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Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ

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Rex C. Reeve Jr.

The first principle of the gospel is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the starting point for all who would be his true followers. How, then, does one develop faith and become a disciple of Christ? The Book of Mormon and modern revelation answer this important question by defining, clarifying, and supporting the teachings of the New Testament. Through a study of the Book of Mormon, individuals can learn how to develop their own personal faith.

Joseph Smith declared faith to be the foundational principle of the gospel when he wrote, "We believe that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" (A of F 4). This brief statement emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus Christ and establishes it as the starting principle for all who would be true followers of Christ.

During his earthly ministry, as recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament, Christ recognized, measured, and rewarded the faith of his followers. He taught and demonstrated that the faithful would be rewarded with healings and forgiveness of sins, and eventually eternal life. Christ required his followers to demonstrate their faith in him by righteous living and service to others. The necessity and rewards of faith are clearly taught in the Gospels; however, these books do not give a clear definition of faith, nor do they give many specific steps to developing personal faith in Jesus Christ.

The Book of Mormon provides support and doctrinal insights for the teachings of the Gospels regarding the role and necessity of faith in Jesus Christ. In the Book of Mormon, Christ recognized, measured, and rewarded the faith of his followers and required them to demonstrate their faith in him by righteous living and service to others. In addition, the Book of Mormon provides a simple definition of faith and specific instructions concerning how individuals can develop their own personal faith. The purpose of this article is to show how the Book of Mormon supports, clarifies, and defines New Testament teachings regarding faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith to be Healed and Forgiven

From the accounts given in the Gospels of the New Testament, it is clear that many of the healings and miracles Jesus performed were the result of the faith of those who were involved. For example: (1) When the woman who had been diseased with an issue of blood for twelve years touched the hem of the Savior's garment, she was immediately healed. Jesus said to her, "Daughter, be of good comfort; thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour" (Matt. 9:22). (2) When Jesus was visiting the region of Tyre and Sidon, a Phoenician woman requested that he bless her daughter who was possessed of a devil. The woman demonstrated great faith when she said, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, thou Son of David; my daughter is grievously vexed with a devil. . . . But he answered and said, I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, It is not meet to take the children's bread, and cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour" (15:22, 24-28). (3) "And, behold, there came a leper and worshipped him, saying, Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed" (8:2-3). (4) Lastly, when Jesus was in Capernaum, a Roman centurion demonstrated his faith in seeking a blessing for his servant who

was sick with palsy. Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. . . . And Jesus said unto the centurion, Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee. And his servant was healed in the selfsame hour" (8:10, 13).

The Book of Mormon confirms and clarifies the testimony of the Gospels that the Savior does recognize, measure, and reward the faith of his followers. For instance: (1) After the family of Lehi obtained the plates of brass and were joined in the wilderness by Ishmael's family, Nephi said to his brothers, "Yea, and how is it that ye have forgotten that the Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him?" (1 Ne. 7:12). (2) As Lehi and company were preparing to continue their journey in the wilderness, to his great astonishment Lehi discovered at his tent door a brass ball of curious workmanship. The ball pointed the way they should travel in the wilderness. "And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld the pointers which were in the ball, that they did work according to the faith and diligence and heed which we did give unto them" (16:28). (3) When Zeezrom lay sick with a burning fever, "Alma cried unto the Lord, saying: O Lord our God, have mercy on this man, and heal him according to his faith which is in Christ. And when Alma had said these words, Zeezrom leaped upon his feet, and began to walk" (Alma 15:10-11). (4) Perhaps the capstone example of this principle occurred near the end of the first day of the Savior's visit to the American continent when he said, "I see that your faith is sufficient that I should heal you" (3 Ne. 17:8). The multitude went forth and all were healed. Christ also blessed the little children and prayed mightily to the Father in behalf of those assembled. As they arose from the earth Christ declared, "Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now my joy is full" (17:20). Faith in Jesus Christ provides the means to receive great blessings, particularly the healing of physical, emotional, psychological, and moral ailments that are part of this mortal experience.

The Gospels record that faith in Christ brings individuals a forgiveness of sins. The following are examples: (1) When Jesus entered Simon's house, a certain woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. "And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven. . . . Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace" (Luke 7:48, 50). (2) "And, behold, they brought to him a

man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. . . . But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house" (Matt. 9:2, 6-7).

