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## Seeds of Faith: A Follower's View of Alma 32

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# *Seeds of Faith: A Follower's View of Alma 32*

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Elaine Shaw Sorensen

No more beautiful discussion on the principle of faith is offered anywhere in scripture than in the thirty-second chapter of Alma in the Book of Mormon. Alma had already seen the powerful effect of the word of God upon the hearts of the people. He recognized that sharing the word has a greater effect “than the sword or anything else” (Alma 31:5). The beauty of Alma’s message is preserved in Mormon’s abridgement by a literary style that builds from profound insights into humility, through the metaphor of the planting and nourishing of the seed of God’s word, to understated allusions to the fruits of faith. The seminal analogy lays a foundation for understanding the essential characteristics of the doctrine of faith.

## *Humility Precedes Faith*

The Zoramites had once known the word of God (Alma 31:8), and it is significant to note that even in their apostasy they had not ceased to worship. Indeed, their diligence was apparent in their weekly prescribed prayers of thanks for worldly prosperity, in which they thanked God that they were chosen and elected over others (Alma 31:16–18). Not only was that a false notion, but they had also abandoned the essential humility necessary to maintain a faithful connection with truth. With the

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loss of humility came the loss of ability to discern good from evil, the loss of a Christian nature that applies the word of God in daily life (Alma 31:23), which was replaced by increasingly complex worship rituals, traditions, and structures (Alma 31:12–18). Ultimately, among their greatest loss was that of the gift of faith.

Among the apostate Zoramites, only the humbled poor, those cast out of the synagogues they had help build, listened to Alma. He rejoiced that their poverty and afflictions had humbled them, even though he recognized that their humility, was constrained. He knew being humble is prerequisite to building faith (Alma 32:6–8; see also Moroni 7:43). However, he affirmed the greater blessing of those who humble themselves of their own will when they hear the word of God, regardless of their circumstances (Alma 32:15–16, 25).

Shown by how it prepared the Zoramites “to hear the word” (Alma 32:6), such humility is an integral part of the nature of one who submits to the wisdom of God and provides fertility to the soil for planting the seeds of the word of God, for those seeds only can be nurtured by faith. Alma noted that faith comes from submission to the word, an abiding characteristic of the faithful, rather than from performance of external acts. He found hope in the humility of the Zoramites even more than in their apparent willingness to do weekly worship in the synagogues. Though important, such outward acts are transcended by the change of the inner nature of the individual, as observed in Alma’s words, “I behold that ye are lowly in heart; and if so, blessed are ye . . . Do ye suppose that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only? . . . Do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week?” (Alma 32:8, 10–11) Alma is implying by these rhetorical questions that worship is a spiritual, perpetual act of faith, not merely a weekly ritual.

Alma’s lesson has meaning today. Latter-day Saints seem naturally inclined to focus upon their works. This propensity to rely so heavily on works that document obedience seems to be an outgrowth of our present technological, behavioristic

society, which places so much emphasis on observable achievement. Increasingly encumbering and complex, family, career, and even Church activities can disperse attentions toward multiple distractions among tasks and programs. Illusionary time and goal management techniques, if not grounded in a basic Christian nature, can further contribute to task-based rituals and repetitions in life. By extending ourselves laterally *outward* in noisy worldly ways, we risk becoming swallowed up in the proud illusion of progress (Alma 31:27), when what we need is to extend quietly *inward* toward humility and *upward* toward God. As with the apostate Zoramites who lacked the essential humility that leads to faith, the achievements and prosperity that embellish our lives become meaningless trappings of mortality with no eternal significance without faith. Doing home teaching, earning a scout merit badge, or doing other assigned acts of service can become little more than offerings on the Rameumptom (Alma 31:21), if our hearts are not earnest and our daily nature not Christian.

