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Transcript

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Daniel C. Peterson

Experiment upon My Word

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Summary:

Daniel Peterson discusses the sermon on faith given by Alma the Younger in Alma 32. Faith is not merely intellectual assent but trust or confidence, and it is expressed actively rather than passively. Peterson argues that the dichotomy between faith and works is artificial, since the root word for *faith* implies behavior. Alma invites us to experiment on the quality of faith, and Peterson suggests that scientific approaches to experimentation are applicable. He recommends testing or trying faith with the aid of prayer. He proposes that faith can have a spiral effect and that confidence can increase with continued experience.

Transcript
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Experiment Upon My Word

Daniel C. Peterson

In Alma 32 we read that Alma the Younger and his missionary associates had great success, specifically among the poor and the outcast, among the Zoramites. So it's to them [the outcast poor] that the really remarkable message of Alma 32 is directed. Now, this is historically plausible because we know from the early Christian church that it was people who were dislocated, people who were dissatisfied with their lot, who were most likely to listen to their message. You think of the heathen, the people who didn't receive the message. These were the people who dwelled on the heath, out in the countryside. Or [think of] the *pagani*, the Pagans. These are the dwellers of the villages. They were people who were still caught up in their kinship ties and their traditional ways of doing things and so on. So it was the people in the cities who listened to the message, because they had been uprooted and taken into the city and had become torn away from their families and their traditional gods and values. So they were willing to listen to the gospel. It's the comfortable—the Zoramites with their Rameumptom, for example—who don't listen.

We find the same thing in nineteenth-century Mormonism. The people on the American frontier—uprooted, torn away from their normal backgrounds—were willing to listen. When the missionaries were sent to Great Britain during the Industrial Revolution, it was the new working class of the cities who listened. Even today this is so, and I'm sure most missionaries have found that the people who are bereaved, or recently have moved, or somehow are misplaced (maybe foreigners),

are more willing to listen, often, than the local people, who are comfortable, who have everything they seem to need.

Now, I'm not trying to reduce conversion to just this kind of social and economic background, but it is a kind of divine discontent that makes us willing to listen, makes us ready to hear the word. And because the poor among the Zoramites were ready and willing to hear the word, because their minds were open, because they were unhappy with the situation they found themselves in, they listened and received this marvelous message.

Alma starts off by announcing a kind of definition of faith. He says:

Faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true.

Now, as I said concerning faith—that it was not a perfect knowledge—even so it is with my words. Ye cannot know of their surety at first, unto perfection, any more than faith is a perfect knowledge.

But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words. (Alma 32:21, 26–27)

Now, *experiment* seems, to many, an oddly modern word. It's really not.

Ancient scientists, ancient philosophers, did do experiments of a kind. It isn't really a modern word, but it expresses a remarkably sophisticated and profound grasp of what faith is. You find, if you look in the scriptures, that a verb quite commonly associated with faith is *exercise*, [as in] "to exercise faith." This shows that it's an active thing—not simply a passive belief, but an active quality, something that we do; we exercise faith.

Moroni says, "I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6). Now, *trial* here is not to be confused with a murder trial, a criminal trial. It's a test, something that tries our faith. We have to experiment upon the word. This is a very, very modern sort of idea, a very profound idea. We have begun to recognize it in recent centuries with what is often called "the scientific method." I want to suggest to you today that the idea suggested in Alma 32, the idea of experimenting upon the word, is very, very scientific. It's not a matter of blind faith. Faith in the scriptures is not blind. Faith sees—maybe in a different way, but not an altogether different way, than science sees.

In science, one of the first things you do is you gather data; you notice things, facts about the world that call for explanation. Then you form a hypothesis, some possible explanation for those data that you have noticed. You decide then if you want to test the hypothesis, if you want to be really scientific about it. You decide what the implications of the hypothesis are; that is, if the hypothesis were true, what would be some of the implications of it? What would also be true that you can test? The scriptures supply these three: the data, the hypothesis, and some of the implications of the hypothesis—especially the first two, the data and the hypothesis.

Then what you do, in the scientific method, is you test to see if the implications are, in fact, true. You say, "If my theory is true, such and such should also be the case." You make predictions; then you check to see if those predictions come true. You do more observations. You run a chemical test to see if what you expect to be the case will be the case. If so, if you find that it is true; then the hypothesis has

been, at least to some extent, validated. You have found that it bears fruit; it's true. Maybe this needs to be repeated over and over again until your confidence has fully built up that the theory, or hypothesis, that you've advanced really does account for what you've seen.

