It tricks the

³ See Matthew 6:5-8; Luke 18:9-14; 20:47.

⁴ See 2 Nephi 28:21; D&C 3:4; 67:10-12.

mind and spirit into believing that there is no need to seek out those things which are of God. In Alma 32:4-6 (emphasis added) we find an antidote to this state of being:

4 Now, as Alma was teaching and speaking unto the people upon the hill Onidah, there came a great multitude unto him ... of whom were poor in heart, because of their poverty as to the things of the world.

5 And they came unto Alma; and the one who was the foremost among them said unto him: Behold, what shall these my brethren do, for they are despised of all men because of their poverty, yea, and more especially by our priests; for they have cast us out of our synagogues which we have labored abundantly to build with our own hands; and they have cast us out because of our exceeding poverty; and we have no place to worship our God; and behold, *what shall we do?*

6 And now when Alma heard this, he turned him about, his face immediately towards him, and he beheld with great joy; for he beheld that *their afflictions had truly humbled them*, and that they were *in a preparation to hear the word*.

It becomes evident that there is a necessity for being in a “preparation to hear the word,” which can manifest in any number of ways. For many people that path is paved beginning with a crisis in their lives that forces them to confront the question of whether God truly exists. With many of these people, that crucial question may not have otherwise been confronted had they not suffered the aforementioned trial. For others, it may be a doctrine of the Gospel that sparks a curiosity within them which can guide them to seek out the truth of all things through the Spirit. Many more also may be drawn to the Gospel by witnessing its transformative power in the lives of those around them and wonder if a similar transformation could take place within their own lives. Whatever the particular circumstance may be, *faith must begin with some agent of compelling*.

Identifying Faith through Experimentation

The Book of Mormon not only recognizes the prerequisites for faith but outlines a new approach to developing faith that seems to be tailored for this modern dispensation. The pursuit and nurturing of faith is framed as an experiment, one which is grounded and straightforward. In verses 26 and 27, Alma begins this framing by establishing what faith is *not*:

26 Now, as I said concerning faith—that it was not a perfect knowledge—even so it is with my words. Ye cannot know of their surety at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge.

27 But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.

This is arguably the most sober and grounded approach to faith in the whole of the Standard Works. Realistically, people can only be expected to handle the truth “precept upon precept ... line upon line ... here a little and there a little” (Isaiah 28:10). Alma teaches that to begin this process of learning

truths it is necessary to “awake and arouse our faculties ... and exercise [even] a particle of faith” to bring forth the fruits of faith.

Alma’s experiment invokes two pre-requisites: (1) one must give place to the seed in their heart, and (2) one must not cast it out by their unbelief. Alma then instructs the reader to take notice of the effects that the Holy Spirit can have. Two effects specifically are named: the “swelling motions” in our heart (emotional), as well as the enlightening of our understanding (mental). The plurality of manifestations of the Spirit is of particular interest. He then highlights an important observation:

28 It must needs be that this is a good seed, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul ... yea, it beginneth to be delicious to me.

Before continuing, Alma pauses and emphasizes that we know the seed is good because every seed “bringeth forth unto its own likeness” (31). In Matthew 7:16-18, this same truth was taught by Jesus Christ in Galilee:

16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles?

17 Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit.

18 A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit.

Discernment is a skill that takes a lifetime to learn, but remembering this principle can provide safety from snares set by the adversary. Alma clarified how to use the Savior’s principle of discernment when it comes to faith. He continues:

33 And now, behold, because ye have tried the experiment, and planted the seed, and it swelleth and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, ye must needs know that the seed is good.

34 And now behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; ... for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls ...

35 O then, is this not real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is light; and whatsoever is light, is good, because it is discernible, therefore ye must know that it is good; and now behold, after ye have tasted this light is your knowledge perfect? Behold I say unto you, Nay; neither must ye lay aside your faith, for ye have only exercised your faith to plant the seed that ye might try the experiment to know if the seed was good.

Alma again plainly acknowledges a reality: the Gospel and the ways of God can only be learned one step at a time. It is not meet to be given the whole truth of all things in one fell swoop. It is impossible to acquire a perfect knowledge of all things, and yet this faith when genuinely exercised can bring forth real, tangible fruit (continuing in the analogy of the seed). It is given as a guarantee that those who earnestly seek confirmation by the Spirit will receive it. Alma provides further instruction:

41 But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, *looking forward to the fruit thereof*, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life.

Notice in particular the charge to “[look] forward to the fruit thereof.” The ultimate lesson in this experiment is that anyone can know of the truthfulness of the Gospel if the seed of faith is cared for diligently, and its fruits are continually sought after. It is only after this course of identifying and cultivating faith can one begin to bring forth signs and miracles by it.

Faith Always Precedes Signs

Throughout the dispensations of the Gospel upon the Earth, faith has always preceded signs and miracles. An enduring doctrine that rings true in the realm of faith is that all things must exist in opposition. In Ether 12, Moroni drew the same conclusion after recounting the marvels and wonders made possible through faith:

6 And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things; I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.