Business measures success by outcomes. In education the technical training model promotes a behavioral tradition that results in specific performances. Sometimes, as the Zoramites, we also desire to offer the set of rules in our spiritual lives, with the documented trail of our good actions coupled with prosperity, as evidence of our place on the path to exaltation. Such emphasis upon works tends to give a sense of control. We find reasons for blessings and see trials as consequences of failure. We seek training for exaltation. Such behaviorism works for things that are concrete, visible, and rule-driven.

Behaviorism alone does not work, however, for those elements that are spiritual in nature: discernment; finding meaning; longing after goodness; having ethical awareness and moral courage; loving learning; having concern for excellence; having love, charity, or humility; becoming godly. Alma called the learning of these principles “wisdom” (Alma 32:12). Such wisdom, provoked by humility, provides the necessary foundation

for coming to faith, and enriches the soil that receives the seeds of the word of God.

## What Faith Is and What Faith Is Not

The concept of faith appears throughout most of scripture with very little definition. Contextual discussions generally assume a sense of meaning pertaining to particular situations (See Alma 15:10; 48:15; 57:26–27). Alma's analogy of the seed is particularly valuable because it (a) provides a poetic and meaningful definition of faith, (b) focuses on the process as much as on the outcome of the development of faith, and (c) affirms the universal applicability of the principles described. Alma poignantly notes that God often imparts his word by angels: "To men, yea not only men but women also. Now this is not all; little children do have words given unto them" (Alma 32:23). Anyone can sow the seed of the word of God, regardless of spiritual maturity, from prophet to lowliest struggling disciple. Alma clarifies what faith is and what it is not, and identifies the necessary elements for the existence and growth of faith.

### *Faith, Belief, And Hope*

Like other writers in scripture, Alma associates the concepts of faith, belief, and hope. Elder James E. Talmage pointed out that since we have no English verb for faith, we use the term "believe," and noted that in the Bible, with few exceptions, "belief" refers to the fullest assurance of faith to mean "to live accordingly" (*Articles of Faith* 479). Belief in the seed, or living according to the word, is a key aspect of faith. It seems clear that Alma also refers to belief in explaining faith (Alma 32:18–19, 27). Though he distinguishes among belief, desire to believe, and sure knowledge, his words affirm the validity of belief as a part of faith.

Hope is also mentioned in Alma's definition of faith: "hope for things which are not seen, which are true" (Alma 32:21).

The principle of hope was confirmed by Moroni (Ether 12:6), and in the old world by Paul (Hebrews 11:1). Hope is obviously an important part of faith. Though some have struggled with whether it precedes or follows faith, Alma seems to present hope as an interrelated principle that enlightens and expands insight into faith. Alma's poetic images of belief in planting and cultivating the seed, hoping for the growth of the seed, offer an inspiring assurance to the disciple seeking faith. Both Moroni and Mormon later validate that assurance: "Wherefore, whoso believeth in God might with surety hope for a better world . . . which hope cometh of faith, maketh an anchor to the souls of men, which would make them sure and steadfast" (Ether 12:4; see also Moroni 7:42–43).

### *Faith Is a Gift*

That faith is a gift is more explicitly described elsewhere in scripture (see Rom 12:3; I Cor 12:8; Eph 2:8; Moroni 10: 11). The Prophet Joseph Smith observed a connection between gifts and faith (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*; hereafter *TPJS* 270), proclaiming that faith is received from hearing the word of God (*TPJS* 148). The Prophet continued that faith, among other gifts of grace, repentance, and salvation, is a gift of God purchased for humanity by the blood of Christ. Elder Orson Pratt said that although faith is obtained "through the exercise of free will and agency," it remains a gift of God, transcending any reciprocal expectation from our efforts to earn it (82–83). Elder Talmage asserted, "Though within the reach of all who diligently strive to gain it, faith is nevertheless a divine gift, and can be obtained only from God" (*Jesus The Christ* 347).

Alma's reference to the gift of faith is more subtle. It lies deep within the analogy of the seed itself, in the nurturance of the word of God. Who has planted any seed, watched the sprouting, and tasted the fruit without marveling at the divine gift of the harvest? I don't remember a single summer in all the time I have spent with my father that he hasn't hosted a tour

of the fields, sweat dripping from the end of his nose, in exhilarating near surprise at the heavenly gift of a rich hay crop and mature grain harvest. Elder Neal Maxwell noted, “True faith is not to be brought about by overwhelming and intimidating intervention from God” (32).

