

## A Sure and Certain Foundation

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BYU Idaho Devotional

In May of last year, President Nelson spoke to you, the young adults of the Church, saying, “You must own your own conversion. No one else can do it for you. . . . I plead with you to take charge of your testimony.”<sup>[1]</sup> A few months later, he extended the same invitation to the entire Church.<sup>[2]</sup> I hope you are acting upon his invitation, that you are owning your own conversion and taking charge of your own testimony.

Over the years, as I have sought to solidify my own testimony, I have been moved by the words and quest of another modern-day prophet. To the young people of his day, President Joseph F. Smith declared, “From my boyhood I have desired to learn the principles of the gospel in such a way and to such an extent that it would matter not to me who might fall from the truth, who might make a mistake, who might fail to continue to follow the example of the Master, my foundation would be sure and certain in the truths that I have learned.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Is your testimony of Jesus Christ and His restored gospel strengthened by, but not dependent on others? Is your foundation sure enough and certain enough that you can remain unshaken even if someone you admire in the faith makes a mistake now, in the future, or in the past? Is your knowledge and testimony of truth strong enough that you can stare down compelling reasons to doubt and choose to believe? Have you learned the principles of the gospel “in such a way” that you can do all this?

In the spring of 1837, for reasons that seemed legitimate to him, Apostle Parley P. Pratt turned his back on the Prophet Joseph Smith and tried to take others with him, including a young convert from Canada whom Parley had taught and baptized just one year earlier. In your mind, I want you to think of someone who has been instrumental in bringing you unto Christ and strengthening your testimony. What if that person reached out to you personally, announced his or

her departure from the Church, and tried to persuade you to leave? Would it rattle you? How would you respond? Many of you have already faced this. Here is how that young Canadian convert responded:

“I am surprised to hear you speak so Brother Parley. Before you left Canada you bore a strong testimony to Joseph Smith being a Prophet of God, and to the truth of the work he has inaugurated; and you said you knew these things by revelation, and the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . . Now, Brother Parley, it is not man that I am following, but the Lord. The principles you taught me led me to Him, and I now have the same testimony that you then rejoiced in. If the work was true six months ago, it is true today; if Joseph was then a prophet, he is now a prophet.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The young Canadian convert was John Taylor, and his response to Parley was instrumental in Parley’s quick return to the Church. John Taylor and Parley P. Pratt were both young adults at the time. Each was faced with what might have been a compelling reason to doubt. I marvel at John’s strength to stay, and I marvel at Parley’s courage and humility to return.

### **Agency in the Matter of Belief**

As you increase your efforts to increase your testimony, you are likely to be confronted with reasons to doubt. President Nelson cautioned, “Don’t pollute [your testimony] with false philosophies of unbelieving men and women.”<sup>[5]</sup> Please hear me and understand: there will always be some reason or another to doubt the truthfulness of this church and gospel. There are arguments and evidence supporting the proposition that there is no God, that Jesus was just a good philosopher-teacher, that Joseph Smith was simply a charismatic storyteller and that this church and gospel are not true. This evidence, these arguments, are on some level appealing and believable, for there are many who believe them.

The existence of such evidence and arguments should neither surprise nor shake you. I invite you to read again 2 Nephi, chapter 2: “It must needs be, that there is an opposition [or, in other words, an opposite] in all things.” Why? Because “The

Lord God gave unto man that he should act for himself. Wherefore, man could not act for himself save it should be that he was enticed by the one or the other.”<sup>[6]</sup>

In short, agency—that is, our ability, our responsibility, to choose for ourselves—is essential in all things, including and beginning with belief. In order to preserve our agency in the matter of belief, there must be opposites from which to choose—reasons to believe and reasons to doubt. God does not give us doubts, nor is He the author of error, but He allows them because it is absolutely critical that you and I choose for ourselves to believe or not to believe. There will never come a time, at least pre-Millennium, when God removes all reason to doubt, for to do so would be to remove all agency in the matter of belief.

