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A Discussion of Lecture 1: What Faith Is

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A Discussion of Lecture 1

What Faith Is

Dennis F. Rasmussen

I first met the Lectures on Faith twenty-five years ago as a young missionary. I have returned to them often since. I have learned that to understand the Lectures on Faith we must be prepared to read and to ponder them prayerfully. We must seek to trace out their latent ideas. We must be patient. By sincere searching we may gain more and more of the deep wisdom they offer us.

The first lecture announces the three-fold division of the lectures taken together: Lecture 1 concerns the nature of faith; Lectures 2 through 6, the object of faith; and Lecture 7, the effects of faith. The first lecture introduces the topic and lays a basis for what follows. The later lectures expand and clarify the teaching of the first. My purpose is to provide some reflections concerning Lecture 1, which treats faith in its most general sense. To speak of faith in general, without reference to its object or effects, is to give but a preliminary and partial account. The teachings of the other lectures are essential to a proper understanding of the first lecture, for the part cannot be grasped without the whole. But the whole cannot be presented all at once. So the diligent student of the Lectures on Faith must read them all many times. Only in the course of this kind of study will their comprehensive unity and meaning become clear.

What, then, is faith? Lecture 1 quotes Hebrews 11:1, adding the word "assurance": "Now faith is the substance [assurance] of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"

(LF 1:8). In other words, faith sustains hope for things not yet obtained and grants assurance that they will be. What is the practical import of this assurance? What is the nature of faith? The lecture affirms that faith is "the principle of action in all intelligent beings" (LF 1:9). These few words provide a new viewpoint from which to study the nature of faith.

We may approach this viewpoint in terms of hope. Hope is confidence in the future, the time when the things not yet seen will appear. Hope, then, requires an awareness of time and a power to conceive what has not yet occurred. We say "tomorrow" or "next week" or "next year," and often fail to note the marvel: we can speak and think about what has not yet happened and does not yet exist. All the world is immersed in time, but only intelligent beings understand this, and they alone can hope. This power to look forward to the future is two-sided. We may face the future with hope but also with fear. Those creatures that cannot conceive the future as we can do not share our plans and purposes, but neither do they bear our worries and cares. To be filled with hopeless thoughts of the morrow is surely more painful than to have no awareness of the future at all.

But human beings do face the future, an unknown yet all-embracing realm toward which and into which every path of life leads. By means of our power to consider the future, we may introduce purpose and aim into the course of our lives. We may, if we will, guide our lives by thoughtfulness and hope. But hope alone is not enough. Faith gives confidence or assurance to hope that it can find the things it seeks. By giving assurance concerning the future, faith helps us to plan our present actions with an eye to the future. Faith sustains our imagination and strengthens our will. For faith is the principle of action. This means that faith is the beginning or origin of action. Because we are intelligent beings who possess faith as well as hope, the things we seek in the future can affect our present plans. These plans, when faith puts them into action, can in turn help to secure what we seek. As the very "substance of things hoped for," faith thus makes genuine hope possible. We may, perhaps, believe we can do

something without hoping to do it. But we cannot hope to do something without believing we are able to do it. In the words of Mormon, "without faith there cannot be any hope" (Moroni 7:42).

We not only consider the future but also remember the past —both our own and that of others. The past contains the lessons mankind has learned. We ignore it at great risk. But of the two, past and future, the future must be regarded as the more vital. The idea of progress, so important in the gospel and in Western civilization where Christianity took root, is clearly a product of faith and hope. We keep the ideal of progress vivid and strong when we seek to go forward and do better than we have. If ever we begin to think more about past deeds than about future deeds, then progress has ceased to beckon us. But though we look to the future, we live in the present, which is the time for action, the day, as scripture says, in which our labors are to be performed (see Alma 34:32-33).

What, then, is action? An action occurs when an intelligent being living in a world of time carries out a choice or plan first conceived in his mind. The idea precedes the act. Even actions performed by habit, which seem to involve no aim, were not always so. They were once subject to choice, and they became habits by choice, even if the choice was simply a passive refusal to prevent them. To choose something actively means to pursue it as an end to be achieved in the future, even if that future reaches no further ahead of the present than a brief moment. An action is voluntary, chosen, done on purpose. The aims of actions may vary, but every action has an aim, some result intended. Because faith is the principle of action, action has faith as its source. Action is faith at work; without faith, there would be no action. In the words of the first lecture,

> If men were duly to consider themselves and turn their thoughts and reflections to the operations of their own minds, they would readily discover that it is faith, and faith only, which is the moving cause of all action in them; that without it both mind and body would be in a state of inactivity, and all their exertions would cease, both physical and mental (LF 1:10).

