

Faith Is Not Blind

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TO THE MEMORY OF B. WEST BELNAP

*who taught us to see
that
faith is not blind*

Image on p. 61, *The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre on the Morning of the Resurrection*, Eugene Burnand/Bridgeman Images

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CHAPTER 2

The Simplicity Beyond Complexity

We first met as students in a BYU religion class called “Your Religious Problems.” We both solved our biggest “religious problem” when our friendship from that class blossomed into our marriage. For each class, a student would pick a religious question, do research on it, then lead a discussion. We each wrote a short paper on how we would resolve the problem.

Some of the students looked at Church history issues or criticisms of Joseph Smith. Others looked at doctrinal questions, and some just wondered how to live the gospel better. It was a blessing to explore these questions together in an attitude of mutual trust. Our teacher, West Belnap, then BYU’s Dean of Religion, often let us struggle. He wanted us to reach our own conclusions. Yet he knew just when and how to guide us with an occasional nudge. He was teaching us how to be good students of the gospel even as he helped us strengthen our faith in it. That class helped us see that “faith is not blind.”

We both know what it means to encounter issues that require deeper digging in both thought and faith. Few of today’s questions are new ones. What is new is the volume of raw dialogue around

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these issues as facilitated by the internet—a tool that, as we all know, can create both clarity and chaos.

Seeking a little order for the chaotic part, we'd like to share a model of thought that tries to encourage both clear thinking and faithful choosing. When held together, thought and faith can interact to help us keep our spiritual balance—and help us grow. Let's start by taking a look at the natural tension between the ideals of the gospel and the realities of life.

When we are young, we tend to think in terms of black or white—there is very little gray in our perspective. And many youth and young single adults have a childlike optimism and loyalty that make them wonderfully teachable. They typically trust their teachers, believe what they read, and respond eagerly to invitations for Church service. New adult converts often have similar attitudes. Their cheerful spirit and outlook make a refreshing contribution to their wards and branches.

As time goes on, however, our experience with real life often introduces a new dimension—a growing awareness of a gap between the real and the ideal, between what *is* and what *ought* to be. A piano teacher explaining how practice makes perfect shared this image about setting high goals and striving to reach them—which captures the relationship between the real and the ideal: “A distant star, / but not too far / to lure us out into the firmament. / And tho we ne'er may reach it, / we have tried / and in the trying / have learned, perchance / to make an orbit of our own.”⁴ We stand on the earthly surface of reality, stretching upward toward our lofty ideals. Let's call the distance between where we are and where we want to be “the gap.”

We first see the gap when we realize that some things about ourselves or about other people are not what we thought they were. For example, even at a Church university that one might expect to be warm and homey, a brand-new student can feel lost

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and intimidated. Or maybe she brushes up against a faculty member whose attitudes about the Church are more liberal—or more conservative—than she expected.

And when we become acquainted at an adult level with those who have been our heroes, we might begin to see their human limitations. For instance, maybe one of our parents disappoints us in some way. Or we might see a Church leader forget an important meeting or lose his cool when he's feeling stressed. Perhaps we try hard to be obedient and we pray for needed help, but the answer just doesn't come in the ways the scriptures seem to promise. As a new missionary we might experience a jarring surprise when moving from the exhilarating idealism of the Missionary Training Center to the sometimes perplexing realities of daily life in the mission field. Maybe we suffer a surprise setback with our health, or we bump into an unexpected conflict with a close friend or family member. We might run across information we haven't heard before about Joseph Smith or Brigham Young. Or maybe we encounter something posted on the internet that raises religious questions we don't know how to answer.

Such experiences can produce an unsettling sense of uncertainty, and we might understandably yearn for simpler, easier times. We might find ourselves becoming a little skeptical, or we may begin to ask questions that haven't occurred to us before. Not everyone will encounter these things in the same way, but as we grow and increase in our awareness, most of us do run into some uncertainty and opposition.

The fundamental teachings of the restored gospel are potent, clear, and unambiguous. However, even the scriptures contain some ambiguity. Consider, for example, the story of Nephi, who was directed to slay Laban in order to obtain a critically important scriptural record. That situation is charged with uncertainty until

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we realize that God Himself, who gave Moses the commandment not to kill, was also the source of the instruction to Nephi.

