

FAITH *to* STAY

**Inspiring New Discoveries, Stories &
Insights To Help Strengthen Your Faith
During the Storms of Life**

SCOTT BRANDLEY

Faith to Stay

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First Edition

This book is dedicated to all those
who feel lost in the storms of life.

Remember that God loves you.

And Christ stands ready,
His hand reaching through
the darkness and chaos,
pleading for you to take hold.

There is no divide He cannot,
and will not, cross to save you!

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Faith to Stay **INTRODUCTION**

What you are about to read is a bit unconventional when it comes to the topic of faith.

But sometimes when we go through trials and are searching for answers, it can be helpful to take a step back and look at things from a different perspective.

This book helps you do that by introducing you to several new discoveries, stories, and insights that you've likely never heard of, don't know much about, or haven't really considered before.

It also explores a variety of unique concepts and ideas that will spark your mind in new, creative ways to help enlighten and inspire you and bring you closer to God.

So, here's the deal.

If you're a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who struggles with doubts or concerns but still has the faith and courage to believe—even when things are hard and you feel like giving up—then this book is for you.

My ultimate purpose is to help you to strengthen your faith in the gospel, and I do that by taking you on a unique journey, spanning a variety of engaging topics, including many things that traditional LDS books don't typically discuss, like:

- God and Creation vs. Macroevolution
- The importance of primary and secondary questions
- The Goldilocks Principle and how it affects everything around us
- The Ketef Hinnom Scrolls and other ancient Paleo-Hebrew discoveries linking Jehovah to Christ
- Incredible statistical probabilities surrounding the prophecies of Christ
- Insights and parallels into Christianity and world and Church history
- A deep dive into unique Church doctrines
- Revisiting Lehi's journey across the Arabian Desert using documented expeditions, new discoveries, and modern technology
- An exciting ancient artifact found in a dig by the Smithsonian Institute
- Recent discoveries of ancient petroglyphs and pictographs—found in Illinois of all places—representing the resurrected Savior (with pictures)
- Interesting parallels between repentance and forgiveness
- A fascinating concept called “Pascal’s Wager” dating back to the 1600s
- Innovative ways to cope with difficulties and hardships that affect our faith
- And much more!

There are also numerous scriptures and quotes from prophets and Apostles, along with many uplifting, faith-promoting stories—creating a well-rounded intellectual, emotional, and spiritually edifying experience.

My hope is that by the time you reach the end of this book, the truths, concepts, and ideas you discover along the way will touch

your heart and reignite your faith—regardless of your current level of activity.

Whether you went to church last week or haven't been in years, you will find the information in every chapter to be well laid out, easy to understand, and very thought-provoking.

Before you get started, I want you to know that I have a testimony of Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, the Prophet Joseph Smith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Book of Mormon.

My testimony is woven throughout every single sentence, paragraph, and page in this book. This is my gift to God—a small token of my deep love and appreciation for all that He and the Savior have given to me and my family.

I truly hope you enjoy it, and that it strengthens your faith and gives you the courage to stand firm in the gospel when the storms and pressures of life conspire against you.

Remember that Christ is always there, reaching out as a light in the darkness—all you have to do is reach back.



My Gift to You

If you'd like to learn more about the cover image *Take My Hand*, and get your own free digital copy to download, print, and frame, you'll find a special page at the end of this book.

Chapter 1

IS GOD REAL?

A Crisis of Faith

I have a confession to make, and this isn't easy to admit, but I experienced a faith crisis when I was serving as a bishop several years ago.

When I originally started writing this book, I knew that I had to share this experience. But at the same time, I was worried that if I shared too many details that I might put other people's faith at risk, which was the exact opposite of my intent, and so I wrote several different versions to try to minimize and even write around some of the more difficult elements of my story.

What I eventually realized is that however challenging it may be to share certain details, they provide significant insight and context into other important areas of the book that can really help to increase and deepen the faith of the reader. Without them that context is lost.

And so, I've decided to share with you my full experience with the hope that it will ultimately help you in your faith journey and bring you closer to God.

A Bishop's Unexpected Struggle

My story starts in 2014.

I was a brand-new bishop at the time—39 years old and ready to take on the world. While my life was far from perfect, the faith-building experiences I had faced up to that point seemed to far outweigh my trials and challenges. As a result, I felt truly converted to the gospel.

I had no idea just how easily and quickly my faith could be tested.

I had only been serving in my position for a few months when a young couple in my ward told me they were questioning their faith and were considering leaving the Church.

It caught me by complete surprise.

Not only had they both served missions, but they had faithfully and diligently served in a variety of callings over the years, including leadership positions. They also had small children to whom this decision would profoundly affect. They were honestly one of the last couples I ever expected to say that.

I just couldn't believe it.

As we sat together, the husband told me in pensive, sorrowful tones that their reasons for leaving involved certain points of doctrine and events in Church history that stemmed from recent essays that the Church had published on their website.

I wasn't aware of these essays at the time, and so I told them I would do some research and prayerfully consider their concerns and meet with them again.

The Questions That Shook My Faith

The first thing I did after that meeting was go directly to the Church's website. As it turned out, they had recently published several essays on different topics regarding certain points of Church history and doctrine that they felt needed additional clarification.

These essays included things like the nature of God, the First Vision, Heavenly Mother, plural marriage, race and the Priesthood, and the translation of the Book of Mormon.

It was a noble effort by the Church to create a source of truth where people could learn about various events in Church history and unique doctrinal topics but reading them all at once was overwhelming.

I don't know if it was the shock of the couple's announcement, the sheer amount of information I was absorbing, or the desperation I felt in trying to find compelling answers to their questions—but within mere hours of that initial meeting, I suddenly and unexpectedly found myself questioning my own faith.

This was deeply concerning to me. Thoughts of doubt started to creep into my mind, and it consumed my thoughts and emotions for several days.

I kept thinking to myself. “This can't possibly be happening to me! What would my wife and family think if they knew I was questioning my faith? What would my ward think?”

I didn't dare tell anyone what I was going through, but I also knew that I wouldn't be able to keep it a secret for very long if I wasn't able to find a resolution.

After a lot of walking, pondering, and prayer, I felt a strong impression that I needed to try to break my faith down into its most basic principles, re-examine each principle objectively to the best of my ability, and then, if I determined that it was correct, to put it back in its place.

I felt that this was the only way for me to reconfirm to myself the truth of my beliefs.

And so, I decided to start with the most important fundamental question I could think of, “Does God exist?” However, if I was to be truly objective, it meant that I also had to sincerely consider the

alternative, “What if God doesn’t exist?”

Examining the Alternative

Since I was already well-versed in arguments for God’s existence, I decided to explore what I deemed to be the only other possible alternative—evolution—to see if there was any irrefutable evidence that would give me a reason to doubt my faith.

There was so much on the line!

So much to lose, including my family, my friends, my social circle, my calling, my way of life, and ultimately my identity. But I had to know for sure if what I believed was true, and so I reluctantly but purposefully started my journey into the unknown.

Does God Exist?

As I began to delve into the world of evolution, I made some important initial observations:

My first observation was that there were two general camps; the creationist/theist camp and the evolutionist/atheist camp.

Creationists believe in a divine creator—that God designed and formed the universe, the earth, and all things in it, including man.

Evolutionists, on the other hand, believe the universe originated from nothing through the big bang and that life began in a primordial swamp as a single-celled bacteria. Over the course of 3.5 billion years, this bacterium is said to have evolved into the vast diversity of plant and animal life on earth, including man.

My second observation was that while evolution is often presented as a fact, it is actually a belief, just like Christianity is a belief. And while I already knew that most scientists believed in evolution, I was surprised to discover that there are subtle shifts taking place,

where prominent members of the scientific community are starting to publicly question the validity of the theory.

For example, in my studies I discovered a website called dissentfromdarwin.org, where more than a thousand prominent scientists around the world have publicly signed a statement declaring, “We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged.”

My third observation was that many Christian churches spend a lot of time and resources trying to debunk evolution, which really helped me in my research.

One of the reasons why I don’t think that Latter-day Saints spend very much time on evolution is because we have the Book of Mormon as our second witness of God. However, every other Christian religion lives or dies by the Bible alone, so they have no other choice but to put a stake in the ground and fight for their position.

Things I Didn’t Know about Evolution

Through my research, I discovered so many fascinating things I didn’t know about evolution. But every time I found something new, whether it was for or against it, there was always a rebuttal from the other side attempting to discredit the idea or discovery.

So, to try to be as objective as possible, I attempted to break down and narrow these discoveries into their basic elements or claims. I then tried to determine if there were any hard facts for or against those claims.

After careful thought and consideration, I concluded that I couldn’t find any solid evidence to definitively prove evolution.

Ultimately, there were three things that made evolution a difficult pill for me to swallow:

1. Macroevolution hasn't been proven to exist.

When it comes to evolution, there are two types: microevolution and macroevolution.

Microevolution is the ability for diversity and small differences to occur within a specific species; it's a common occurrence in nature.

Macroevolution is the idea of one type of species turning into another completely different type of species over time (like seaweed becoming an apple tree, a fish becoming a crocodile, or a bird becoming a monkey).

When it comes to scientific validation, microevolution is widely accepted by scientists, because it can easily be seen and proven. But macroevolution is widely taught in schools and institutions—almost as a fact instead of a theory—and has proliferated much of the scientific and professional community, even though there's no conclusive evidence that's ever been found to prove it.

In fact, macroevolution is so prevalent that in most cases it has replaced creationism—the belief that God created the world and everything in it—as the de facto standard in educational textbooks, effectively indoctrinating millions of people to accept evolution and reject God as the reason for our existence. This is one of the primary reasons why faith has become such a challenge for so many.

In my search, I kept finding examples of microevolution that evolutionists seemed to repeatedly mislabel as macroevolution.

They often referenced specific plant types evolving into other plants of the same variety. They referred extensively to Darwin's finches—a group of finches that Charles Darwin, the father of the theory of evolution, discovered on the Galapagos islands, that had different sizes of beaks. They also referenced a study on moths that changed their wing color to blend in with their background to

protect themselves from predators.

But, in every case I could find, there was not a single example of macroevolution. Plants were still plants, finches were still finches, moths were still moths, and so on.

I also discovered that the lack of physical evidence regarding macroevolution has become a real challenge when examining fossil records.

Based on Darwin's teachings, paleontologists should find transitional fossils in abundance as countless species evolved and diversified over billions of years. But instead of finding a vast smorgasbord of transitional treasures, they've continually come up empty handed.

Even renowned paleontologist Stephen J. Gould, one of the most influential scientific writers of this generation, wrote that "the extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record persists as the trade secret of paleontology."¹

The reason he wrote this admission was because the lack of transitional fossils was so striking to him as a paleontologist, that he risked his entire career and went against traditional Darwinism in an effort to postulate a new theory of his own to try to explain their uncomfortably obvious absence.

2. Genes rarely, if ever replicate into something better.

One of the fundamental ideas of macroevolution is that over time, genes mutate into improved versions of themselves—ultimately leading to the creation of new and diverse species. However, genetic science has shown that the opposite is happening in the world today.

When it comes to mutations, the vast majority are either nearly-neutral (slightly damaged but still functional) or harmful (malfunctioning or dysfunctional), with positive mutations being

1 Gould, Stephen Jay. "Evolution's Erratic Pace." *Natural History*, May 1977, p. 14.

the very rare exception. This accumulation of damaged mutations over time is called genetic entropy.

To visualize the process of genetic entropy, picture a large jar full of 1 million white marbles.

If you were to take 100 white marbles out every day and replace them with 80 gray marbles (nearly-neutral mutations), 19 red marbles (harmful mutations), and 1 green marble (positive mutations), and you did that daily for 5,000 days (where 1 day equals 1 lifetime), at the end of that process you would have 500,000 white marbles, 400,000 gray marbles, 95,000 red marbles, and only 5,000 green marbles.

Now, in the real world, there are other variables, of course—like survival of the fittest, that could potentially slow down genetic decline. However, even in the best possible scenario, the number of positive mutations is so minuscule compared to the overwhelming number of negative mutations that any long-term improvement is statistically improbable.

The 5,000th descendant would almost certainly be in a significantly worse genetic state than the first, as we see happening today with genetic disorders and species degeneration.

As you can imagine, genetic entropy creates a huge dilemma for evolutionists, because macroevolution and genetic entropy are polar opposites and can't possibly co-exist.

Either the majority of our random genetic mutations are positive (macroevolution) or they are negative (genetic entropy), and modern-day science clearly shows us that it's the latter.

3. Life cannot come from an inanimate object.

Billions of dollars have been spent on biotechnology, where countless numbers of the best and brightest scientists, using the most cutting-edge tools, have tried to create life. But, as hard as these scientists have tried, in every lab experiment ever done, none

have even come remotely close to doing so.

The closest they've ever come to creating life is through cloning, which involves taking a piece of pre-existing DNA from one living cell and adding it to a piece of pre-existing DNA from another living cell (creating new life from existing life).

In his article, "Evolution is Religion—Not Science," Dr. Michael G. Houts, PhD states:

Many famous evolutionists have calculated the odds of a cell or even just the proteins in a cell randomly assembling. These odds (calculated by evolutionists themselves) so discredit the theory that they typically are not mentioned in discussions of the topic. The famous atheistic astronomer Sir Frederick Hoyle calculated the odds of even just the proteins of an amoeba arising by chance at one in $10^{40,000}$, i.e., one followed by 40,000 zeroes (Hoyle and Wickramasinghe, 1981, p. 130). Harold Morowitz, former professor of Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry at Yale University, calculated the odds that a simple, single-celled organism might randomly assemble itself from pre-existing building blocks as one in $10^{100,000,000,000}$, i.e., one followed by 100 billion zeros (Morowitz, 1968, p. 98). Carl Sagan and other famous evolutionists (including Nobel Laureate Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA) have come to similar conclusions (Sagan, et al., 1973, pp. 45-46). Calculations such as these were the basis of Sir Frederick Hoyle's famous quote that the probability of spontaneous generation "is about the same as the probability that a tornado sweeping through a junkyard could assemble a 747 from the contents therein" (Hoyle, 1981, 294[5837]:105).²

Let's take a moment to really put this into perspective.

2 Dave Miller, et al., "Evolution Is Religion—Not Science [Part I]," Apologetics Press, 28 Aug. 2021, <http://apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?article=2299>.

According to the Oxford University Press, *Nasuia deltocephalinicola*, the smallest bacteria genome, (or in other words, the smallest living single-celled organism that scientists have ever discovered) has 56,045 nucleotide base pairs.

If you recall from your high school chemistry class, all DNA is comprised of 4 different base pairs, Adenine and Thymine (which can be written as AT or TA) and Cytosine and Guanine (which can be written as CG or GC).

These 4 base pairs are repeatedly strung together into one massively long strand that makes up each living organism's DNA.³

Now, if you were to take all 56,045 base pairs of this particular bacteria, and wrote its exact DNA sequence out on paper, it would be the equivalent of a 75-page paperback book and would read something like this:

CG-TA-AT-AT-GC-CG-TA-TA-AT-GC-GC-CG-TA-TA-AT-CG-AT-AT-AT-GC-GC-TA-CG-TA-AT-GC-CG-AT-AT-GC-CC-CG-TA-AT-CG-AT-TA-AT-GC-CG...

Mathematically, the odds of this sequence happening randomly is $4^{56,045}$, where 4 is the total number of ways the base pairs can be arranged (AT, TA, CG, and GC), and 56,045 is the total number of base pairs.

If you multiply $4^{56,045}$, every calculator will reply with infinity, because the number is so impossibly large.

Even if you tried to get just 20 base pairs to be sequenced in the proper order, the odds are 1 in 1,099,511,627,776, or 1 in a trillion.

And, if you added just 5 more base pairs and tried to sequence 25 of them in the proper order, the odds jump to 1 in

3 Gordon M. Bennett and Nancy A. Moran, "Small, Smaller, Smallest: The Origins and Evolution of Ancient Dual Symbioses in a Phloem-Feeding Insect," OUP Academic, Oxford University Press, 25 Aug. 2013, <https://academic.oup.com/gbe/article/5/9/1675/555845>.

1,125,899,906,842,624, or 1 in a quadrillion, which means it's 1,000 times harder to sequence.

Now, try to fathom the impossible odds of all 56,045 base pairs coming together and randomly aligning themselves in exact order, just to create the smallest, most simple bacterial DNA sequence on earth.

However mind-blowing this feat may be on its own, it's just the very first step of assembling this incredibly intricate puzzle.

Since we just discussed DNA, let's start there.

For simplicity, let's pretend that the first primordial DNA strand (3.5 billion years ago) just happened to have the same number of nucleotide base pairs as today's smallest known bacteria, and all 56,045 base pairs somehow came together and were perfectly organized, sequenced, and ready to go.

For this primordial DNA to even have a chance of survival, it would need somewhere to exist—a place where its code could remain stable and protected from the elements. It would need a cell membrane.

For the sake of discussion, let's say that somehow a cell membrane spontaneously formed around this impossibly complex strand of self-assembled primordial DNA. Even if this happened, it still wouldn't be nearly enough.

The next miracle that would have to happen is that several body parts would have to appear out of nowhere to successfully perform a variety of vital functions necessary for its survival.

For a prokaryotic cell (the type of cell this would have had to have been), internal and external functions are performed by things like the cytoplasm, ribosomes, pili, and flagellum.

It would need these and other critical parts to absorb food (nutrition), turn that food into energy (respiration), get rid of

waste (excretion), move around its environment (movement), sense its surroundings (awareness), grow (growth), and replicate itself (reproduction).⁴

Then, once all of these essential cell parts and pieces somehow morphed into existence to create a fully formed single cell, the cell body would then need to be able to understand, process, and execute the DNA code inside of it.

It would also have to turn any instructions it received into meaningful actions that would directly benefit and promote both the longevity and progeny of the cell.

Here's the bottom line—without ALL these incredibly intricate, vital parts and systems being fully present and actively working in perfect harmony with each other all at the same time, there's no possible way that a biological cell could successfully function or even exist!

But let's say that somehow this “miracle DNA” and all of its microscopic cell parts and pieces spontaneously came into existence, all at once in the exact same primordial swamp billions of years ago, and that it simultaneously combined to form the first-ever cell.

Even if all of this happened, there's still one massive problem—it wouldn't be alive! It would be nothing more than an inanimate object sitting there—just like an unplugged computer, with all the parts it needs to properly function but without a power supply to do anything about it.

But let's keep going, just for fun. Let's say that somehow our theoretical cell spontaneously came to life—like the proverbial gingerbread man jumping out of the oven.

Even after that, it would still have the impossible challenge of successfully replicating itself on the very first attempt, and then

4 “Mrs. Gren,” Basic Biology, 5 Oct. 2020, <https://basicbiology.net/biology-101/mrs-gren>.

positively mutating and growing into literally millions of other viable organisms, plants, and animals, with each mutated species being a vastly improved genetic version of its original self, eventually culminating in the evolution of its ultimate masterpiece—a human being.

Did you know that humans have 3.2 BILLION nucleotide base pairs in every single cell?

That is the equivalent of 4.3 MILLION pages of DNA code all written in exact sequence, compared to the 75 pages in the original bacterium. That's approximately 57,000 times more DNA code in every single human cell, times 37.2 TRILLION cells in a human body that make up more than 70 extremely complex, interrelated organs—all of which work together in perfect unison.

When you break it down like this, evolution miserably fails on every possible level.

So, to summarize, let's recap the list of impossibilities:

- DNA can't possibly organize itself randomly into the proper, exact sequence of tens of thousands of nucleotide base pairs that are necessary to create even the simplest single-cell bacteria.
- A cell can't just appear out of thin air with all its vital parts and organs automatically assembled and working, with DNA magically inside, ready to go.
- A cell can't possibly function without some way of being able to read and translate its DNA to carry out the DNA's instructions, successfully replicating itself to ensure its own survival, and having some way to ingest and absorb energy to sustain its life.
- A life form can't add more DNA to itself, improve its DNA, or turn itself into an entirely new species through changes in its existing DNA.

And, finally, if scientists today were to somehow create the perfect cell in a lab, with everything necessary for that cell to properly function, survive, and replicate, they couldn't possibly, under any circumstances, just somehow magically cause the cell to spring to life.

Life cannot come from an inanimate object.

Not only is each step of the process above impossible on its own, but we're talking about adding impossibility on top of impossibility, over and over again to an absurd level.

Ultimately, just like your smartphone or laptop can't exist or function without an intelligent designer and a continuous power source, no living thing can exist without a higher power intricately and painstakingly designing it, creating it, and, most importantly, giving it precious life!

The Goldilocks Principle

Once I was convinced that macroevolution was impossible, I decided to look at the earth and see how likely it was that it just happened to randomly exist in its current state.

What I discovered can best be described by the story of Goldilocks.

We all know the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, where everything that Goldilocks tried was either too hot, too cold, too big, too small, too hard, too soft, or just right.

This idea of things being "just right" has turned into something called the Goldilocks Principle. It's currently used in a wide range of disciplines, including developmental psychology, biology, astronomy, economics, and engineering.