Now, I want to be clear—by acknowledging the existence of reasons to doubt, I am not legitimizing them, and I am certainly not advocating or excusing doubt itself. Jesus said, “Doubt not.”<sup>[7]</sup> In the face of reasons to doubt, doubt not.

And what? Did you think Satan would throw up flimsy, easily dismissible reasons to doubt? No! They will be enticing and flattering. If the prince of darkness can transform himself into an angel of light,<sup>[8]</sup> then surely he can put forth ideas and arguments that appear enlightened.

## **Human Tendency and Human Error**

One of Lucifer’s tactics is to play upon our natural human tendency to project natural human tendencies on God. Ignoring or forgetting the fact that His ways and His thoughts are different from and higher than ours,<sup>[9]</sup> we sometimes try to create or recreate God in *our* image so that He and His doctrine align with our thoughts, our ways, our shifting sympathies and evolving values. Discovering that God and His doctrine are not shifting or evolving, but everlasting and unchanging, can become a reason to doubt for some.

Another of Satan’s strategies is to use human error to disprove or diminish God’s truth. Brace yourself—it is possible, even likely, that something you have said or done has become someone else’s reason to doubt. We sometimes have an

unrealistic expectation that God must somehow search out or raise up errorless people to do His work and lead His Church. In 1890, Wilford Woodruff declared, “The Lord will never permit me or any other man who stands as President of this Church to lead you astray. . . . If I were to attempt that, the Lord would remove me out of my place.”<sup>[10]</sup>

What does that statement mean to you? Unfortunately, some have interpreted or distorted it to mean that the Lord will never allow Church leaders to make a mistake. That is simply not the case. It has never been the case. The scriptures repeatedly show that God does His work through humans and those humans make mistakes, sometimes even while God is using them for His purposes. Consider how many times in the Old Testament God used mistake-prone people to establish or preserve His covenant, and guide, sustain, and deliver His covenant people.

Then there’s Peter, the ear cutter-offer<sup>[11]</sup> who denied Christ.<sup>[12]</sup> Given his behavioral history, how could the church he led possibly be true? Yet it was. And finally, there’s Joseph Smith—mistake-prone at times, just like the ancients. But God called and magnified him in the greatest Restoration of truth ever.

And what about you? If the truthfulness of this Church or the truthfulness of your beliefs were judged by your errors, would anyone ever believe what you believe? Would there have been fewer mistakes, fewer messes, if God had only restored His Church and gospel through you?

So, what do we do with error? You can’t hide from the humanness of humans. But it is equally unproductive to seek out error and wallow in it by making it an emphasis of study. You will never come to know and understand the truths of God by studying the errors of man. Nor has God appointed you, me, or anyone to be an ongoing arbiter of error in His leaders, scrutinizing every word or act of apostles and prophets to make sure they fit within our current understanding of correctness. That is not His plan; it is not His order.

## Build upon the Rock of Our Redeemer

What, then, creates a foundation that is sure and certain, regardless of reasons to doubt. Well, if we acquire truth and testimony line upon line,<sup>[13]</sup> I ask you, what is your bottom line, your foundational line? If it is not Jesus Christ, I invite you to immediately make it Jesus Christ. “Remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation . . . a foundation whereon if [you] build [you] cannot fall.”<sup>[14]</sup>

Those who build upon Jesus Christ, will not, *cannot* fall. Those who do not build upon Jesus Christ, ultimately will not be able to stand or withstand. Little wonder, then, that President Nelson has invited you to “make the continual strengthening of your testimony of Jesus Christ your highest priority [and then] watch for miracles to happen in your life.”<sup>[15]</sup> I testify that the greatest miracle is the changing of a heart, the complete conversion of a soul.

In order to receive a sure and unshakable witness of Jesus Christ, we must, as President Nelson urged, “do the spiritual work required”<sup>[16]</sup> to receive such a witness. This work most assuredly includes intently studying the Book of Mormon.

