

## *Spiritual Strength in Challenging Times: Lord, Increase Our Faith*

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The view of you right now is one of my favorite scenes of Women's Conference: thousands of happy women sitting close together, excited to learn, while producing periodic glimpses of flashing crochet hooks. It reminds me of the painting of Christ with Mary and Martha. Mary is sitting at the feet of the Savior as she listens with rapt attention, rarely blinking her eyes. Martha is just as attentive, but is vigorously stirring the contents of her mixing bowl at the same time. Whether it is crocheting or taking copious notes, some of us have minds that become more alert and attentive when our hands are moving. Others of us learn best by sitting still and concentrating on the words that are more felt than heard.

Many men don't get Women's Conference. To see a multitude of women together for two days without anyone trying to be the Alpha Female is a mystery to them. They do not understand that we learn well in groups when opportunities are given to share our own insights after formal presentations have concluded. In reality, some of the best ideas for application of gospel principles will be discussed in informal gatherings tonight. After some of those late night sessions, I have frequently heard men muse, "What can women possibly talk about for so long?" These two days allow a brief separation from daily duties at home and work to see a different perspective for creating increased understanding and love in our lives.

### **The Problem, Universal Fear**

This year may be especially important for clarifying priorities and developing spiritual strength. We know that this mortal life was intended to give us trials, but in the past year, the depth of our cumulative woes have come in tsunami-like fashion. Although this is not the only talk on spiritual strength in challenging times that you have heard this year, my prayer is that the perspective I have elected to consider will complement the inspired counsel we received during General Conference and elsewhere to rekindle our hope for tomorrow.

Many and diverse problems are hitting close to home—for some of us they come like a daily barrage with barely time to catch our breath. What appeared to be secure jobs are dissipating.

Retirement plans are changing because a life-time of savings has waned. Neighbors or co-workers are persecuting God-fearing people because of their reverence for the family. Debilitating accidents or illnesses are leaving in their wake expensive medications and often reduced health insurance. A child is electing to follow the permissive path of the world. Divorce is creating another single parent with all the responsibilities of childcare, wage-earner, housekeeper, and bill-payer. An increasingly tight budget is being stretched to pay the mortgage for a home now worth a fraction of the original loan value. War is snatching lives of loved ones, selfishness is turning love cold in a marriage, and in later years, healthy spouses are becoming full-time caregivers for their beloved incapacitated partners. We are being emotionally, financially, and spiritually stretched more than we thought possible. In short, one by one, our sources of secular security are being taken away with no immediate bail-out in sight.

Ours is not the only period of the world where entire populations have experienced challenging times in nearly every aspect of life. Certainly the people of the Book of Mormon knew about turbulent times, of economic privations, of rebellious children, of the casualties of war, and persecution against the Saints. Moses and the Old Testament Israelites could tell us something about not having a home and surviving on a rather simple diet while pandemic diseases regularly decimated their numbers. And what about the trials of the early Saints in Nauvoo or those who received assignments to establish a homeland in the desolate west?

Even the twelve men whom Jesus selected to be His original Apostles recognized that daily companionship with the Savior did not insulate them from hardships and fear of the future. At one point, they pleaded with the Master, “Lord, increase our faith” (Luke 17:5). Although expressed in a variety of ways, the Apostles’ plea echoes our own yearning in these days of uncertainty. “Dear God,” we pray, “please increase our faith.”

Receiving an increase in faith, however, will conversely require the decrease of fear for the future, self-deprecation over past mistakes for which we have already repented, and personal justifications that block spiritual promptings to change. Elder Neal A. Maxwell described such fears that barricade our faith-filled petitions to God. “With little faith, we may actually acknowledge God’s past blessings but still fear that He will not deliver us in the present situation. Or we may trust that God will finally deliver us but fear He will do so only after a severe trial which we desperately do not want! . . . Inwardly and anxiously we may worry, too, that an omniscient and loving God sees more stretch in us than we feel we have. Hence when God is actually lifting us up, we may feel He is letting us down” (*Lord, Increase Our Faith*, 3).

### **The Power of Faith in Christ**

No wonder Jesus first wanted His disciples to appreciate the power of even a little faith before they could understand how it is increased. Likening beginning faith to one of the tiniest seeds, Jesus began His response to the Apostles’ request: “If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye could say to this sycamine [mulberry] tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you” (Luke 17: 6).