The Book of Mormon provides a powerful second witness that faith in Christ brings forgiveness of sin: (1) Nephi was told in a vision that the twelve ministers who will stand to judge his people "are righteous forever; for because of their faith in the Lamb of God their garments are made white [sins forgiven] in his blood" (1 Ne. 12:10). (2) After Enos prayed a long time, with great effort, he said, "And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee, and thou shalt be blessed. . . . Wherefore, my guilt was swept away. . . . [And the Lord said,] wherefore, go to, thy faith hath made thee whole" (Enos 1:5-6, 8). (3) When Jesus was defining and explaining his gospel, he emphasized the importance of faith leading to forgiveness of sin when he said, "And no unclean thing can enter into his kingdom; therefore nothing entereth into his rest save it be those who have washed their garments in my blood, because of their faith, and the repentance of all their sins, and their faithfulness unto the end" (3 Ne. 27:19).

Another clear teaching in the New Testament is that faith in Jesus Christ and belief on his name bring individuals the blessings of everlasting life: (1) "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life" (John 5:24). (2) "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (3:14-16). (3) At the death of Lazarus, Jesus told Martha, "I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (11:25). (4) Near the conclusion of his Gospel, John summed up his main purpose in writing by saying, "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (20:31).

The Book of Mormon again supports and clarifies the doctrine that salvation and everlasting life come through faith in Jesus Christ. For example, Benjamin taught, "And lo, he cometh unto his own, that salvation might come unto the children of men even through faith on his name" (Mosiah 3:9). Furthermore, Nephi explained that the brazen serpent lifted up by Moses in the wilderness was symbolic of Christ being lifted up in completing the Atonement (Hel. 8:14), and in both cases those with faith to look would be saved: "And as many as should look upon that serpent should live, even so as many as should look upon the Son of God with faith, having a contrite spirit, might live, even unto that life which is eternal" (8:15). Mormon taught his son Moroni that, "By the ministering of angels, and by every word which proceeded forth out of the mouth of God, men began to exercise faith in Christ; and thus by faith, they did lay hold upon every good thing. . . . And after that he came men also were saved by faith in his name; and by faith, they became the sons of God" (Moro. 7:25–26). Mormon also taught, "And what is it that ye shall hope for? Behold I say unto you that ye shall have hope through the atonement of Christ and the power of his resurrection, to be raised unto life eternal, and this because of your faith in him according to the promise" (7:41).

A Definition of Faith in Jesus Christ

The Gospels of the New Testament help to define faith, but any definition we develop will be incomplete without the information available from the writings of Paul, the Book of Mormon, and modern revelation. In writing to the Hebrews, Paul said, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

Alma, when teaching the Zoramites, said the following about faith: "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" (Alma 32:21).

Moroni added to our definition when he said, "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; . . . for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6).

The *Lectures on Faith* give us two more clarifying points that add to our definition: "Let us here observe, that three things are necessary in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. First, the idea that he actually exists. Secondly, a *correct* idea of his character, perfections, and attributes."¹ John wrote, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

Given the foregoing statements, the following four elements comprise the definition of faith:

1. One comes to know the true Christ having never seen him.

Some might ask, "Is it even possible to know someone you have never seen?" I think most people would say, "Yes, you can know people you have never seen." Examples include a pen pal, a writer such as Shakespeare, a relative, or a prophet such as Joseph Smith or Moses. I feel like I know my great grandfather who died many years before I was born. I have heard stories of his faithful life, I have read his missionary journal, and I have developed a love for him that grows stronger as I learn more about him. I feel the same love and acquaintance with the Prophet Joseph Smith. I have never seen him, but I have read from those who did know him. I have read many of his writings and have felt the Holy Ghost testify to my soul that he is a true prophet. In those same ways a person can come to know Jesus Christ.

Another important consideration is that getting to know someone (whether we have seen the person or not) is a gradual process, starting from a casual acquaintance to a deep, personal relationship. At first we learn a few basic facts about the person such as the name, family situation, hometown, and so forth. As time passes it is possible to know what the person thinks and believes, and even what some of the person's deepest desires and concerns are.

In coming to know the true Christ, having never seen him, individuals must start by having in their mind and in their heart the idea that Christ actually does exist. The *Lectures on Faith* teach that "it was by reason of the knowledge of his existence that there was a foundation laid for the exercise of faith in him; . . . for faith could not center in a Being of whose existence we have no idea."²

At this point, individuals do not have a perfect knowledge of Christ but have been told that there is a Christ. Now they must decide what they will do with this new truth. Will they reject and ignore it, or will they nurture and expand it and seek to learn more? This is the first test of one's faith. Alma pleaded with those he had taught about the true Christ that they pass this first test and let this little seed of faith grow in their hearts. "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. . . . But behold, if ye will 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" (Alma 32:26-27).