Now sometimes—and this is also a very valuable result in science—sometimes the hypothesis is not confirmed. This may be for one of several reasons. Maybe the hypothesis is untrue; maybe it's simply wrong, the wrong theory. Nice idea, but it didn't pan out. Maybe the hypothesis was not accurately formulated. Maybe it's basically true, but you've mistaken in the way that you laid it out. Maybe the implications that you drew, the things that should be true if it's true, are not really right. Maybe you didn't read it correctly if you made false predictions. Maybe you've misdrawn them. Maybe you have not handled the experiment correctly. This happens quite often, where in a chemical experiment, something is contaminated or something enters in that messes it up so it doesn't work. Maybe it was misconceived; maybe it was mishandled.

But, especially if you're a scientist who knows that positive results have been found in many, many cases, you'll want to try this experiment again to see if you can get it right, to see if you can, as they say, replicate the results in your own laboratory. If there are testimonies of many, many other people out there saying, "We have found this hypothesis, this theory, to be valid. We have found that it accounts for things. We find that it gives us good results," then if you find negative results, you should probably try it again. I would suggest that faith is very much like this. There are thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of witnesses

who testify that things of faith are true. And so it gives us reason to continue the experiment, to try it again.

There's another principle that should be in consideration here. Moroni says, "Dispute not because ye see not" (Ether 12:6). Now, this sounds, at first, very unscientific—that you should believe in something that you can't see. But, in fact, we do that all the time. Nobody has ever seen an electron. Perhaps, in the nature of the case, we never will. It may be physically impossible to see an electron. But we know that electrons are there because we see their effects, for example, in a cloud chamber. In all manner of chemical events and experiments, you can deduce the existence of a thing because you can see the effects that it has even if you can't see it itself.

Earlier generations doubted the existence of germs, bacteria. Think of Semmelweis and Pasteur, who had to contend for the existence of germs. People around them said, "This is ridiculous. You can't see them. What kind of an explanation is this? Something you can never see." But, in fact, the effects were there, and eventually, they were able to convince others around them that there were reasons to wash your hands when going from one operation to another, or to take care of the cleanliness and hygiene in the hospital.

There's something else that needs to be said about faith. Faith, as the word is often used in the scriptures, is the same thing as trust. It's not just assent to a particular list of abstract propositions. It's trust in a person. We believe that God is personal, and you develop trust in a person much the same way that you develop trust in God. In this sense, I would argue that faith versus works is a spurious issue.

The word that's translated as *faith* in the scriptures—and I sometimes almost wish that we didn't use the word *faith* because it's come to have a religious connotation that's maybe foreign to its original use—the word that's translated *faith* could also be translated as *trust*, or even *confidence*. We express our faith, or our trust, or our confidence, in another human being by our actions. It would be silly to say, "I trust John completely," and then when John comes to me and asks to borrow some money, say, "Oh no, no, no. Nope, you can't have any." Or if I say, "I trust my son completely. I have absolute confidence in him," and when he says, "Dad, can I borrow the car keys?" I say, "No, no. I trust you completely, but no, I'd never let you alone with the car." I may have good reason not to trust. But if we do trust a person, we express our trust through actions.

So, the idea of "faith without works" is really meaningless because faith is expressed precisely through what we do, how we act, how we interact with other people. The devils also know, says James. They know that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ, but they don't act accordingly. This is not faith. Our actions, therefore, are the test. We receive no witness until after the trial of our faith. We receive no witness, perhaps, until after our actions have expressed our faith. What's more, something else that needs to be said about faith is that it's more than an emotion, it's more than just a subjective feeling of trust, although it includes that in most cases. "What *doth it* profit, my brethren," says James, "though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him?" (James 2:14). Well, of course, faith, in a sense, can. But in other senses, faith by itself, just the abstract sense that it's true, will not save. James goes on to say:

If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food,
 And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be *ye* warmed and
 filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are
 needful to the body; what *doth it* profit?

Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith
 without thy works, and I [says James] will shew thee my faith by my works."
 (James 2:15–18)

So, faith expresses itself through actions, and that's, again, the message that you'll
 find in Alma 32, as well.