In other words, nothing is impossible—no trial, no loss, no burden—if we have faith in Jesus Christ. Most frequently in scripture, the term “faith” combines belief in the Savior with the profound need and desire to act, to do, and to be stretched beyond our comfort zone. Through

multiple scriptural teachings and examples, we learn that living by faith occurs when we are so absolutely sure of what God has promised that we cannot be constrained from doing all that He asks, even when no evidence of how the promise can be fulfilled is visible (see JST Hebrews 11:1).

For instance, take the stirring roll-call of the faithful reported in Hebrews 11. I will here cite only two of the verses. First, “by faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, . . . prepared an ark to the saving of his house” (Hebrews 11:6). To appreciate Noah’s faith, I first wonder at young Nephi’s faith when the Lord instructed him to build a boat while his family waited by the ocean’s edge to travel to the Promised Land. I marvel further that Laman and Lemuel actually had sufficient trust to get into that boat that their little brother made. Yet how much faith must Noah have had to build a boat when there was no water around. His assurance of what God had promised was so great that he boldly set out to build a large ark, hardly a project that could be hidden from the neighbors. His actions could not be separated from his faith in the Lord even though he saw no evidence of a storm in the forecast, let alone a destructive flood.

A second example, “by faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace” (Hebrews 11:31). A Canaanite woman, a harlot, living among her idolatrous kinsmen, received so much faith in the Israelites’ God that she could not be held back from doing something to help the Lord’s cause. With only a mustard-seed of faith, Rahab put her own life on the line to protect the two Hebrew spies who came into Jericho, even when she had no evidence of God’s promises of protection and spiritual progression. Like Noah, she acted because of her reverence for the only true God, without any expectation of reward.

Many more are named in Hebrews 11, but the common denominator that fueled their stunning increase in faith was challenges. The chapter concludes, “God having provided some better things for them through their sufferings, for without sufferings, they could not be made perfect” (JST Hebrews 11:40).

In our day, the present difficulties can become catalysts to increase our faith in the Savior. Given that God created the earth to teach us to live by faith in His Son, our current situations become potential laboratories for testing, refining, and increasing our faith. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that God willed the current financial crisis or incited the wars and turmoil in the world in order to build up our faith reserves. God is never the author of greed and evil.

Neither am I saying that suffering will automatically develop greater faith in us. Remember that after the more than twenty years of war between the Nephites and Lamanites, “many had become hardened, because of the exceedingly great length of the war; and many were softened because of their afflictions, insomuch that they did humble themselves before God, even in the depth of humility” (Alma 62:41). It isn’t our environment or the severity of the trial that changes us, but how we respond to the uncertainties. Do we lose hope and fear to act or do we turn to the Lord in faith, ready to go wherever and do whatever He bids us?

Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, beauty will come from ashes and compensatory blessings will emerge from the filthiest recesses if we come to Him in sincerity and humility. As the Apostle Paul later observed, “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:11). Or as the Psalmist sang, “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

### **The Parable of the Unprofitable Servant**

After giving the Twelve a better appreciation for the tremendous power inherent in having faith in Him, Jesus next responded to their request for an increase in faith by relating to them the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant. This is one of the lesser known and cited parables, perhaps because its connection to a plea for increased faith appears obscure or even unrelated. The Apostles asked Jesus to increase their faith, and in turn Christ told them this parable:

But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat?

And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?

Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I [think] not.

So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: We have done that which was our duty to do.

(Luke 17:7-10)

The Savior is clearly the Master in the parable. He tells us that we are the servant, or more accurately “the slave,” as the Greek language renders it. Important doctrines are alluded to in the parable that teach us how faith is strengthened during challenging times. But first, we could benefit from a better understanding of what it meant to be a slave in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus’ mortal ministry.

The term “slavery” calls up horrendous images of abuse and dishonesty that transpired in our nation’s past and inexplicably still occurs in parts of the world today. Slavery in the first century, however, should not be confused with the practice of keeping slaves in this country’s history. Slaves in New Testament times were neither recognized by race, nor a lack of education, nor even by necessarily being at the bottom of the social-economic triangle. Many slaves even owned property.

Because of the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace), slaves in the Roman Empire were less likely to be prisoners of war or victims of kidnappers during the time of Christ. More frequently, slaves in the first century were born to slaves, or forced into slavery to pay their debts, or volunteered to become slaves. Why would anyone choose to be a slave? To improve one’s standing in society.