### *Faith Is Action*

Joseph Smith defined faith as “the assurance which men have of the existence of things which they have not seen, and the *principle of action* in all intelligent beings” (*Lectures on Faith* 1:9). Faith as a moving force gathers power as it is activated. Again, Alma’s metaphor applies: The planting of the seed requires both active attention in distinguishing good seed from bad, barren soil from rich, and active effort in cultivating, nourishing, and even harvesting. Though the divine potential for harvest lies only within the seed, any farmer knows the analogy of the seed is one of hard physical, mental, and spiritual work, energy, and power. Elder Talmage noted that “passive belief on the part of a would-be recipient of a blessing is insufficient; only when it is vitalized into active faith is it power” (*Jesus The Christ* 319). Such active power is seen in accounts of the faithful throughout the scriptures (see Nyman 67–77).

### *Faith Is Not Perfect Knowledge*

Three times Alma explains that to have faith is not to have knowledge. Alma repeated, “If a man knoweth a thing he hath no cause to believe . . . faith is not to have a perfect knowledge . . . Now, as I said concerning faith—that it was not a perfect knowledge” (Alma 32:17–18, 21, 26). If knowledge is not faith, can “doubt” then be a part of coming to faith? Latter-day Saints often fear, deny, or avoid the idea of doubt, as though it were synonymous with sin. Certainly, that doubt associated with skepticism or an inclination to reject the truths of salvation, to “cast out” the seed by unbelief and resist the Spirit of the

Lord (Alma 32:28), is counterproductive to the search of faith (McConkie 208). However, in seeking truth, doubt as the humble, longing, sometimes even faltering “desire to believe,” can be a motivating force in coming to God. In the wearying clouds of trial and unknowing, often all that one does know is God.

For example, for much of my own life, my faith resembled knowledge. I knew by my own experience and observation that obedience led to blessings, that God answered all my prayers. Without a trial of doubt, I was secure in a near perfect knowledge of the word of God in my life, at least for my level of development. Since then, life has brought crises of doubt. Following the sudden death of my son, I struggled with not knowing whether or where he existed. I knew where the scriptures told me he was, I knew where family, friends and Church leaders told me he was, but I resented their assumption that I could at least find comfort because I knew where he was. The truth was I did not *know*. I was convinced that my loss was no less than that of a nonbelieving mother. I did not know with any assurance that could nourish the seed of God’s word in my heart. However, what I did know was God. Only by acknowledging my doubt in a humility acquired from loss, and taking that unknowing “desire to believe” to God, was I able to find a sprouting, growing faith.

Submission of that unknowing to the will and workings of a Heavenly Father was for me the beginning of faith. Alma said, “Yea even *if ye can no more than desire to believe*, let this desire work in you.” (Alma 32:27). In this sense, doubt can be a motivating force in coming to faith. The only people who never doubt are the atheists, who share a positivistic certainty that there is no God. Hugh B. Brown was once heard to say, “No one has ever had authentic assurance unless he has served an apprenticeship in doubt” (quoted by Truman Madsen in a *Deseret News* interview with Jerry Johnston, November, 1989). Elder Boyd K. Packer observed, “Faith, to be faith, must center around something that is not known. Faith, to be faith, must go beyond that for which there is confirming evidence. Faith, to be



faith, must go into the unknown. Faith, to be faith, must walk to the edge of the light, and then a few steps into the darkness” (“Faith” 62; see also “What Is Faith” 42).

## Necessary Elements of Faith

Woven throughout Alma’s analogy are clues to elements necessary for the existence and growth of faith. In addition to humility there are truth, agency, and works.