The interesting thing about earth is that virtually everything that allows us to live on this incredibly complex planet follows the Goldilocks Principle.

For example:

- Our solar system just happens to be in the Galactic Habitable Zone in the Milky Way. It's in the ideal location, at the edge of a spiral arm called the Orion Arm, about two-thirds of the way from the center of the galaxy, where there are significantly fewer stars, minimal space debris, and lower levels of radiation, which makes it stable and safe.
- The sun just happens to be the perfect size for our solar system. It provides the earth with the perfect amount of light and heat to support all forms of life.
- The earth just happens to be the perfect distance from the sun, orbiting the sun in the Goldilocks Zone (this is its actual name). Just a few degrees from its current orbit around the sun, either closer or farther away, would make earth uninhabitable.
- The moon just happens to be the perfect distance from earth, the perfect size, and in the perfect orbit. The moon orbits at the perfect speed to stabilize the earth, slow down its rotation, create tides to keep the oceans oxygenated so they don't stagnate, normalize our weather, and provide many other benefits. (Also, did you know that the sun is four hundred times larger than the moon, and four hundred times farther away from the earth than the moon? This is why the moon and sun appear to be the exact same size during an eclipse. Is this an incredible coincidence or something more?)
- The earth's core just happens to be strong enough to create something called a magnetosphere, which creates a powerful shield around the earth that continuously deflects radiation from the sun and space, and protects us from solar flares, solar winds, and meteors. Without it, the earth would be uninhabitable.
- The earth just happens to have an ozone layer, which is very rare and reflects ultraviolet radiation from the sun. Dubbed "the earth's sunscreen," the ozone layer protects plants and

animals from overexposure that would otherwise lead to excessive radiation. Without the ozone layer, life on earth would die.

- The earth's atmosphere just happens to have the ideal chemical composition to facilitate all different kinds of plant and animal life. This combination of 78 percent nitrogen, 21 percent oxygen, and 1 percent other elements happens to also create the ideal atmospheric pressure, which allows liquids to form and allows us to breathe an optimal amount of oxygen. Our atmosphere is also ideal for the earth's water cycle to properly function. Without it, the earth would become uninhabitable.
- The earth just happens to have massive amounts of liquid water that makes all life possible, absorbs heat from the sun, stabilizes the world's overall temperature, absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, and so much more. Without liquid water, the earth would definitely be uninhabitable.
- The earth just happens to be tilted at 23.5 degrees. This is the ideal tilt to allow the earth to have multiple seasons and optimal sun exposure. If the earth were tilted any more or less, it would lead to catastrophic atmospheric events that would impact the earth's overall stability and long-term capacity for life.
- The earth also just happens to have the ideal amount of gravity. Just a 5 percent difference in gravity either way would be disastrous because of everything it directly impacts, including the earth's magnetic field, our atmosphere, our orbit around the sun, the moon's orbit around the earth, the speed and rotation of the earth, and countless other things.

So, what does all of this mean?

It means that every day, we go about living our normal lives without giving a second thought to things like the galaxy, the sun, the magnetosphere, the ozone layer, the atmosphere, the moon,

water, earth's gravity, or earth's tilt and orbit.

But all of these and countless other “Goldilocks” systems, alignments, processes, protections, and unbelievably fortuitous circumstances all combine to create the impossibly perfect set of ideal conditions that allow us and all other types of plants and animals to be able to live and thrive in abundance.

Again, when you stack up the impossibilities on top of impossibilities, it can't happen by chance. It's too perfect and too organized to not be intimately and painstakingly designed to the last detail.

My Ultimate Conclusion

After deeply and sincerely pondering the theory of evolution and considering the implications of living in a Godless world, I came to the following conclusion.

If we are nothing more than the product of random chemical reactions, and life simply sprang up from a swamp and evolved by chance, then everything we know, everything we love, and everything we hold dear—is all the result of an accidental chemical spill.

Which would mean that we don't really matter.

Not in any ultimate sense. Not beyond the fleeting moment of time we occupy. There is no purpose to our existence beyond whatever we invent to distract ourselves from the crushing reality of our own insignificance.

It would also mean there is no God, no Savior, no plan of salvation, no heaven or hell, no right or wrong—just survival, existence, and the passing of time before we, like every other living thing, simply vanish forever.

Sure, we could make the most of it by trying to find meaning in

life as we know it, but in the grand scheme of things it would all be pointless.

If we truly accepted macroevolution, we would have to accept that as humans we have no more importance or intrinsic value than the grass on our front lawn, mold growing on a rock, or a goldfish at the pet store—we just happened to win the genetic lottery.

And the worst part? Everyone we love—our parents, our siblings, our spouse, our friends, and even our children—would all exist only right here and now, and once they die, they are gone. Forever.

It's heartbreaking to know that millions of people live under the crushing weight of this cold, hollow, and hopeless reality—especially when the alternative is so rich with meaning, purpose, and hope.

“What if God does exist?”

If we didn't somehow emerge and evolve from a meaningless accident, then that means that we were placed here deliberately—not by chance or by some random mutation process, but by an eternal, all-powerful, all-loving Creator.

He carefully and painstakingly created the universe, our galaxy, the solar system, this amazing earth, and every single incredible thing in it—including us—and designed it all to work together in perfect harmony for our benefit.

It also means that God, our Creator, has a specific purpose and plan for each of us, which gives life incredible depth, meaning, and joy!

This is the most important thing any human can possibly know—that God exists, and He has a plan for us!

This is ultimately the answer that I found as a result of the trial of my faith. And while this may seem like an obvious answer on its surface, because I was willing to put the reality of God to the test, I now have a much deeper appreciation, humility, and sense of

wonder for this precious and powerful truth which I'm incredibly grateful for.

The Foundation of Our Faith

In the end, believing in God is a choice that we each must make on our own.

When asking ourselves, “Does God exist?” Our natural instinct is to attempt to answer it to the best of our ability using knowledge, logic, and reason. Those are all great decision-making tools, but we also need to believe that He exists.

Knowledge, logic, reason, and our belief in God, combined with our unique life experiences and personal revelation become the core foundation of faith upon which our testimonies are built.

Once we have this foundation, we can begin to establish and build, or rebuild, if necessary, additional principles of our faith based on the Savior, the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and the Church itself—all of which further combine to deepen and strengthen our belief in God.

My hope is that what I've shared in this chapter, and throughout the rest of this book, will expand and strengthen your faith—not just in God's existence, but in His love for you.

Because He is real and He does love you. And that knowledge changes everything.

I am so incredibly grateful for this truth in my life, and I hope you are too.

Let's see where that knowledge takes us from here.

Chapter 2

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Primary and Secondary Questions

The second time someone told me they were leaving the Church, it was a sister in my ward, acting on behalf of both her and her husband.

It had all started a couple of years earlier when she was studying the gospel online. At first, she studied using the Church's website, but over time she was drawn to other sites that were not sponsored by the Church. Some of those sites presented information that created questions in her mind and caused her to eventually doubt her faith.

I met with her and her husband several times, trying to answer their questions and resolve their concerns, but I was unsuccessful despite my best efforts. Ultimately, they left the Church and took their children with them.

A few years later, I came across an incredible BYU talk titled Stand Forever by Elder Lawrence E. Corbridge, a General Authority Seventy.

This talk changed my life.

In it, Elder Corbridge addresses the loss of faith that many people are experiencing in the world today. He says there are countless ways

that members of the Church can be distracted or even deceived.

He then introduces a simple but powerful solution that allows us to avoid unnecessary distractions and deceptions that can damage or derail our faith. He states:

Begin with the primary questions.

There are primary questions, and there are secondary questions. Answer the primary questions first. Not all questions are equal, and not all truths are equal. The primary questions are the most important—everything else is subordinate.

There are only a few primary questions. I'll mention four of them:

Is there a God who is our father?

Is Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Savior of the world?

Was Joseph Smith a Prophet?

Is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints the Kingdom of God on Earth?

By contrast, the secondary questions are unending. They include questions about church history, polygamy, people of African descent, women and the Priesthood, how the Book of Mormon was translated, the Pearl of Great Price, DNA and the Book of Mormon, gay marriage, the different accounts of the first vision, and on and on.

If you answer the primary questions, the secondary questions get answered too, or they pale in significance, and you can deal with things you understand, and things you don't understand; things you agree with, and things you don't agree with—without jumping ship altogether.⁵

5 Corbridge, Lawrence E. "Stand Forever." BYU Speeches, Brigham Young University, 15 Oct. 2021, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/lawrence-e-corbridge/stand-for-ever/>.

In addition to the four primary questions that Elder Corbridge mentioned, I'd like to add one more: Is the Book of Mormon true?

As we focus on and reinforce these primary questions in our life, our faith and testimony naturally increase and strengthen, and the desire to have certain secondary questions answered becomes less important when weighed against our primary beliefs.

This doesn't mean that secondary questions aren't important, or that there's not a good answer for them. It just means that once you truly know that God exists and that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, secondary questions tend to become less of a priority.

Another thing to consider regarding secondary questions is that in many cases we don't have the complete answers for one or more reasons, especially when it comes to:

- Questions that involve the past, because we weren't there to experience first-hand what actually happened and why, or
- Questions regarding the power of God or the plan of salvation outside of our actual life here on earth—things we can't directly see, feel, and experience with our own eyes or other senses.

And to make matters even more complicated, because of the information age that we live in, we have instant access to seemingly countless opinions and answers to our questions, but we never really know the true intentions and motivations behind these answers.

If we're not continuously on guard and careful about the source of our information, we can unknowingly put our eternal salvation into the hands of those who come to us "in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves" (Matthew 7:15).

This is one of the main reasons why putting too much attention or weight on secondary questions can be harmful and potentially dangerous to our spirituality and faith—because the answers we often end up finding are incomplete, inaccurate, biased, highly

speculative, or intentionally deceptive.

This is why it is so important to focus on answering the primary questions first and gaining a true testimony of each of them for ourselves!

There's a reason why this book started with the first and most important primary question, "Is God real?" It's because without a solid answer to that question and a firm testimony of God we are unable to effectively counter the constant barrage of secondary questions that attempt to challenge His existence, purpose, and plan.

Ultimately, it's the answers to the primary questions that create the deepest roots of our testimony and give us the strength necessary to overcome the difficulties, persecutions, trials, and challenges of life that continually try and test our faith.

The Rest of the Story

During my faith crisis, when I broke my faith down into its fundamental principles, in addition to asking myself "Is God Real?" I also came up with 4 additional questions: "Is Jesus Christ the Son of God? Is Joseph Smith a Prophet? Is the Church true? Is the Book of Mormon true?" It was by sincerely and objectively answering these five questions through prayer, reflection, research, and inspiration that I was able to rebuild my testimony and strengthen my faith.

Five years after my faith crisis, and two years after I had started writing this book, Elder Corbridge's talk came out, and his primary questions almost perfectly matched my fundamental questions! As I watched him speak, I knew that his message was for people just like me, the two couples in my ward, and countless other members of the Church who at one point or another have struggled with their faith.

The idea of focusing on the primary questions as the foundation of our faith and testimony is so powerful that once you realize its

importance, it completely changes how you view the gospel going forward.

Over the next four chapters we'll dive into the remaining primary questions and see what additional insights, discoveries, and hidden treasures we can find.

Chapter 3

IS JESUS CHRIST THE SON OF GOD, THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD?

Understanding the Father to Understand His Son

Before we attempt to answer the second primary question regarding the divinity of Christ, it's important to fully address the first primary question that Elder Corbridge posed, "Is there a God who is our father?"

While Chapter one focused on establishing God as the creator of our existence and the foundation of our faith, it only alluded to the second part of the question regarding God being our father.

However, if we are to truly understand the role of Christ in our lives, we need to understand both our relationship to God and the Savior's relationship to God.

It is important to know that God is our father for several reasons:

1. It makes our relationship with God very personal

Rather than an unknowable, unfathomable, all-powerful being giving us life for no apparent rhyme or reason, this knowledge gives us both a spiritual and familial bond with God.

No longer are we random creations wandering around without purpose; we are spiritual sons or daughters of the most powerful being in the Universe. He is the actual father of our spirits and the source that gives our bodies life.

This makes our view of life infinitely more valuable, because it gives us a completely different perspective of our individual divinity and worth.

It also allows us to have a meaningful relationship with God because it connects us with Him on a personal level—as a loving father who has our best interests in mind and deeply cares about us, the lives we lead, and the choices we make.

This knowledge also creates within us a profound, personal sense of humility and gratitude for all the blessings and opportunities we have, because we know the source from which they originate and the true intent behind them.

2. It establishes the importance of family relationships

God being the literal father of our spiritual body creates a paternal bond directly between us and God.

This is why the term “Heavenly Father” is so sacred and endearing, because it denotes an intimate connection between a father and his son or daughter. The knowledge that God is the father of our spirits also ties every person on earth together as part of a global family.

In addition, God being our spiritual father also sets a precedence for the importance of families here on earth.

It also gives us purpose and joy as we bring children of our own into the world, teach them, and experience with them the joys, trials, and adventures of life.

3. It is the foundation of the plan of salvation

Without the knowledge that God is the father of our spirits, the plan of salvation would look very different.

Instead of being the children of God, we would instead be creations of God, which would, in effect, remove the intimate, ever-loving, paternal bonds that tie a father to his children and children to their father.

Without this deep, emotionally driven, family bond, our relationship with God would be much more formal and rigid—more authoritarian, standoffish, separated, and process-oriented. The family relationship would also become less important or even irrelevant.

Ultimately, removing God as our loving father would effectively turn our relationship with God into a master/servant paradigm instead of a father/child paradigm.

The two are vastly different, and a master/servant paradigm would frustrate the purpose of the plan of salvation as we know it.

4. It ties us directly to Christ—as both our Savior and our brother

Because God is our Heavenly Father (the father of our spiritual bodies), and the father of Christ's spiritual body, it means that Christ is our brother. Knowledge of that relationships allows us to create an emotional, personal bond with Christ and He with us.

This adds much more significance to our Heavenly Father allowing Christ to willingly sacrifice Himself for us, knowing that He was sending His Son, our brother, to suffer and die.

His sacrifice in performing the Atonement makes it so that we might all be able to be forgiven of our sins and ultimately be resurrected and exalted to return to live with God again.

Bottom line, relationships matter a lot, especially when we're defining the core relationships between God, Christ, and ourselves and how they relate to our salvation and eternity.

These relationships define the lens through which we view everything around us throughout our entire lives.

Is Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Savior of the World?

To contemplate this question, let's consider it from the hinge-point of truth we've established so far—that God exists and has a specific purpose and plan for us. Then let's attempt to add a second hinge-point by seeking to discover if Christ is real.

When it comes to establishing the importance of Christ and His role as Savior and Creator, you probably don't have an issue with the fact that Jehovah in the Old Testament is Christ in the New Testament.

However, because my purpose is to help you to see things from a different perspective, I want to highlight something interesting about the relationship between Jehovah and Christ of which you're probably not aware. (And in a later chapter, I'm going to show you a fascinating discovery that also ties back to it.)

Ancient Discoveries Connect Jehovah to Christ

Looking back to the Creation, the oldest record we have regarding Adam and Eve's relationship with both God (the Father) and Jesus Christ (the Son of God) is the book of Genesis in the Old Testament.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Moses authored the first five books of the Bible shortly after he freed the Israelites from bondage, sometime in the thirteenth century BC.⁶

After the death of Moses, additional books were added to the Old Testament over time. The last book, Malachi, was added more than five hundred years before the birth of Christ.⁷

6 "Exodus," Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/event/Exodus-Old-Testament>.

7 "The Book of Malachi," Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Book-of-Malachi>.

We can further validate the timeline of the Old Testament, thanks to the discovery of the Ketef Hinnom Scrolls—two silver scrolls discovered near Jerusalem that date sometime between 625 BC and 600 BC.

These scrolls existed before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and are the earliest known citations of texts found in the Bible. Both contain parts of the three blessings found in Numbers 6:24–46, and one of them also contains a variation of Deuteronomy 7:9.⁸

Because these scrolls are so old, they are written in Paleo-Hebrew, which is a precursor to modern Hebrew.

The importance of these scrolls is four-fold.

First, they prove that books of the Old Testament were alive and well in Jerusalem at least six hundred years before Christ was born.

Second, they show that Paleo-Hebrew was being actively written at the time Lehi lived in Jerusalem, and since we know that he was well educated, it's likely that he would have known how to read and write it.

Third, it proves that scriptures were inscribed on metal sheets before the time of Lehi and in the place where he lived.

Fourth, these ancient scrolls contain the oldest known Old Testament passages found, and they reference YHWH multiple times.

(In the Christian world today, we pronounce YHWH as “Jehovah.”) This reference to YHWH may just seem like an interesting point of reference, but there may be more to the story when establishing the validity of Christ.

Below is the Hebrew word for YHWH, formatted left to right as we would read it in English:

8 Gabriel Barkay, “The Riches of Ketef Hinnom,” The BAS Library, 12 Aug. 2016, <https://www.baslibrary.org/biblical-archaeology-review/35/4/4>.

Y H W H

However, in Hebrew it is written from right to left, like this:

H W H Y

Here's what these letters look like in modern Hebrew (right to left):

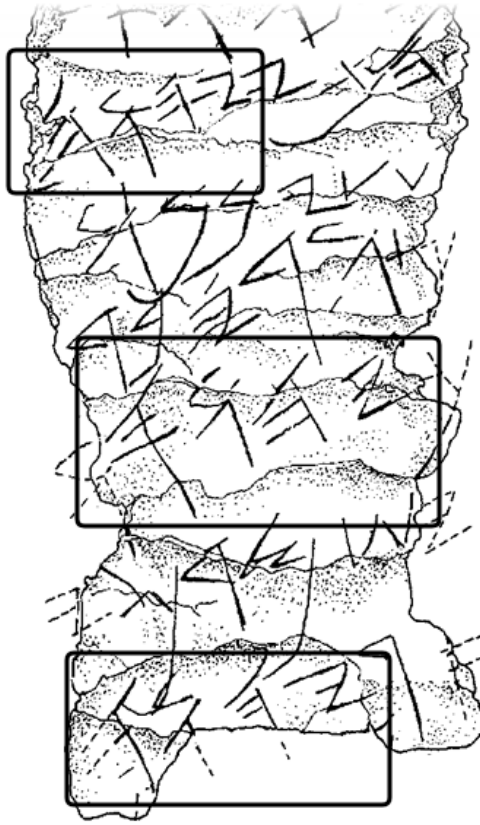
יהוה

In Paleo-Hebrew, which is what the Ketef Hinnom Scrolls were written in, the ancient version of these Hebrew letters looks like this (also read right to left):

𐤅 𐤄 𐤅 𐤁

Below is an illustration of one of the Ketef Hinnom scrolls with the word YHWH etched in Paleo-Hebrew in three different locations:⁹

9 Gabriel Barkay, "The Priestly Benediction on Silver Plaques from Ketef Hinnom in Jerusalem," *Tel Aviv*, 19:2 (1992), Illustration of Ketef Hinnom Scroll 1, 152. DOI: 10.1179/tav.1992.1992.2.139.



Here's where it gets really interesting.

There's even an older version of Hebrew called Ancient Hebrew. This original version of Hebrew has been collected from various petroglyphs and is the precursor to Paleo-Hebrew, which is the precursor to Modern Hebrew.

In Ancient Hebrew, the characters look like this (again read right to left):



Remarkably, while the three different versions of Hebrew have evolved visually over thousands of years, they've managed to retain the same overall meaning.

Here are some of the words that scholars believe these characters translate into across all three versions of Hebrew (read from right to left):

Behold

Look

Nail

Hook

Behold

Look

Hand

Arm

Peg

Secure

The reason why it's important to refer to the Ancient Hebrew characters is to help us visually determine on what the Paleo and Modern Hebrew letters were initially based, and to gather clues as to who YHWH might be.

Moving from right to left, the first character is an outstretched hand. The next character is a man, with his hands up in the air, who appears to be in the act of worship or praise. The third character appears to be a nail. And finally, the last character is a repeat of the second.

So, putting it together, these four Hebrew characters could literally mean.

Behold ← Nail ← Behold ← Hand

Which would mean that YHWH could be translated as “Hand Behold Nail Behold,” or “Behold the Nailed Hand.” Now, if we break down the sounds of each Hebrew letter, the sounds are as follows (in English formatting, shown left to right):

Y H W H

Yod - Heh - Vav - Heh

Ultimately, there are differing interpretations as to how these four Hebrew Letters are supposed to sound when put together, but the most common Christian pronunciations are “Ye-ho-vah” or “Je-ho-vah.” (Traditionally, the second “Heh” on the end was not pronounced out of respect and reverence, which is why it’s not part of the word Jehovah today.)

The irony behind this is that even if it was proven that YHWH meant “Behold the Nailed Hand,” Jewish scholars would most likely refuse to believe that it had any relation to Christ, since Jews don’t believe that Jesus is the Messiah. And unfortunately, much of Christianity believes that Jehovah refers to God the Father—not Christ—which makes this precious gem essentially lost in plain sight.