There's something more that needs to be said about it. Faith involves a measure
 of risk. It's a leap into the dark, or as Kierkegaard, the great Danish philosopher and
 theologian, said, it is "a leap of faith."¹ Faith can involve time, money, effort, even
 life being yielded up, in some extreme cases. Faith involves doing something when
 we don't absolutely know what the outcome will be. When I give my son the keys
 to the car, I don't absolutely know, but I have confidence in him that everything will
 turn out all right. If I give fifty dollars to my friend who has to borrow it, I don't
 have absolute certainty that he'll return it, but I have confidence because I've had
 experiences with him in the past. I trust him. So faith involves a measure of risk;
 it's not a certainty. If it's a certainty, it's not faith.

Think of a person who is drowning, caught in the torrent, clinging onto a tuft of
 brush or something. When the rescuer comes to him, he has to let go of that bush
 in order to be saved. He may feel temporarily safe. He's scared of letting go. He's
 safe for the moment, but that tuft of brush may well be carried away by the torrent
 eventually. We're all kind of in that situation, you know. We're all in a world

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments—Johannes Climacus* (Princeton University Press, 1985),
 43. Commentary on this phrase can be found in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard
 Commentary* (Mercer University Press, 1994), 183–5.

where the torrents are raging around us. (Or if you want to change the metaphor, we're in a burning house, and we need to get out of it eventually.) But if he doesn't let go, he cannot be saved. He has to release the bush in order to be saved by the rescuer. He can't go on holding on to it or else he won't be rescued, and maybe he'll even cost the life of his rescuer. It's an important principle that we have to be able to take that step, based, not blindly, but based on confidence and things that we've learned in the past to take that step in the future.

I'm very fond of the great fantasy series by C. S. Lewis, the great British literary scholar and thinker. In *The Last Battle* of his series *The Chronicles of Narnia*, there's a group of evil Dwarfs who think themselves imprisoned inside a small, dirty stable. Well, when the heroes of the story enter this supposed stable, they immediately realize that the door through which they have entered is a magical one. It leads them into a whole world. It's not a small stable at all. It's a wonderful place. They're not constricted by it; they're liberated by going through the door. So it is with faith. Let me quote from that book, *The Last Battle*, the final book in the series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*:

"It seems, then," said Tirian, smiling himself, "that the Stable seen from within and the Stable seen from without are two different places."

"Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

"Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."²

Now, the reference there is, of course, to the stable in Bethlehem. Much like the Church, the stable can only be accurately perceived by those who had entered into it.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 140–41.

To stand from the outside looking in is not to see what it's really about. True faith allows us to see better, more clearly, more accurately. It enables us to see the significance that, to many others, may not seem significant at all. And mere entry, while necessary, is not sufficient. The Dwarfs were inside but couldn't see what they were really in. What are those black Dwarfs who could not or would not see the reality of the place where they found themselves?

"You see," said Aslan [Aslan is the lion, the Christ-figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*], "they will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they can not be taken out."³

So faith involves trust—not cunning, not cynicism, but trust in someone else. Now, before I get back to the Alma 32 passage, which is one of the most brilliant and profound discussion of faith in all of scripture, let me refer to another one that is a profound discussion: the parable of the sower, which is found in the synoptic gospels. You may remember that there are four groups of seed sown by the sower in that parable. There's seed that falls by the wayside; it's eaten by fowls, by the birds of the air. Jesus explains that this is the seed that is preached to those who don't understand, and then the evil one takes it away, represented by the birds. There is also the seed that falls upon stony places. It grows very quickly, but it is scorched because it is rootless; it doesn't last. These are the people who convert or listen to the gospel and receive it with immediate joy, but they have no endurance of trial and persecution because their roots are not deep enough. There is also the seed that is cast among thorns that is choked as the thorns grow up. Jesus explains that the

³ Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 148.

thorns in this group of seed represent the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. People become so concerned about the things in this life that they don't remember what's really important. Finally, there's the seed that falls upon good ground, and this seed brings forth fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.

