

He Does Not Take Counsel from His Fears

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Several months ago, we received a letter from our son, Keith, who is serving in the Washington Seattle Mission. He wrote:

“Unfortunately, this letter has to be the bearer of some bad news. Saturday night, Elder Abel [his companion] collapsed in the bathroom. I gave him a blessing and . . . that night we visited the fireside for departing missionaries. When Sister Pinegar saw how peaked and pale he looked, she immediately sent him to the mission doctor. When we met up again that night, Elder Abel filled me in: ‘He says I’m incredibly healthy, I’m just anemic. They want me to see another doctor tomorrow.’ Upon [my] return to Bellevue, I learned that Elder Abel had been put in the hospital. [The] President talked to me and informed me that Elder Abel would be discharged in a few hours and would be spending the night at the Pinegars. I went and collected some things he would need for his overnight stay. When I got to the President’s home, I waited until Elder Abel and [the] President arrived. As I was about to leave I said, ‘Well, Elder Rice (the elder I was with) and I are gonna go find some people for you and [I] to teach.’ There was a funny silence, and [the] President said, ‘Why don’t you two head in here and Elder Abel can talk to you.’ I realized something was wrong, and as Elder Abel and I walked into an adjacent bedroom I said, ‘That doesn’t sound good, buddy, what’s going on?’ I turned to Elder Abel and after a second he said, ‘I have leukemia.’ His eyes got red, [and] then mine got red. We both sat down. ‘What does that mean, Elder Abel?’ He started to cry, which I have never seen him close to doing, ‘It means I’m going home Sunday.’ I’ve never seen anyone cry more bitter tears than when he was explaining that his mission was about to end. We talked and laughed and cried our eyes out for about half an hour.”

Our family was shocked and saddened by the news of Keith’s companion. We prayed for Elder Abel and pondered how even those who are most worthy—indeed those who are wholly devoted to the service of the Savior—are not immune from the vagaries of mortality.

It is apparent that each of us will face significant challenges in this life. Elder Marvin J. Ashton said about these challenges:

“It would seem that no one escapes some uncertainty, insecurity, doubt and even fear. This mortal existence is invariably challenging and unpredictable. An honest person who is acquainted with the characteristics of life cannot ever be completely confident that his circumstances will not change unexpectedly.”¹

Indeed, if you consider the faithful people you know who face significant challenges, you will probably realize that the list is rather long. Even those who seem to live a charmed life are not immune. It reminds me of a new bishop who sat on the stand during his first week of service and thought, “Wow, no one in our ward has any problems!” After several months, he scanned the same congregation and observed, “Wow, every person in our ward has problems!”

Since we will all face doubt and fear from time to time, how can we learn to develop faith that is stronger than fear and to trust in Him who understands all things and knows the beginning from the end?

President Monson once said of President Hinckley, “He does not take counsel from his fears.”² Note that President Monson didn’t say, “President Hinckley has no fears.” He said, “He does not take counsel from his fears.” There is a difference. Lt. John Putnam, who died at the age of 23 during World War II, said: “Courage is not the lack of fear but the ability to face it.”³

Sadly, fear has become a common commodity in our modern age. Purveyors of entertainment use fear to attract patrons. Movies, books, video games, amusement park rides, and extreme sports promise an adrenalin rush by causing patrons to confront their most fundamental fears, including the fear of death. Fear sells products and it can decide elections. Indeed, fear has become a potent military and political weapon. The primary objective of the terrorist, after all, is to spread fear in the population.

There is nothing that will tear the fabric of society more quickly in a crisis than fear and panic. No one understood this better than Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who famously observed in his first inaugural address: “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified, terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”⁴ Many from that era agree that President Roosevelt’s greatest contribution may have been that he gave people courage and hope.

In our lives, it is possible for us to be overcome by our fears:

- I might lose my job.
- What if my children are not faithful?
- There is a convicted felon living in my neighborhood.
- My spouse could leave me.
- My son has been called up for military service.
- I have an incurable disease; I will never get better.

The list could go on and on. Those who take counsel from their fears are prone to agonize and worry. They may suffer the physical and psychological effects of anxiety or feel paralyzed by their situation, as though there is nothing they can do to change the inevitable outcome. Some may require medical treatment or counseling to deal with these feelings, which can be intense and overwhelming.

May I suggest some things that can be done when we have feelings of fear and uncertainty?

First, remember that God is over all. He numbers all the hairs of our heads. He is in charge. Elder Hugh B. Brown taught this great lesson in his famous address titled “God Is the Gardener.” As Hugh pruned a current bush in his garden he imagined the protestations from the bush as it was cut back. “How could you do this to me? I was making such wonderful growth.” He mentally reminded the bush that pruning would make it stronger: “Look little currant bush, I am the gardener here and I know what I want you to be.” Years later, when Hugh considered his own life and the ways he felt he had been unfairly cut back, he exclaimed, “How could you do this to me, God? There is nothing that I could have done—that I should have done—that I haven’t.” Then he heard the whisper of Heavenly Father’s voice: “I am the gardener here. I know what I want you to do.”