Fortunately, as members of the Church, we know that Jehovah and Christ are the same person, which makes this discovery very exciting for us!

After all, what are the chances that the Hebrew name for Jehovah—from the time of Moses to this very day—has a hand and a nail in both its character design and its meaning?

Even the original 1908 version of the Jewish Encyclopedia explicitly states that “Yod” is the “Tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The name seems to be connected with ‘yad,’ meaning hand,” and that “Vav” is the “Sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The name possibly means nail.”¹⁰

How poetic that Christ Himself said, “*Behold* the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of *the nails in my hands* and feet . . .” (Doctrine and Covenants 6:37; emphasis added).

Old Testament Prophecies of Christ

Changing gears, let’s take a moment to consider the miracle of Christ and the incredible prophecies in the Old Testament that predicted His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

The word “prophecy” is defined in Merriam-Webster as:

1. An inspired utterance of a prophet.
2. The function or vocation of a prophet specifically—the inspired declaration of divine will and purpose.
3. A prediction of something to come.¹¹

If we were to consider this definition in the context of all the Old

10 Yod, “Jewishencyclopedia.com,” YOD- JewishEncyclopedia.com, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7975-i>; Heh, “—Heh—the Fifth Letter of the Hebrew—Alphabet—Essentials,” Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/137077/jewish/Heh.htm; Vav, “JewishEncyclopedia.com,” WAW, JewishEncyclopedia.com, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14651-vav>; Heh, The Letter Hey, https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_One/Aleph-Bet/Hey/hey.html.

11 “Prophecy,” Merriam-Webster.com, 2022 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prophecy>.

Testament prophets who prophesied of Christ, we could actually rewrite it to make it a lot more specific. It might read something like this...

Old Testament Prophecy of Christ:

“A prediction or inspired utterance from Old Testament prophets, who were divinely inspired to declare God’s will regarding the future birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.”

If the Old Testament is truly the word of God, written by ancient prophets of God, then any prophecies that follow this definition must come to pass, otherwise the Old Testament (if it’s translated correctly) can’t be true. If it’s not true, it’s not from God, and it’s not part of God’s plan.

However, the opposite is also true. If the prophecies do come to pass, then it demonstrably shows that the Old Testament (declared prophecies) and the New Testament (fulfilled prophecies) are both from God, and they contain God’s plan for us!

With that in mind, let’s discuss Old Testament prophecies of Christ.

From Adam and Eve to the birth of Christ, the salvation of man rested on the hopes of every Old Testament prophecy of Christ coming true.

And we’re not talking about just a few obscure prophecies of the Savior—we’re talking about more than fifty direct prophecies, with several being time or location-specific. There are also more than three hundred indirect prophecies.¹²

Also, as previously mentioned, we know that every book in the entire Old Testament was written before 500 BC. That means it is highly unlikely that these prophecies were added after the books

12 “351 Old Testament Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus Christ,” New Testament Christians.com, <https://www.newtestamentchristians.com/bible-study-resources/351-old-testament-prophecies-fulfilled-in-jesus-christ/>

had been completed.

Here are some of the more well-known scriptures in the Old Testament foretelling Christ's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection. (I've added an asterisk next to some of the prophecies that have special meaning, which I'll discuss a little further on.)

- He would be born in Bethlehem* (Micah 5:2). This is very specific. It's also interesting to note that Bethlehem was a tiny place, with some sources estimating fewer than one thousand people living there at the time.
- He would have a forerunner who would announce to the people to prepare for His arrival* (Malachi 3:1). This scripture is unique because once John the Baptist officially announced that Jesus was the Messiah, he in effect, set in motion His responsibility to successfully fulfill all of the foretold prophecies regarding His ministry in every detail.
- He would begin His ministry in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1–2).
- He would be innocent and without sin (Exodus 12:5).
- He would perform many miracles, like healing the deaf, blind, mute, and lame (Isaiah 35:5–6).
- At the height of His ministry, He would enter Jerusalem as a king, but He would do so riding on a donkey* (Zechariah 9:9). This sounds so strange to us today, but in ancient times kings and royalty would ride a donkey as a sign of peace, whereas they would ride horses as a sign of war or aggression. The Jewish people knew that the promised messiah would enter Jerusalem on a donkey, which is why they celebrated his arrival. However, the Pharisees also knew this, and no doubt saw Christ's arrival as the ultimate form of blasphemy.
- He would atone for the sins of the world (Daniel 9:24).
- He would be betrayed by one of his disciples* (Zechariah 13:6).
- The price of the betrayal would be thirty pieces of silver*

(Zechariah 11:12). This is a very specific amount of money with which to betray someone you love—especially hundreds of years before it happens.

- The thirty pieces of silver for which he was betrayed would ultimately be given to a potter (someone who makes pottery)* (Zechariah 11:13). This is of particular interest because it's so unique and specific. In Matthew 27:6–10, when Judas Iscariot went back to the chief priests, he threw the coins they gave him on the ground and fled. The chief priests knew it was blood money, so instead of putting it back into the treasury, they bought a piece of land from a local potter, where they subsequently buried strangers who died in the city.
- He would be wounded, beaten, oppressed, and afflicted, but would not open His mouth to defend Himself* (Isaiah 53:4–7). What person, if being beaten or on trial for his life, would not try to defend or protect himself?
- His persecutors would cast lots for his clothing (Psalms 22:18).
- He would have his hands and feet pierced* (Psalms 22:16). Christ was never asked how He wanted to die—it was decided for Him. Also, death on a cross was reserved for the worst criminals, which would make it a very unlikely outcome for most people at the time. For prophets hundreds of years in the past to prophecy that the Savior of the world would die in such a horrific fashion is ludicrous—and yet, it happened!
- None of his bones would be broken (Exodus 12:46). When the Lord first instituted Passover through Moses, He commanded the Israelites that sacrificial lambs should not have any of their bones broken. When Christ was on the cross, Pilate ordered the Roman soldiers to break the legs of the those being crucified to ensure they died before the Sabbath. They broke the legs of the other two, and were just about to break Christ's legs, but discovered that he had died. In this case we're talking about a 1,400-year-old prophecy,

and its fulfillment literally came down to mere seconds.

- He would thirst and be given gall and vinegar to drink (Psalms 69:21). Gall and vinegar—or as Mark recorded, “wine mingled with myrrh”—was customarily offered as an anesthetic to ease the suffering of someone who was dying. Often it was wine that had fermented and gone sour, which is why it was called vinegar.
- He would die and be resurrected (Isaiah 25:7–8).
- He would make His soul an offering for sin and intercede for the transgressions of man (Isaiah 53:10–12).
- He would make a new covenant (called the law of the gospel) and do away with the old one (the law of Moses) (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

As you can see by reading just these eighteen prophecies, anyone who claimed to be the Messiah had to meet many very unique and specific qualifications for that claim to be true.

Christ was the only person who could have and ultimately did meet every single one of them.

What Are the Odds?

When you step back and consider the mathematical probability of one single person fulfilling all the messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, the odds of someone fulfilling even a handful of them—let alone all of them—are staggeringly improbable, if not impossible. The only way it could happen is if that person was in fact the Messiah.

Even though the number is improbable or impossible to calculate, people are still willing to try.

During his tenure as chairman of the Departments of Mathematics and Astronomy at Pasadena College, Peter Stoner was very interested in biblical prophecies. He decided to try to determine the odds of

just eight of the Old Testament prophecies of Christ being fulfilled.

Together with six hundred of his students, he examined these eight prophecies (the ones in the list with the asterisks next to them). He and his students collectively determined the most conservative odds in which each of the eight prophetic scriptures could be fulfilled by a single person.

The conclusion was staggering. They determined that the prospect that any one man could satisfy these eight prophecies was one in 10^{17} , which is 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000, or one in one-hundred quadrillion. He goes on to explain the odds like this:

Suppose that we take 10^{17} silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state.

Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote using their own wisdom.

Now these prophecies were either given by inspiration of God, or the prophets just wrote them as they thought they should be. In such a case the prophets had just one chance in 10^{17} of having them come true in any man, but they all came true in Christ.¹³

And this is with only eight of the prophecies of Christ coming true!

13 "Chapter 3, The Christ of Prophecy," Science Speaks by Peter W. Stoner, http://dstoner.net/Science_Speaks/Christ_of_Prophecy.html.

Now, imagine the odds of all the prophecies of Christ in the Old Testament coming true (which they did), and the number becomes so impossibly large that you can't even fathom it.

So, what can we conclude from all of this so far?

- God exists, and He is our Father in Heaven.
- He loves us.
- He created this amazing world for us.
- He has a plan for us.
- He put prophets on earth to tell us about His plan and to prophecy of Christ.
- Jesus Christ came into the world and fulfilled His part of the plan.
- All the prophecies of Christ came true.
- *Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God, and the Savior of the World!*

Making Christ Personal

In the next chapter, we'll delve more deeply into God's plan. But for now, I want to share a personal experience about the Savior that I had while on my mission in South Africa.

I was at a zone conference, which is a special meeting where missionaries gather to be instructed by the mission president and his APs (Assistants to the President).

As the meeting started, one of the APs got up to speak and said something to this effect:

"Close your eyes. Imagine yourself standing in an empty room. You see a door on the opposite side of the room. As you're standing there, the door opens, and a man walks in and gently closes the door behind him. As he turns to meet your gaze, you suddenly realize it's the Savior. You

have five minutes alone with Him.”

Then he sat down.

Before I share with you my personal experience, I invite you to do this yourself.

Stop reading. Close your eyes for a few minutes and imagine yourself in a room standing face to face with the Savior.

Please don't skip this. Just humor me. Stop reading and give it a try—see what happens.

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As I stood there, I realized that there was nowhere I could hide. No walls. No justification. I knew that He knew me and could see the intent of my heart.

I hesitated for a moment, looked at His eyes, and then ran up and hugged Him as tightly as I could. I felt His arms embracing me and knew that He loved me deeply.

As I embraced Him, I uttered three short statements to Him that seemed to come from my soul and that have stayed with me for the rest of my life: “I love you . . . I'm sorry . . . I need more time. . .”

As I've reflected over the years on this incredibly vulnerable, raw, spiritual moment, I have come to realize that the reason why those

five minutes had such an impact was because I was brutally honest with myself about my life up to that point.

I realized that I truly loved Christ and that I was so grateful for Him in my life. He made me want to be the best possible version of myself every day.

I also realized that I was truly sorry for all the stupid mistakes, bad decisions, and sins I had committed in my life. I realized too that while I was incredibly grateful for His willingness to take those from me, I still felt bad that He had to suffer on my behalf. I wished at that moment that I had made some better choices along the way.

Finally, I realized that I had so much more to give during my time here on earth, and I wasn't ready to go back to my heavenly home yet. This realization has caused me to reflect on my life on numerous occasions since, and to recommit to do better when I've found myself falling short.

A few years ago, I was preparing a talk for sacrament meeting, and I decided to share this experience with the congregation.

As I prepared my talk, I thought to myself, "I wonder what my experience with the Savior would be like today?" So, I closed my eyes and recreated the experience that I had as a young missionary.

I still gave the Savior a big hug. But after I hugged Him this time, I let go, stepped back and faced Him with incredible gratitude in my heart. I said to Him, "I love you . . . Thank you . . . What more can I do?"

My first statement hadn't changed but had become more heartfelt and genuine. The feeling of love was both given and reciprocated unconditionally.

My second statement changed from "I'm sorry" to "Thank you." I was so incredibly grateful to Him for my life, my family, and all the joy, peace, and happiness that His Atonement had given me over the years.

Finally, instead of asking for more time, I changed my original statement to a question, asking Him, “What more can I do?” This change may have been the result of having more life experiences to draw from, but in that moment, I truly wanted to do more to show Him my sincere gratitude and appreciation.

Upon reflection, I believe one of the reasons why this experience was so powerful and personal is because rarely, if ever, do we get the opportunity to talk to or interact with Christ directly.

We always pray and talk to Heavenly Father—not to the Savior—even though we thank our Father for the Savior and do many things in His name. This experience gives us the unique ability to talk to Him directly and intimately—likely for the first time ever—which can be very introspective, meaningful, and even life-changing.

The Reality of Christ

As this chapter has shown, and future chapters will continue to validate, there is overwhelming historical and scriptural evidence that Christ is real; that His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection were prophesied hundreds of years in advance; and that all the prophecies about Him came true and were fulfilled.

That being said, it’s important to remember that while ancient discoveries and scriptures give us unique insights into the life of the Savior, it’s the Spirit and personal revelation that confirm the truth of His divinity to our heart and mind, and help us to ultimately answer the primary question of Christ’s existence for ourselves.

It is my hope that this chapter has helped to give you a new perspective and appreciation for the miracle of His life in yours.

Chapter 4

WAS JOSEPH SMITH A PROPHET?

What Would You Do?

In the previous chapter, I started to discuss some of the unique differences in how we as members of the Church view God and Christ compared to the rest of the Christian world. But as I continued writing, I realized just how different many of our other beliefs are as well.

However, to truly answer the primary questions, we must seriously consider and address the differences between our Church and the rest of Christianity.

Because if the answers we discover in the exploration of those differences help us to determine whether God truly has one plan for all of us, then they are essential not only for our own salvation, but for the salvation of everyone on earth.

So, if you are reading this book and are not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I hope this helps you to understand my sincere intent in exploring these differences.

I would also ask you to thoughtfully consider whether there could be additional truths or teachings about God and His plan that you might not already know—truths that could potentially enhance or

improve your existing relationship with both Him and the Savior.

Christianity in Chaos

As I was doing research for this chapter, I was shocked to discover that there are currently more than 45,000 known Christian denominations and organizations in the world.¹⁴

Each of these denominations considers itself to be a distinct, religious body within Christianity, professing unique organizational and doctrinal traits. And while all of them believe in the Bible and teach from the Bible, they don't all agree on the same doctrine.

Every Christian believes that the Bible contains the word of God, but the problem is that it's only one source of truth. And each denomination sees what they believe to be true based on the only viewpoint they trust—their own.

This ultimately begs the vital question... Which Christian denomination teaches the one true plan of God?

It's a very important topic that deserves serious exploration, because as Christians, common sense tells us that God can't possibly have 45,000 different plans for us.

Rather, it tells us that He would have one specific plan and purpose for all of mankind, and that the Savior would have taught that singular plan to the prophets in both the Old and New Testaments.

So, where does that leave us?

Well, it leaves us with 45,000 Christian denominations all believing that the Bible contains the word of God, but each unable to agree on what God's actual plan is.

14 "Quick Facts about Global Christianity," Center for the Study of Global Christianity, 8 Dec. 2019, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/center-for-global-christianity/research/quick-facts/>

And since His plan strongly influences and guides our lives, defines who we are, and directly affects our moral choices and actions, it should not only be important, but vital that we know what it is.

But how do we possibly do that with so many different versions of the plan?

Well, if we take everything we know about Christianity and the original Church of Christ—meaning the organization that Christ personally established during His ministry—we can distill things down to one of two main conclusions:

1. Peter, whom Christ ordained to be the chief Apostle and leader of His original church, passed on his leadership and the keys of the priesthood to Linus (a possible bishop in the original church) before he died. Linus then passed those keys on to his successor, and so on and so on, down to the current pope. This is the Catholic Church's official belief.

Or. . .

2. Because of widespread wickedness and persecution outside of the original church, and apostasy and corruption inside, the Apostles did not pass on the priesthood keys. The priesthood authority was instead taken from the earth, to be restored at a future time.

So why only two conclusions?

Well, it stands to reason that God would reveal and establish His one true plan for all of mankind through Christ's original church, and not through any offshoots, outliers, break-offs, or branches.

This means that if we go with conclusion one, we must eliminate all 45,000 Christian denominations other than the Catholic Church.

Alternatively, if we go with conclusion two, we only find one other denomination claiming to have the fully restored gospel of Christ's original church, along with a restoration of the priesthood and

priesthood keys: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Now, only having two options might sound incredibly presumptuous on its surface, but the logic behind it is based on one absolute, indisputable truth:

The church that Christ himself established is and always will be His one true church with His one true plan.

Therefore, we must believe that while prophets may be fallible and make mistakes, Christ would never allow any prophet (or chosen leader) of His church to do anything that would lead it astray. Therefore, Christ's church can't possibly be any church other than the Catholic Church or a restored church because He would simply not allow any other option to happen.

If we don't hold to this fundamental truth, then we have to concede that at several points over the past two thousand years, Christ knowingly allowed not one, not two, not ten, not even a hundred, but *thousands* of prophets to lead His church astray to the point that branches upon branches had to be established in order to continue to adhere to His original church's authority and doctrine.

He just couldn't allow that to happen, otherwise His fundamental purpose, and the plan of God itself would be frustrated. That means there was not, nor could there ever be, a branch or break-off of the true gospel of Christ—leaving only the Catholic Church or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints remaining as viable options.

The Two Viable Options

When trying to determine which of the two remaining options is Christ's original church, and the church through which God has revealed His master plan, the first and most obvious thing to do is to compare the two and see which one makes more sense.

A continuation of authority, or a restoration of authority?

Catholics believe that Christ's original church continued after His death and became the Catholic Church, because before he died, Peter passed on his priesthood keys to Linus.

Since there are no other Christian churches that existed anciently that aren't schisms or break-offs of the Catholic Church, Catholics simply dismiss them as apostates and thereby claim themselves as Christ's only true church.

For me, the continuation of authority through the Catholic Church is unlikely for several reasons.

First, it doesn't make sense that Peter, the chief Apostle, would pass on the keys of the administering of the church to a bishop in the church instead of to another Apostle. Different priesthood offices have different responsibilities for a reason. As the leader of the church, Peter, more than anyone would know this, and therefore would simply not do that.

Second, Christ set up the twelve Apostles for a specific reason, so why wouldn't the church continue to run the way He had just organized it? Why would it suddenly change as soon as He left? We know that after Judas Iscariot died and Christ had died and was resurrected, Matthias was called to be an Apostle to fill the void. Why would they do that if having a quorum of twelve Apostles wasn't important to running and administering the church?

Third, why would God go to great lengths to reveal His teachings through prophets for thousands of years, up to the time of Christ, and then completely do away with prophets and change to popes instead? There is no mention of the word pope in the Bible, and it wasn't part of Christ's original church. Even in the Catholic Church, the official use of the term pope wasn't specifically reserved for the Bishop of Rome until 1073 AD, more than one thousand years after Christ's mortal ministry.¹⁵

15 "Papacy," Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/papacy>

Fourth, there is no evidence, scripture, or historical record showing that Peter passed on the priesthood and his Apostolic keys to Linus. The entire theory, which is called the Petrine Theory, is based on conflicting sources and weak inferences from records that were written hundreds of years after Christ and Peter were both long gone.

On the other hand, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believes that the priesthood and the keys were taken off the earth after the death of the Apostles.

They were then restored to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery by Peter, James, and John—conferring upon them the Melchizedek Priesthood, ordaining them to be Apostles, and giving them the keys of the ministry.

To me, this seems much more likely for the following reasons:

First, the idea of angels and heavenly beings appearing to people is quite common in scripture. Therefore, it's completely plausible that the leaders whom we know had the priesthood authority and keys during Christ's ministry could easily appear to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, restoring the priesthood to the earth.

Second, we are told several times in the scriptures that there had to be an apostasy and a restoration of the gospel before the second coming of Christ. If the original church was never taken away or lost, then it couldn't be restored, and these prophecies would be left unfulfilled.

In *Jesus the Christ*, Elder James E. Talmage writes:

The most important of the internal causes by which the apostasy of the Primitive Church was brought about may be thus summarized: (1) The corrupting of the simple doctrines of the gospel of Christ by admixture with so-called philosophic systems. (2) Unauthorized additions to the prescribed rites of the Church and the introduction of

vital alterations in essential ordinances. (3) Unauthorized changes in Church organization and government.¹⁶

When I consider this quote in the context of the early Catholic Church, there seems to be a lot of alignment, especially when you consider the Council of Nicea and the creation of the Nicene Creed. The Creed introduced the concept of the Trinity and forever changed the way the world looked at God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost.

President Spencer W. Kimball put it this way:

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the apostasy came not through persecution, but by relinquishment of faith caused by the superimposing of a man-made structure upon and over the divine program.

Many men with no pretense nor claim to revelation, speaking without divine authority or revelation, depending only upon their own brilliant minds, but representing as they claim the congregations of the Christians and in long conference and erudite councils, sought the creation process to make a God which all could accept.

The brilliant minds with their philosophies, knowing much about the Christian traditions and the pagan philosophies, would combine all elements to please everybody. They replaced the simple ways and program of the Christ with spectacular rituals, colorful display, impressive pageantry, and limitless pomposity, and called it Christianity.

They had replaced the glorious, divine plan of exaltation of Christ with an elaborate, colorful, man-made system. They seemed to have little idea of totally dethroning the Christ, nor terminating the life of God, as in our own day, but they

16 “The Long Night of Apostasy,” Chapter 40, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/jesus-the-christ/chapter-40?lang=eng>.

put together an incomprehensible God idea.¹⁷

When the Church was restored, it was organized as Christ had originally established it when He was on the earth, with Apostles and prophets to lead and guide it. Additionally, the true nature of God, the Savior, and the Holy Ghost were once again revealed as three separate and distinct beings, with God and Christ having bodies like ours.