This is a natural image to be used among people who are predominantly agriculturists, people who live with the daily rhythms of growth and decay, the seasonal rhythms of harvest and sowing. This parable also shows up, in a sense, among the Nephites, who also lived, as most people did until very recent times, in a world where they saw those rhythms of agriculture. Alma, too, uses this image to explain faith. He says:

Now, we will compare the word unto a seed. Now, if ye give place, that a seed may be planted in your heart, behold, if it be a true seed, or a good seed, if ye do not cast it out by your unbelief, that ye will resist the Spirit of the Lord [Notice there are no ground-hardened pagans or heathens here], behold, it will begin to swell within your breasts; and when you feel these swelling motions, ye will begin to say within yourselves—It must needs be that this is a good seed, or that the word is good, for it beginneth to enlarge my soul. (Alma 32:28)

It cures us of the cramped, dwarfish cynicism that affects those who can't believe, who cannot have faith or trust. "Yea, it beginneth to enlighten my understanding" (Alma 32:28). It leads to better and expanded vision. It's not true that faith blinds us, or that faith is blind. Faith can help us to see more. "Yea," says Alma, "it beginneth to be delicious to me" (Alma 32:28). It tastes good, notice. It gives us positive and reinforcing experiences. This is what's often referred to as the "fruits of the gospel." "A tree," says the Savior, "is known by its fruit" (cf. Matthew 7:16; 3 Nephi 14:16).

You come to know that something is good. The good tree gives forth good fruit. An evil tree gives forth evil fruit. But it's not possible for an evil tree to give off good fruit. Alma continues:

Now behold, would not this increase your faith [to know that it tastes good]? I say unto you, Yea; nevertheless it hath not grown up to a perfect knowledge.

But behold, as the seed swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, then you must needs say that the seed is good; for behold it swelleth, and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow. (Alma 32:29–30)

It's a seed that works. A bad seed doesn't grow. A bad seed is dead. A good seed does grow.

And now, behold, will not this strengthen your faith? Yea, it will strengthen your faith: for ye will say I know that this is a good seed. . . .

And now, behold, because ye have tried the experiment, and planted the seed, and it swelleth and sprouteth, and beginneth to grow, ye must needs know that the seed is good.

And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because you know. (Alma 32:30, 33–34)

You don't have faith anymore, in that case, because you know something for a certainty. "For ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it had sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand" (Alma 32:34).

Let me just say something about that phrase, that idea of the mind being expanded, which, again, I find to be a true characteristic of faith, not the contraction that some critics see. This is quite a different form of mind expansion than the kind of mind expansion I remember growing up with in California, where we heard constantly about counterfeit kinds of mind expansion—"mind-expanding drugs,"

for example. They were very much a part of that world, and yet I see little evidence that they expand anyone's mind. Rather, they tend to constrict and contract people's understanding, and to destroy their lives, ultimately.

"Oh then," says Alma, "is not this real? I say unto you, Yea, because it is light; and whatsoever is light, is good, because it is discernible" (Alma 32:35). And this carries on an image of light that runs all through the scriptures. We have the Dead Sea Scrolls, with their image of the sons of light fighting against the sons of darkness; or the light that came into the world, in John; or the light of the Doctrine and Covenants, when a soul that is filled full of light comprehendeth all things. This is the kind of state that we're hoping to move toward. And, of course, you remember, all the experiences of angels in the scriptures, for example, where they're surrounded with light. Or the appearance of the Father and the Son to Joseph Smith "whose brightness and glory def[ied] all description" (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

The world of the Father, the world of the Son, is a world of light and understanding and truth. And this light can come to us through faith. But faith is not just an emotion. Faith sometimes carries us when the emotion is not there, just as covenants carry us, because our moods, our emotions, can fluctuate, go up and down. I'm sure that many of you have had the same experience I have of just coming out of a meeting—say a fireside—just walking on top of the world and resolving never to sin, never to commit another mistake. And then, of course, you get into your car, and somebody cuts you off in the parking lot, and it's all lost. The mood is gone. And you've lost control again. This happens many times in our

lives. We all know, too, that in a relationship with someone—say, for example, a marriage—there are times when cultivating that relationship is the most important thing to us in the world and other times when we're tempted to let it slide, maybe when other things become urgent and seemingly more important.

And so our moods go up and down, but what keeps us in those things is our trust, our faith, the promises we've made, the covenants we've made, the things that we've come to understand in the past that can carry us through a weak period or a low period. That is one of the functions of faith. Faith in this sense can be thought of as resolve.