Said Elder Brown of this experience:

“I wanted to tell you this oft-repeated story because there are many of you who are going to have some very difficult experiences: disappointment, heartbreak, bereavement, defeat. You are going to be tested and tried to prove what you are made of. I just want you to know that if you don’t get what you think you ought to get, remember, God is the gardener here. He knows what he wants you to be.”⁵

In 1981, I had just completed a graduate degree and was anxious to put my new-found knowledge to good use. In other words, I needed a job. We had two small children at the time and were surviving thanks to the kindness of my in-laws. Although I was diligent in seeking employment, months passed with no offers. The economy was poor and competition for work was intense. Faced with this challenge, I began, for the first time, to take counsel from doubt and fear. I imagined a worst-case scenario where no one would hire me. I might become the first unemployable MBA graduate in history. What would I do? How would I provide for my family? Naturally, there was fervent prayer and abundant humility. Ultimately, I came to the knowledge that Heavenly Father was aware of our situation and that everything would work out.

Within a few more weeks, and a miraculous series of events, I was able to secure a position with a fine firm and begin my career. Because of my experience, I never took anything at work for granted. I was glad to have a great job. I worked hard and was appreciative of the opportunity I had been given. This incident provided the foundation for a career that has been personally rewarding and provided sufficient income for our family.

Second, pray for Christ's strength and courage. Mormon's great teaching on charity shows the pattern whereby we can be partakers of all Christlike attributes. He states:

“Wherefore, my beloved brethren, pray unto the Father with all energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this [substitute faith and courage for] 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” (Moroni 7:48).

Remember, the Savior has felt the same feelings you are feeling. As he faced his greatest challenge, he exclaimed “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine be done. And there appeared an angel from heaven, strengthening him.” [Luke 22:42–43]

Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, comparing our own experiences to those of the Savior:

“As we confront our own lesser trials and tribulations, we too can plead with the Father, just as Jesus did, that we ‘might not . . . shrink’—meaning to retreat or recoil (D&C 19:18). Not shrinking is much more important than surviving! Moreover, partaking of the bitter cup without becoming bitter is likewise part of the emulation of Jesus.”⁶

Years ago in the mission field in Chile, where I served, we sometimes used a first contact approach called “harvesting the field.” This involved knocking on a door, asking for the head of household, and stating, “We are representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ. He has sent us here to leave His peace and blessing in your home. May we come in and do that?” When we were allowed in, we would say, “This blessing is for the entire family. Would you mind gathering the family together?” After the family assembled we would again explain, “We represent Jesus Christ and He has sent us to your home to leave His peace and a blessing in your home.” Then came the hard part: We would kneel and invite the family, “Will you kneel with us as we do this?” There we were, on our knees in a stranger's home, looking up and inviting them to join us in prayer. If we hesitated when we knelt, there was usually uncomfortable giggling or laughter and the response, “No thanks, perhaps another time.” If we didn't hesitate, and demonstrated our resolve, there was a good chance the family would kneel with us. Then a prayer for the family and a priesthood blessing would be pronounced. Many times, this was a powerful spiritual experience that paved the way for teaching the gospel.

I have never had a more intimidating experience as a missionary than when we were “harvesting the field.” This made street contacting feel like child's play. As you might expect, spiritual preparation before this approach was critical. We prayed earnestly for the strength of the Lord and to be filled with His courage.

On one occasion, after an evening of “harvesting” with one of the assistants to the president, we were filled with the joy of several powerful experiences. He said, “Elder Evans, that was incredible! I've never done that before.” I was surprised. I assumed he was an old hand at these things. As we talked, we realized that without an endowment of courage from the Lord, this experience would never have been possible.

It also illustrates to me that fear need not be connected to a specific problem or crisis. It can just as easily arise from a challenging Church calling or other significant responsibility.

Third, exercise faith. Since fear and faith cannot coexist, we must take action to have faith replace fear. Otherwise, fear is likely to linger like an unwelcome guest. Endless consideration of the question “Why did this happen to me?” is unlikely to be constructive or instructive. Be proactive as you go about your daily activities. Be prayerful and decide on a course of action. Seek the Spirit to confirm your decisions as described in Doctrine and Covenants section 9. Remain positive and be grateful for the blessings you enjoy.