Faith, then, "is not only the principle of action, it is also the principle of power in all intelligent beings, whether in heaven or on earth" (LF 1:13). These words imply that even God himself acts by faith, and the lecture goes on to assert that

> we understand that the principle of power which existed in the bosom of God, by which he framed the worlds, was faith; and that it is by reason of this principle of power existing in the Deity that all created things exist; so that all things in heaven, on earth, or under the earth exist by reason of faith as it existed in him (LF 1:15).

Modern revelation declares that "the glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36). The first lecture teaches that faith is the principle and power of intelligence in action. Insofar, then, as man is an intelligent being who acts by the principle of faith within him, he partakes of a divine principle. When God gave man dominion over the earth, he did so because man, as an intelligent being, had the power to act by faith, and thus to act like God. Man's task, within the sphere of his stewardship, is to continue the work of creation by the principle of faith, shaping the future in accordance with this principle.

In the foregoing I have tried to give an account of the teaching of the first lecture on faith. I want now to turn to what I called at the beginning its latent ideas about faith. In other words, I wish to discuss some of the ideas that seem to follow from the first lecture. We have seen that faith is "the principle of action in all intelligent beings." Faith prompts them to plan, to prepare, and then to act so as to obtain some purpose or end which lies yet in the future. But what end? Intelligent beings are equipped by the principle of faith with power to act and hence to realize the ends they hope for. Is there any final or ultimate end toward which all their actions ought to aim? Is one end just as much worth pursuing as any other, or, among all the ends which intelligent beings might imagine and pursue, is there one that includes all others? Is there some end that is proper for man to seek? The great thinkers of the ages have combined in agreement with the rest of mankind in their answer. All have answered, yes. There is an ultimate end for which all men naturally search. Its

name is happiness. The right of men to pursue happiness is one of three rights called "inalienable" in the Declaration of Independence.

What is happiness? Here the agreement which answered the former question vanishes. Who could count the multitude of answers to the question, what is happiness? But is it not strange that there should be agreement about the name for man's highest end and none about its content? Some people today answer, no. They see nothing strange at all in this, and they encourage what they sometimes refer to as alternative experiments in living. They urge each man to find his happiness as he will, alleging that as men differ, so should their aims. All around us we find people who seem to believe such ideas, people crisscrossing the human landscape in every direction seeking their own kind of happiness. Unheard or unheeded are those who warn that most of these paths will lead to a wrong and bitter end. Unstudied is the gospel teaching that speaks of a strait gate and a narrow way. But the fact remains, happiness is not whatever anyone chooses to call it. Happiness is not wherever anyone tries to find it. Real happiness has its own unchanging nature, and the wise, at least, remain agreed on what it is. In the words of Aristotle, written over 2,300 years ago, happiness is "an activity of soul in accordance with virtue" (I:vii). This idea will sound familiar to Latter-day Saints, who believe in being virtuous, and who read in the Book of Mormon that life should be guided by "the great plan of happiness," and that "wickedness never was happiness" (Alma 42:8; 41:10). I want for a moment to emphasize just the first part of Aristotle's statement, because it too should be familiar to Latter-day Saints, and also because it can shed light on one of the profound ideas latent in the first lecture. Aristotle says that happiness is an activity. This means that happiness is not the sort of end that can be obtained and held. It is an end that literally must be lived; it is the highest kind of existence, the highest way of living for human beings.

We know from the teachings of Lehi that there are two kinds of beings, those that act and those that are acted upon

(2 Nephi 2:14). Man is a being who acts. He acts by faith, which is the principle of action within him. The final aim of all his action is happiness. But as Aristotle saw, happiness is not an object, not a thing to be acted upon, not something to be kept, hoarded, or defended against thieves. Happiness is activity. How could it be otherwise and still be a proper end for a being whose nature is to act? But happiness is not just any activity. It is "an activity of soul in accordance with virtue." Joseph Smith said almost the same thing: "Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God" (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 255-256). In agreement with Aristotle, the Prophet taught that happiness can be achieved only through virtuous action. Drawing upon revelation as well as reason, he could give a fuller account of such action than the ancient philosopher could. But both men understood that happiness is man's highest end and that it depends on acting in the proper way.

The next question to be raised is how do we show that we are truly acting in accordance with virtue? What will indicate that our actions are right, so that we may look back and say with Nephi that "we lived after the manner of happiness" (2 Nephi 5:27)? Because faith is the principle of action, its presence will only be disclosed in some action. It shows itself in the deed. Imagine a very young boy at play. You can see by looking that he is small, that his hair is brown, that his eyes are blue. But can even the keenest eye tell by looking whether or not he can walk? No, because an ability or power cannot be seen or discovered in advance of the action in which it displays itself. So, too, faith is revealed in the action that it calls forth. Prior to that action, faith, like ability, remains hidden and unused. It exists as a capacity, as a potential action. It is there—it can be used or put to work—but that will require action.