I like to think of the story of *Othello*, by Shakespeare. In *Othello*, if you remember the story, Othello was married to a beautiful woman by the name of Desdemona. There's a man who is very jealous of Othello. [This man] is believed by Othello to be his very best friend, his lieutenant, Iago. Iago secretly hates Othello and wants to destroy him. So, Iago spends the entire play sowing the seeds of doubt (another kind of seed) in Othello's mind, trying to convince him that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. Othello rejects this at first, but gradually, he is won over. What he has allowed to happen to him is [he has allowed] his past experience, his confidence, his trust, in Desdemona to be destroyed by someone who is not at all his friend, who doesn't wish him well. Now, there will be periods where our confidence in certain things is lessened, or when, occasionally, as in Othello's case, the evidence may seem temporarily to go against something that otherwise we know to be true. And that's when faith can carry us through.

It involves a constant, riveting effort, really, to keep ourselves in the life of faith and in the life of righteous commitment to the gospel. There's a wonderful story that has been passed down in the Brigham Young family, as I understand it, for a long, long time, and it goes like this: Brigham Young was supposed to have had a beautiful hand-tooled leather saddle that he was very fond of when he was living in the Lion House in Salt Lake City. And there was one rule that he laid down to his children: They were not to touch that saddle; they were not to come anywhere near it. It was so beautiful that it was being kept very, very nice. Well, one day he was off doing some sort of business and came back and found, to his horror, that his children had his saddle out there and had been trying to put it on a horse, and in fact, had dropped it into the mud; it had gotten nicked up and dirty. He was absolutely furious. He'd told them many times not to do this. He grabbed the saddle and stomped away with it into the Lion House and slammed the door behind him.

One of his wives, Lucy B. Young, who tells the story, followed after him. She followed him as the doors slammed in the Lion House, and she went in by his office where he had gone in. She put her head by the door to see if she could hear what he was saying, and she could hear Brigham inside his office saying, "Down on your knees, Brigham! Down on your knees!"⁴ He was trying to get himself back under control. And this is what we have to do; there is no one exempt from it in the human condition—not prophets, not anybody—who is exempt from this constant fine-tuning, constant reorientation, constant trying to correct our path and get ourselves back to the strait and narrow. Faith, these commitments, these covenants

⁴ Oscar A. Kirkham, general conference address, *The Improvement Era*, September 30–October 2, 1955.

have to be cultivated, they have to be kept alive. The devils know that Jesus is the Christ, and they tremble, but they do nothing about it. They don't act accordingly.

So Alma proceeds with his metaphor of the tree of faith that's been planted with the seed of the word by saying:

And behold, as the tree beginneth to grow, ye will say: Let us nourish it with great care, that it may get root, that it may grow up, and bring forth fruit unto us. And now behold, if ye nourish it with much care it will get root, and grow up, and bring forth fruit. (Alma 32:37)

Now, what would nourish the tree of faith? What would keep the seed of the word alive? There are a number of things, and I'm sure that you can all think of things that would do it: prayer, reflection on our experience and on the scriptures, study, keeping the commandments, acting upon the promises of God and finding them both fulfilled and fulfilling. Alma goes on, warning:

But if ye neglect the tree, and take no thought for its nourishment, behold it will not get any root; and when the heat of the sun cometh and scorcheth it, because it hath no root it withers away, and ye pluck it up and cast it out. (Alma 32:38)

It is the same thing that happens with those seeds cast by the sower in the New Testament that fall upon stony ground. People receive them with joy, but then the sun comes out, and they wither because they have no root. But there must be, deep within each of us, deep within the soil of our own souls, if you will, experience or roots that are beyond the reach of day-to-day trials, and temptations, and stresses, and troubles. If not, our faith will always be vulnerable; it will always be uncertain, anemic, like a fruit tree that is always on the brink of dying and never bears. If the seed proves to be rootless and doesn't grow and doesn't prosper, it's not because the seed was bad, not in the case of true faith. Alma goes on, saying:

Now, this is not because the seed was not good, neither is it because the fruit thereof would not be desirable; but it is because your ground is barren, and ye will not nourish the tree, therefore ye cannot have the fruit thereof. (Alma 32:39)

This is an entirely natural process, in a sense; in many cases, it's sadly predictable. You see people doing all the wrong things that will tend to destroy or not allow faith to grow. And thus Alma continues:

If ye will not nourish the word, looking forward with an eye of faith to the fruit thereof, ye can never pluck of the fruit of the tree of life.

But if ye will nourish the word, yea, nourish the tree as it beginneth to grow, by your faith with great diligence, and with patience, looking forward to the fruit thereof, it shall take root; and behold it shall be a tree springing up unto everlasting life.