Also, the Savior once said, “Do not your alms before men, to be seen of them” (Matthew 6:1). But He also said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works” (Matthew 5:16). Another example—the Lord has said He can’t look upon sin with the least degree of allowance (see D&C 1:31). Yet elsewhere He said, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:11). Justice is indeed a divine law, but so is the law of mercy. At times these two concepts can seem inconsistent, until reconciled by the higher doctrine of the Savior’s Atonement.

God has given us correct principles by which we may govern ourselves, but these very principles may at times seem to be in conflict. Choosing between two principled alternatives (two “goods”) is more difficult than choosing when we see an obvious contrast between good and evil. But learning to make such choices is essential to our spiritual maturity.

Moreover, today’s society is filled with increasing dissonance and conflict on a host of political, cultural, and social issues. People on the extreme sides of these questions seem very certain about the right answer. But some people would rather be certain than be right.

So life is full of ambiguity, and learning to manage the gap between the ideal and the real is one purpose of the mortal plan. By divine design, we all face “opposition in all things” (2 Nephi 2:11). As Lehi’s dream teaches us, some parts of mortality are certain and clear, as symbolized by the iron rod that marks the path to eternal life, while other parts of mortality are unclear, as symbolized by the mists of darkness. But the distance between where we are on the path and where we want to be at the tree of life remains. This distance can be filled with misty clouds, and those holding to the rod can’t always see clearly ahead of themselves.

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Let's talk about how to deal with that uncertainty. We'd like to suggest a three-stage model that builds on a perspective offered by the distinguished American judge Oliver Wendell Holmes: *"I would not give a fig for the simplicity [on] this side of complexity. But I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."*⁵ Stage One of our model is the simplicity on this side of complexity, innocent and untested. Stage Two is complexity, the gap between the real and the ideal, where we struggle with conflicts and uncertainty. Stage Three is the simplicity beyond complexity, a settled and informed perspective that has been tempered and tested by time and experience.

For example, we recently attended a Latter-day Saint testimony meeting for some of the women inmates at the Utah State Prison—women separated from their families and from society by serious crimes and serious struggles. In bearing her testimony, one of the inmates said, "When I was a little girl, I often bore my testimony in church. In my innocent little singsong voice I would say, 'I love my mom and dad. I know the Church is true. My Heavenly Father loves me. Jesus suffered for my sins.' But today, behind these bars, I am saying those same words with new eyes and a new heart. Now I understand what the words really mean—I know the Church is true. My Heavenly Father loves me. Jesus suffered for my sins."

She was discovering the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

The challenge with those who remain fixed in innocent, idealistic simplicity is that their perspective may not yet have grappled with the realities of what Holmes calls "complexity." That's why he wouldn't give a fig for the untested idealism of naïve simplicity.

Some people still in the early simplicity of Stage One just don't see a gap. They somehow filter out any perception of the differences between the real and the ideal. For them, the gospel at its

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best is a firm handshake, a high five, and a smiley face. Their mission was the best, their ward is the best, and every new day will probably be the best day they ever had. These cheerful ones are optimistic and relaxed. They can weather many storms that seem formidable to those of a less sunny disposition.

Others in this stage may see the gap, but they choose—whether consciously or not—to ignore the terra firma of reality, thereby pretending that they have eliminated the gap, with all its frustrations. They cling to the ideal so single-mindedly that they just don't feel the discomfort that comes from facing the real facts about themselves, about others, or about the world around them. For them, perhaps the gap asks questions that are too raw, pushing them into a sense of denial that filters out painful realities.

When we don't see the gap or we focus only on the ideal while blocking out the real, our perspective lacks depth. If this is our paradigm, faith can be both blind and shallow, because it lacks awareness and careful thought. These limitations can keep us from extending our roots into the soil of real experience deeply enough to form the solid foundation needed to withstand the strong winds of adversity (see Alma 32:37–38). Growing deep roots requires that we learn to work through uncomfortable realities.

As we grow into Stage Two complexity, we can see reality despite its distance from our ideals—"things as they really are" (Jacob 4:13). Only when we see both the real and the ideal can we deal with the gap in a constructive way. If we don't grapple with the frustration that comes from facing bravely the uncertainties we encounter, we will lack the deep roots of spiritual maturity. If we don't see the problems that exist, we won't be able to help solve them.