Sometimes, in studying the Book of Mormon or presenting it to others, we are tempted to bypass its primary purpose and jump straight to the collateral conclusion that if the Book of Mormon is true, Joseph Smith is a prophet and this is God’s church. These are logical, accurate conclusions, but I invite you to read the book for its primary purpose—to convince the people of this earth that Jesus is the Christ. I promise that as you do this with an honest, open heart, you will have an experience with Jesus that you have never had before. It will be sweet, convincing, and lasting, and you will become converted unto the Lord, with a naturally occurring desire to unite with His Church.

When you ask God, the Eternal Father, if these things are true—if Jesus is the Christ, if this is His gospel—it is essential that you ask in faith.<sup>[17]</sup> Asking, and for that matter, reading from a position of doubt or skepticism will not summon a response from Heaven. “Prove-it-to-me” prayers are seldom answered, and if they are, it is usually to the condemnation, even destruction, of the one

demanding proof. Think Korihor and Sherem, for example.<sup>[18]</sup> Asking in faith—even a particle of faith—implies that you at least have a desire to believe. Lead with this desire and “let [it] work in you.”<sup>[19]</sup>

Asking in faith also means that you believe God will answer your prayers and give you the knowledge you desire. This faith is often demonstrated by what you do after you ask. Waiting patiently, unwaveringly for the witness you desire is part of asking in faith.

### **The Language of the Spirit**

Answers from God in response to earnest inquiries come by the power of the Holy Ghost, speaking to your mind and to your heart<sup>[20]</sup>—your spiritual sense of learning. Trying to understand the things of God by some way other than the Spirit of God is like trying to understand the flavor of food by listening to it. You’re using the wrong sense! If we neglect our *spiritual* sense of learning and feeling, we will never adequately know God’s truth. In fact, without the Spirit of God, the things of God will probably seem foolish. Paul confirmed, “The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”<sup>[21]</sup>

The language of the Spirit has been described as “original but inarticulate, heard only with the soul.”<sup>[22]</sup> Without some level of fluency in the language of the Spirit, you cannot know the foundational truths you must know so that you cannot fall. I urge you to become acquainted with and fluent in the language of the Spirit.

Now finally, it is likely that the light and knowledge you need, the witness you desire, to make your foundation sure and certain will descend gradually, as the light did upon the boy Joseph. It will come over time and in increments. But I promise that these increments will aggregate into a witness of Jesus Christ and His gospel that will be sure and certain, even as reasons to doubt continue to swirl and hiss about you daily.

Brothers and sisters, I hope you realize that having perplexing questions that arise from reasons to doubt is not a problem. But please understand, finding answers to these perplexing questions ultimately is not the solution. The solution is a sure and certain foundation whereon if you build, you cannot fall. That foundation is Jesus Christ and His gospel, the fullness of which is found and taught in this Church.

### **An Unshakeable Witness**

I close by sharing the unshakeable witness of someone who built upon a sure and certain foundation. In the winter of 1842, a young single adult named Jane Elizabeth Manning joined the Church in Connecticut. With several other converts, including some of her own family, she made the thousand-mile journey to Nauvoo, most of it on foot. Upon hearing of her arduous journey and unrelenting faith, the Prophet Joseph declared to a friend, “What do you think of that . . . isn’t that faith?”<sup>[23]</sup>

Jane endured persecution with the Saints in Nauvoo. She felt wrenching grief when Joseph and Hyrum were murdered. She crossed the plains in 1847 and became a beloved friend and minister in the Salt Lake Valley for decades. She rejoiced in the doctrine of the temple and contributed to its construction. But she was not able to receive the highest blessings of the temple because Jane was Black. At that time, members of Black African descent were prohibited from participating in the endowment and sealing ordinances.