And because of your diligence and your faith and your patience with the word in nourishing it, that it may take root in you [note that the word has to take root in *us*], behold, by and by ye shall pluck the fruit thereof, which is most precious, which sweet above all that is sweet, and which is white above all that is white. (Alma 32:40–42)

Here you can notice the unmistakable echoes of the tree of life that Lehi and Nephi saw in 1 Nephi. This is the very tree that Alma is talking about. As it grows up, planted with the seed of the Word, nourished carefully by us, it springs up into the tree of life. He goes on to describe it as "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). Notice that we'll feast; we won't nibble. We should not forget Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman at the well. He promised her water that would leave her never thirsting again (see John 4:14). Now, she thought it was the water of that well, some miraculous way that he would have to bring it up out of that well, but that wasn't what he was talking about at all. Then, later on with his disciples, Jesus talks about the meat that he has that they know not of (see John 4:32). His meat was to do the will of the Father in Heaven. Earthly water, earthly things,

cannot satisfy, and the Samaritan woman was wrong in thinking that earthly water, even from a well with a long pedigree in scripture, as that well had, would. These things never have the power to give us total satisfaction in this life. "Our hearts are restless," said St. Augustine, who certainly knew about this from an early life filled with immorality and all the wrong values, "Our hearts are restless," he said, "until they rest in thee." That, I think, is one of the great lessons to be learned in this life, that all the substitutes that this world offers us really don't satisfy.

It's said of Thomas Henry Huxley, who was the great partisan of Darwinian evolution in the nineteenth century, that even he who argued for a very naturalistic form of evolution one night commented that he'd had a particularly good day, he'd had a good day at work, he'd had good food, he had good friends to talk with (he'd gone out in the evening to go to an opera, I believe—no, it was *Hamlet*), but at the end of it all, he said, "Is this it? Is this all there is?" Because in the long run, even those things, good as they are, those are good things—a good day's work, good friends, good family, good culture—even these things don't satisfy, and yet this is the best the world has to offer.

"Then," Alma finishes, "my brethren, ye shall reap the rewards of your faith, and your diligence, and patience, and long-suffering, waiting for the tree to bring forth fruit unto you" (Alma 32:43). The message of Alma 32 is really the same as that expressed in John 7 of the New Testament, yet another instance of the agreement of the Book of Mormon and the Bible on important theological issues. In John 7 the Savior is quoted as saying, "If any man will do his [that is, the Father's] will, he shall

know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or *whether* I speak of myself" (John 7:17).

Again the test is in the action. It's not faith without works; it's faith expressed through works, faith tested by works. "More testimonies," Brigham Young said, "have been gained on the feet than on the knees."⁵ I suspect that this is true, to a large extent, although I also suspect that the strongest testimonies are those that combine both action and prayer. My bet is that it's both together that form the very strongest faith, like two cables woven together. Study, prayer, action, experience—they all correct and reinforce one another and strengthen one another. If you have faith based solely on theoretical study of the scriptures, you have a theoretical faith, which is not a very strong thing. On the other hand, if you have a faith based entirely on action, it may be a very good thing, and yet it may possibly be misguided, misinformed. To take the two together, to correct and learn and profit from your own experiences, to bring scripture to bear on what you yourself have seen, and also to bring what you yourself have seen and experienced to bear upon the scriptures is to provide the very strongest kind of life in faith.

Now, one of the requested actions that the Lord has invited us to do by which we can put our faith to the trial and gain yet stronger faith is prayer. Of course, the classic promise in Moroni 10:4–5 is that if we will ponder the things that have been given to us in the Book of Mormon and then make them the subject of earnest prayer with real intent, the Lord will reveal their truth unto us. Now, Laman and Lemuel, on the other hand, offered the response earlier in the Book of Mormon,

⁵ Bishop Legrand Richards, general priesthood meeting address, October 5–7, 1951.

when they were asked, "Why don't you pray about these things?" they said, "Well, we don't because the Lord makes no such things known unto us" (see 1 Nephi 15:8–9). Had they given him a chance? No, they had known in advance that no such answer would come. And so they refused to put the principle to the test. That's what the Lord invites us to do, and he promises a response if we will do what he has asked.

I think it's very striking that critics of the Book of Mormon have launched one of their major attacks against the idea of praying about the truthfulness of the book. It's desired that we not pray about it because, I think, it's fear that there might be an answer. I testify that there is one. The Book of Mormon says it's not the Lord who teaches men not to pray. It's someone else.