After a person desires to nurture and expand the seed of truth planted in the heart, the next step is to learn more truth about the true Christ. I stress the word *truth* because faith sufficient to lead to eternal life can only be based in truth – false ideas and teachings about Christ lead to fear and uncertainty. The test of one's faith, at this point, is how sincerely and diligently the person seeks more truth and discerns between truth and error. A person would continue progressing by learning the facts and details of Christ's earthly ministry – where he went, what he did, and what he said. The Gospels of the New Testament and the words of the prophets serve as a principal source. On this foundation one must add knowledge of the true characteristics of Christ.

Individuals must know that Christ existed, "that he was God before the world was created" and that he actually created the heavens and the earth. They must know that Christ is "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in goodness," and that he is "from everlasting to everlasting"; that he "changes not," he is the same "yesterday, today, and forever; and that his course is one eternal round, without variation." They must know that he is a God of truth and love, and cannot lie. He is no respecter of persons, and all who fear him and work righteousness are accepted of him.³ Learning these and other truths causes faith in Christ to increase.

For those seeking to know the true Christ, at some point the witness of the Holy Ghost is available to them. Nephi taught that those who entered in by the gate "have received the Holy Ghost, which witnesses of the Father and the Son" (2 Ne. 31:18). Alma taught, "Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your

heart, . . . if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord, behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves – It must needs be that this is a good seed, . . . for it beginneth to enlarge my soul; yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding, yea it beginneth to be delicious to me” (Alma 32:28). This sure witness of the true Christ, born by the Holy Ghost, is the most important experience in coming to know Christ. This experience can be more powerful than actually seeing him.

If individuals set a goal to increase their faith in Christ, they are really determining to know him better even without seeing him. It is hard to know how to increase one’s faith directly, but there are ways to get to know him better. A person can read the words of those who knew Christ personally, learn more of his attributes, read the words that he spoke, and seek the witness of the Holy Ghost. No matter what age one is or what spiritual condition one is in, one can always find ways to increase knowledge and understanding of Christ. This is another test of one’s faith: to see if one will continue, over a lifetime, to seek to increase one’s knowledge of the true Christ.

2. As one comes to know the true Christ, having never seen him, one’s love for him increases.

Faith is built on the foundation of knowing Christ, as discussed above, but true faith includes feelings and actions. When Jesus was asked by the lawyer which was the first great commandment in the law, “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matt. 22:37–38). Mormon taught that “charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever; and whoso is found possessed of it at the last day, it shall be well with him” (Moro. 7:47).

As individuals come to know Christ and his attributes, their love for him increases. When they learn who he really is and what he did for us, what we could not do for ourselves, the Spirit causes their hearts to swell with gratitude, appreciation, and overwhelming feelings of love. Mormon pleaded with those reading the Book of Mormon, saying “Pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love, which he hath bestowed

upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God; that when he shall appear we shall be like him" (Moro. 7:48).

President Benson taught that loving God requires total commitment. "To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength is all-consuming and all-encompassing. It is no lukewarm endeavor. It is total commitment of our very being—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—to a love of the Lord."⁴ Alma told Helaman, "Let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever" (Alma 37:36). This seems to be another test of people's faith, to see if they will center their thoughts and affections on the Lord. Again, if individuals say they want to increase their faith, they are saying they want to increase their love for Christ.

3. As one's love for the Savior increases, one also experiences an increased desire and ability to be obedient to his commandments and do things his way.

In addition to teaching that an individual must have the idea that God exists and must gain a knowledge of his characteristics, the *Lectures on Faith* teach that the third requirement for exercising faith in God is "an actual knowledge that the course of life which he is pursuing is according to [God's] will." The question was asked, "Would an idea of these three things lay a sure foundation for the exercise of faith in God, so as to obtain life and salvation? It would; for by the idea of these three things, faith could become perfect and fruitful, abounding in righteousness unto the praise and glory of God."⁵

The great plan of God included the creation of this earth, which provided a place where the spirit children of the Father could receive their physical bodies and test their obedience to his commandments. Abraham heard the Lord say, "We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abr. 3:25). "And [the Lord] gave unto them commandments that they should love and serve him, the only living and true God, and that he should be the only being whom they should worship" (D&C 20:19). Christ taught, "But if

thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt. 19:17), and "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

The conscious choice to be obedient to the commandments of God and to reject the enticings of Satan is the highest expression of man's agency. Lehi taught his son Jacob, "For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. . . . Wherefore, 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" (2 Ne. 2:11, 16). Lehi concluded his teachings by saying, "Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh. . . . And they 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" (2:27).