Because a slave's individual social standing, honor, and economic opportunity were dependent on the status of his or her owner, chances for improved social standing and careers enticed many individuals to sell themselves into slavery for a time. Not only did slavery offer job security when employment opportunities were thin, but slaves could inherit an improved life style. Frequently, freed slaves became Roman citizens.

Knowing that first-century slaves received the potential for added freedom and opportunities in life makes it easier for us to appreciate why Christ would liken us to slaves in his parable. It also helps to remember that He who is the only completely just and merciful Master is also our Owner. He is also the greatest Exemplar of servitude. Steeped in debt beyond our capacity to repay because of our sins, mistakes, and shortcomings, Jesus Christ bought us with a price; He ransomed us by giving His perfect blood. When we entered into the covenant of baptism, we demonstrated to Him and to ourselves that we needed a Redeemer and desired to make His work our work. In short, we chose to become His servants, or slaves, to go where He calls us to go, to say what He directs us to say, to become what He alone enables us to become. No wonder that the Apostle Paul, a Roman citizen and freeman from birth, used this imagery to describe his willing decision to turn his life over to the Master; he rejoiced at his good fortune to have become a slave for the Savior (see 1 Corinthians 7:22; 9:19).

In the parable, we are not only the Lord's servants, but we acknowledge that we are His "unprofitable servants". Jesus asked His disciples whether the servant who has been working all day in the fields in the parable should expect to be richly rewarded and finally served by the Master in return. Anticipating that his listeners would see the fallacy of such an expectation, Jesus explained that the servant would instead hasten to prepare and serve dinner to the Master before preparing something to eat for himself. Likening his disciples to the servant, the Savior concluded, "likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: We have done that which was our duty to do."

We don't much like being called unprofitable, which is another reason we probably prefer to ignore this parable. In this great era of entitlement, when consulting companies are reportedly hired for the sole purpose of stroking egos of new employees, when workers expect bonuses for merely showing up to work, and when students anticipate A-grades because they worked hard in class, the Savior's parable is hard to swallow. On those days when our confidence is shattered, or when we choose to assume a martyr-like attitude of accepting responsibility for all the problems around us, or when we think that we can never hear enough praise to make us feel acceptable, the lesson that our Savior is teaching in this parable is not particularly welcomed. It can sound like the Lord is asking us to add even more work to our already impossible daily demands. So why not just throw in the towel now? Instead of reminding us of our "nothingness" without Christ, we may prefer to find a scripture which reads, "thou art fine just the way thou art, my daughter, and hast worked hard enough, kick back now and rest, for I will do thy work for thee." But, of course, no such scripture exists.

Through the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant, Jesus seems to be telling us something better. As in the parable, King Benjamin called his people unprofitable servants, even when they were previously described as "diligent in keeping the commandments" (Mosiah 1:11; 2:21). In his sermon, this beloved Nephite monarch testified that everything that we are we owe "to that God

who has created you, and has kept and preserved you, and has caused that ye should rejoice” (Mosiah 2:20). All that God asks of us is to follow Him, and when we do, He immediately blesses us all the more, increasing our debt to Him. King Benjamin concluded, “therefore of what have ye to boast?” (2:22-24). Aaron, a great Nephite missionary, taught King Lamoni’s father that, “since man had fallen he could not merit anything of himself; but the sufferings and death of Christ atone for their sins, through faith and repentance” (Alma 22:14). The closer we come to the Savior, the easier it is to admit that we are nothing without the grace and power of Jesus Christ.

Before jumping to conclusions that our Master’s goal is to make us miserable with increased drudgery and heavier burdens, let’s look at the parable from a different angle. What if the parable’s message is not about how long we work in the Lord’s service, or how hard we work for Him, or even what we are specifically assigned to do in our service? What if the Master is teaching us to learn WHY we work and WHY we serve? What if the message is what we learn and become along the way?

The epistle of the Apostle Paul to Philemon in the New Testament tells of a slave named Onesimus, who ran away from his master Philemon. Onesimus’ name means “profitable.” One wonders whether it was a popular name given to those born to slaves. Well—Onesimus was not profitable when he deserted his duty in Colossae but ended up in Rome where he met the imprisoned Paul. There Onesimus was converted to Jesus Christ and returned to Philemon with a letter from Paul requesting that Philemon forgive his repentant slave. In a delightful play on words, Paul becomes a type of Christ who justified Onesimus because the slave was penitent, albeit still a work in process. The Apostle Paul wrote to Philemon that “in times past [Onesimus] was to thee unprofitable, but now [is] profitable to thee and to me” (Philemon 1:11). Through his faith in the healing power of Christ, Onesimus was declared profitable, worthy, or righteous. Through the grace of Jesus Christ, he became worthy of God’s blessing.

