

Finding My Faith

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One night during my freshman year of college in 1989–90, a good friend of mine and I stayed up late studying for exams.

Suddenly, Matt asked me a question that would become one of the defining moments of my life. “What does your church think God is like? I mean, what do you think He looks like?”

I didn’t have an answer for him. Being sensitive to my circumstance, he gently let the matter drop. But I couldn’t forget it. I was in an extraordinary position: I was a Protestant attending Brigham Young University, and though I had doubts about my own faith and religion in general, I had no intention of changing religions. Instead, for the entire year I had carefully barricaded myself spiritually by deflecting religious conversation. With this simple question, my friend had at last succeeded in opening a tiny breach into my heart.

Searching for Faith

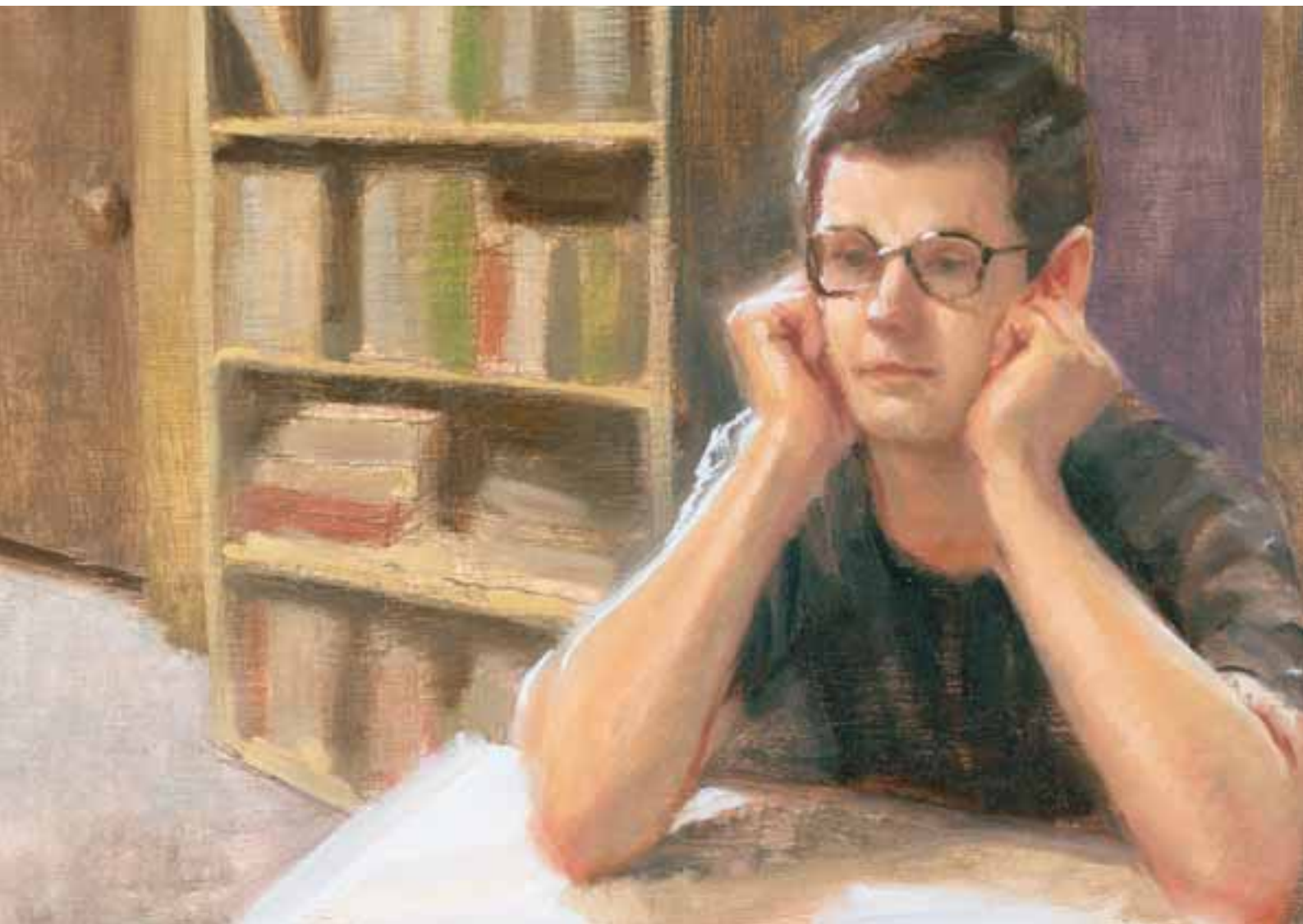
Over the next several months, I asked myself repeatedly, “What do I believe? More important, do I believe? Is there really a God, and, if so, what is He like? Could I come to know Him? Would He answer my prayers? Could I have faith like my Latter-day Saint friends do?”