In our actions we not only show others our faith, but we show it to ourselves as well. Returning for a moment to the young child, he himself does not know he can walk until he actually

does. His power to walk is revealed to him too at the moment of action. But faith is more than an optimistic state of mind or a good feeling or a warm sense of security; it is the beginning of action; it is the power to act. As such it can never be found just by looking within. It cannot be found by looking at all. It can only be found by acting, because it only displays itself in action. The real test of our faith is how we act. There is deep wisdom, then, in a familiar idiom of Latter-day Saints. When we want to speak of someone's religious commitment, we do not usually say he is pious or observant or devout. Instead we say he is faithful, or, more commonly, we say he is *active*. A faithful member of the Church *is an active member*, because faith is the principle of action. Faith finally reveals itself in action and nowhere else. The Apostle James was being ironic when he wrote, "shew me thy faith without thy works." In fact, this is impossible. Everyone, like James, must say, if there be any doubt about it, "I will shew thee my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

The words of Aristotle speak of happiness as an activity of the soul. The soul, of course, directs the body, and thus far I have mentioned only activities that might be called physical or external. But there is an internal or mental activity of the soul that must also be mentioned if we are to understand correctly and fully what faith is. I will return to this inward work of faith after treating some other matters first.

I have said that we show our faith even to ourselves by our works. This should give both assurance and reassurance to those who are sometimes inclined to reflect or even to doubt. As faith is the principle of action, so the opposite of faith, which we usually call doubt, is the principle of inaction. Faith is not just a state of mind; doubt is not just a state of mind either. In the end it matters little what kind of reluctance I may happen to feel. What does matter is how I act. However uncomfortable it may be, a feeling of bewilderment or uncertainty, which may occasionally trouble the best of us, is no reliable measure of our faith or lack of it. The real measure is always the same. As King Benjamin taught, "if you believe all these things see that ye do

them" (Mosiah 4:10). Turning this statement around, we may also say, if you do all these things, see (or recognize or acknowledge to yourself) that ye believe them. We need to trust what our own good deeds tell us about ourselves. The unexpected and amazed hero, after the crisis has passed, may truly say, "I can't believe I did it." The fact remains that he did. And he did because he could, even though he did not know it until the need of the moment led him to draw on a source of action deep within himself, a source whose full strength he had never before measured. None of us really knows in advance how much he can do. So we can rarely, if ever, say with complete certainty, "I did my best."

"Faith is the principle of action in all intelligent beings." Does it follow that faith is the principle of *all* their actions? If so, shall we be forced to say that faith leads to evil actions as well as good ones? To answer these questions we need to consider more closely what it means to be intelligent in the scriptural sense of this word.

Because intelligence, as scripture says, is identical with light and truth, it seeks these in all things (see D&C 93:36; 88:40). To be intelligent also includes insight into the rational ordering of things. It includes an understanding of logical structures, causes and effects, laws, and principles. But most of all, intelligence always embraces what is true, just, and virtuous. In matters of conduct it looks for the right way to join means and ends. It wants to choose what is good in its quest for happiness. Now faith in its widest possible sense is the principle of all actions of all intelligent beings, but only to the degree that these actions are truly intelligent and do in fact seek light and truth. Unfortunately, an intelligent being is capable of acting in unintelligent ways. He is capable of willfully rebelling against his own intelligence and following something else instead—appetite, passion, whim, momentary desire, and, at the extreme, evil itself. But when he does this, he no longer acts by means of the principle of faith as an intelligent being. To the degree that anyone seeks evil, he loses, to that same degree, his intelligence, for "light and truth

forsake that evil one" (D&C 93:37). Anyone bereft of intelligence because he prefers darkness to light can have no faith by which to act, but only a degenerate desire that will lead finally not to happiness but to hell. If for a time he may claim to "take happiness in sin," the time will be short, and the illusory happiness will quickly turn, in Mormon's terrible words, into the "sorrowing of the damned" (Mormon 2:13).