Third, as part of the Restoration, Joseph Smith received the gold plates and was given the ability to translate them through the gift and power of God, resulting in the Book of Mormon. This book is truly the keystone of our religion and an incredibly important gift from God to the entire world. Because of its very existence, our claim of being Christ's true church on the earth becomes incredibly hard, if not impossible, to ignore.

Fourth, because of the Book of Mormon, we no longer have just a single point of truth or reference by which to judge and interpret the teachings of the Bible. We now have a second witness of God's teachings and His plan, which means there are two books of scripture from two sets of prophets, being written at the same time on opposite sides of the world and then coming together in our day to prove the divinity and reality of God and clarify his teachings.

By having a second book of scripture, all 45,000 other denominations—including the Catholic Church—find themselves in a very difficult situation, because the only church that can unlock the truth of God's one and only plan for all of mankind is the church that has both books.

So, Why Would God Allow 45,000 Christian Denominations to Exist?

17 Spencer W. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, Edward L. Kimball, ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, Inc.), 425.

At this point, you might be asking yourself, “Why would God allow 45,000 Christian denominations to exist and believe different things if He wanted everyone in the world to know His ‘one true plan’?”

I don’t know all of God’s reasons, but I do know one—agency. While Christ was prophesied to come in the meridian of time, it is painfully clear by the simple fact that His own people chose to crucify Him and kill or exile all the Apostles, that the world wasn’t ready for the fullness of the gospel.

After Christ’s death, the Apostles tried to continue running the church, but there was so much opposition and persecution from the outside, combined with desertion and dissension on the inside, that it ultimately couldn’t continue in its true form. Within a relatively short amount of time, we see man beginning to intercede on behalf of God and Christ, redefining and redesigning the church into their own vision of what they thought it should be.

Then, for nearly two thousand years, mix in multiple religious councils, wars, schisms, politics, power struggles, distance, and limited communication—with only one single point of doctrinal truth (the Bible) to guide them in apostasy and darkness—and you ultimately end up with 45,000 differing points of view.

But because God loves us, He promised to restore the truth and His plan when mankind was truly ready to receive it.

Ironically, it was the creation and proliferation of multiple Christian denominations that made it possible for the Restoration to occur. Without them, there never would have been a religious revival in Joseph Smith’s day, and he would have never had the desire to pray and ask which church was true.

Fortunately, one of the great and comforting truths revealed in God’s true plan is that every single person who has ever lived on earth, regardless of their belief in this life, will have the opportunity to be taught His true gospel plan and accept or reject it.

This is why we see the fact that there are 45,000 different Christian denominations as a good thing, because all of these amazing believers of Christ are already striving to actively follow His teachings and be like Him.

Everything Has Its Opposite

If you think about it, in many ways Joseph Smith was the ultimate protestant, breaking away from Christianity in order to save it. And even though he was mocked, ridiculed, tortured, and ultimately killed for ushering in the Restoration, he remained true and steadfast to the end.

One of the unique realizations I had while writing this chapter is that many of the teachings and doctrinal truths restored by Joseph Smith were then, and still are to this day, either completely foreign or in direct opposition to the doctrines of mainstream Christianity.

To even consider the idea that a simple farm boy's vision and subsequent revelations would stand up against the entire known body of Christendom seems so completely absurd that it's almost impossible to conceive, yet that's exactly what happened.

And rather than these revelations and doctrines crumbling under intense pressure and scrutiny over the past 200 years, they've only served to further highlight, strengthen, and solidify the desperate and timely need for them in our day; standing out as powerful beacons of truth and light and continually reinforcing the importance of the Restoration.

The Love of Fellow Christians

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that I love about the restored gospel and the restored knowledge of God's one true for plan is that it gives everyone, past or present, the opportunity to accept or reject it, regardless of their current religious beliefs. To me

that's another sign of its truthfulness.

However, I also realize that because of the last two thousand years of religious history, tradition, and turmoil, the restored gospel is not something that most living Christians are likely to accept until the Millennium. But that doesn't mean that we should treat them any differently.

I'd like to share a personal experience about a new love and appreciation that I gained a few years ago for the many different types of faithful believers in Christ.

When I was a bishop, the Boy Scouts in my area participated in an annual event called the Ten Commandments Hike, where the scout troops in the area would visit ten different churches throughout inner-city Ogden and be taught one of the Ten Commandments at each location. As part of that experience, they could ask any questions they wanted about that religion.

It was such a positive, eye-opening experience the first year I went that I took both my sons and my daughters with me the next year.

There were several reasons why this event had such a profound impact on me:

First and foremost, I was able to meet people of many different faiths, and in every case, I could feel their genuine love and dedication to God. It gave me a whole new appreciation for religion outside of our Church, and all the good that the gospel does in people's lives—regardless of what denomination they're a part of.

Second, it gave me a unique opportunity to see first-hand how other people worshiped God. The most striking thing to me was how noticeably different each denomination's teachings were compared to each other, and how each church focused its beliefs on very particular gospel principles and doctrines. These included things like devotion to service, traditional and ceremonial rituals, the Trinity, science, being born again/saved by grace, and even the

Old Testament (one of the stops was a Jewish synagogue). It was almost as if each church took a piece of gospel truth and then built their religion around it.

Third, it made me realize just how much I take the fullness of the gospel for granted. As I observed these people, it was incredible to see how they were each striving in their own way to do the best they could with the knowledge they had. In some ways, it felt like many of them were more devoted to God than I was, which was very humbling.

My point in sharing this story is that as members of the Church it's easy to forget just how truly marvelous it is to have the fullness of the gospel in our lives every single day. This experience allowed me to see members of other churches with fresh new eyes—as those who truly love God and are diligently striving to serve Him, while holding on dearly to the precious truths they have available to them.

If you want to gain a new admiration for the fullness of the gospel, go visit some other churches in your area—it will give you a new appreciation of Heavenly Father's mercy and love for His children, and the wonderful, eternal plan He has for all of us.

What Does Any of This Have to Do with Joseph Smith?

When we consider the life of Joseph Smith, especially as a youth or young man growing up in the early 1800s, he seems to be an unlikely conduit through which God would restore His plan to mankind.

In fact, if you look objectively at his overall situation, Joseph Smith had the odds heavily stacked against him:

- He lived on the frontier in the middle of nowhere.
- He was a farmer.
- He had very little education.
- He had no money.

- He had no credentials.
- He had no credibility.

And yet, in other ways it seems like the circumstances were ideal:

- The Protestant Reformation was in full effect.
- America was a free country and a land of religious freedom and opportunity.
- Men were allowed to worship God freely and legally establish new religions.

These were radical new ideas at the time, and they opened up new ways of thinking that weren't possible before this period in world history.

For the first time in centuries, the world was ready to once again accept the true gospel, and God took the opportunity to open the last dispensation by answering a young boy's prayer and calling him to be a prophet.

This faithful young man was pivotal in restoring God's true plan back on the earth, and through him, many important things were restored, including Christ's original church, the priesthood, important doctrines, revelation, temples, and the Book of Mormon—all of which we will discuss in much more detail in the following chapters.

Ultimately, all of Christ's teachings, principles, truths, powers, and ordinances needed to be made available to us once again in order for all of humanity to truly benefit from God's master plan, and Joseph was the one who God chose to restore it all back to the earth.

So, Was Joseph Smith a Prophet of God?

For millions of members of the Church today, there is no doubt that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God.

But what that really means is that every single member, at some point, has had to go on their own personal journey of spiritual discovery to find out for themselves.

People who truly want the answer to this question must be willing to weigh their knowledge of Joseph Smith against all the combined knowledge they've learned about him throughout their lives, using wisdom, discernment, the Holy Spirit, and faith as their guides in the pursuit of truth.

They also must be able to set aside some potentially difficult and even unanswered secondary questions about him, knowing that they might not be fully answered until the next life.

But ultimately, it's the restoration of Christ's church, along with His priesthood authority, and the knowledge of the vital importance of God's one true plan that can help earnest truth seekers to determine whether Joseph was a true prophet of God.

Let's move on to the next primary question to see what other wonderful truths have been restored through the prophet Joseph Smith.

Chapter 5

IS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH?

A Question Really Worth Considering

As I contemplated the importance of the next primary question—is The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints truly God’s true church on the earth?—my first impression was that if Joseph Smith was a prophet, then the Church had to be true simply by default.

However, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that God wouldn’t just want you or I to blindly accept that as the answer.

He would want us to study it out in our hearts and minds and confirm its truth for ourselves—with the teachings of the Church having the ability to act as a witness to the truthfulness of Joseph as a prophet.

The ultimate answer to this question is very important because the teachings of the Church directly influence virtually every aspect of our lives, including what we believe, how we act, the choices

we make, who we marry, who we socialize with, how we raise our children, what we spend our time and money on, where we live, what we eat and drink, and even what our goals and dreams are.

Because these teachings are so all-encompassing, we really need to know if the Church is true. Fortunately, there is a way for each of us to receive this answer.

By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them

As Jesus was giving His famous Sermon on the Mount, He shared a prophetic warning along with some valuable counsel to all within the sound of his voice: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:15–16)

If we break this down, Christ is saying that we should use our discernment and reason when any potential claims from religious leaders are presented to us as God’s truth.

Ultimately, we need to look at the results, or fruits of their claims or teachings and see whether they ultimately bring us to the actual truth or whether they mislead or misdirect us.

There are many false prophets in the world today. Some are easily spotted, while others are much more difficult to detect, even to the point that “they shall deceive the very elect” (Matthew 24:24).

This is why it’s so important to find God’s true plan and Christ’s true church, because once we do, it is much more difficult for us to be persuaded or deceived.

For this chapter, our goal is to determine whether The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is Christ’s true church on the earth today.

As I mentioned, the easy answer would be to just go off the previous chapters and assume that everything we’ve discussed so far

is the truth—that God is real, Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and that Joseph Smith was a prophet of God—and to simply accept that the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also true.

However, let's suspend that option temporarily, and instead follow the advice of Christ. Let's really dig into the truths and teachings of the Church today to see what its fruits are and if they are truly "good."

Six Major Doctrines Restored Through Joseph Smith

In 1989, the Church released a two-part series titled "The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith."¹⁸

In this series, the authors explored six of the major doctrines that were restored from Christ's original church, which are the Godhead, the nature of man, the Creation, the priesthood of God, scripture, and temples and their ordinances.

As I read this series, I felt that these six doctrines perfectly aligned with this chapter, and so I've included a summary of them in this chapter, supplemented with my own research, thoughts, and ideas.

As we explore each of these areas, I encourage you to look for the good fruit that Christ has challenged us to seek when discerning truth. Also, consider how unique, special, and powerful these teachings are when compared to mainstream Christianity, and ask yourself these three questions:

18 Donald Q. Cannon and Larry E. Dahl, "The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith: The Godhead, Mankind, and the Creation," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/01/the-restoration-of-major-doctrines-through-joseph-smith-the-godhead-mankind-and-the-creation?lang=eng>; Donald Q. Cannon, Larry E. Dahl, "The Restoration of Major Doctrines through Joseph Smith: Priesthood, the Word of God, and the Temple," <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1989/02/the-restoration-of-major-doctrines-through-joseph-smith-priesthood-the-word-of-god-and-the-temple?lang=eng>

- Are these teachings good and do they make sense to me?
- Do these teachings play an important role or purpose in my life?
- Do these teachings enlighten my soul and bring me closer to God?

Let's jump in...

The Godhead

In Joseph Smith's time, the main Christian sects of the day (Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists), were all break-offs of the Catholic Church and thus believed in the Trinity.

The Trinity was one of their foundational beliefs because of the Nicene Creed and other related creeds—like the Athanasian Creed, which described the Godhead as “one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the persons: nor dividing the essence.”¹⁹

Some of the break-offs, like the Presbyterians, continued to even further mystify the Godhead by introducing doctrines that defined God as “a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible.”²⁰

Compare this ever-evolving transformation and obfuscation of the definition of Deity to Joseph Smith's experience in 1820.

As a young, fourteen-year-old boy, Joseph went behind his home to a grove of trees to pray and asked God which of the sects was right. As a result of that prayer, and without him even realizing the importance of it at the time, the true nature of God and Christ was

19 “Athanasian Creed,” Christian Reformed Church, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/athanasian-creed>

20 “Westminster Confession of Faith,” Westminster Confession of Faith- Chapter 2, https://bpc.org/?page_id=546

revealed as They both appeared before him.

Not only did he see for himself that God and Christ were two separate beings, but that truth was confirmed by God the Father as He personally introduced His Son, Jesus Christ, to Joseph.

This was the very first truth restored to the earth.

It didn't take extensive documents compiled by dozens of educated scholars over hundreds of years to define who they were. It was simple and clear. God and Christ were two separate, exalted men. They both had bodies of flesh and bone. And Christ was the Son of God, as God Himself stated. It was a simple truth, untainted by centuries of philosophy and endless debate.

Knowing this truth makes it seem so obvious when Moses says, "God created man *in his own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them*" (Genesis 1:17; emphasis added).

Moses goes into even more detail in Genesis 5:1,3 (emphasis added):

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day that God created man, *in the likeness of God made he him;*
...

And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son *in his own likeness, after his image;* and called *his* name Seth.

In these verses, Adam follows the same pattern to describe the birth of his own son—even using the same wording.

If Adam was made in God's image and likeness, and Seth was made in Adam's image and likeness as the scriptures above clearly state, wouldn't all three of them have the same image and likeness, being that of a human male?

If God has no body, parts, or passions, it would mean by definition that He is not human, and therefore He would not be able to create us in His own likeness and image.

The reality is that numerous scriptures clearly show God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost as three separate beings with one united purpose.

Without seeing them as truly separate, you can never fully relate to any of them.

Knowing that they are human is what binds us to God as our spiritual father and Christ as our spiritual brother and Savior. It helps us to understand why they love us and why they would create this incredible world for us—just like we love our parents and our children and want the best for them.

But most importantly, it helps us to understand why God would allow Christ to come to earth to suffer for our sins and die for us, which gives us a much deeper appreciation for that incredible sacrifice.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Simply replace “the world” with “his children”, and this scripture instantly takes on a much deeper, personal meaning. This scripture is not talking about the world—it’s talking about His children—us!

He loves us. He created us. He created this amazing world for us. And He wants us to become like Him, just like we want our kids to become like us.

Can we truly have a loving father/son or father/daughter relationship with an intelligence that is unknowable and that takes up the immensity of space but has no body, parts, or passions?

Can we really call the Savior the “Son” of God the “Father” if God doesn’t have a male body?

Can we call Christ our “brother,” or God our “Father,” if “family” is nothing more than a man-made construct to give our temporal lives meaning?

These questions naturally lead to other questions, like:

If God himself doesn’t have a body, why would He want us to be resurrected with our human body? Why wouldn’t we just be spirits like Him? Why do we even have to be resurrected?

Why would God create heaven for us?

Why go through all the trouble of creating this earth for us, having us be born, die, be resurrected, and go to heaven if there’s not an important purpose or plan for it all beyond this life?

These questions have just scratched the surface, but I think you get the point.

From a Trinitarian perspective, without the full knowledge of the true nature of God, we get a very incomplete picture of who we truly are, why we’re here, and what our eternal potential can be.

However, with the truths restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith, all of these questions are answered. This helps us to more clearly understand our true identity and purpose here on earth, which ultimately provides us with the opportunity to have a more intimate, personal relationship with Heavenly Father, His son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost.

The Nature of Man

Just like the Godhead, our knowledge of the nature of man completely separates us from the rest of Christianity.

The predominant belief among most Christian denominations is

the idea of *ensoulment*—that God creates a person’s spirit at the very moment of, or shortly after the moment of conception.

Because of this belief, mainstream Christianity rejects the idea of a premortal life. But without a premortal existence, serious doctrinal questions arise.

Consider the war in heaven in Revelation 12, where Satan is thrust out of heaven and down to earth followed by one-third of the hosts of heaven. Or Jeremiah 1:5, where he is told by the Lord that He knew Jeremiah before he was born. And Job talks about how “all the sons of God shouted for joy” when God “laid the foundations of the earth” (Job 38:4, 7) as just a few examples.

Fortunately, with the knowledge of the premortal existence restored, we begin to understand why God created the earth. As spiritual children of God, we had to be born, receive a physical body, and undergo a mortal existence to become like God.

We also learn why there was a war in heaven and that we successfully fought for our chance to have agency. Unfortunately, when Satan convinced one-third of the spirits in the premortal existence to follow him, they were cast out of heaven and did not receive a body.

In addition, we learn that because of the pure nature of God, only those who are clean can dwell with Him, which is why we needed someone to be our advocate and Savior. Jesus Christ atoned for our sins, making it possible for us to return and live with Him again if we repent.

In the Pearl of Great Price, more knowledge is given as we discover that Abraham saw “the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;”

And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood

among those that were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born. (Abraham 3:22–23.)

This tells us that we all had different levels of intelligence before we were born, which would make sense if we lived with God as spirits.

It would also explain the war in heaven (which consisted of differing ideas and opinions regarding the salvation of man), why God and Lucifer were more prominent figures in the war (higher intelligence, more noble and great, with extensive knowledge and influence), and why two-thirds of the hosts of heaven stayed and one-third were cast out (the ability to deliberate, choose, and fight for one's own destiny).

Speaking of these things, Joseph Smith said, “At the first organization in heaven, we were all present and saw the Savior chosen and appointed and the plan of salvation made, and we sanctioned it.”²¹

As this quote suggests and other scriptures confirm, the reason why we sanctioned the plan was so we could have the opportunity to come to earth and fully exercise our agency.

This can be either comforting or unsettling, depending on the choices we make in life. But ultimately, we chose to have our agency, knowing that God would be fair and just if we did our part.

One of the unique doctrines regarding the nature of man that was restored through Joseph Smith is that each of us can become like God.

This might be a difficult pill to swallow for those who are raised in a different Christian denomination, because they really have no context or perspective to allow them to presume something so bold

21 “Joseph Smith, Discourse, 5 January 1841, as Reported by William Clayton,” Page 7, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/discourse-5-january-1841-as-reported-by-william-clayton/4>

or grand.

However, from our point of view, knowing what we know about the premortal existence, we not only learn that it's part of God's plan for us to become like Him, but that He wants us to become like Him. That's why there's a plan in the first place!

It's the reason why we're even here.

Think about it. Why else would God go through all this effort? Why would He do everything that He has done for us—the herculean, painstaking detail and wonder of it all—from the microscopic to the universal?

It's because God is a creator, and we are His ultimate creation—and our purpose and joy brings Him purpose and joy.

Consider something you've done in your life that has brought you incredible happiness.

Once you've experienced that thing, what do you immediately want to do? You want to share that experience with those you love. You want to see their joy as they experience the same joy you've experienced, because seeing them have joy brings you joy.

What does God say to Moses? “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). And Nephi tells us that “men are, that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25).

If we exist then to have joy, then there's no doubt that our joy brings God joy.

And because God loves each of us personally, not only does He want us to have joy and happiness, but He also wants us to progress and reach our full potential, both in this life and the eternities with Him—along with all those that we love, including our ancestors and our posterity!

It's the ultimate plan of salvation and exaltation and is truly the

greatest gift that God can give.

The Creation

While our view and the rest of Christianity's view of the Creation in Genesis 1 are similar on many accounts, one of the truths restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith regarding the creation of the world and the universe is that stars and planets didn't just appear out of thin air—they were organized out of existing elements and matter.

Most other Christian sects at the time of the Restoration believed in a concept called *ex nihilo*, which meant to create something out of nothing.

They believed (and still do today) that God created the entire universe and everything in it out of literally nothing. He simply willed it, and it came to exist.

Joseph Smith, however, revealed that matter cannot be created or destroyed, and that Christ, under God's direction, organized existing elements and materials to create this earth and other "worlds without number" (Moses 1:33).

Prior to the third century AD, records show that early Christians believed in creation through organization, similar to what Joseph Smith taught.

For example, Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist, stated in his writings in 157 AD that "[God] in the beginning did of His goodness, for man's sake, create all things out of unformed matter .

.. ”²²

When we look at the word “created” in Genesis 1:1 and examine its original Hebrew form “bara,” we find that it means to create, shape,

22 Justin and John Kaye, *The First Apology of Justin Martyr* (Griffith, Farran, Okeden & Welsh, 1880).

fashion, or form, which is consistent with the idea of an organized creation.

Alternatively, the concept of *ex nihilo* is not found anywhere in the Bible. In fact, it wasn't formally defined as dogma by the Catholic Church until the fourth Lateran Council in 1215 AD.²³

Surprisingly, modern science supports Joseph Smith's view that "the elements are eternal" (Doctrine and Covenants 93:33). They do so based on two different laws of physics:

- The Law of Conservation of Mass, which states that in a chemical reaction, mass is neither created nor destroyed, and
- The Law of Conservation of Energy, which states that energy is neither created nor destroyed—only converted from one form of energy to another.²⁴

These laws tell us that matter has always existed, and that it simply changes between states.