It was not that I hadn’t had opportunities to consider such probing questions before; for years some of my best friends were LDS. These friendships had led me to attend BYU. But almost always I had pushed away their gospel overtures. The few times I had met with the missionaries, I didn’t listen with an open mind.

I was too afraid of the changes that would be required, changes that might socially and emotionally isolate me from my family. I was unwilling to believe that I had been wrong or that my traditions were incorrect. I did not believe that I could receive revelation from God or even that others could receive it. It seemed preposterous, illogical, and even strange that God would appear to the boy Joseph Smith, that He would reveal new scripture, and that only one religion had received the divine guidance for its establishment as the true Church.

Ironically, I doubted the authenticity of all religions, including my own. While I had a heart filled with love for family and friends, a heart that longed for answers, when it came to the whisperings of the Spirit, I had a heart of stone.

After my freshman year I returned home to Kentucky to continue my education. My Latter-day Saint friends soon left to serve missions, and I felt a profound loneliness at their



absence. I wanted to have some of the conviction that had inspired them to offer two years of their lives. At the same time, I was continually bothered that I still had no answer to Matt's question. I wanted to know truths for myself. At last, after many letters from my friends encouraging me to meet with the missionaries, I overcame my trepidation and accepted.

Considering Conversion

Nevertheless, I had reservations regarding the idea that the various principles of the

gospel were interconnected into one unified whole. The missionaries believed that since their message, in its entirety, was either all true or all false, once I gained a testimony of one principle, I could naturally accept all their teachings.

I did not believe them. I thought it was acceptable to pick and choose what I wanted to believe from a sort of spiritual and doctrinal smorgasbord.¹ At the same time, my logic demanded empirical evidence as proof, not faith-based conversion.

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Unfortunately, my logic also left me unhappy and dissatisfied. All philosophical arguments I considered were competing postulates of pessimism that provided no real answers. I desired something more, something that would commune with my heart the way my friends and the missionaries described communing with the Holy Ghost. I participated in the missionary discussions in hopes that I might come to know what they said was true or, at the very least,

gain some satisfaction in learning it was false.

The missionaries were patient yet bold. Over the course of several months, they taught me many discussions and invited me to be baptized a number of times, but I always said no. I was waiting for some obvious and miraculous event that would provide me with a witness before I was willing to accept their invitation. I didn't receive that kind of witness, so I kept stonewalling their invitations.

One day the elders read a passage from the Book of Mormon: "Dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6). Then they said, "Josh, every time we invite you to be baptized, you say no. What you have to do is say yes, and then the Spirit will confirm it to you."

In other words, I had not yet received a witness because I had not yet tried my faith. I had taken no thought but to ask, believing I would receive without trying (see D&C 9:7). I had effectively blocked the Spirit from being able to witness to me because I was unwilling to take the next step. What I needed to do was to take a leap of faith into the darkness before the light would shine. The confirming witness would come after I tried my faith, not before.²

My first thought was that the missionaries were manipulating me to get me baptized. Then it occurred to me that at the precise moment when I answered no to the baptismal invitation, something faint left my heart. It was a still, soft, and subtle feeling of peace urging me to follow the missionaries' counsel, but I had not recognized its presence until it was gone, leaving me confused, unhappy, and sorrowful.

I wondered if this faint feeling could be the Spirit leaving me and if the cause of my confusion was my own hard heart pushing Him away. With no other recourse, I decided to try the missionaries' challenge. I would say yes to the inevitable invitation, and then if I felt the Spirit as they promised me, I would go through with the baptism. On the other hand, if I did not feel the Spirit, I was perfectly prepared to tell the missionaries I was just joking.

Testing the Seed

The evening of our next appointment we watched a new Church video, *The Prodigal Son*. There was a special feeling in the room; the missionaries were visibly touched, tears welling in their eyes.