Ammon, a Nephite missionary to the wicked Lamanites, embraced the blessing of being about the Lord’s work without expectation of praise along the way. Captured by the Lamanites and taken as a prisoner to their king, the young missionary was given an offer to marry the king’s daughter. Instead, Ammon requested to be the king’s servant. He volunteered to be a slave for Christ. After hearing the incredible report of Ammon’s labors during his first day at work in the king’s field—gathering scattered sheep and fighting off those who attempted to steal them—King Lamoni inquired as to the whereabouts of this faithful servant, only to learn that Ammon was already preparing the king’s horses and chariots as he had been previously directed. Upon hearing this, King Lamoni exclaimed, “Surely there has not been any servant among all my servants that has been so faithful as this man; for even he doth remember all my commandments to execute them” (Alma 18:10).

Is that what the Savior was teaching His disciples when they asked Him for an increase of faith? Was He telling them through the parable that as indentured servants, their faith would increase when they lost themselves in the work, found joy and satisfaction from helping others, and did not seek for recognition? In a day when we may hear more criticism and mocking than praise for our work, the Master is reassuring us that He knows our heart and that He is with us. Jesus is telling us to carry on with a perfect brightness of hope despite the storms that surround us.

Mother Teresa became an icon of faith because she wholeheartedly espoused this philosophy. Listen to a taste of her advice: “If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway. If you are honest and sincere, people may cheat you. Be honest and sincere anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, people may be jealous. Be happy anyway. You see in the end, it is between you and God; it was never between you them anyway.”

In his analysis of the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant, Elder John K. Carmack of the Seventy observed a similar conclusion, “Perhaps the Savior was teaching us [in the parable] that if we are serious about desiring greater faith, nothing short of maintaining a constant eternal perspective will do. If we place ANY condition on our willingness to serve the Lord with all our hearts, we diminish our faith. . . . We will continue with pure intent and total commitment the rest of our lives” (56-57).

My guess is that understanding this principle will not change a lot of what we do or how much we do each day, but it can make a dramatic difference in our attitude and enjoyment of life. Most importantly, our faith in Christ will increase to sustain us in our challenges. Please consider with me, therefore, three of the many lessons we can learn by serving the Lord without expectation of reward.

### **We are Rendered Profitable or Worthy**

First, we can learn how we become profitable or “worthy” through our participation in God’s work. In modern English, the word “worthy” means having merit and deserving praise. No wonder that many of us feel a tinge of discomfort when, during an interview for a temple recommend, our priesthood leader asks, “Are you worthy to enter the temple?” Those are humbling times, when the Spirit bears witness that we are still a work in process and do not merit praise. An obsolete use of the word “worthy” is actually more helpful here—previously, the word was a transitive verb, meaning “to be rendered worthy,” and even “to be exalted.”

Through the process of justification, Christ imputes His righteousness to us as servants in His vineyard. Only with our Master Jesus Christ are we worthy. He declares us worthy or profitable, even when we still have shortcomings. As the Apostle Paul taught, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Through His grace, the Savior gives us His goodness to support us in our desires to become like Him. In other words, to say that “I am worthy” means that I have been rendered worthy through the Atonement of Jesus Christ and therefore have the ultimate hope of exaltation.

I find it instructive that the Savior directed us to call ourselves “unprofitable” in the parable. He does not call us that. Through Joseph Smith, the Lord taught, “Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God” (D&C 18:10). In God’s eyes, we have worth. The very next verse clarifies how the unprofitable is called worthy: “For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him, on conditions of repentance” (D&C 18:11). Only through the mercy, merits, and grace of Jesus Christ, we are made profitable. Because of the Atonement, we have worth.

Even when we are “yet sinners,” when we exercise faith in Jesus Christ, we may still have the Holy Spirit with us. For example, when I am thinking or doing something that is offensive to God, I often feel the Spirit whisper to me to stop acting or thinking that way. Is the Spirit with me at those times because I am righteous? Of course not. He is with me because of the Savior’s righteousness.