When considering the differences between these two ideas, let's set aside the universe for a moment and focus only on the creation of the earth—something that we have more experience with and can relate to more easily.

Consider what makes more sense; all the elements of the periodic table simply poofing into existence on-demand as God needed them—like a genie granting a wish—or God using raw elements and materials that already exist, and carefully and thoughtfully gathering and organizing them to create this and other worlds?

If you still have any doubt, I highly encourage you to re-read Genesis 1 and make note of the words that are used, like, "without

23 "Creatio Ex-nihilo," Encyclopedia.com, 18 Jan. 2022, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/creatio-ex-nihilo>

24 "Conservation of Energy and Mass," National Geographic Society, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/topics/resource-library-conservation-energy-and-mass>.

form, moved, divided, made, gathered, bring forth, set, created, let us make,” and so on.

I would also encourage you to search for the term “nebula images” on Google. There you will find hundreds of breathtaking pictures of massive clouds of gases and elements that are the precursor to the formation and creation of stars and planets.

There are trillions of nebulae in the universe, with the average nebula measuring one light-year, or about 6 trillion miles in length!

To give you an idea of how massive that is, the sun is 8.3 light minutes from the earth, and there are 525,960 light minutes in a light year.

That means that to travel the length from one end of a nebula to the other, you would have to go the distance from the earth to the sun 63,369 times.

Now add width and depth in addition to the length, and you start to get an idea of how much unorganized matter is readily available in just a single nebula.



*"Pillars of Creation" Eagle Nebula in the constellation Serpens
Source: depositphotos.com*

The Priesthood

The priesthood is the power and authority of God, and it is how God created and governs the heavens and the earth.

One of the gifts God has given to man is the ability to receive and use the power and authority of the priesthood under certain rules and conditions:

- Ordinances can be performed only with permission from someone who is in authority and who holds the keys to authorize the ordinances. (Authority)
- The priesthood must be conferred from one priesthood

holder to another, with the conferrer holding the proper office. (Authority)

- The power of the priesthood can come only through personal righteousness. (Power)

As mentioned in Chapter Four, there are only two possible options here.

Either the priesthood power, authority, and presiding keys were passed on through the papal leadership of the Catholic Church, or they were taken off the earth due to wickedness, corruption, and apostasy, and restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith.

When considering the most viable option, we should ask ourselves these two questions:

- Which of the two churches' priesthood organizational structures most closely aligns with the church Christ organized while He was on the earth?
- Which of the two churches' modern-day use of the priesthood most closely aligns with how the priesthood was used both in ancient times and during the ministry of Christ?

When viewed objectively through this lens, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is much more aligned in both structure and use.

Here are some examples:

- Similar priesthood organization and structure to the ancient church.
- Two priesthoods, like in the scriptures—Melchizedek and Aaronic (Levitical).
- Modern-day revelation using priesthood power and authority.
- Sealing power to seal priesthood ordinances both on earth and in heaven.
- Unpaid, lay ministry.

- Priesthood keys given to multiple levels of the Church so the priesthood could be effectively run and administered.
- Temples to perform saving ordinances for all those who haven't received them.
- Worthy male members of the Church holding the priesthood and using it in their everyday lives to bless both their families and their communities.

It's these real-life examples of the priesthood that set the Church's authority apart from both the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations.

Just to be clear, this doesn't mean that other churches don't do or believe in some of these things, and it doesn't mean that the members of these churches aren't incredibly good, God loving people. It also doesn't mean that God doesn't help them or that they can't receive blessings or miracles in their lives.

All it means is that they don't have access to the full power and authority of the priesthood that is currently available to them.

As members of the Church, hopefully, when given the right opportunity, we can share these additional truths with all those who are willing to listen.

Scripture

When I was seventeen, my family and I went to Temple Square. As we were looking at a Book of Mormon exhibit inside one of the buildings, I happened to glance over at a wall that showed a simplified scriptural timeline of the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

It started out as one line showing the prophets in Israel recording their experiences. Then in 600 BC, the line split, and it showed prophets in America also recording their experiences.

From that point on, the timeline showed two parallel lines of both

the prophets in Israel and America, receiving and writing down their prophecies and revelations from God at the same time, on opposite sides of the world.

For some reason, even though I had grown up active in the Church, the importance of the Book of Mormon didn't really make sense to me until that moment.

For the first time, I saw the genius behind God having two completely independent, complementary sources of truth.

God never intended to give us only one book of scripture. He strategically timed it so that when the people of the world were ready, they would receive more truth and light.

While all the books in the New Testament were completed by approximately 70 AD, the Bible as we know it wasn't fully compiled and published until around 400 AD. Ironically, that's around the same time the Book of Mormon was fully compiled by Mormon, who then buried it in the ground (421 AD) for future publication.

So, from 400 AD to 1830 AD, the world had only one book of scripture. But with the dawn of American and religious freedom, more light and knowledge could finally be revealed, and God's second book of scripture could be officially introduced to the world.

One of the ways we can know of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is to look at it objectively from a doctrinal point of view, examining how well it aligns to the truths and teachings of the Bible.

The closer the two books align, the more likely they are both from God.

When looked at from this perspective, the Book of Mormon delivers in spades:

- Lehi is a prophet of God living in Jerusalem, and he receives revelations from God, just like other prophets in Jerusalem at the time.

- Lehi's family takes several books of the Old Testament with them to America, including the five books of Moses, and teach and educate their posterity directly from them.
- They dutifully follow the law of Moses for six hundred years until Christ is resurrected.
- They build temples like the prophets do in Jerusalem.
- They have similar priesthood offices.
- They perform baptisms and teach faith and repentance.
- Many miracles happen as people are righteous, and destruction happens as people become wicked.
- Their prophets teach and prophesy to their people regarding God, the Savior, salvation, and many other truths that are consistent with the teachings of the Bible.
- Christ visits them after His resurrection and ascension in Jerusalem and teaches them the same teachings that He taught His followers in Jerusalem.
- They replace the law of Moses with the new higher law after Christ visits them following His resurrection.
- Christ implements the sacrament among them.
- Christ establishes His church among them, just like He did in Jerusalem.
- Christ establishes a similar leadership structure consisting of twelve disciples.

The people constantly talk about Christ, both before and after He visits them. In fact, the Book of Mormon references Christ every 1.7 verses on average.

Bottom line, there has never been a book that has aligned with, supported, strengthened, and proven the truthfulness of the Bible more than the Book of Mormon.

Temples

One of the most unique and wonderful teachings that was revealed through Joseph Smith is the reinstitution of temple covenants on the earth. This teaching is found nowhere else in the Christian world today.

The temple is a vital part of God's plan for all His children because it is the great equalizer.

The entire purpose of the temple is to give every single person who has ever lived the opportunity to be baptized, receive eternal ordinances and endowments, and be sealed to their spouses and families for eternity.

It's the Lord's house, a holy and sacred place and a connection point between heaven and earth.

According to the Hebrew Bible, before the birth of Christ, temples were called Beit YHWH, or "House of Jehovah."

Unfortunately, the importance of temples and the vital, eternally significant work that went on inside them anciently has been lost to modern Christianity.

Without this knowledge, most Christians don't realize that temples are just as important, if not more important to Christ's true church today as they were anciently.

They also don't understand that both Old Testament and modern-day temples were and always will be the "House of the Lord," meaning Jesus Christ, the great Jehovah.

To us, this is a precious restored truth, as we see those very words on the front of every temple and humbly revere their eternal significance and importance whenever we enter His holy house.²⁵

The Lord has always commanded people to build temples to

perform sacred ceremonies and ordinances for both the living and the dead.

Moses and the Israelites had a portable temple as they wandered in the wilderness. King Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed in 587 BC by the Babylonians, rebuilt seventy years later, and destroyed again in 70 AD by the Romans. We also know the Nephites built temples in ancient America.

Building and using temples for eternal ordinances is a sign of the true church in both the past and the present.

While some churches today may call their buildings “temples,” they aren’t true temples by definition. Temples are places where eternal work for the salvation of souls is done—and there is a lot of it to do!

Today, temples cover the earth, and millions of eternal ordinances are performed each year.

These temple ordinances connect our families, and ultimately, all of us as part of God’s family for eternity, and are one of the most rewarding, fulfilling, joyous blessings God has given us.

Unfortunately, this knowledge has been completely lost to every Christian denomination on earth today except for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Tasting the Fruit

As you’ve read the six major doctrines restored through Joseph Smith, hopefully you took Christ’s challenge to heart and examined these teachings by their fruits.

I also hope you remembered to ask yourself the three questions. Again, they are:

- Are these teachings good and do they make sense to me?

- Do these teachings play an important role or purpose in my life?
- Do these teachings enlighten my soul and bring me closer to God?

Let's take a moment and consider these restored doctrines from a 10,000-foot view. As you read the following statements comparing our view of the gospel to the rest of Christianity, consider the three questions above, how you feel inside, and the ultimate fruits of each statement:

- God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three separate beings with one purpose, and God and Christ have bodies of flesh and bone just like we do.

Or . . .

- God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost are all one God—referred to as the Trinity—and are incomprehensible and unknowable, without body, parts, or passions.
- We lived with God before we were born and are spiritual children of God. He sent us here to gain a body like He has so that we can ultimately become like Him.

Or . . .

- Our spirits don't exist until the moment we are conceived, and there really isn't a reason for us to have a body from an eternal perspective; nevertheless, we will be resurrected when we die, and we will live again with God in heaven.
- God collected and organized elements and matter to create the earth.

Or . . .

- God willed the earth to be created, and all the elements appeared out of nowhere from nothing.

- Christ ordained twelve Apostles to preside over His church, and when all of them were either killed or exiled due to wickedness and apostasy, Christ took the priesthood off the earth. Then, when the world was once again ready to receive it, He restored the priesthood in its fullness, with modern day prophets, apostles, and revelation to guide us.

Or . . .

- Christ ordained twelve apostles to preside over the church, and when most of them were either killed or exiled due to wickedness and apostasy, Peter transferred the priesthood to a bishop. Hundreds of years and many successions later, the position of bishop eventually evolved into the role of a pope. And after John's death, the last living apostle, all revelations ceased.
- God gave us two sets of scripture or "two witnesses" that perfectly align and complement each other, to ensure that His truth is established and that His one true plan is taught.

Or . . .

- God gave us one source of truth—the Bible. His plan is to have 45,000 Christian denominations all teach different versions of what they believe to be the truth based on their own perspective.

And finally:

- God wants every single one of His children to be given the opportunity to accept His one true plan—whether in this life or the next—and He gave us the priesthood to allow saving ordinances to be done in temples to ensure that everyone gets that chance.

Or . . .

- God wants the living to light a candle for those who have

died, and pray to the saints on their behalf, so that He might be merciful to them on the day of judgment.

If you are searching with an open heart and mind, all these doctrines and many others show that you truly can know them by their fruits.

The good fruits that God restored to the earth through the Prophet Joseph Smith are some of the greatest contributions to the salvation of mankind.

God knew that Christ had to come to the earth precisely when He did, because only then would His own people be prideful, arrogant, and wicked enough to kill Him.

The prophets prophesied of it hundreds, even thousands of years beforehand in detail, as discussed in Chapter Three.

They also prophesied that there had to be an apostasy after Christ and the Apostles died. The Jewish leaders had just killed their promised Messiah that they had waited centuries for, along with most of the Apostles.

The world was clearly not ready for the fullness of the gospel, but the seeds of Christianity had to be planted and have time to grow and spread in order for the fullness of the gospel to be accepted and restored to the world in the future.

The world was being prepared for the time when God's true plan could finally be returned to the earth once again, and many inspired Christian denominations actively participated and played an integral role in that preparation.

The long wait finally came to an end on a spring morning in 1820, when a young boy named Joseph Smith went into the woods behind his house to pray.

He had nothing. To the secular world, he was no one. He had no agenda, presumptions, or plans. He was unprepared in so many

ways, yet he was sober, sincere, humble, teachable, and pure of heart—all the characteristics and traits that truly matter.

And so, through the faith of a young boy's plea, God the Father and Jesus Christ revealed themselves to Joseph as two separate beings—human beings, just like you and me.

They knew him personally, they taught him, and they prepared him to usher in the restoration of the fullness of the gospel.

The world was finally ready for the truth. The timing was right. And Joseph Smith was chosen by God and the Savior to “lay the foundation of this church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth . . .” (Doctrine and Covenants 1:30).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is truly the kingdom of God on the earth. And by God's own design, it stands as a beacon of truth and light to the world in the last days.

Chapter 6

IS THE BOOK OF MORMON TRUE?

The Adventure of a Lifetime

Over the past decade, the Book of Mormon has taken me on some incredible adventures, leading to discoveries that have brought the people and places of the Book of Mormon to life in ways that I never could have possibly imagined.

One could say these discoveries were coincidence, but I truly feel that God has guided me down this particular path for the purpose of sharing them with others.

With you.

I would venture to say that most members of the Church have never read about what I'm going to share with you. And in some cases, less than ten members of the Church have ever even seen what I'm about to show you.

One of the main reasons why I feel like I've been prompted to write this book is because the information I've learned and discovered about the Book of Mormon is incredibly faith promoting and can significantly change the way you perceive and read the Book of Mormon—literally bringing it to life like never before!

Three Journeys of Discovery

In this chapter I'm going to share with you three distinct journeys of discovery:

- The first is the journey of Lehi and his family from the beginning of the Book of Mormon, starting in Jerusalem and continuing to the land Bountiful, where they built a ship and sailed to North America.
- The second journey documents a fascinating discovery made by the Smithsonian Institute as part of an official archaeological dig in 1889 in Eastern Tennessee.
- The third journey documents a trip that I took in 2019 with a small group of friends and family. We made some incredible new discoveries, including an altar surrounded by numerous petroglyphs depicting what appears to be the resurrected Savior.

Before you read this chapter, I want to be very clear that everything I'm about to share with you is based on "parallels" to the Book of Mormon. Since the Nephites and Lamanites lived more than 1,600 years ago, nothing that I say can be definitively proven; however, it all aligns incredibly well, and all of it seems very possible, if not probable.

I also want to say that my testimony of the gospel is not based on anything in this chapter. I know the gospel is true and that the Book of Mormon is true, regardless of where the accounts in it took place. And if everything I share with you here someday ends up being completely wrong, then I will still be as faithful as I am now, and I hope you will be too.

Please know that I do not share this information lightly, and for some of you it may be different from what you've been taught about Book of Mormon geography. But if you keep an open mind, I promise you will at least gain a different perspective.

Finally, as much as I want to share everything in detail that I've

discovered about Book of Mormon geography, I fear that sharing too much of it will detract from the main purpose of this book. So, while I have more than enough information to write an entirely separate book on the subject and may do so at some point in the future, for now I will attempt to condense as much as I can into this chapter.

Consider this the Reader's Digest version.

Journey #1: Lehi's Family in Jerusalem and Arabia From Jerusalem to the Valley of Lemuel

About ten years ago, I discovered a book titled *Lehi in the Wilderness* by two explorers named George Potter and Richard Wellington. My uncle owned an LDS bookstore at the time, and this book caught my eye. Its subtitle read *81 NEW, Documented Evidences that the Book of Mormon Is a True History*.

The premise of the book was that George and Richard had business dealings in and around Jerusalem. Since they were already there, they decided to try to replicate Lehi's journey from the time he and his family left Jerusalem to the point where they reached the land Bountiful, built a ship, and sailed to the promised land.

The only problem was that as far as they knew at the time, Jerusalem and the Red Sea were the only known documented locations mentioned in the Book of Mormon that still existed. So, with those two known starting points, they researched possible routes that Lehi could have taken, got in their SUV, and the rest is history—literally!

In 1 Nephi, we get some huge clues as to the path Lehi took. Those clues are in italics in the scriptures below:

And it came to pass that he departed into the wilderness.
And he left his house, and the land of his inheritance, and

his gold, and his silver, and his precious things, and took nothing with him, save it were his family, and provisions, and tents, and departed into the wilderness.

And he came down by the borders near the shore of the Red Sea; and he traveled in the wilderness in the borders which are nearer the Red Sea; and he did travel in the wilderness with his family, which consisted of my mother, Sariah, and my elder brothers, who were Laman, Lemuel, and Sam.

And it came to pass that when he had traveled three days in the wilderness, he pitched his tent in a valley by the side of a river of water.

And it came to pass that he built an altar of stones, and made an offering unto the Lord, and gave thanks unto the Lord our God.

And it came to pass that he called the name of the river, Laman, and it emptied into the Red Sea; and the valley was in the borders near the mouth thereof.

And when my father saw that *the waters of the river emptied into the fountain of the Red Sea*, he spake unto Laman, saying: O that thou mightest be like unto this river, continually running into the fountain of all righteousness!

And he also spake unto Lemuel: O that thou mightest be like unto *this valley, firm and steadfast, and immovable* in keeping the commandments of the Lord! (1 Nephi 2:4-10; emphasis added.)

Before I break this down, you should know that Saudi Arabia—which is basically the entire area in which Lehi's journey takes place—is one of driest, hottest, most arid places in the world. Those conditions make travel very difficult—especially if one travels long distances.

Unlike Lehi's family, who used camels to travel, George and Richard used an SUV; the trip would have been impossible

otherwise.

They knew that a camel could travel approximately twenty-five miles per day on flat ground and good soil. Since they knew Lehi traveled south from the top of the Red Sea for three days, that meant the valley of Lemuel had to be within seventy-five miles.

They also noted that in verse 5, it says that they traveled down “by” the borders, and then they traveled “in” the borders which are “nearer” the Red Sea.

In my research, I have found that George, Richard, and other scholars postulate that the term “borders” refers to mountains. It just so happens that there are two mountain ranges on the east side of the Gulf of Aqaba (the northernmost top of the Red Sea), running parallel to each other. As you head south, down the sea, after about forty miles you literally run into the first mountain range “nearer” to the sea. At that point you have no other option than to go into a wadi (a dry riverbed that becomes active during the rainy season) and enter “in” to the first mountain range.

However, there are other scholars who believe that the term “borders” refers to geographical boundaries. The Hebrew and Arabic definition for the word border includes words like “limit, boundary, edge, end, and frontier”. I’m inclined to lean toward this second, direct interpretation, mainly because the words “mountain/s” and “border/s” are used numerous times throughout the Book of Mormon and are clearly defined to mean mountains and borders in the same way that we define them today.

This second interpretation implies that once they hit the mountains along the Red Sea, they were leaving known geography—at least geography about which they knew.

They were entering an unknown frontier and were “in” the borders. But either way, regardless of how you define the word “borders” in this instance, both interpretations work incredibly well and ultimately get you to the same place. In the first definition, they

enter into the borders or mountains; and in the second definition, they go beyond the edge of the known borders or boundaries, into the mountains.

George and Richard drove their SUV into this wadi (dry river valley), which initially forced them to drive about five miles east, away from the Red Sea. The wadi then turned south and ran in a nearly straight line, parallel to the sea. During this entire time, they saw almost no signs of life.



After about thirty miles the wadi suddenly turned back west, and

there in front of them was an oasis in the middle of the mountain range, with grass, plants, grain, berries, and various palm trees with tree different kinds of dates growing on them.

And just past the oasis, there arose a massive granite canyon that cut all the way through the mountain. As they started through the canyon, they found a natural perennial spring that ran through the valley and emptied into the Red Sea.

It is the only known perennial spring that exists in Saudi Arabia.

As I read their book and looked at the photographs, I was floored! What were the odds of all these things being found—exactly as described in the Book of Mormon? Lehi’s family leaving Jerusalem; reaching the Red Sea; traveling south for three days; going into the mountains; finding an oasis with different kinds of food and resources available right next to a massive, two-thousand-foot-high “firm, steadfast and immovable” granite valley with a “continually running” source of water that empties directly into the Red Sea?

I really wanted to see it for myself, but how? Suddenly I had a light bulb moment—Google Earth! I ran over to my computer, opened the app, and sure enough it was all true.



Elim Oasis at Wadi Tayyib Al Ism
Source: Andrew Jones, discoveredsinai.com

The place they found is called Wadi Tayyib Al Ism, and today it's one of the top ten tourist attractions in Saudi Arabia because it's so incredibly rare and unique.



When you look at it from space (above), you can see dozens of tributaries all connecting and flowing into one central wadi, which then leads right past the oasis, into the granite valley, and out to the sea.

In the photo, the valley is so deep that it looks like a black crack running right through the mountain.

Here's how the tourism industry describes it:

One of Saudi Arabia's great natural wonders, the

spectacular red cliffs of the Wadi Tayyib Al Ism gorge rise up to 600m in height before they open onto the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Aqaba [Red Sea].

From the beach and palm trees at Wadi Tayyib Al Ism's idyllic mouth, the chasm winds its way through the ancient mountains for five kilometers following a small clear stream before finally emerging on the other side.