Insofar as intelligence governs someone, he will seek by faith to obtain his highest end, which is happiness. Now since happiness is "an activity of soul in accordance with virtue," not just acting, but acting in a certain way is required for happiness. We perform the actions that will finally yield happiness only by choosing first to follow virtue. In the words of the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant, "virtue (as the worthiness to be happy) is the supreme condition . . . of all our pursuit of happiness" (Book II:II). Only the virtuous, only those who seek the good, only those who keep God's commandments are worthy of happiness. And only those who are worthy of happiness can achieve it. This is not because God or anyone else would seek to withhold it, but because happiness is "an activity of soul in accordance with virtue." Happiness is not something which another can give or take away. Neither is it something that can be achieved when sought directly and solely for itself. It only comes when its proper condition is met. That condition is virtue. Happiness requires, happiness *is* a virtuous or moral way of acting. Everyone finally decides for himself, by how he acts throughout his life, whether or not he will be happy. Only the worthy can be, and only the worthy will be.

To the early Christians the apostle Peter declared, "add to your faith virtue" (2 Peter 1:5). We now need to clarify just how faith helps us develop virtue or the moral worthiness that is the condition of all true happiness. Faith, as the principle of activity, looks to the future. The future is a realm of ends, but some of them exclude each other. An action that will achieve one end, such as traveling, excludes another, that of staying home instead. In facing the future, then, faith is always confronted with choices.

It must seek one end or another, but it cannot seek all ends. And even though it sets for itself as its highest end the achievement of happiness, faith must still choose among various particular actions. But how can faith be sure it will choose the right one? Not knowing in advance all that an action involves, but hoping to reach happiness, how can faith choose wisely?

When we ponder this question, we see that faith needs something more than its highest end, happiness, to guide its choices and actions. Without in any way renouncing happiness as our daily and also our eternal goal, we see that by itself happiness is not a sure guide. We do not always clearly know in advance what will make us happy. We can look forward to the new day or to the distant future, hoping it will reward our search for happiness, but how it will do this lies beyond our own unaided powers. We cannot, then, act wisely upon the basis of what we think the future will bring. Neither can we follow those who advise us to forget the future and live only in the present, savoring its delights while we can. Were we to try this, we would soon find that all our actions have consequences, whether or not we intend them or seek to ignore them. Though we try not to look beyond the moment, our actions will carry us beyond it, and soon cause us to wish we had looked and considered what might follow from what we did. But even if we had, we still might have missed our aim. We cannot by ourselves foretell the future. And so we need to guide our lives by reference to something other than the happiness we hope to attain.

"Faith is the principle of action in all intelligent beings," and its final end is happiness. The immediate guide for faith, however, is not happiness, but virtue or worthiness to be happy. Such worthiness means, as we have seen, uprightness, goodness, holiness, obedience to God's commandments. So we must give up happiness as our direct end if we are to attain it as our final end. Like many other worthwhile things, happiness cannot be obtained as a direct end. Earning a diploma, mastering a skill, building a house, raising a child—these are worthy ends, but each one follows from certain kinds of activities and cannot be

achieved except by means of those activities. To obtain the end we must undertake the proper activity, because the end cannot be separated from that activity. The end cannot be had directly, but it will follow if we do our work well. So faith understands those earnest words, "Do what is right; let the consequence follow" (*Hymns* #237). It is not for us to foretell the precise arrangement of things yet future. It is for us each day to follow steadfastly the guidance of virtue, full of hope and faith that as we do, as we make ourselves worthy of happiness, that end will follow. Faith gives us confidence that virtuous conduct and happiness can never long be kept apart. But for now, during the moment at hand, faith repeats the message of the Preacher, "Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl 12:13).

At its highest level faith as the principle of action thus becomes the principle of duty to keep the commandments of God. These have been given to us. We know what they require, we know how to obey them. The commandments give us what we need: a constant and ever-present standard by which to guide our lives. And as we seek to obey them, our faith once again supports our hope. Anyone who has a sense of duty to keep the commandments also has hope that duty can, indeed, be done. It would be pointless to speak of a duty that bids us to do what we cannot do. What we ought to do we can do, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Such faith and hope sustained young Nephi as he said, "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them" (1 Nephi 3:7).

Some observers have claimed that a life of duty and virtue limits men and hampers their spontaneous powers. They bid men to leave their fetters behind and to follow their natural inclinations. But faith regarded as the call to virtue, to duty, to keeping the commandments, does not limit or bind us. It liberates our power to act. Alone and unguided, we all too often defeat our own best plans because we are divided against ourselves. We are

halfhearted, torn by conflicting impulses. Undisciplined spontaneity only scatters and wastes our lives. But duty calls in an urgent voice that demands a response from our whole being. When heeded it gathers and magnifies all our powers like a lens focusing the rays of the sun. Nothing else can create the intensity of life that obedience to duty can. Such willingness to obey fills the soul with strength and allows the pure principle of faith to guide its course. Latter-day Saints, of all people, know first-hand what men and women filled with the spirit of obedience to duty can achieve. Our history is replete with examples of those whose faith became invincible because they never doubted that they could do what they were commanded to do.