However, despite the value of becoming aware of complexity, one's acceptance of the clouds of uncertainty can become so complete that the iron rod fades into the surrounding mists, and

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skepticism becomes not just a helpful tool but a guiding philosophy. A person viewing life only from the perspective of complexity will often eliminate his or her upward view of the ideal and focus exclusively on the real. In Stage One, the inexperienced person seems to have all of the answers, but may not yet know many of the questions. In Stage Two, that same person can have all of the questions, but few of the answers. In Stage One, faith is blind because it lacks awareness of reality. In Stage Two, faith is still blind if it sees complexity as the end of the journey of faith, because it has lost its vision of the ideal. A little learning, as valuable as that is, can be dangerous when left to think too highly of itself. The ability to acknowledge ambiguity, an important step in our spiritual development, is not a final form of enlightenment—it is only the beginning.

People who take too much delight in complexity's tools of skepticism sometimes try them out in a Church classroom or in conversations with others. They love to cross-examine the unsuspecting, just looking for somebody's idealistic bubble floating around so they can pop it with their shiny pin of skepticism. But when we burst those bubbles, we can lose harmony, trust, and the sense of safety that comes only when the Spirit is present. We need to look longer and harder at difficult questions and pat answers, but without lurching from extreme innocence to extreme skepticism. Today's world is full of hard-core skeptics who love to "enlighten" those who are stuck in idealistic simplicity, offering them the doubt and agnosticism of complexity as a seemingly brave new way of life.

I once learned how being overly realistic—getting stuck in skeptical complexity—can inhibit the workings of the Spirit. I had been on my mission in Germany about a year, long enough to learn that our work was hard and our successes few. I was assigned to train a new missionary, Elder Keeler. One day when I was away

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at a leadership meeting, he and another new elder met a pleasant woman at the door, but they didn't know enough German to talk with her. Yet he said he felt a strong spiritual impression that she would someday join the Church.

In fact, he was so excited about her that he forgot to write down her name—or her address. He knew only that her apartment was on some fifth floor in the middle of our huge, high-rise tract-ing area. He was sure he'd recognize her name next to the doorbell, so the next day we dashed up and down polished staircases for hours, but we couldn't find her. When I said we needed to go back to work, tears came to his eyes, and his lower lip began to tremble. He said, "But Elder Hafen, the Spirit really spoke to me about that woman." I muttered that maybe the Spirit was telling him to write down the name and address.

But to teach *him* a lesson, so I thought, I raced him up and down more staircases. Then, an hour or two later, we found her—Renate Wolfart. And forty years later, Marie and I were with Renate, her husband, Friedrich, and all four of their children and spouses in the Frankfurt Germany Temple. We watched through our tears as Friedrich, now a temple sealer, sealed their youngest daughter and her husband. That's a lesson I pray I won't forget: never lose sight of the "ideal."

The best response to the gap of uncertainty is to keep growing into Stage Three, where we don't just *see* the real and the ideal; we also *hold on* to each perspective—with eyes and hearts wide open. Looking through the lens of this simplicity beyond complexity, we can take action even when we wish we had more evidence before deciding what to do. For instance, we can sense the value of accepting a Church calling when we're feeling too busy to take on more duties. Or we can follow the First Presidency's counsel even when we don't understand the reasons behind that counsel—or when

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others around us criticize it. We're able to give the Lord and His Church the benefit of the doubt about our unanswered questions.

The choice to be believing at this stage is very different from mere blind obedience. It is, rather, a knowing and trusting kind of obedience. Instead of asking us to put aside the tools of an educated, critical mind, this attitude invites us to use those tools, coupling them with our confidence in the ideal, so we can improve the status quo, not just criticize it. Call it informed faith.

G. K. Chesterton once distinguished among “optimists,” “pessimists,” and “improvers,” a comparison that roughly corresponds with Holmes’s progression from early simplicity through complexity into mature simplicity. He concluded that both the optimists and the pessimists look too much at only one side of things. So neither the extreme optimist nor the extreme pessimist is of much help in *improving* the human condition, because people can’t solve problems unless they are willing to acknowledge that problems exist while remaining loyal enough to do something about them.

Chesterton said the danger of the excessive optimist is that he will “defend the indefensible. He is the jingo of the universe; he will say, ‘My cosmos, right or wrong.’ He will be less inclined to the reform of things; more inclined to a sort of front-bench official answer to all attacks, soothing everyone with assurances. He will not wash the world, but whitewash the world.”