It's worth taking your time over the Wadi Tayyib Al Ism hike to appreciate the scale and majesty of this stunning site.²⁶

26 Saudi Arabia Top Ten, [Corinthiantravel.co.uk.](https://www.corinthiantravel.co.uk/), <https://www.corinthiantravel.co.uk/destination/saudi-arabia-tours/top-ten-experiences>



*Granite walls of Wadi Tayyib Al Ism with foliage
and perennial stream - Source: Unknown*

There is definitely a higher power involved in Lehi's family finding and inhabiting this location. It was beyond the borders of normal civilization, but close enough to be able to return to Jerusalem without the need of extensive planning, which they did multiple times.

In addition, it provided them with vital food resources; much-needed shade from the Arabian sun; and, most importantly, a dependable, clean water source that wouldn't have been possible anywhere else—at least in any other place where they could be secluded.

From the Valley of Lemuel to Shazer

After Lehi's and Ishmael's families leave the Valley of Lemuel, we learn that (again, clues are italicized):

And it came to pass that we did take our tents and depart into the wilderness, across the river Laman.

And it came to pass that *we traveled for the space of four days, nearly a south-southeast direction, and we did pitch our tents again; and we did call the name of the place Shazer.*

And it came to pass that we did take our bows and our arrows, and go forth into the wilderness to slay food for our families; and after we had slain food for our families we did return again to our families in the wilderness, to the place of Shazer. *And we did go forth again in the wilderness, following the same direction, keeping in the most fertile parts of the wilderness, which were in the borders near the Red Sea.* (1 Nephi 16:12–14; emphasis added.)



Because they were in the mountains, their natural path would have led them in a south-southeast direction, staying close to the Red Sea.

Along this trajectory, there are easily two wadis within a four-day journey—one within sixty-five miles and the other within seventy miles. Both wadis have oases that stretch several miles. And, if they were traveling during the rainy season, there could have been water in both wadis, giving them a viable, but temporary water supply.

It's interesting to note that at this point they are still “in” the borders, meaning either in the mountains or in uncharted wilderness or uninhabited lands. In this case, both definitions still apply. And, with this being a mountainous region, they were continually surrounded by viable hunting grounds.

Another reason why I like the direct interpretation of the word

“borders” is because during the initial portion of their journey, they were deliberately trying to avoid populated areas as much as possible. Lehi was a well-known man whose life was actively being threatened, and Nephi and his brothers were possible suspects in the death of Laban. Being in uncharted or uninhabited borderlands—at least during the beginning of their journey—significantly lowered their risk of being discovered.

From Shazer to the Frankincense Trail

From Shazer, George, Richard, and other Book of Mormon scholars believe Lehi and his group cut southeast through the mountain range and joined up with the Frankincense Trail for the remainder of their journey, which continues in a south-southeast direction until it reaches the Indian Ocean.

This is the most viable option for several reasons:

- Beyond Shazer, they travel “near” the Red Sea instead of “nearer,” which implies that they’re moving away from it.
- George and Richard’s research determined “the most fertile parts” of the journey south-southeast down the Red Sea were predominantly found on the east side of the Hejaz Mountain range, not on the west side by the sea.
- The Frankincense Trail—an ancient trail used to transport frankincense from the Indian Ocean to Egypt, Jerusalem, and various ancient northern ports and cities—had been well established for hundreds of years before Lehi’s time. It was the only known way to travel up and down the length of Saudi Arabia and survive. Lehi would have been well aware of this, and by joining the Frankincense Trail where they did, they would have traveled far enough south that any concerns regarding their discovery would be gone.
- The only dependable source of water and food past Shazer was along the Frankincense Trail. Wells were strategically dug

all along the trail within a few days of each other to make travel possible.

- Once they made it to the Frankincense Trail, they would have been on the eastern side of the Hejaz Mountains. From that point, as they continued their journey south-southeast, on the east side of the trail was the Arabian Desert and certain death. However, on the west side of the trail was the Hejaz Mountain range, which included a number of interspersed fertile wadis and oases, where food and water could be gathered and game could be hunted.

Lynn and Hope Hilton—a couple who also made an exploratory journey in Arabia to document Lehi’s travels—said this after considering the viability of Lehi traveling on his own:

Lehi could not have carved out a route for himself without water, and for a city dweller to discover a line of water holes of which desert-dwellers were ignorant of is an unlikely prospect.

The family, therefore, must have traveled and survived as other travelers of their day did in the same area, going from water hole to water hole.²⁷

Not only were these wells along the Frankincense Trail necessary for survival, but they provided much-needed safety and refuge for travelers along the trail, with the tribes who controlled them offering protection in exchange for a tribute.

Lehi and his family, having a high social status and being well educated, would likely have been warmly welcomed along their journey, with their tribute potentially being that of an educational nature. This also may help to explain why it took them eight years to

27 Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, “In Search of Lehi’s Trail,” Liahona, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/1977/07/in-search-of-lehis-trail?lang=eng> (This quote was edited at the request of the late author’s wife. The original quote said “public waterhole”, but whether they were public or private is unknown.)

reach Bountiful.

Now, we have to ask ourselves whether it is possible that Lehi and his group could have remained on the west side of the mountains as they headed down the Red Sea? Well, with God on your side, anything is possible. But regardless of which side of the mountain range they traveled along, at some point between Shazer and Nahom, they had to cross the range.

However, there is a very interesting discovery that may further support the “east side” theory of travel.

The Lihyan Kingdom

As serendipity would have it, a new kingdom called the Lihyan Kingdom emerged shortly after Lehi and his family traveled south down the Red Sea. In English, “Lihyan” means “the people of Lihy or Lehi.”²⁸ In antiquity, the Lihyanites covered the entire northern half of the east side of the Red Sea—which is where Lehi and his family would have traveled.

28 Lynn M. and Hope A. Hilton, *Discovering Lehi* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, Inc., 1996), 75.



This kingdom replaced the ancient Dedan Kingdom (referenced multiple times in the Old Testament) and remained in power for three hundred years. Some items of particular note are that the Lihyan's built a large temple, and had a baptismal font (which still existed when the Hiltons explored the area). Significantly, the name of NFY or Nafy is one of the few names found in ancient Lihyan script.

Lynn and Hope Hilton, in their book *Discovering Lehi*, state:

We have a tribal group who came to political power less than a century after Lehi's sojourn in their territory. It is possibly called after a derivation of his name, they preserved and used the personal name Nafy (Nephi), built a temple and font similar to Solomon's, and were located

astride Lehi's likely trail.²⁹

As a well-educated and successful businessman of high social standing, not to mention a prophet of God, it is possible that Lehi and his family left a lasting legacy behind them that evolved into something more over time. If anything, it's highly coincidental, but for this to really be a viable possibility, they would have had to have traveled on the east side of the Hejaz Mountain range.

From Shazer to Nahom

As you travel further down the Red Sea past the halfway point, ancient oases become more scarce, and watering holes are further apart, making the journey along this particular portion of the Frankincense Trail much more difficult. In addition, the summer months can reach 130 degrees Fahrenheit, and it gets so hot that it becomes impossible to travel. Ancient inhabitants were often forced into the higher, cooler mountains to survive.

Coincidentally, as you read 1 Nephi 16:15–35, you can see how their journey becomes increasingly more challenging between Shazer and Nahom.

Right after leaving Shazer, verse 15 says that “it came to pass that we did travel for the space of many days, slaying food by the way, with our bows and our arrows and our stones and our slings.”

However, as they continue to travel further south, finding food gets a lot more difficult—especially when Nephi broke his bow and his brothers' bows lost their spring. Ultimately, they reached a point of starvation. Verses 19 and 20 really sum up the level of incredible hardship that they were experiencing:

And it came to pass that we did return without food to

29 Hilton and Hilton, *Discovering Lehi*, 99.

our families, and being much fatigued, because of their journeying, they did suffer much for the want of food.

And it came to pass that Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael did begin to murmur exceedingly, because of their sufferings and afflictions in the wilderness; and also my father began to murmur against the Lord his God; yea, and they were all exceedingly sorrowful, even that they did murmur against the Lord. (1 Nephi 16:19–20.)

Fortunately, Nephi was able to find wood that was strong and flexible enough for him to make a new bow. As one of George Potter and Richard Wellington's associates discovered during their exploration of this area of Arabia, olive wood is a quality hardwood that still exists in that region today and can be used to make a viable bow. There may also be other varieties of hardwoods along the Hejaz Mountains, but as long as there is at least one, we can successfully validate Nephi's claim.

Ultimately, Nephi was led by the Liahona to go to the top of a nearby mountain by their camp and was able to obtain food so they could continue. But unfortunately, it appears this part of the journey was too much for Ishmael, and he died soon after. In verses 34 and 35 we are told:

And it came to pass that Ishmael died, and was buried in the place which was called Nahom.

And it came to pass that the daughters of Ishmael did mourn exceedingly, because of the loss of their father, and because of their afflictions in the wilderness; and they did murmur against my father, because he had brought them out of the land of Jerusalem, saying: Our father is dead; yea, and we have wandered much in the wilderness, and *we have suffered much affliction, hunger, thirst, and fatigue; and after all these sufferings we must perish in the wilderness with hunger.* (1 Nephi 16:34–35; emphasis added.)

So, even after they arrived at Nahom, things didn't improve, because they were convinced more than ever that they were going to die from hunger.

While the death of Ishmael is sad, Nahom—the place where he was buried—happens to be the location where Lehi's group officially change their direction of travel from south-southeast to east, and where they began the final leg of the Arabian part of their journey. This gives us a very specific geographical area where Nahom would have to be located, because the two directions must intersect each other.

At the time of the publication of the Book of Mormon, there were no physical locations in this part of southern Arabia called Nahom. The actual name resurfaced in the 1990s when a group of German archaeologists excavated a temple site in Yemen and discovered a solid limestone altar dated to the sixth or seventh century BC with the name NHM (Nahom) engraved on it. Since that time, two additional altars bearing the same inscription have also been excavated, confirming NHM as an actual, known ancient location.³⁰

The most incredible thing about the discovery of Nahom is where it's located. Not only is it on the Frankincense Trail, but it is also east from the land Lehi eventually called Bountiful. In other words, we now have historical evidence that there was actually a place called NHM or Nahom, dating before Lehi's time, that is in the precise location where the Book of Mormon says it should be!

From Nahom to the Land Bountiful

By the time the group reached Nahom, the scriptures say that Laman and Lemuel and the sons of Ishmael had been through such an incredible amount of hardship that they decided to kill Lehi and Nephi and go back to Jerusalem. But the Lord intervenes, chastens

30 Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, 10: 2 (2001), Article 9.

them, and blesses them with food:

And it came to pass that the Lord was with us, yea, even the voice of the Lord came and did speak many words unto them, and did chasten them exceedingly; and after they were chastened by the voice of the Lord they did turn away their anger, and did repent of their sins, insomuch that *the Lord did bless us again with food, that we did not perish.* (1 Nephi 16:39; emphasis added.)

This was both a literal and figurative turning point. Not only did they change directions and head “nearly eastward from that time forth” (1 Nephi 17:1), but they also changed their hearts and repented of their sins. This change made the final leg of their harsh Arabian journey bearable, as they were faced with crossing the most deadly and perilous part—the Arabian Desert itself.

During this leg of their journey, we are told that they subsisted on raw meat (most likely some kind of dried meat or jerky), which implies that they didn’t light any fires. This is very interesting, because it is during this portion of their journey that they would be the most vulnerable. They were, for the first time, completely surrounded by desert, and the threat of being raided was very real—especially due to the scarcity of resources in that part of the land.

Fortunately, God was with Lehi and his group. George Potter and Richard Wellington reported from their nighttime desert observation of encampments that had Lehi’s group used fire at night, “the light travels so far in the clear desert air that it would have been possible to pinpoint the whereabouts of [Lehi’s] family on the trail from upwards of thirty miles away.”³¹

We read in 1 Nephi:

31 George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, Inc., 2003), 118.

. . . and we did travel and wade through much affliction in the wilderness; and our women did bear children in the wilderness.

And so great were the blessings of the Lord upon us, that *while we did live upon raw meat in the wilderness*, our women did give plenty of suck for their children, and were strong, yea, even like unto the men; and they began to bear their journeyings without murmurings. (1 Nephi 17:1–2; emphasis added.)

The Land Bountiful

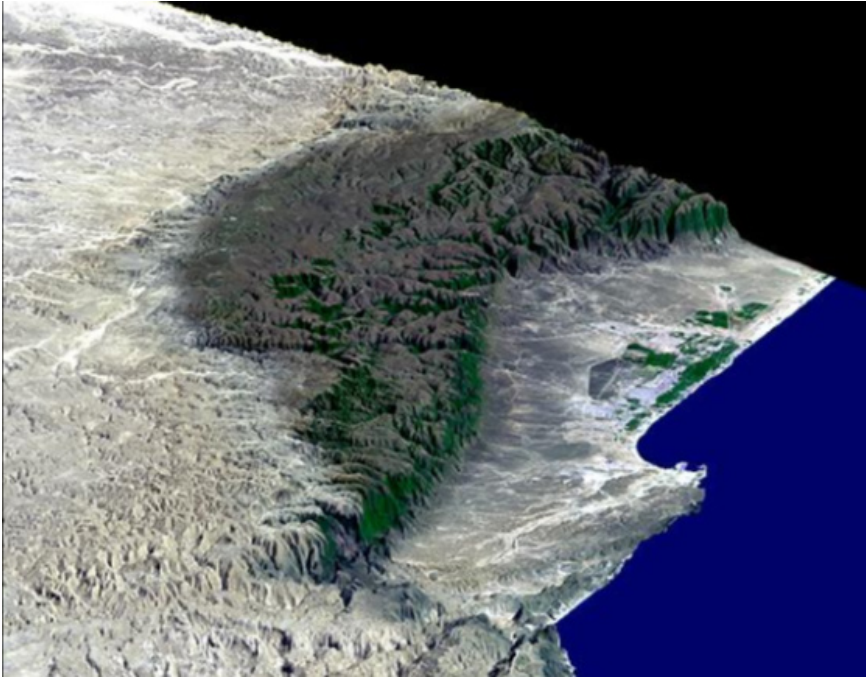
The entire Arabian Peninsula covers 1.2 million square miles of the driest, hottest, most formidable landscape in the world. But for thousands of years, unbeknownst to most of the world, there remained hidden at the southern edge of the Arabian Desert a forty-mile-wide strip of beautiful, luscious paradise—teeming with all kinds of animals, birds, fruits, grains, bees, trees, grasslands, freshwater rivers and lakes, ocean life, and more. It was also the largest supplier of frankincense in the ancient world, and as such was the starting point of the Frankincense Trail.

It also housed an ancient port, where frankincense and other goods were exchanged and exported to other parts of the old world. However, as frankincense became more readily available in other countries, this ancient hub, along with its beauty, ultimately became lost to antiquity.

In fact, this Arabian “Garden of Eden” was so completely unknown to anyone in the modern world that it didn’t even appear in any known books or publications until 1846, sixteen years after the Book of Mormon was published.³²

This beautiful land, which Lehi called Bountiful, is known today as

the Salalah Coastal Plain in Oman, and it's one of the most beautiful places in all of Arabia. It's unique because it's the only place along the entire Southern Arabian coast that directly benefits from the Indian Ocean monsoon season.



Perspective View, Landsat Overlay, Salalah, Oman, Southern Arabia
Source: NASA/JPL

The reason why it is so green is because the Salalah Coastal Plain is surrounded by the steep Qara Mountain range running directly behind it. When the monsoon season comes, the mountains act as a barrier, causing the clouds to release their moisture. This fresh water in turn has provided a one-of-a-kind “super” oasis that has thrived against the backdrop of one of the most inhospitable places on earth for centuries.

Here's where things get really interesting.

Google Maps makes it possible for us to see where Lehi turned and headed east from Nahom—something you can only see from space. Once Lehi and his family crossed the empty quarter (two hundred miles of harsh, unprotected desert), the topography changes, and the terrain becomes a vast maze of thousands of wadis deeply eroded into the landscape for hundreds of miles.

Lehi and his family would have been forced to travel within the wadis wherever they led—north, south, east, or west—and they would have had to choose just the right wadis to travel through if they wanted to make it to Bountiful. This is likely why Nephi said they went “nearly” eastward, and is a part of the journey where the Liahona could have played an important role.

So, while we picture in our heads more of a straight line, in all reality, Lehi’s journey probably looked something more like this:



Another fascinating thing about turning east at Nahom is that the journey from Jerusalem to Nahom was about 1,350 miles. The only way for Lehi to get to Bountiful was through a wadi called Wadi

Hadhramaut, which just so happens to be due east from Nahom.

The entrance to Wadi Hadhramaut is only twenty-five miles wide, and it looks like a shark opening its mouth. Once you're in the mouth of the shark, it funnels you directly into the wadi, but if you miss the opening, there's no other way to get to Bountiful.



If Lehi's group had turned east just a few miles before Nahom, after crossing the empty quarter they would have been forced north into the heart of the deadly Arabian Desert. If they had turned east just a few miles past Nahom, they would have been forced south, arrived at the Indian Ocean, and found nothing but lifeless desert sand. Only by turning east at Nahom were they able to enter the Wadi Hadhramaut and make it to Bountiful safely.

So, in other words, Lehi and his family traveled 1,350 miles south-southeast down the Red Sea on the desert's edge, experiencing countless trials and tribulations. Then Lehi pointed his family

east, directly into the wide-open desert—something they probably imagined was certain death. They had to hit a narrow gap only twenty-five miles wide on the other side, or they would very likely die and never reach their destination.

This incredible chain of events gets even more incredible when we consider the additional criteria that must all be met once Lehi arrives in Bountiful, in order for us today to truly say, “This is the place.”

According to the Book of Mormon, there are nine criteria that must be met for a location to qualify as Bountiful:

- It must have a mountain (see 1 Nephi 17:7). The entire coastal plain is literally surrounded by mountains; the tallest is 5,000 feet.
- It must be by the sea of many waters, or Irreantum (see 1 Nephi 17:5). It's literally on the coast of the Indian Ocean.
- It must have “much fruit” (see 1 Nephi 17:5). There are a wide variety of fruits that grow there. It's also the only place in Arabia that actually grows tropical fruits.
- It must have wild honey (see 1 Nephi 17:5). Wild honeybees are native only to this particular area and are found in no other place in Arabia. To this day, Oman honeybees have not been fully domesticated, and honeycomb can be found in hollowed-out logs or crevices, in caves, and even hanging in trees.
- It must have wood—large enough timbers to build a ship (see 1 Nephi 17:8, 18; 1–2). Historically, large trees were known to exist in the Qara Mountains, but they have been logged and deforested over time. (It would also have been possible to import large timbers by ship.) In addition to wood, Salalah has an abundance of coconuts, which would have made great fibers for sails and rope—a necessity for ship building.
- It must have somewhere to build a large ship (see 1 Nephi

17:8, 18; 1–2). The ancient port of Khor Rori is located in the Salalah Coastal Plain and is the ideal location to build and harbor ships because it has a natural inlet that is completely protected from the ocean. This protection would be critical during storms as well as during the spring and fall monsoon seasons.



Khor Rori ruins with inlet in the background

Source: depositphotos.com

This photograph shows the Khor Rori inlet looking from the inside out to the Indian Ocean.

You can see the massive cliffs that protect the entrance, making it an ideal shipping port.

These are also the only cliffs in the region, making them the likely location where Laman and Lemuel attempted to throw Nephi into the sea.



Ships on the shore of Khor Rori
Source: depositphotos.com

Here is another image of Khor Rori, with some old ships still on the shore. One of the cliffs is seen in the background.

- It must have a cliff where Nephi could have been thrown “into the depths of the sea” (see 1 Nephi 17:48). There is only one place along the southern Arabian shoreline with cliffs high enough to throw someone from—the hundred-foot-high cliffs that protect Khor Rori.
- It must have ore to make tools (see 1 Nephi 17:9–10). Different types of ores have been found in the Qara Mountains, but not in quantities large enough to make them easy to locate. This may be why Nephi asked and was directed by the Lord where exactly to find the ore he needed. Ironically though, over the years, large quantities of iron and copper have been found in and around Khor Rori, along with an ancient building that

was a workshop for metals.³³

- It must have animals to hunt that would provide meat to eat and skin for a bellows (see 1 Nephi 17:11, 18:6). In addition to Salalah being a refuge for a wide variety of wild animals, Salalah and the surrounding region has reportedly also had cattle since before Lehi's time.³⁴ Either a wild animal, a cow, or even one of their camels would have been adequate to create a bellows to molten ore for tools.

As you can see, the Salalah Coastal Plain meets all these very specific criteria.

No matter how you look at it, there is no possible way that Joseph Smith could have known any of these things about the Salalah region. For him to even guess that a place like the Salalah Coastal Plain existed and that it included all nine of these criteria would have been both impossible and utterly absurd, considering what was known about the southern coast of Arabia in 1830—unless, of course, the Book of Mormon is true.