On December 27, 1884, Jane wrote a plaintive petition to the President of the Church, whom she knew personally. Acknowledging her race and the Church’s policy then in place, she pleaded to be allowed to receive the blessings of the endowment and sealing. “God promised Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blest and; as this is the fullness of all dispensations is there no blessing for me?”<sup>[24]</sup>

Her request was not granted. The Church President to whom she petitioned was John Taylor. He who once withstood what might have been his compelling reason to doubt now became part of what might have been Jane Manning’s compelling reason to doubt. Jane made similar petitions to Wilford Woodruff and Joseph F.

Smith, who similarly upheld the race restrictions at the time. It would have been easy and understandable for Jane to pack it in, shut it down, and walk away. But she didn't. Why? Because her foundation was sure and certain in the truths that she had learned.

Near the end of her life, Jane identified by name Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, and Joseph F. Smith, not as men who upheld the Church's race restrictions for priesthood and temple blessings; rather, she identified them as "good, great, and holy men" whom others should listen to and obey.<sup>[25]</sup> She died with this simple but sure testimony: "I want to say right here that my faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ as taught by [T]he Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is as strong today, nay, it is, if possible, stronger than it was the day I was first baptized. I pay my tithes and offerings [and] keep the Word of Wisdom. I go to bed early and rise early. I try in my feeble way to set a good example to all."<sup>[26]</sup>

I aspire to Jane Manning's unwavering faith. I would be honored and humbled if she would allow me to stand with her and bear testimony to you that Jesus is the living Christ, the Son of the living God; that the living God is our loving Father; and that this Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the church Jesus promised Peter He would build. It has been restored to the earth in these last days, never again to be thrown down. I testify that Russell M. Nelson is a "good, great, and holy man," a prophet of God. I commend to you his invitation to make the continual strengthening of your testimony of Jesus Christ your highest priority, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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[1] Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity" (worldwide devotional for young adults with President Nelson, May 15, 2022)

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson>.

[2] Russell M. Nelson, "Overcome the World and Find Rest," *Liahona*, Nov. 2022,

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2022/11/47nelson>.

[3] Joseph F. Smith, *Gospel Doctrine: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Joseph F. Smith*, ed. John Andreas Widtsoe (Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg, Oct. 14, 2014), eBook.



[4] B. H. Roberts, *Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1953), 39–40.

[5] Russell M. Nelson, “Overcome the World and Find Rest.”

[6] 2 Nephi 2:11, 16

[7] Doctrine and Covenants 6:36

[8] See 2 Nephi 9:9; 2 Corinthians 11:14; Doctrine and Covenants 128:20

[9] See Isaiah 55:8–9

[10] Official Declaration 1

[11] See Luke 22:50; John 18:10

[12] See Luke 22:55–62; John 18:17

[13] See Isaiah 28:10

[14] Helaman 5:12

[15] Russell M. Nelson, “Overcome the World and Find Rest.”

[16] Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018,

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/05/sunday-morning-session/revelation-for-the-church-revelation-for-our-lives>.

[17] See James 1:6

[18] See Alma 30:6–60; Jacob 7:1–20

[19] Alma 32:27

[20] See Doctrine and Covenants 8:2

[21] 1 Corinthians 2:14

[22] Hugh B. Brown, *Eternal Quest*, ed. Charles Manley Brown (Salt Lake City, Utah: Bookcraft, 1956), 435.

[23] James Goldberg and Veronica Anderson, *Autobiography of Jane Elizabeth Manning James*, BYU Studies, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/article/autobiography-of-jane-elizabeth-manning-james>.

[24] Jane E. James to President John Taylor, Dec. 17, 1884, transcribed in Henry J. Wolfinger, “A Test of Faith: Jane Elizabeth James and the Origins of the Utah Black Community,” in *Social Accommodation in Utah*, edited by Clark S. Knowlton (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah, 1975), 148.

[25] James Goldberg and Veronica Anderson, *Autobiography of Jane Elizabeth Manning James*.

[26] *Ibid.*