On the other hand, he said, the danger of the pessimist is “not that he chastises gods and men, but that he does not love what he chastises.” In being the so-called “candid friend,” the pessimist is not really candid. “He is keeping something back—his own gloomy pleasure in saying unpleasant things. He has a secret desire to hurt, not merely to help. . . . He is using the ugly knowledge which was allowed him [in order] to strengthen the army, to discourage people from joining it.”⁶

To illustrate the “improvers,” Chesterton refers to the loyalty of

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women: “Some stupid people started the idea that because women obviously back up their own people through everything, therefore women are blind and do not see anything. They can hardly have known any women. The same women who are ready to defend their men through thick and thin . . . are almost morbidly lucid about the thinness of his excuses or the thickness of his head. . . . Love is not blind; that is the last thing that it is. Love is bound; and the more it is bound the less it is blind.”⁷

An entry from the journal of my father, Orval Hafen, illustrates Chesterton’s “improvers.” He had moved beyond innocent idealism; his eyes were fully open to uncomfortable realities. Yet he had also moved past the complexity of being consumed with realism. Now his mature, more complete perspective gave him a new form of simplicity that permitted him to think and act productively, subordinating what he saw with his wide-open eyes to what he felt in his wide-open heart.

A friend of my parents was called as the bishop of their ward and said he couldn’t do it unless my father would be his first counselor. Dad had earlier served in a stake presidency for ten years, and he was feeling very stretched with numerous obligations. So he wrote, “if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” He knew a bishopric’s work could feel like “a continual grind [with] no let up.” And “in some respects I am not humble and prayerful enough; I have not always been willing to submit unquestioningly to all the decisions of the Church.”

But because he didn’t feel he could “say no to any call that is made by the Church,” he wrote, “not as I will, but as Thou wilt.” He resolved to do his best, even knowing he might “chafe under the endless meetings.” But “the work of the Church will have to come first. It will not be hard for me to pay my tithing and attend regularly, as I have been doing that.” But “I will have to get to the temple more often” and “become better acquainted with the

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ward members and be genuinely interested in them,” hoping “they might find it possible to feel the same toward me. Perhaps in my weak way I will have to try and live as close to the Lord as we expect the General Authorities to do.” My father was an understated and honest man who still took his ideals seriously. His attitude makes me want to be as meek as my education has taught me to be tough-minded.

Holly’s story gives us another example of someone progressing from innocent simplicity through complexity to settled simplicity. At age eighteen, Holly was extremely active in the Church, but in an “autopilot” kind of way. Then someone persuaded her that women ought to hold the priesthood. She was so convinced by this idea that she indignantly resigned her Church membership. A few years later, her college roommate was taking the missionary lessons. Holly decided to sit in. Her heart was touched, and she decided to pray for the first time in years.

As soon as she said the words “Heavenly Father,” her frosted heart started to melt. She began to cry. In that moment she felt a tender connection with her Father in Heaven that, over the next days and weeks, led her to discover a relationship with Him that she hadn’t known before. She called it “the closeness.” Soon Holly was rebaptized. As she studied and prayed, her “closeness” to Him deepened. Stubbornness softened into trust. Then she said about her previous issues, “I trust Him. He knows what He’s doing.”

The prophet Alma knew all about these three stages: he taught that faith in God is a process, not an event, and that it requires great effort and patience. As recorded in Alma 32, he said that in the beginning, our simple desire to believe enough to exercise the first steps of faith does not yield a perfect knowledge—we actually “*cannot* know” with surety about the truth of Alma’s words until we try the experiment and plant the seed in our hearts. As the seed

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grows, it expands our hearts and enlightens our minds until it is very real to us. But we're not done.

When we encounter the first surprises of complexity, we must tend the sprouting seed of faith with great care, so that when the sun burns hot, the sapling will not wither. By its very nature, faith can and will overcome opposition that is sometimes downright *withering*. Especially in the heat of those trials, we remember to look forward “with an eye of faith” to the time when we may partake freely of the fruit of the tree of life—the reward for our diligence and long-suffering.

And when we do reach the tree of life, there will be no more gap between the real and the ideal. We will have settled our complexities by a tough but trusting process of refinement through which, in pure and knowing simplicity, the real and the ideal become one.

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