The life of faith, as I see it, is a spiral. Good experience leads to renewed commitment, which leads to yet more good experience, which builds our faith and our confidence—just as continued experience with a person whom we trust builds greater trust in him and helps us to have more and more confidence in good people, and the Lord is the best of all people. We have complete and implicit confidence; we know that the person will never let us down when it is within his power. And the Lord is omnipotent. If it's within his power to fulfill his promises, he will. And this is what faith is. We know, and we have confidence, that when the Lord makes promises to us, he will fulfill those promises.

As in Alma, we secure one bit of confidence, then we move on to secure another, and we build on the foundation of that confidence to experiment yet further upon the word and find that the promises are fulfilled until we have perfect faith like

unto a perfect day. This is what the medieval theologians called “faith seeking understanding.”⁶ It’s a very profound principle. Sometimes, of course, we’ll just have to take things on trust. It would have been better for Othello if he had continued to trust Desdemona, despite the fact that some of the evidence seems to be against her, because he had had strong experiences with her in the past and should have known and should have remained faithful to those experiences.

Sometimes there will be puzzling things in our own lives or in the world as a whole, and there will be issues, maybe, that we can’t resolve right away. But with faith we have confidence that those things are ultimately resolvable. We will ultimately understand. This is all based on the assumption that God is God, that he has the power to do what he will do, that he has the power to keep his promises, and that he is good, and that the promises and things he makes to us are good. We expect that someday all these things will be clear to us if they are not clear now. But much can be clear in this life.

Let me go back just briefly to *The Chronicles of Narnia*, that fantasy series by the great theologian, philosopher, and literary scholar, C. S. Lewis. Interestingly, they contain their own metaphor of fruit and tree. Let me quote from *The Chronicles of Narnia*:

Tirian had thought . . . that they were inside a little thatched stable, about twelve feet long and six feet wide. In reality they stood on grass, the deep blue sky was overhead, and the air which blew gently on their faces was that of a day in early summer. Not far away from them rose a grove of trees, thickly leaved, but under every leaf there peeped out the gold or faint yellow or purple or glowing red of fruits such as no one has seen in our world. The fruit made Tirian feel that it must be

⁶ R.W. Southern, *Saint Anselm* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 126. The phrase *fides quaereus intellectum* was coined in Anselm’s “Proslogion” (a supplement to the Monologion).

autumn: but there was something in the feel of the air that told him it could not be later than June. They all moved towards the trees.

Everyone raised his hand to pick the fruit he best liked the look of. . . .

What was the fruit like? Unfortunately, no one can describe a taste. All I can say is that, compared with those fruits, the freshest grapefruit you've ever eaten was dull, and the juiciest orange was dry, and the most melting pear was hard and woody, and the sweetest wild strawberry was sour. And there were no seeds or stones, and no wasps. If you had once eaten that fruit, all the nicest things in this world would taste like medicines after it. But I can't describe it. You can't find out what it is like unless you can get to that country and taste for yourself.⁷

One of the stories that I'm fond of comes from my own special field of Islamic studies and Islamic philosophy. One of the greatest figures of Islamic philosophy is a man by the name of (Muhammed Abu Hamid) al-Ghazali, who died in 1111 A.D. He's one of the greatest minds in the history of Islam—and I would argue, one of the greatest minds, the greatest philosophers or philosophical thinkers in human history. He was a precocious young man who achieved great success very early in his life. He eventually became professor at the Nizamiya, the great university of Baghdad, which was probably the finest school in the world at the time, and he was probably the finest professor—and certainly the most popular, packing people into lectures in what was something like a modern law school, sort of a cross between a theological college and a law school because, of course, Islamic law is religious law. He packed people in; he was very popular. He was the dominant intellectual figure in Baghdad of his day. He had the favor of the prime minister of the Seljuk Empire, of the Nizam al-Mulk, who was the patron of the school, the Nizamiya, which was named after him. He had everything that you could want.

⁷ Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 136–137.

And yet he said he reached a period where he wasn't satisfied. He asked himself the question again, "Is this all there is? Is this really all there is to life? It's not satisfying." And he began to feel that he was doing something very unworthy, that he was teaching people to be successful but not to be good. He was teaching people to learn rules and make a success in their careers but not to know the truth. And then he began to ask himself, "Do I even know the truth myself? What sort of certainty do I have? Is all this worthless? Is there any point to all of this?" And he went through a crisis of faith. In his own autobiography, known as *al-Munkidh min al-dalal, The Deliverer from Error*, he tells the story of this crisis, which eventually reduced him to the point where he could no longer teach. He literally could not. He went through what must have been something like a nervous breakdown where he was physically unable to talk. He had to take retirement. Everyone was, of course, upset about this. It was the talk of Baghdad at the time. What had happened to this man, the great star? Where had he gone? Why had he quit? Well, he said he just couldn't go on doing it.