President Benson gave three summary guidelines when he said, "*The great test of this life* is obedience to God. *The great task of this life* is to learn the will of the Lord and then do it. *The great commandment of this life* is, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.'"⁶

To know and love Christ and to want to do things his way rather than some other way is the essence of faith in Jesus Christ. It would be inconsistent to say one has faith in Christ and then willingly disobey his commandments. The degree of individuals' faith in Christ is not measured by what they say about him but by their obedience to him. In simple terms, individuals know that their faith in Christ is increasing when what they want to do and what Christ would do are the same. Obedience or disobedience is another test of one's faith. Again, if individuals say they want to increase their faith in Christ, what they are really saying is they want to be more obedient to him. Anyone at any stage of life can find ways to improve obedience.

4. As faith in Christ increases, there follows an increased desire to serve others by helping them gain faith in Christ.

In the New Testament, Christ told Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). Just before Christ ascended into heaven he appeared to the apostles at the sea of Galilee and asked Peter three times if he loved him. Each time Peter responded, "Thou knowest that I love thee," and each time

Jesus responded, "Feed my lambs. . . . Feed my sheep. . . . Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

In the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in the New Testament and in the Book of Mormon, Christ taught that his true followers are given the opportunity and the privilege of influencing others when he told them they were the salt of the earth, or a light to his people. Salt that does not influence others has lost its value and must be cast out. Concerning being a light, Christ said, "Therefore let your light so shine before this people, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (3 Ne. 12:16; see also Matt. 5:16). When father Lehi tasted of the fruit of the tree which was more sweet than he had ever before tasted, he immediately desired that his family share it with him: "And as I partook of the fruit thereof it filled my soul with exceedingly great joy; wherefore, I began to be desirous that my family should partake of it also; for I knew that it was desirable above all other fruit" (1 Ne. 8:12). After their conversion, the four sons of Mosiah gave up the opportunity to become king over the Nephites in order to preach the gospel to the Lamanites. They had been guilty of serious sins and realized the terrible punishment they faced. Through sincere repentance they overcame their sins and desired to help others experience the peace and joy they had received: "Now they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble. And thus did the Spirit of the Lord work upon them" (Mosiah 28:3-4).

The best example of this principle is probably Alma the Younger. After he was converted to the Lord, he began from that time forth to go throughout all the land preaching the word of God in much tribulation. Later in his life he told his son Helaman, "Yea, and from that time even until now, I have labored without ceasing, that I might bring souls unto repentance; that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost (Alma 36:24).

To know, love, obey, and serve Christ by bringing others closer to him brings a fulness of faith. It would be inconsistent for individuals to say they have faith in Christ but then refuse to lift

and serve others. In fact, as a person's faith increases, there follows an overpowering desire to bless and lift all of the Lord's children. Again, one's degree of faith is not measured by what one says about Christ but by Christ-like actions toward others. Any person at any stage of life can find ways to serve others.

Conclusion

Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the first principle of the gospel and is the starting point for all who would be true followers of Christ. The necessity and importance of faith in Jesus Christ has been clearly taught by true prophets—past and present. The Gospels of the New Testament and the Book of Mormon both teach that faith is rewarded with healings and other miracles, with forgiveness of sins, and with the blessings of eternal life. In addition, the Book of Mormon and modern revelation provide a simple definition of faith and specific instructions concerning how individuals can develop their own personal faith.

1. One comes to know the true Christ having never seen him.
2. As one comes to know the true Christ, having never seen him, one's love for him increases.
3. As one's love for the Savior increases, one also experiences an increased desire and ability to be obedient to his commandments and do things his way.
4. As faith in Christ increases, there follows an increased desire to serve others by helping them gain faith in Christ.

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Notes

1. *Lectures on Faith*, comp. N. B. Lundwall (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 33; lecture 3, paragraphs 2-4.
2. *Ibid.*, 33; lecture 3, paragraph 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 35; lecture 3, paragraphs 12-18.

4. Benson, *Conference Report*, April 1988, 3.
5. *Lectures on Faith*, 33, 38; lecture 3, paragraph 5 and corresponding question and answer.
6. Benson, *Conference Report*, April 1988, 5-6.