### *Truth*

Alma notes that faith is “hope for things which are not seen which are *true*” (Alma 32:21). Hope in something false or wrong is faith in a bad seed that cannot swell, sprout, or grow, and must be “cast away” (Alma 32:30,32), “for every seed bringeth forth unto its own likeness” (Alma 32:31). The Prophet Joseph Smith asserted that faith must center on the correct idea of God’s existence and nature (*Lectures on Faith* 3:3–4). And Elder Bruce R. McConkie reminded that “faith and truth cannot be separated; if there is to be faith . . . there must first be truth” (262). It follows, as an order of natural and divine law, that for the power of faith to function, the object of faith must be true. The comforting beauty of this consideration is that truth and faith mutually witness that each other exists.

### *Agency*

A theme of agency pervades the entire analogy of the seed. The gift of faith is tempered by our choices in methods and consequences in preparing the soil, planting, nourishing, and harvesting seeds of faith. The growth of the seed depends not only on the nature of the seed (Alma 32:30–32), but also on the willingness to try the experiment (Alma 32:33, 36), to nourish the growth (Alma 32:37), and to choose not to neglect the tree (Alma 32:38, 40). While faith is offered as a gift, it must be received by the exercise of agency in acceptance and cultiva-

tion. Indeed, blessings and knowledge are often granted or withheld as a direct consequence of a person's willingness or unwillingness to receive them. Bruce C. Hafen cited the words of William James from his *Essays on Faith and Morals*, "God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity," and proposed the possibility that the strength and power of the very being of God may be increased by our fidelity, "not only because we must nourish the seed of faith in our own lives, but also because he needs us to help nourish those seeds in the lives of others" (79). To consider the positive use of agency in synchrony with the very source of the blessings of faith is a humbling, powerful affirmation of the principle of agency.

### *Works*

The message of the role of works emerges in Alma 32:41–43, where he notes the need for "great diligence." The Apostle James also included works in the principle of faith (James 2:17–26). As discussed, faith is an active principle of power requiring energy and diligence for realization of its fruits. Works of obedience, Christian commitment, and repentance are necessary for faith to abide. Thus, Alma was intent on teaching the Zoramites correct worship according to faith (Alma 32:10–11). Orson Pratt reminded that the gift of faith is not offered to us without our own works (82). Robert Millet summarized, "We exercise appropriate faith in our Master by involving ourselves in the work of the Master" (46).

## The Fruits of the Seed

Alma closed his words with a promise of the rewards of the fruits of faith (Alma 32:42–43). Citing other prophets Alma continued in patience to teach the Zoramites of worship, prayer, and the mission of the Savior. His desire and promise were that all might continue and endure in the experiment, nourish the

word of God by faith, and behold the resulting tree “springing up . . . unto everlasting life” (Alma 33:3, 15, 23).

The analogy of the planting experiment is particularly powerful. The images of nurturance of the seed and the symbols of the tree and fruit endure universally through time and culture. The messages to endure in the nurturing of the seed, to actively await the maturity of the tree and the transcending beauty of the fruit of eternal life, “the greatest of all the gifts of God,” are themes repeated in scripture (1 Nephi 15:36; D&C 14:7).

Just as the ancients escaped death by fire and found safety from the sword of war by their faith (*TPJS* 270), Latter-day Saints may also know the fruits of faith. Those fruits may not be realized in times of doubt and testing. Indeed, we are promised no witness until after the trial of our faith (Ether 12:6). But just as Elijah did not find the Lord in the winds or the earthquakes or the fire (I Kings 19:11–13); and just as the long spring of rains on the sprouting and growing seed offer yet no fruit to one who is hungry, we must wait with hope until the tumult subsides. Then, on a quiet unsuspecting summer morning, the bud bursts with fruit. True to the longing, hopeful expectation “of things not seen,” angels whisper with confirming miracles. To each who dares the experiment, the fruit is unique and delicious, “most precious, . . . sweet above all that is sweet, . . . white above all that is white, yea, and pure above all that is pure; and ye shall feast upon this fruit even until ye are filled, that ye hunger not, neither shall ye thirst.” (Alma 32:42).

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