And when you have those awful feelings after you have lost your temper and yelled at the kids, do you have to go through all the steps of repentance before you are “worthy” to turn to God in prayer, asking Him to help you calm down and find a better way to respond to disobedient children? Of course not. Because of the Savior, even when we are broken, we can pray directly to our Father in heaven, and we can worthily partake of the Lord’s covenant blessings in our Sacrament Meetings and in the Temple. The prayer of an Old Testament prophet named Zenos reiterates this principle: “Thou didst hear me,” he prayed, “because of mine afflictions and my sincerity; and it is because of thy Son that thou hast been thus merciful unto me, therefore I will cry unto thee in all mine afflictions, for in thee is my joy; for thou hast turned thy judgments away from me, because of thy Son” (Alma 33:11). Notice that it was not because of Zenos’ righteousness, but because of his sincerity and afflictions and because of the reality of the Redeemer that God heard his prayer. Through His mercy and grace, our Savior does a lot more for us every day than He gets credit for.

Like Onesimus, as members of the Church of Jesus Christ, we are called “Saints,” not because we are perfect, but because we have made a covenant with Christ to become like Him by relying on His mercy and grace. In only that way can we confidently and honestly answer, “Yes, I am worthy.”

### **We Gain Experience in Relying Wholly on the Lord**

The second lesson of applying the principles of the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant is experience in actually relying on the merits of the Savior. Unfortunately, our faith does not increase by merely citing the scriptures that promise strength when our faith is tried. We need personal experiences that stretch our faith. As President Uchtdorf recently admonished us in General Conference, “We must get off the side lines and practice what we preach.” When God takes us to that place where no one can help us but Him, we enter that sacred realm where spiritual growth and unshaken confidence in God is forged.

I know a family who jumped off those side lines a couple of months ago and are experiencing what it means to walk by faith. To protect their identity, I will here refer to them as the Browns. Dutifully paying rent each month for a home they hoped to be able to purchase in the future, the Browns returned home one day to find a notice on their door declaring the house in foreclosure and giving them 10 days to vacate. Unfortunately, this family is not the only one in such straits today; however, the Browns had recently made some dramatic changes in their life that makes their story especially meaningful to our discussion here. For the first time, they had chosen to include faith in Jesus Christ in their lives.

Brother and Sister Brown married and had a baby boy when they were still in high school. They were baptized in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when they were children, but

had never been active. When their son was 11 years old, the Browns moved to another city. One day the missionaries walked past their home and began chatting with the precocious boy who was playing in the yard. He told the missionaries that he wanted to learn about Jesus Christ and asked his parents for permission to receive the missionary lessons. Soon the son was baptized and bringing his parents to Church. He bore his testimony nearly every month in his ward. The day he was ordained to the Aaronic Priesthood, shortly after his twelfth birthday, was only days after the Browns received the foreclosure notice on their home.

During the ensuing Fast and Testimony Meeting, Brother Brown stood to bear his testimony, the first time he had ever done so in his life. He related what had happened to him and his family in the short time they had lived in the neighborhood, including finding the gospel of Jesus Christ—and unfortunately—trusting in the owner of their home. The Browns were actually ahead in their rent payments, having received word from the landlord that the home was financially stable. After learning that the landlord never paid the mortgage on the home all the while he was collecting their rent, Brother Brown observed, “If this had happened a year ago I would have been so angry that I would have turned to drinking and drugs. Now I am thinking that maybe this was supposed to happen. We have loved this ward, but maybe God wants us to go to a different ward where we can strengthen others who are struggling, the way that you have strengthened us.”

Like the Browns, during challenging times we are in a position to see the positive side of adversity. It is by getting off the side lines and experiencing what it means to live by faith that our faith increases. Only then do we begin to see that working in the Savior’s vineyard brings lasting fulfillment and joy, no matter what else anyone says.

### **We Obtain A Clearer Perspective**

The third and final way that our faith increases through applying the message of Jesus’ parable is that it changes and informs our perspective of the Lord and subsequently, of ourselves. In the parable, we see Jesus as our Master on whom we are completely dependent. He is therefore not merely an Elder Brother whose purpose in life is to make us happy by looking after our every need. Neither is He simply a great, moral teacher. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (Mere Christianity, 56).