Elder Robert D. Hales taught:

“I have come to understand how useless it is to dwell on the *whys, what ifs, and if onlys* for which there likely will be no answers in mortality. To receive the Lord’s comfort, we must exercise faith. The questions *Why me? Why our family? Why now?* are usually unanswerable questions. These questions detract from our spirituality and can destroy our faith. We need to spend our time and energy building our faith by turning to the Lord and asking for strength to overcome the pains and trials of this world and to endure to the end for greater understanding.”⁷

Let me tell you about a wonderful couple I home teach. Dan and Linda are an inspiration. I enjoy visiting them as I am strengthened and uplifted each time we meet.

About three years ago, Dan was diagnosed with cancer. After the initial shock of the news, Dan and Linda sought priesthood blessings. They were counseled to seek knowledge about the situation and were promised that they would know what actions to take. They were also promised that they would have peace. Immediately, they began an extensive study of Dan’s disease. A regimen of diet and exercise was started, consistent with the principles of the Word of Wisdom. Linda participated along with Dan and both experienced the benefits of increased energy. They both look great and Dan has never felt better. Throughout this continuing challenge, Dan and Linda have remained optimistic and proactive. They take counsel from their doctors but keep the ultimate responsibility for Dan’s treatment for themselves.

Most important, this experience has strengthened their relationship with one another and with the Lord. They study the scriptures regularly, pray individually and as a couple, attend the temple, serve faithfully in ward callings, and minister to the needs of those around them. Their attitude is positive. They enjoy the peace of the Spirit.

Let me return to the story of Elder Abel. He is undergoing chemotherapy and is reported to be responding well. Of him, my son Keith wrote:

“Elder Abel [has] been an inspiration to the whole mission. His optimism is just incredible. He’s maintained such a positive outlook throughout all this. Isn’t it funny how it’s usually the person to whom the problem comes that’s the strong one while everyone else falls to pieces. If anyone can get through something like this,

Elder Abel can.”

Keith’s experience with Elder Abel also teaches us a powerful lesson. Just as we must learn to deal with personal challenges, we may also be deeply affected by the challenges faced by our loved ones. Keith was emotionally drained and fearful for his missionary companion. He found it necessary to acknowledge Heavenly Father’s omnipotence, seek the Savior, and exercise faith in Elder Abel’s behalf.

Keith also has his own personal way of considering eternal principles—he sketches. Often, his drawings are of heroic persons from the scriptures, such as Nephi, Captain Moroni, or the Apostle Peter. Some of the other elders in the mission have asked Keith to sketch their favorite scriptural story or person. As I was preparing this talk, I happened to be flipping through Keith’s letters home, which often contain a copy of his latest sketch.

[insert Keith’s sketch]

When I came to this drawing, patterned after the well-known *Christus* statue, I was appreciative of the thoughts, desires, and personal insights that must have gone into its creation. My mind was turned to the teachings of the Savior that have personally given me comfort in times of fear and uncertainty.

One day several years ago, while I was minding my own business and enjoying life, I became dizzy and had trouble standing. After a long series of medical tests over several months, I was diagnosed with Meniere’s Disease, a disorder of the inner ear, which causes hearing loss, constant ringing, and attacks of vertigo. These attacks come without warning and create the sensation that the world is spinning. You might say that Meniere’s patients believe that the world revolves around them. These attacks can be frightening and usually involve nausea, vomiting, and partial incapacity. The unpredictable nature of the disease has caused sufferers to describe themselves as feeling like a time bomb waiting to go off. When I was first diagnosed and learned the implications of my situation, I feared that I would become deaf and be unable to work or drive a car. During some attacks, which can last for hours, the thought occurred to me, “What if the vertigo never stops?” During these times, this scripture came to my mind:

“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (*John 14:27*).

Sometimes during an attack, I found myself repeating this verse over and over. From my experience with Meniere’s Disease, I have learned that faith dispels fear and that the fruit of faith is peace. Peace comes from the Holy Ghost. I am not cured. I could have an attack at any time. But I am not afraid. I know that God is over all, I seek the strength of the Savior, and I choose to be proactive and exercise faith. I have enjoyed blessings and spiritual experiences that would not have been available except for this challenge. I am not suggesting that we should pray for a problem so that we can grow, but I do believe we can become better people by the challenges we face.

President James E. Faust taught:

“Let us not take counsel from our fears. May we remember always to be of good cheer, put our faith in God, and live worthy for Him to direct us. We are entitled to receive personal inspiration to guide us through our mortal probation. May we so live that our hearts are open at all times to the whisperings and comfort of the Spirit.”⁸

May we be blessed to face the challenges of fear and uncertainty in our lives.

Notes

1. “Strengthen the Feeble Knees ” *Ensign*, November 1991
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. “The Currant Bush ” *New Era*, January 1973
6. “Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ ” *Ensign*, November 1997].
7. “Healing Body and Soul ”, *Ensign*, November 1998
8. “Be Not Afraid ” *Ensign*, October 2002