After the movie ended, we read several passages in the scriptures. At last Elder Critchfield turned to me and asked, "Josh, will you be baptized on Saturday, November 10, at 4:00 in the afternoon?"

I hesitated and then answered, "Yes."

The Spirit hit me with such an electrifying presence that the hairs on my arms rose, and I nearly cried. There could be no doubt that light had shone into the darkness. I had tested my faith, and I knew unequivocally that I had to be baptized.

I had gained a testimony of the goodness of one seed of faith, but I had yet to see it grow to fruition (see Alma 32:35–36), and I had not yet received a confirming witness of other gospel principles. My trial of faith was not yet over.

Not long after I was baptized and confirmed, doubts crept into my mind. I felt conflicted between the very personal experience I had had when deciding to get baptized and my old logic, which did not accept faith-based knowledge.

Soon I again felt the haunting feelings of confusion and sorrow, and I did not know what to believe. Nevertheless, I had made a commitment, and I determined to remain active in the Church and apply the principles I had been taught until the trial of my faith resolved my conflict one way or another.



AFTER OBEDIENCE COMES THE LIGHT

"It sounds so simple to build upon a foundation of truth that you may wonder why everyone doesn't succeed. For one thing, it takes great humility. It's hard to repent, to admit you are wrong on faith alone, before the evidence of a feeling of being forgiven and light comes. But that is the way it has to be. First comes obedience and then come the confirming assurances, the revelation of truth, and the blessing of light."

President Henry B. Eyring, First Counselor in the First Presidency, "A Life Founded in Light and Truth," *Ensign*, July 2001, 9.

Finding My Faith

The Lord did not leave me to wander alone. I was given a calling to serve with the missionaries, and as we went proselytizing each week, the missionaries continued to shepherd me. My home teachers were faithful. My home teaching companion was prompt and consistent. Many ward members developed friendships with me by involving me in their lives, inviting me into their homes for dinners and for family home evenings. They prayed with and for me. The bishop and his family cared for and encouraged me. I could sense the honest intentions of their hearts, and that strengthened my resolve.

One day, some months later, it dawned on me that every time I read the Book of Mormon, I felt a subtle, familiar feeling of peace, much as I had felt during the discussions and baptismal invitations. I had a sudden moment of clarity: this was the Spirit. As I thought the words—"If this is the Spirit, then this book must be true"—that subtle feeling swelled in my heart, and my faith turned to spiritual knowledge of that principle.

As my heart continued to become more "broken" and my spirit more "contrite" (see Ether 4:15), other confirming experiences followed. In time my doubts were replaced by convictions. I knew that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ,



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that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God, not by my own intellect or by the persuasions of others, but by the undeniable presence of the Spirit speaking to my spirit. Precept upon precept opened to my mind (see 2 Nephi 28:30). As these confirming experiences built upon each other, my perceptions of the gospel expanded, and spiritual understanding came more quickly. Each experience required diligence, a willingness to listen and to follow, and a desire to yield to the enticings of the Spirit (see Mosiah 3:19).

I can say today that the gospel is true, for I have learned this for myself. Once the gospel seemed strange and illogical; now it is familiar and wonderful to me. The gospel principles are indeed all interconnected in one great whole. Even with relatively limited doctrinal knowledge, as a missionary I could testify of these truths. As my doctrinal knowledge expands, so does my testimony.

My collective testimony works as a carefully forged and constantly nourished bulwark against adversity. It sustains me through the challenges I face, most particularly the efforts of the evil one to sow seeds of doubt regarding things I have already received answers about (see D&C 6:22–23). When I feel weak, when doubts come, when pain lingers, I apply the same pattern that has yielded fruit from the first day I received a testimony: I reflect upon each testimony-building experience I have received, I reinvigorate my practice of the principles I have been taught, and I pay attention as the Spirit reaffirms my faith.

The gospel is true, all of it, and it is open to all who will, in the humility of their hearts, try their faith by taking a step of faith into the darkness. The Savior's light is there, hidden only by our unwillingness to find it. There may be many dark times in our lives or times when our testimonies are challenged. I discovered that the Savior's illumination awaits us when we willingly seek Him, and that illumination, if we seek it continually, leads us unto conversion. ■

NOTES

1. See Glenn L. Pace, "Follow the Prophet," *Ensign*, May 1989, 26.
2. See Boyd K. Packer, "The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ—Plain and Precious Things," *Liabona* and *Ensign*, May 2005, 8.