- He couldn't have known that a one-of-a-kind paradisaical oasis like Salalah existed on the coast of the Arabian desert, because nobody in America knew that it existed!
- He couldn't have known that there was an ancient natural port and inlet where they could build and sail a large ship, because again, nobody in America knew it existed!

He couldn't have known that there would be wild honeybees. Who in their right mind would even imagine that something like wild honeybees could possibly be found in a vast, scorching desert where there are virtually no plants, very little life, and certainly no flowers for bees to pollinate?

33 Sumhuram, https://nabataea.net/explore/cities_and_sites/sumhuram/

34 Nicholas Clapp, *The Road to Ubar: Finding the Atlantis of the Sands* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 221–222.

He couldn't have known any of it, and it wouldn't have even made sense to consider that something so incredible could ever be found in such an arid wasteland. Yet, we're able to read all about the land Bountiful in detail in the Book of Mormon, because it's all true.



If we look at Lehi and his family—from when they first leave Jerusalem to the time they finally arrive in Bountiful—we can't help but acknowledge God's guiding hand throughout their journey.

Lehi and his family were a chosen people, led by inspiration through some of the most treacherous landscapes and harsh living environments in existence. They suffered extended periods of starvation, thirst, and fatigue, and they were pushed to their mental, physical, and spiritual limits. But they persevered and ultimately

made it to Bountiful—a much-needed respite before their year-long passage across the ocean to the promised land.

Journey #2: Lehi's Family in America

Unlike Lehi's travels in the Arabian Peninsula, which are generally agreed upon by Church scholars, this isn't the case when it comes to where Lehi's group landed. In fact, there are two very different, prominent theories supported by two main groups. One group supports what's called the "Mesoamerican" model, and the other group supports what's called the "Heartland" model.

The Mesoamerican group believes that Lehi and his family sailed east across the Pacific Ocean, landed in Central America, and lived in and around Guatemala. The Heartland group, on the other hand, believes that Lehi and his family sailed west across the Atlantic Ocean, landed by Florida, and lived in the eastern United States.

Growing up, I was always taught that the Book of Mormon events took place in Central America, but about ten years ago, I learned about the "Heartland" model of the Book of Mormon.

I can tell you that I've spent countless hours researching both models. I've also personally traveled to both locations multiple times and have visited the ruins of massive, breathtaking ancient civilizations in both geographical areas.

After carefully weighing and considering both models, my personal belief is that the majority of Book of Mormon events took place in the Eastern United States.

However, that being said, this book is about helping you to build and strengthen your faith in God, the Savior, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—it is not about the location of Book of Mormon events.

So, even though I could easily write a book about all the fascinating

things that have been discovered in the heartland of America that directly parallel and align with the Book of Mormon, I will instead share only what I feel can be proven.

And that ultimately comes down to one amazing discovery made in 1889 in eastern Tennessee. Incredibly, this piece of evidence found in the America's heartland ties directly back to ancient Jerusalem and our discussion about the Bible from Chapter Three.

The Bat Creek Stone

The Bat Creek Stone is a small stone with ancient writing on it, and was professionally excavated in 1889 from an undisturbed burial mound near Bat Creek in eastern Tennessee. It was discovered as part of an official archaeological dig by John W. Emmert of the Smithsonian Institute's Bureau of Ethnology.

When Emmert and his team dug through the mound, they discovered nine skeletons. Under the head of one of the skeletons they discovered the stone, along with two copper bracelets and several fragments of polished wood that were believed to be ear spools.



The Bat Creek Stone

Credit: Scott Wolter

The stone is 4.5 inches long and 2 inches wide, and has a lighter layer underneath, with a thin, dark layer on top. Several ancient characters are engraved on the stone.

When the stone was first discovered, Cyrus Thomas, who oversaw the dig, thought that the writing on the stone was Cherokee, but no translation attempts were successful. Soon after its discovery, the stone and the other artifacts were documented and stored at the Smithsonian.

In 1964, more than seventy-five years after the stone was first discovered, Chicago patent attorney Henriette Mertz came across Smithsonian photographs of the stone.

As she examined it, she realized that the characters were upside down and that the writing on the stone was actually Paleo-Hebrew—the same writing on the Ketef Hinnom Scrolls found in ancient Jerusalem! (See Chapter Three.)

This discovery was independently confirmed in 1971 by Semitic language scholar Dr. Cyrus Gordon. In determining the translation, both Gordon and Mertz agreed that the second, longer word block (on the left) says “for Judea” (or “for the Judeans” if the broken letter on the far left is added). Initially there was some speculation on the shorter first word, but the consensus by Cyrus, Mertz, and Stieglitz (another Hebrew scholar) was that it says “only,” which renders the translation, “Only for the Judeans.”

How incredible that a stone in Paleo-Hebrew writing was found in a Hopewell burial mound in the eastern United States dating back to Book of Mormon times that specifically refers to the tribe of Judah! In fact, it’s so incredible that as soon as other scholars got wind that the inscription was Hebrew instead of Cherokee, they immediately tried to discredit it.

However, in 1988, the wood fragments found with the stone

were radiocarbon dated and returned a date of 32–769 AD. Those dates are consistent with the Hopewell burial mound in which the fragments were discovered.

By way of explanation, the Hopewell are a group of people who settled in the Florida region sometime between 400 and 600 BC.³⁵ Over time, they moved north and grew into a huge civilization that covered most of the eastern United States, building tens of thousands of different settlements, mounds, hilltop forts, temples, and massive earthworks. They grew and flourished for hundreds of years, until their civilization inexplicably degraded. That resulted in significant internal conflict, with many of their cities and settlements being surrounded by large ditches and wooden stockades for protection. Ultimately, the Hopewell civilization disappeared near the Great Lakes region around 400 AD.³⁶

In 2004, 115 years after its discovery, the Bat Creek stone's authenticity was questioned by two American archaeologists, Robert Mainfort and Mary Kwas.

They claimed that Emmert had potentially seen a Paleo-Hebrew drawing of a similar phrase in an old Masonic book printed in 1870 and copied the inscription from the drawing onto the stone;

35 "Hopewell Culture," Encyclopedia Britannica, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., <https://www.britannica.com/event/Stone-Age/Hopewell-culture>

36 Owen Jarus, "Hopewell Culture: Moundbuilders of the Midwest," LiveScience, Purch, 29 Apr. 2017, <https://www.livescience.com/58897-hopewell-culture.html>.

In his article, Mr. Jarus states: The Hopewell culture flourished until around 1,500 years ago, when things suddenly changed. "In a short span of time, people ceased building monumental ceremonial centers, they drastically reduced their production of art, they acquired far fewer exotic materials and their interaction spheres contracted to small territories surrounding villages that often were themselves surrounded by stockade walls," wrote Brad Lepper in his book *Ohio Archaeology* (Orange Frazer Press, 2005). He noted that these stockade walls appear to have been built to defend against attacks, an indication that the amount of conflict increased. Archaeologists do not know why conflicts increased or why the other changes marking the end of the Hopewell culture occurred.

however, there were several problems with their hypothesis.

For example, not only was the Bat Creek Stone text missing one of the letters found in the drawing, but it also contained an extra letter.

This additional letter was a significant hurdle for Mainfort and Kwas—especially considering that it changed the meaning of the larger word from “Jehovah” to “Judea”.

But the real smoking gun was something even more subtle—a small dash separating the two words. This dash was not found in the Masonic drawing.

It appears that the author of the drawing erroneously assumed that ancient Hebrew words were separated by a space, as they are in English or modern Hebrew.

He didn’t realize that Ancient Paleo-Hebrew words were separated with a dot or a dash—exactly like we find on the Bat Creek Stone.

As a result of this simple, nondescript dash being found on the stone—but absent from the drawing—the authenticity of the Bat Creek Stone was vindicated on its own merit.

But, in an incredible twist of fate, there’s actually much more to that little dash than meets the eye. It turns out that this little dash, which looks like a comma or a short diagonal line, is actually quite rare in Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions. Most Paleo-Hebrew word dividers use dots instead of dashes.

However, it turns out that this particular type of horizontal dash was also discovered carved into a stone wall in Hezekiah’s tunnel underneath Jerusalem, dating to 701 B.C.—100 years before Lehi and his family left.³⁷

37 McCulloch, J. THE BAT CREEK STONE REVISITED: A REPLY to MAINFORT and KWAS in AMERICAN ANTIQUITY. 2005, <https://www.asc.ohio-state.edu/mcculloch.2/arch/AmerAntiq.pdf> In his rebuttal, Dr. McCulloch states: The unusual Bat Creek word divider does appear in the Siloam inscription, which was discovered in 1880 in Hezekiah’s tunnel in Jerusalem and dates historically to 701 B.C.

Then in 2010, forensic geologist and TV personality Scott Wolter performed a thorough investigation and examination of the Bat Creek Stone on an episode of *America Unearthed*.

Wolter was given full access to the stone and was able to scientifically examine it and prove its authenticity using cutting-edge technology. He also wrote an official report of his findings, which have been peer reviewed and published.³⁸

In his report, he states the following:

Based on the review of the historical correspondence and the reflected light and scanning electron microscopic examinations of the artifact on May 28, 2010, the following conclusions are appropriate:

- Our geological findings are consistent with the Smithsonian Institute's field report written by John W. Emmert.
- The complete lack of the orange-colored silty-clay residue in any of the characters of the inscription is consistent with many hundreds of years of weathering in a wet earth mound comprised of soil and "hard red clay."
- The inscribed stone and all the other artifacts and remains found in the mound with it, can be no younger than when the bodies of the deceased were buried inside the mound.

So, how does a stone buried in an ancient mound in North America that dates back to Book of Mormon times happen to have Paleo-Hebrew writing on it that directly refers to Jewish people from the tribe of Judah who are from Jerusalem?

38 Scott Wolter, Report of Archaeopetrography Investigation: Bat Creek Stone (American Petrographic Services, Inc., 2010), <http://www.ampetrographic.com/files/BatCreekStone.pdf>

The only explanation that makes any sense is if the Book of Mormon took place there.

While there are numerous other incredible discoveries with ancient Hebrew writing on them in the United States, the Bat Creek Stone is the only one that was excavated by the Smithsonian Institute in a controlled dig.

In addition to the Bat Creek Stone, there are many other amazing discoveries and parallels authenticating the Book of Mormon that have been discovered in the heartland.

The following list represents just the tip of the iceberg:

- Tens of thousands of ancient mounds dating back to Book of Mormon times
- Numerous massive earthworks dating back to Book of Mormon times
- Large defensive trenches and timber fortifications surrounding ancient cities
- Ancient roads
- Ancient gold, silver, iron, copper, lead, and other precious metals
- Metal swords, points, implements, and jewelry
- Defensive metal breastplates
- Defensive metal headplates and protective headgear
- Advanced textiles
- Freshwater pearls
- Horse and elephant remains
- DNA markers tying ancient inhabitants to Jerusalem
- Adena (possible Jaredite) and Hopewell (possible Nephite) civilizations that very closely match Book of Mormon timelines and geography
- Numerous hilltop forts and places of resort

- Ancient stone walls
- Petroglyphs depicting Christ

I have personally seen many of these places and things.

It is staggering just how many ancient discoveries have been made in the eastern United States that members of the Church know very little, if anything about—even those who live there!

Virtually every eastern town in the heartland of the United States has an old museum filled with shelves of ancient arrowheads, axe heads, shovels, grinding stones, and more—with many of them dating back to Book of Mormon times.

To the locals, they just see them as interesting curiosities and collectibles found by townsfolk in nearby farmer's fields and riverbeds, but they are so much more.

The third and final section of this chapter was actually sparked by one of these local collectors and his lifetime hobby of looking for ancient artifacts around the area where he lived.

It all started when my dad got news that this collector had died, and they were auctioning off his collection about fifty miles north of Nauvoo, Illinois.

It sounded like it would be fun to go check it out, so me, my dad, two of my uncles, a cousin, and a friend all jumped on a plane.

Little did we know the incredible adventure that we were about to embark on that would change our lives forever.

Journey #3: Christ Hidden in Plain Sight

We arrived in St. Louis on the evening of Saturday, September 7, 2019.

On Sunday, we took in several of the local sites, including the St.

Louis Arch and the massive Cahokia ancient mound complex and temple site just east of St. Louis.

We also picked up Wayne May. Wayne is the creator and publisher of Ancient American magazine, which has been documenting and publishing ancient discoveries across the United States since the early 1980s.

Wayne is also one of the foremost experts on ancient sites and civilizations across America and has amassed an impressive collection of artifacts over the years.

Before the auction, we asked Wayne if he would be willing to fly in a few days early to take us around and show us some of the ancient sites that had been discovered in Illinois, which he was happy to do.

Ancient Hilltop Forts

It just so happens that southern Illinois is very interesting geographically, because the entire bottom of the state is literally surrounded by huge rivers, creating a massive natural barrier that is very difficult to cross.

On the east side of the state is the Ohio River, and on the west side is the Mississippi River. These two rivers converge at the very bottom of Illinois and continue south as the mighty Mississippi.



Visual representation of ancient hilltop forts protecting southern Illinois Source: Wayne May. Map recreated by Clarissa Brandley

Unknown to most people other than Illinois locals, the very bottom of the state has a series of ancient hilltop fortifications that form a line of defense, effectively barricading off the bottom of the state.

Dating shows that these hilltop forts were erected well within the Book of Mormon timeline, which creates a very interesting parallel.

In an effort to protect his people from the Gadianon robbers, Lachoneus is directed by the Lord to gather his people together in the center of their lands. It states:

Yea, [Lachoneus] sent a proclamation among all the people, that they should gather together their women, and their children, their flocks and their herds, and all their substance, save it were their land, *unto one place*.

And he caused that fortifications should be built round about them, and the strength thereof should be exceedingly great. And he caused that armies, both of the Nephites and of the Lamanites, or of all them who were numbered among the Nephites, should be placed as guards round about to watch them, and to guard them from the robbers day and night. (3 Nephi 3:12–14; emphasis added.)

We also know from other scriptures in the Book of Mormon that the people dug ditches and used hills, towers, and stone walls to build areas of resort and protection.

Surprisingly, the hilltop forts that run across the bottom of Illinois are strategically built on the tops of high bluffs that, due to the geological landscape, have cliffs that create natural barriers on the north, east, and west sides. These cliffs are virtually impossible to scale.

But the really fascinating thing is that on the south sides of the forts that aren't naturally protected are massive stone walls. These walls, originally measuring between six and ten feet high and just as wide, were painstakingly erected from countless large stones that were transported from riverbeds as much as two hundred feet below, to the top of each fortified location.

This had to have been an incredible undertaking, since many of the rocks weigh more than two hundred pounds and the walls stretch hundreds of feet—the longest being more than six hundred feet.³⁹

Some of the forts even have multiple layers of stone walls, one

39 Rian Nelson, "Stone Walls of Southern Illinois," Book of Mormon Evidence, 24 Nov. 2020, <https://bookofmormonevidence.org/stone-walls-of-southern-illinois/>

behind the other, with large ditches in front of them. Some of these forts also had lookout towers built into the walls.

When visiting these forts, it is obvious that they were built to protect the people inside of them but were not made for long-term habitation. These forts were very possibly defensive positions for armies or guards whose job it was to defend the people in the southern lands by watching for invaders coming from the north.

George Jackson, a retired Department of Natural Resources employee for the State of Illinois says that fourteen of these ancient forts are still known to exist, but there could be more than forty such structures crossing east to west.

Now, is it possible that there just happens to be a series of strategically defensive ancient hilltop forts running along the bottom of Illinois for some other reason? Maybe. But it certainly looks like they were built to defend the lands to the south of these fortifications.

Each of these forts were close enough to each other that they could have potentially used smoke signals to alert their neighbors to intruders. And with steep cliffs and massive stone walls to protect them, it was likely that whoever was within these forts could have successfully held their ground until reinforcements arrived.

Here are some pictures I took of these hilltop forts on our trip:



Stones of an ancient hilltop fort in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

Here's one of the rock walls. Directly on the other side is a very steep embankment.



Stones of an ancient hilltop fort in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

You can see just how long these walls are and how big these rocks are!



Stones of an ancient hilltop fort in southern Illinois

Source: Unknown

Here's an old photograph (author unknown) showing the immense size of one of these stone walls back in the 1800s.



Cliffs of an ancient hilltop fort in southern Illinois

Source: Scott Brandley

This photo was taken from the bottom of one the hilltop forts. All the forts we visited had steep cliffs like these, usually on the north, east, and west sides, with a rock wall on the south side.



Cliffs of an ancient hilltop fort in southern Illinois

Source: Scott Brandley

Here's another shot taken at the bottom of one of the forts. This fort is called Pounds Hollow, and it has amazing rock faces that are almost completely smooth and vertical. (That's my dad, Dave

Brandley in the photo.)

As cool as these hilltop forts are, if that's all we saw when we were with Wayne, it wouldn't have been compelling enough to include in this book about faith.

But hidden within and around these ancient forts were other incredible discoveries—some of which no one had ever found before to our knowledge.

These additional discoveries convinced us that these people not only knew Christ but very likely knew the resurrected Christ.

What I'm about to share with you definitely increased my faith and the faith of those who were with me, and it's my hope that it will increase yours too.

The “Resurrected Christ” Petroglyphs

Several ancient petroglyphs have been discovered in the same area as these hilltop forts. The locations of these petroglyphs have not been made readily available to the public in an effort to limit vandalism.

Fortunately, Wayne knew the right people, which is how we were not only able to visit some of the hilltop forts on private land but were also able to gain access to the petroglyphs.

The first wall of petroglyphs we saw was near Fountain Bluff Township in Illinois. We had no preconceived expectations and had no idea of the connections and discoveries we were going to make to Christ later that day (and the next day), so we all just looked at the drawings engraved on the wall with a passing interest and took some pictures (thank goodness).

While there were some petroglyphs of animals, there were also quite a few handprints and circle crosses on the rock face that caught our attention.

Here are some of them...



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois

Source: Scott Brandley

An engraved handprint with a hole in the palm and a circle cross next to it.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

An engraved handprint with a hole in the palm.

The top petroglyph on the following page shows a circle cross between two animals.

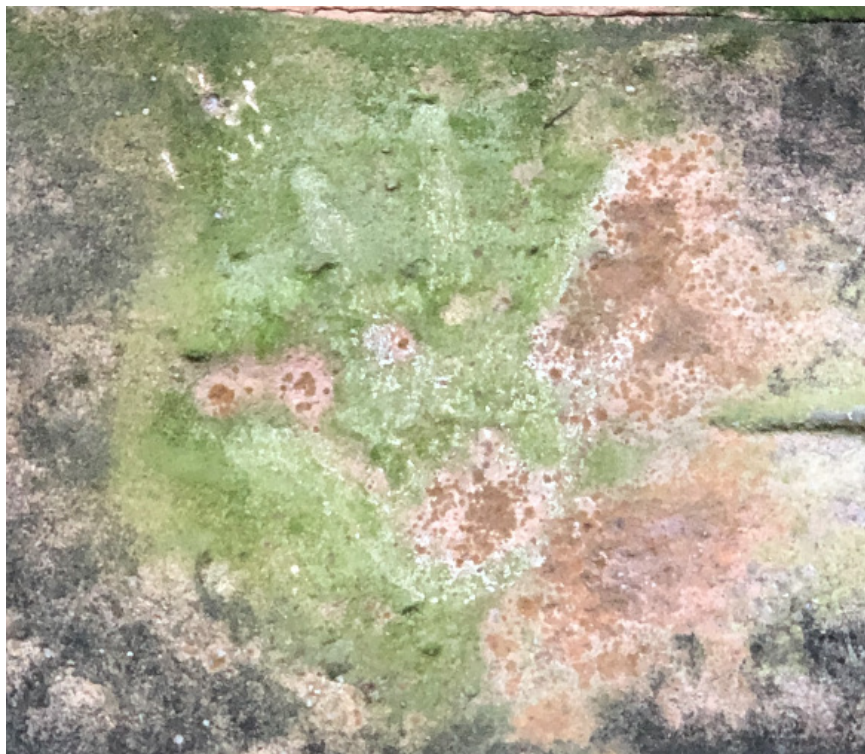
The lower petroglyph has a striking resemblance to the cross (left) and the Savior with outstretched arms (right).



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois

Source: Scott Brandley

An engraved handprint covered in moss or algae.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

An engraved handprint with a hole in the palm.

At this point, I thought the handprints were interesting, but I didn't make a potential connection between Christ and the hands with the holes in the palms.

It wasn't until our next stop that the light bulbs started to really turn on.

The Secret Altar

Our second stop was a very remote location called the Whetstone

Shelter Site. The site is extremely difficult to reach because it's located in the middle of a four-hundred-foot-high cliff face that runs along the Mississippi River. Fortunately, because it's so difficult to reach and its location is all but hidden to outsiders, it has been well preserved.

As we were trudging up and down steep power line trails surrounded by dense forest, our guide told us that we were going to see what he and other locals called "the Throne."

After we hiked through the wilderness for a couple of miles, he pointed to a random log on the side of the trail and told us to make a sharp right and carefully climb down the side of the cliff. It was incredibly steep with very little to hold on to, but we all managed to make it to a natural recess in the cliff face.