You see, he had come to that point of dissatisfaction that is maybe the requirement for sowing the seed of faith. He withdrew from his teaching position. He eventually, actually, began moving around the Islamic world seeking some way of creating religious certainty within himself, of coming to a certain knowledge of what was true. He said he even got to the point where he even doubted if he could prove that two plus two was four. He said he knew that there were all sorts of illusions, optical illusions and so on, where you thought you saw the truth. You know where you stick a spoon in water, and it looks like it's bent, but it's really not.

So he began to wonder, couldn't there also be mental illusions? Is there some way that one could overcome this? And he really came to a position of absolute doubt.

Finally, he began to notice that there were people who claimed to be certain, who claimed to have certainty. He began to examine those different schools of thought; he found them unsatisfying. He studied with theologians but found out that they all started from premises that, the whole problem was, he couldn't accept to begin with, he couldn't be certain.

He talked with philosophers; he found them very attractive. In fact, he wrote many, many books on philosophy, some of the greatest in the whole field. But ultimately, he said they were not satisfying because you could argue just as well one way as the other. You couldn't know for sure. Finally, he said he came to realize that the people who knew the truth were the Sufi mystics within Islam. Now, let me tell you something about them. These were people who sought personal experience. They wanted to know that it was possible for prophets to have revelation, and the way they would know that is they themselves would come to know, by means beyond the natural, that there was a God. He said he found that it was the Sufis who had the truth, they had the true path. They knew the way to obtain testimonies, as Latter-day Saints would put it. And what was the metaphor they used? He said, "When I began to realize that there was a God, I knew it by the sense of taste." He uses the Arabic word for taste. He said, "I knew it in myself. There wasn't a way I could prove it to other people. I can't transfer it to people, but I can tell you the way I found it, where I came to know that life has purpose, and that

there is a God, and that he does speak to people here upon the earth. I knew it because I could taste it in ways I couldn't deny, in ways I cannot convey to others."

Now, this is the same kind of thing that ultimately rests at the basis of all testimonies, of all faith: Personal experience that we can't convey to others, but we can know. We can understand. You can trust the testimonies of others until you receive your own testimony. You can listen to those who claim to know, evaluate whether you think they are trustworthy, and if you feel that they are, you can proceed on that basis until you come to know for yourself. But faith is a matter of personal experience, ultimately. Reading all the books in the world won't create it. Learning all the scholarly arguments of the world won't create faith. It can sustain faith, it can give you reason to believe that it is plausible, but it can't give you that seed within yourself that is nourished.

Joseph Smith said much the same thing. Shortly before his death at the hands of a mob with blackened faces—and I'm tempted to say at the hands of black Dwarfs—he said this, in the famous King Follett Discourse:

This is good doctrine. It tastes good. I can taste the principles of eternal life, and so can you. They are given to me by the revelations of Jesus Christ; and I know that when I tell you these words of eternal life as they are given to me, you taste them, and I know that you believe them. You say honey is sweet, and so do I. I can also taste the spirit of eternal life. I know it is good; and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more.⁸

This is the principle that is taught by Alma. We experiment upon the word; we find out that its results are good, that the seed is good, that it does just what it's

⁸ Joseph Smith, Jr., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*. comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1976), 355.

supposed to do, that the commandments of God are good, that they lead to better lives, they lead to happier people, better societies, better families. We learn by living the gospel and by praying about it that the promises that the Lord makes are true. When he says, "If you do x , I will give you y ," he does. We learn that he's a person who can be trusted. We learn that he is a person. We learn that we can depend on what he says, and as we go from promise to promise, from commitment to commitment, from covenant to covenant, we gain confidence in that person, God, with whom we have a relationship. I bear you my testimony that these are true principles, that this is the way sketched out in scripture by ancient people who had experience with the Spirit and with God. This is the way to gain faith and to maintain faith in our own time, as well. It is recognized by people all over the world, but is given especially good and profound expression in Alma 32 in the Book of Mormon.