7 For it was by faith that Christ showed himself unto our fathers...

8 ... Because of the faith of men he has shown himself unto the world ... and prepared a way that thereby others might be partakers of the heavenly gift, that they might hope for those things which they have not seen.

10 Behold it was by faith that they of old were called after the holy order of God.

11 ... By faith was the law of Moses given ... and it is by faith that it hath been fulfilled.

12 For if there be no faith among the children of men God can do no miracle among them; wherefore, he showed not himself until after their faith.

13 Behold, it was the faith of Alma and Amulek that caused the prison to tumble to the earth.

14 Behold, it was the faith of Nephi and Lehi that wrought the change upon the Lamanites, that they were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost.

15 Behold, it was the faith of Ammon and his brethren which wrought so great a miracle among the Lamanites.

22 And it is by faith that my fathers have obtained the promise that these things should come unto their brethren through the Gentiles; therefore the Lord hath commanded me, yea, even Jesus Christ.

Moroni then recalls a dialogue he had with the Lord where he makes known his deep insecurities about the “awkwardness of [his] hands” and how worried he was about the mocking of his words by the Gentiles. The Lord then comforts Moroni in verse 27:

27 And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before

me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.

All of God's children, save the One, do not naturally adhere to a principled set of moral codes. The ultimate challenge of this life is to overcome the natural man in spite of divine parentage. Man's weakness is shown not to keep Man in a weak state, but to prepare Man to receive the Gospel in its fullness and "bring to pass [his] immortality and eternal life" (Moses 1:39).

Amulek's Unseen but Effectual Morsel of Faith

What kind of faith is needed for amazing miracles to come to pass? Generally, greater faith corresponds with a greater potential to be blessed of God. However, there can be times where having even a morsel of faith and an inkling of willingness to do the will of God can be greatly magnified beyond measure. In Alma 10, the prophet Alma is in the midst of a great struggle to preach the Gospel to the wicked people of Ammonihah. Amulek, a man who lived amongst the Ammonihahites, recounts the miraculous circumstances in which he meets Alma:

7 As I was journeying ... an angel of the Lord appeared unto me and said: Amulek, return to thine own house, for thou shalt feed a prophet of the Lord; ... for he has fasted many days because of the sins of this people ... and thou shalt receive him into thy house and feed him ... and the blessing of the Lord shall rest upon thee and thy house.

8 And ... I obeyed the voice of the angel, and returned towards my house ... [and] found the man whom the angel said unto me ... and behold it was this same man who has been speaking unto you concerning the things of God.

9 And the angel said unto me he is a holy man; wherefore I know he is a holy man because it was said by an angel of God.

10 And again, I know that [these] things ... are true; for ... as the Lord lived, even so has he sent his angel to make these things manifest unto me; ...

11 For ... he hath blessed mine house ... and my kinsfolk ... and the blessing of the Lord hath rested upon us according to the words which he spake.

A shallow examination of this situation may suggest that it was the visitation of the angel of God *itself* that caused Amulek to know the truth of who Alma was. Yet, the pattern set by Laman and Lemuel is evidence that unless some base threshold of willingness and faith has been attained, even direct visitations from angels will have no lasting effect.⁵ Laman and Lemuel continually chose to remain in their sins and maintained their unwillingness to seek the ways of God. Amulek established in verse 4 that he was a man blessed with great wealth and excellent social standing. While he claimed to have "never [known] much of the ways of the Lord," the situation proved to be more complex. He sought to clarify this in verses 5 and 6:

⁵ See 1 Nephi 3:31; 4:3; 7:10; 16:38; 17:45. These are instances of Laman and Lemuel falling into iniquity or being reprov'd despite having been visited by angels.

5 ... I have seen much of his mysteries and his marvelous power; yea, even in the preservation of the lives of this people.

6 Nevertheless, I did harden my heart, for I was called many times and I would not hear; therefore I knew concerning these things, yet I would not know; therefore I went on rebelling against God, in the wickedness of my heart ...

Thus far, Amulek seems to have a lot in common with Laman and Lemuel. They were both hardhearted and they were both visited by an angel. Why did Amulek ultimately hearken to the voice of the angel, while Laman and Lemuel remained stewing in their own unrighteousness? As Neal A. Maxwell expounded:

Amulek ... is a classic case of an essentially good man being out of touch with the great spiritual realities; he resisted the things of the Spirit because, though he was basically good, he was preoccupied with the cares of the world. When meekness was needed, it was sufficiently there in Amulek. As a result, he became yoked, and he then experienced the costs of discipleship." (*Meek and Lowly*, 12)

Thus, while the angelic visitation was the *literal medium* of communicating the truth, it all ultimately hinged on Amulek's faith and willingness to act when compelled, however small or dormant that faith may have been.