When we think of action, we think first of outward deeds that can be seen, and up to this point I have sought to clarify the nature of faith in terms of such deeds. Emphasis on the outward deed prevents us from substituting mere good wishes for actual performance. It reminds us that we are not pure spirits but embodied spirits, and that we must teach our bodies as well as our hearts to be kind, our lips as well as our thoughts to be clean.

We have seen that faith never demands anything less than external acts or works. But it always demands something more. Important as outward works may be, they remain outward expressions of another, inward way of working. The inward works of faith are the true source and soul of all the outward works. For as a man "thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov 23:7). "What are we to understand by a man's working by faith?" asks Lecture 7. "We answer: we understand that when a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force" (LF 7:3).

What does this mean? In what sense does faith involve a kind of inward action and how is this action related to outward deeds? Human faith as we encounter it in our everyday lives may be compared to art. We often use the phrase "work of art," as when we say, "that is a beautiful work of art." When we speak in this way we are describing something which is the result of external action. But what are we saying about it? We are saying that the object embodies a particular kind of action. What kind?

An action governed or directed by art. In other words, we are saying that the object has in some way captured what we might call art at work.

Now where does art dwell in the first place? Not in an object, but in an artist. Art is first of all a principle within an artist that guides him in fashioning an external object so as to embody in it his art. We often call the principle of art that some people have a gift. But it is not a visible thing, and there is a sense in which it possesses the artist just as much as he possesses it. Art acts within the artist as his master, an inward voice that guides and disciplines his outward work. Truly speaking, a man does not paint with his hand but with his soul. The brush, the palette, the hand, the body—these are all tools directed by the inward working of the artist's soul in accordance with his art. So the work of art is first of all an inward activity that later expresses itself in some outward object. No outward work of art, no object to delight the eye or ear, can be created unless that object emerges from a prior inward work of art, from the labor of the soul.

Now let us turn from the work of art to the work of faith. Whatever the specific outward action may be, the work of faith has its origin, like the work of art, in the principle that dwells and works within. The work of faith, like the work of art, begins in the soul. Faith as the principle of outer action is first of all the principle of inner action that provides the basis for the outward one. This fact needs to be remembered and constantly emphasized in an age such as ours, which tends so much to prize tangible results and observable consequences. The point is not that these are unimportant but that in order to have real worth they must follow from a virtuous inward action of the soul that intended them. That is why Aristotle spoke of happiness not just as an activity of the body, but as an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. This virtuous inward activity is the "real intent" spoken of by Moroni: "For behold, God hath said a man being evil cannot do that which is good; for if he offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing" (Moroni 7:6). Inward acting, real intend-

ing, is the means by which we first seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness. It is a solitary task. It requires concern for matters that perhaps few others care about. It demands obedience to a rule of life that may not always or even often yield immediate outward benefits. It calls for commitments that reach far beyond what any counsel of mere prudence or common sense could recommend.

As a single example of the kind of commitment made by this inward activity of the soul in accordance with virtue, think of the act of promising. Only intelligent beings, beings capable of faith, can make a promise. But what is a promise? A promise is more than a spoken utterance and more than a written agreement, though these external things may manifest it. First and foremost, a promise is a self-chosen act of will that remains fixed and unchanging over a span of time reaching into the future. Some promises, such as legal contracts, have a specified period of duration. Other promises, such as those we call sacred covenants, have no temporal limit. They reach out into the future forever. How much faith and hope does it take to make and then to keep such covenants? When people make unbreakable covenants, they perform the ultimate act of faith. The principle of faith working within them rises far above all merely human considerations of circumstance, risk, and reward, and reveals what the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called "true virtue . . . that chastity of mind which seems to lie at the very heart and be the parent of all other good, the seeing at once what is best, the holding to that, and then of not allowing anything else whatever to be even heard pleading to the contrary" (406).

In a world filled with uncertain outcomes and merely provisional commitments, only being true to covenants, only keeping faith, can lift the soul beyond the reach of doubt and worry and lead it to the source of perfect confidence which is God. Before us all lies a journey that began at our birth and will go on till our death. We live in the time between and act each day as best we can. Some days bring gladness; others force upon us heavy burdens. At times we may question how our path can lead

to happiness or if our faith has reached its limit. We know that strength is gained in struggles; we wonder if we can survive on our own. But so long as we seek to do good, so long as we choose the right, deep within us our faith is working, and our hope still lives. Let us believe this. Let us then continue to act as duty bids. As we do, our faith will be sufficient, and our happiness will be assured.

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