From our new perspective, Jesus Christ is undeniably our Redeemer and our Savior, who alone saves us from becoming “devils, and angels to a devil, to be shut out from the presence of our God” forever (2 Nephi 9:9). An informed perspective of our pitiful situation without the Atonement of Christ helps us see the Savior as “the Rock of Heaven, which is broad as eternity,” who is the Only One who sustains and supports us throughout the mighty storms of life.

Assuredly, when He becomes the foundation for our lives, “we cannot fall” (Moses 7:53; Helaman 5:12).

Furthermore, the more clearly we see the power and righteousness of our Redeemer, the less fearful we view our futures. We see priorities and ways to simplify our lives more clearly. The wealth and power of the world fade in importance while the richness of family, friendships, and the companionship of the Spirit of God expands. President Wilford Woodruff observed, “There is a veil between man and eternal things; if that veil was taken away and we were able to see eternal things as they are before the Lord, no man would be tried with regard to gold, silver or this world’s goods” (JD 17:71). With our new perspective, we discover the gift of being content with our assignment in the Lord’s vineyard.

I had an experience several years ago that taught me that God is the anchor of my soul and the only Constant in a perpetually changing world. It was one of those times in life when everything seemed to be in turmoil. My job description at work changed daily; my new Church calling was for a responsibility that I did not even know existed; and I was confused and frustrated in a dating relationship. At the time, I was working in downtown Salt Lake City and often walked the mile from my home to work, frequently choosing to follow different streets to get there. One morning in early spring, I saw a tree in blossom at the end of the sidewalk. My father had taught me a lot about fruit trees because of the orchard he planted around our family home, so I quickly recognized that the blossoms were popcorn popping on an apricot tree. Walking past the tree that morning brought back wonderful childhood memories when life was simple, and apricots plentiful.

A few weeks passed, without my taking that same route to work. When I finally did go that same way again, I remembered the apricot tree, now visibly full of green leaves. I quickly calculated the stage of growth in the fruit that I should expect to find. I deduced that there should now be lots of small, green fruit visible on the tree. The closer I came, the more I hoped I was right. Sure enough, when I arrived at it, I saw hundreds of little green apricots that filled the tree.

As I continued my walk to work that day, my satisfaction for having predicted the correct stage of development in apricots quickly changed. My eyes were filling with tears. I could not understand my emotions. Why was I crying? I had just seen an apricot tree bearing apricots at the very time that it should have been. Then I got it. Amid all the chaos and feelings of inadequacy, I had just seen an apricot tree, bearing little green apricots, at the very time it should be. That little tree became an answer to an oft-repeated prayer. Through His creations, God seemed to be saying to me that He was still there and that the promises of the Atonement had not changed. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. I knew that I had received one of the Lord’s tender mercies as I arrived at work that day. My job had not changed, but through the enabling power of the Lord, I knew I could accomplish whatever He wanted me to do.

## **Conclusion**

As one who learned the lessons of the Parable of the Unprofitable Servant, the Apostle Paul has become one of my heroes. If ever there was one who could have beat himself up for his past life, that person would be Paul. Prior to his marvelous conversion to embracing Jesus of Nazareth as

his Master and Savior, Paul boasted of his sinless life under the law of Moses and his zeal in ruthlessly persecuting the followers of Christ. If ever there was one who could have had a reason to say, “I don’t deserve to work in the Lord’s vineyard,” it was Paul. He could have easily found justification for being paralyzed in his faith, feeling like he could never be worthy to receive the grace of Jesus Christ, or hope to ever experience the sustaining and joyful support of the Spirit in his many challenges.

But, in one of the greatest examples of faith in the power of the Atonement of Christ, the Apostle Paul exclaimed, “I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14). Rather than looking backwards and finding all the reasons he shouldn’t qualify for the Lord’s forgiveness and strength, Paul’s faith in his Redeemer turned him with confidence to the future. “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed;” Paul wrote in faith, “we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). Even while imprisoned for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul wrote, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11).

My prayer is that our current trying circumstances will propel each of us to greater faith in the Lord. Rather than adding stress and discouragement, I pray that our present trials will lead us to a deeper acceptance of the Savior’s righteousness that He imputes to our account to render us worthy; to a bolder courage to step out into the darkness and experience light as only the Lord offers; and to a clearer perspective of His divinity and constant awareness of each of us, His servants. Let us exclaim with assurance with the Apostle Paul, “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). May we look forward with confidence and remember President Thomas S. Monson’s declaration, “Your future is as bright as your faith.”

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