As we looked out, we saw a breathtaking view of the Mississippi River below us. Then, turning toward the wall, we noticed several petroglyphs surrounding a unique structure that looked as if it was literally carved into the stone face.

From our initial impressions, it did in fact look like some kind of official seat or throne. Behind it were three distinct petroglyph panels carved into the rock, one above another. There were also strange carvings in the actual seat portion of the throne.

Unlike the first site, which had a mixture of animals, handprints, and circle crosses, this site didn't have any animals. Instead, it was covered in hands and circle crosses, with different types of geometric shapes—such as diamonds, circles, holes, and lines—used to create various types of story panels.

As we were looking at the different petroglyphs, it dawned on us that we were looking at very similar engravings—particularly the hands and circle crosses—that we had seen at the first site we had visited earlier that day.

However, unlike the first location, this site had places where there

were two handprints instead of only one.

One particular set of handprints had the thumbs pointing away from each other, which seemed very odd to me. However, it was also the most prominent set, and was carefully and deliberately etched into the stone so that you could clearly see the fingers and palms.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandle

I wondered why the thumbs were pointed in different directions,

and I asked my uncle John to imitate what was carved in the rock using his own hands.

As he recreated the hand gesture, we both stood there in shock.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

The petroglyph looked as though it was a literal carving of the resurrected Christ's outstretched hands being shown to the ancient inhabitants.

It was right there in front of us, carved in rock!

As we began to realize the potential significance of what we were seeing, the potential meaning of all the circle crosses next to the

hands with holes in the palms we had seen seemed to come into focus as we viewed them through the lens of the resurrected Christ.

They appeared to represent an empty cross (suffering and death) inside the sun (light and life). What a simple yet powerful symbol to depict the Savior.

At this point, we were beside ourselves. Little did we know that there were even more amazing discoveries about to be made.

On the way to the site, our guide had told us about a large crack in the rock that was aligned with the summer and winter solstice—the crack lit up at first light on those two days of the year.

It turns out that this strategic crack was located to the immediate right of the open-faced handprints and immediately to the left of the throne, so as to be right in between the two.



Jake Brandley at ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: John Brandley

Since we couldn't do anything with the crack at that point, we turned our attention to the throne. As we were looking at the strange engravings on the seat of the throne, we noticed that one of the engravings looked somewhat like an inverted handprint.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

My uncle then put his hand on it, and it fit perfectly! Someone had painstakingly carved an inverted handprint into the seat of the throne!

There was a small divot for the thumb; a smooth, concave pad where the palm naturally rested (where the finger is pointing in the photo); and separately carved grooves for each finger!

At this point we were freaking out!

Even our guide, a Baptist minister who had been to the site numerous times over the years, was in complete shock from both of our discoveries—first the outstretched hands, and now an inverted handprint carved into the seat of the throne.

The photo below shows my uncle putting his hand on the inverted handprint.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

As you can imagine, we could hardly contain ourselves, but it kept getting better. We soon after found another inverted handprint for

the left hand!



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

It was at this point we realized that this wasn't a throne at all. It was an altar!

With his hands still in the inverted handprints, my uncle slowly knelt down, and we all stood there in reverence and amazement.

He was kneeling before an ancient altar with three petroglyph panels carved out in front of him—likely the first person in centuries

to do so.

As he knelt there, it occurred to us that this was very likely a sacred place where the ancient inhabitants of this land would come and pray to God.

Here my uncle John is kneeling in front of the altar with his hands on the inverted handprints, looking at the three distinct carved petroglyph panels.



Ancient petroglyphs in southern Illinois
Source: Scott Brandley

We spent another hour at this site, contemplating the incredible significance of what we'd discovered. We literally felt like Indiana Jones finding a rare, priceless jewel that had been hidden for centuries.

But it didn't end there. The next day, we went to another hilltop fort. This particular fort took us more than an hour to hike to as we followed along an old abandoned railway line in the middle of nowhere.

As we approached this fort, it was surrounded on three sides by cliffs and a large pond. On the fourth side was, of course, a large stone wall. As we were exploring the fort, I walked to the far end by the cliffs to take photos of the pond below.

As I stood next to the cliff, I turned and happened to look down at a rock outcropping, and my jaw dropped! There in front of me was a pictograph with two more handprints with holes in both palms—and right next to them was a circle cross!



Ancient pictographs in southern Illinois

Source: Scott Brandley

Our guide was completely dumbfounded! In all the times he had been there throughout his life, he had never looked down at the rock.

As we all stood there contemplating all three separate sites—all

with hands with holes in the palms, and all with circle crosses next to them—we could hardly contain our excitement!

When we considered the significance of this third discovery, we realized it was actually *inside* one of the hilltop forts! So whoever built the forts very likely carved the petroglyphs in the other locations, which meant that it was possible that these ancient hilltop fort-builders were followers of Christ—just like the hilltop fort-builders in the Book of Mormon.

It also meant that these fort-builders likely knew that Christ was either going to be or had already been resurrected—even though He lived and died in Jerusalem on the other side of the world.

How was it possible for them to know that? The only way was if prophets living in their day foretold it or Christ personally came and visited them after His resurrection—just like it says He did in 3 Nephi 11.

Faith Rekindled

Even before I started writing this chapter, I knew it was going to be the longest by far.

Several times as I was writing it, I asked myself if I should just take the whole chapter out and write a separate book, because I worried that I might be straying too far from the topic of faith.

But now that I've finished writing it and have read it over several times, it makes me feel excited and invigorated about the gospel, and I feel an increase and rekindling of my faith.

I hope you feel it too.

I wish you could have been there on our trip. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I will always treasure, which is another reason why I decided to keep this chapter.

If I don't share these incredible discoveries with you and other like-minded individuals, then literally no one outside of our little group would ever know they existed, and that would be a real tragedy.

I personally believe that God led us on this inspired journey to make these incredible discoveries at this point in time because He knew we would share them with the world—to all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

I'll leave you with one more thing.

In the third location found inside the ancient hilltop fort, there were no other pictographs or petroglyphs other than the two hands with holes in the palms and the circle cross—beautifully depicting both Christ's tragic death and His glorious light, life, and resurrection.

Consider that for a moment.

Out of all the things they could have left behind, that's what they chose. Perhaps it's because the most important thing to them, and the most important message they could possibly leave for us today, was that they knew the resurrected Savior.

Chapter 7

FAITH AND ADVERSITY

Even Bishops Cry

I don't cry very often, but when I was a bishop, it seemed like my emotions always got the better of me.

I remember a particular experience where I was on a pioneer trek. Every trek that I've been on has what's called a "women's pull," in which the women (and young women) are asked to pull several of the handcarts up a steep hill without any help from the men.

The men went first, pushing about half of the handcarts up a long, steep, rough incline. It had to have been a good quarter of a mile uphill. Once we got to the top, we were asked to line up along both sides of the trail and stand in silence and reverence as the women started at the bottom, made the climb, and eventually passed by us—struggling but completing their task.

The hill we were standing on was quite high. I stood on the edge of a ridge, overlooking the plains below. I could see for miles. The bluff we were on was in the shape of a quarter-moon, and the trail started at the one end at the bottom and followed the inside of the curve to the top, which allowed us to watch the women the entire time they fought their way up the unforgiving slope.

As I stood there taking in the view, two different women in my ward distinctly came into my mind, and an overwhelming sense of pain and heartache swept over me. I felt that they were both going through incredible adversity in their lives, and God was making me aware of it.

The feeling was so intense that tears started streaming down my face. In that moment I wished I could take their struggles away, but even in the midst of my emotions, I was reminded by the very women struggling up the slope before me, that sometimes the people we love and care about have to be allowed to experience hard times and difficult challenges, in order to strengthen their faith.

This chapter highlights several interesting thoughts, stories, and insights that can help to uplift and inspire both you and your loved ones through difficult times of trial and adversity.

The Stories We Tell Ourselves

A few years ago, I went to a business conference where I heard Brené Brown speak. Brené was a research professor at the University of Houston and had spent many years studying human behavior. As a result of her research, she began writing books on the topic and became a #1 New York Times bestseller.

Her entire presentation was amazing, but one thing really stood out to me.

She said that our lives were a compilation of stories we tell ourselves, resulting from the events that occur throughout our lives.

Some stories are uplifting and empowering, and some are limiting and debilitating. And ultimately, the stories we tell ourselves shape our lives, who we believe we are, how we see the world, and who we ultimately become.

Then she asked a question that changed *my* life. She asked, “What

stories are you telling yourself that aren't true?"

Turns out, a lot of what we tell ourselves is based on our own subjective interpretation of our individual circumstances, upbringing, education, and perception of the world around us. And our stories can be very different from those of others.

In fact, two people can experience the same event and have two completely different interpretations of it (if you don't believe me, just ask my wife).

That phenomenon is one of the things responsible for conflict.

Brené then taught us a very valuable, highly effective strategy for resolving these types of situations.

She told us that whenever we disagree with someone, there's a very good chance that it's because we're each telling ourselves a different story and are trying to force our view of the story on the other person.

So, rather than arguing to prove your point, she taught us to rephrase what we're trying to say by saying this instead: "The story I'm telling myself is. . . ." If the other person does the same thing, there is a very good chance that communication channels will open and improve—helping both parties to come to a faster, more meaningful understanding and resolution.

This simple rephrasing of ideas, thoughts, and feelings has been a game-changer in various aspects of my life and the lives of those around me.

"The story I'm telling myself" has become a common phrase that my employees and I use in company meetings, as well as a tool that my wife and I have used on occasion if we aren't seeing eye to eye on something.

The next time you find yourself in a conflict with someone, I highly recommend that you give it a try.

For the most part, the stories we tell ourselves (our perception and internalization of the events we experience throughout our lives) contribute to our overall personality and become the building blocks of what makes us unique. But sometimes we can tell ourselves stories that aren't true. If these are left unchecked or unresolved, they can cause significant damage to our self-esteem and self-worth, and even our faith and spirituality.

For example, when someone sins, that person often feels guilty and begins to feel unworthy of God's love and forgiveness. Feeling unworthy, they distance themselves from Him—effectively cutting themselves off from the Spirit and many other good, uplifting things in life.

But the truth is that God still loves them the same; they're just telling themselves a story that isn't true to avoid facing the guilt they feel for the bad decisions they've made. If left unresolved, this can lead to a life filled with pain, sorrow, and regret.

Another example is when a person is abused or assaulted; they often feel like it's their fault or they did something to cause it to happen. But that's not true—it's a story they tell themselves to try to make sense of a horrible event or impossible situation. This unfortunately too often leads to incredible sadness, frustration, depression, and isolation.

Still another example is when tragedy strikes and someone we love becomes sick, hurt, or even dies. Our initial reaction is often to be angry at God. We tell ourselves the story that if God loved us or them, He wouldn't have allowed such horrible thing to happen. Unfortunately, if we don't change this story, we can become resentful and calloused, and the world around us can become a much darker and lonelier place.

The reality is that we are constantly telling ourselves stories to try to justify things that happen in our lives, either for good or bad. Once we realize this, we can then begin to look more objectively at these stories—particularly the bad or conflicting ones—and start

changing them.

After all, our circumstances don't control us.

As human beings, we have agency, which means that we get to decide who we are and what we can become.

As we begin to change the narrative to some of the more dark and difficult stories we've created, and replace them with better stories based on a more objective perspective, we invite more light and power into our lives, which inevitably makes our lives better and brings us closer to God.

One of my favorite Brené Brown quotes says, "The dark does not destroy the light; it defines it."⁴⁰ To that I add, "Suffering does not diminish our faith; it refines it."

With that in mind, ask yourself, "Who would I be today if I hadn't experienced the struggles, hardships, and challenges I've had to face in my life?"

Think about it. Our lives are a cumulation of all the good *and* the bad, the joy *and* the pain, the blessings *and* the sacrifices, and the light *and* the darkness that we experience.

We can't have one without the other and still have meaningful lives.

We all have to go through our own trials, whatever they may be, and there's no way around them.

And, while some of our trials may be self-imposed and others may be forced upon us, once we truly realize that we choose the stories we tell ourselves, we realize in that very moment that we have the power to change those stories!

We get to decide whether we allow our trials and tribulations

40 Brené Brown, Ph.D., *The Gifts of Imperfection* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2020).

to control, degrade, demoralize, and defeat us, or whether we will allow them to refine, empower, enlighten, and strengthen us.

We ultimately choose whether to live in the dark and be a victim of our circumstances, or to rise from the depths and allow our darkest moments to truly define the light in our lives and refine our faith.

Seeing Trials from God's Perspective

There's another thing that can help us when we're experiencing difficult trials and afflictions, and that is a change in our perspective.

If you've ever climbed a mountain, you know that the limited view from the bottom looking up is very different from the expansive, breathtaking vista once you reach the top. But to obtain that perspective, you must first climb the mountain.

Faith is very similar. It's not something you are entitled to or something that just happens because you want it to. As strange as it sounds, you have to work for it by putting in time and effort.

In Ether 12, Moroni tells us that "Ye receive no witness until *after* the trial of your faith." He also goes on to say:

For if there be no faith among the children of men God can do no miracle among them; wherefore, he showed not himself until *after* their faith. . . .

And neither at any time hath any wrought miracles until *after* their faith; wherefore they first believed in the Son of God. (Ether 12:6, 12, 18; emphasis added.)

What Moroni's telling us here is that as we put in the effort, and exercise our faith in Christ, incredible things can happen—even miracles. But as he also says, we must first believe.

This belief often requires us to change our perspective from a cynical, worldly view of "I'll believe it when I see it" to a humble,

faith-filled view of “I’ll believe it even though I can’t see it.” Or, to take it even one step further, “I’ll believe even though it doesn’t seem like there’s any reason to hope or believe.”

There are times in everyone’s lives when doubt, darkness, and misery seem to be our closest companions. Often, it’s in these most trying moments—when exercising our last bit of hope—that God helps us to rediscover the light.

These are the moments when we’re able to see a glimpse our trials from God’s perspective.

When Joseph Smith, his brother Hyrum, and four other members of the Church were held in the lower dungeon of Liberty Jail during the unforgiving, bitterly cold winter of 1839, they found themselves in one of these dark times. In fact, it was likely the darkest and loneliest experience of their lives.

This was a very difficult, uncertain time for the Church as a whole. Outside of Liberty Jail, their families, friends, and fellow Church members were being continually oppressed and actively threatened by mobs and being forced out of their homes into the cold by the threat of Governor Boggs’ infamous extermination order given just weeks earlier.

Three days after that order, mobs murdered seventeen men and children at Hawn’s Mill. During these times, homes were being ransacked and burned, goods and property were being stolen or taken by force, and women were being sexually assaulted and even raped.

Ultimately, the Saints found themselves with very few state or federal allies and no rights. No one was going to come to their aid or help them. They had to either leave Missouri or die.⁴¹

41 “Part 3: 4 November 1838–16 April 1839,” The Joseph Smith Papers: A Comprehensive Digital Collection of the Papers of Joseph Smith, <https://www.josephsmith-papers.org/intro/documents-volume-6-part-3-introduction-4-november-1838-16-april-1839>.

Inside the jail, conditions were just as dire. In Joseph’s own words, “our food is scant, uniform, and coarse; we have not the privilege of cooking for ourselves, we have been compelled to sleep on the floor with straw, and not blankets sufficient to keep us warm; and when we have a fire, we are obliged to have almost a constant smoke.”⁴²

Lyman Wight, one of the other prisoners with Joseph, recalls that “the mercies of the jailor were intolerable, feeding us with a scanty allowance, on the dregs of coffee and tea from his own table, and fetching the provisions in a basket, on which the chickens had roosted the night before, without being cleaned; five days he fed the prisoners on human flesh, and from extreme hunger I was compelled to eat it.”⁴³

They were kept prisoners from December to April—the four coldest months of the year. To give you an idea of what that would feel like, consider the average temperature in Missouri during these months:⁴⁴

Month	Low	High
Dec	25.8°F	42.0°F
Jan	21.2°F	37.9°F
Feb	26.5°F	44.3°F
Mar	36.2°F	55.4°F

In addition, there was no privacy, no running water, and no sanitation other than a bucket. There was also very little light other

42 “Letter to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839,” The Joseph Smith Papers, 52, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-isaac-galland-22-march-1839/2>

43 “Lyman Wight Testimony of Liberty Jail, 1 July 1843, 1637–1638,” The Joseph Smith Papers, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/8>

44 “Climate for St. Louis, Missouri,” Climate in St. Louis, Missouri, <http://www.rssweather.com/climate/Missouri/St.%20Louis/>

than what managed to eke in from two small openings set into the four-foot-thick walls; an occasional candle; and the rare, meager, smoke-inducing fire.

The long, torturous months spent in Liberty Jail, compounded by the constant uncertainty and fear of what was happening to their families and loved ones on the outside, would likely be as close to the darkest physical, emotional, and spiritual living hell one could possibly imagine.

It was in these seemingly hopeless circumstances that Joseph Smith eventually pleaded with God in desperation:

“O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them?

These were the words of a man who had been forced to his breaking point—a man who had suffered to the very depths of his soul.

It was in these moments that Joseph had to decide whether to be bitter, give up, and curse God, or somehow find the courage to take one more step of faith into the darkest abyss, against all odds of hope.

He chose to take the step.

Look at how he humbles himself in the next few verses and puts his faith and trust in God:

O Lord God Almighty, maker of heaven, earth, and seas, and of all things that in them are...stretch forth thy hand; let thine eye pierce; let thy pavilion be taken up; let thy hiding place no longer be covered; let thine ear be inclined; let thine heart be softened, and thy bowels moved with compassion toward us.

Let thine anger be kindled against our enemies; and, in the fury of thine heart, with thy sword avenge us of our wrongs.

Remember thy suffering saints, O our God; and thy servants will rejoice in thy name forever.

This act of faith, in what surely was one of the most difficult trials of faith Joseph had ever faced, created an opening in which the Savior could intervene and restore hope.

Christ spoke once again to the Prophet, consoling him with the following words:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes.

Thy friends do stand by thee, and they shall hail thee again with warm hearts and friendly hands. (Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–9.)

From this experience, Joseph was able to gain a new, better perspective about life and God's plan for him and the Saints.

He knew that all of his pain and suffering, and the pain and suffering of those he loved were only temporary. He also knew God was watching over them, even when it seemed like all was lost.

In the following section of the Doctrine and Covenants, also

penned in Liberty Jail, the Savior continues to provide valuable insight into pain and suffering, why we have to go through it, and the importance of having an eternal perspective.

Although he was talking to Joseph, the lesson personally applies to each of us. He says:

And if thou shouldst be cast into the pit, or into the hands of murderers, and the sentence of death passed upon thee; if thou be cast into the deep; if the billowing surge conspire against thee; if fierce winds become thine enemy; if the heavens gather blackness, and all the elements combine to hedge up the way; and above all, *if the very jaws of hell shall gape open the mouth wide after thee, know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good.* (Doctrine and Covenants 122:7; emphasis added.)

You may feel like you've already been in the jaws of hell at one or more times in your life. You may even feel that way right now. But there is an incredibly valuable lesson to be learned here:

God has a plan for each of us, and He knows that even though some of the trials we go through in life are incredibly difficult and even unbearable at times, they are a necessary part of our own unique life experience.

Remember that He will provide a witness and even perform miracles *after* the trials of our faith. We don't know when, where, or how these witnesses and miracles will happen, but they will happen if we remain faithful.

Elder Richard G. Scott said, "We are like infants in our understanding of eternal matters and their impact on us here in mortality. Yet at times we act as if we knew it all."

He goes on to say, "If all matters were immediately resolved at your first petition, *you could not grow*. Your Father in Heaven and

His Beloved Son love you perfectly. They would not require you to experience a moment more of difficulty *than is absolutely needed* for your personal benefit or for that of those you love.” (Emphasis added.)⁴⁵

Hopefully, that knowledge brings some level of comfort and peace to your heart.

The Fourth Watch

In New Testament times, the night was divided into four watches.

The first watch was from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. The second watch was from 9 p.m. until midnight. The third watch was from midnight until 3 a.m., and the fourth watch was from 3 a.m. until 6 a.m., or about sunrise.

After Christ had fed the five thousand, He told the Apostles to get into a boat and go to Bethsaida without Him while he sent the people away.

As the Apostles tried to make their way across the Sea of Galilee, they were caught up in a great storm that lasted all night. They were tossed by the waves and continually blown away from their destination.

I would imagine they were both exhausted and scared after rowing in a violent storm for hours on end in darkness.

We know they toiled for the entire night because in Mark 6:46–48 it says:

And when he had sent them away, he departed into a mountain to pray.

45 Richard G. Scott, “Trust In The Lord,” Ensign, November 1995, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1995/10/trust-in-the-lord?lang=eng>

And when even was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land.

And he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them: and about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking upon the sea...”

As the sun was setting, Christ could see them struggling from the hillside where He was, but He didn’t come to help them until the fourth watch, or the early morning.

As you can imagine, the Apostles were frightened when they first saw him.

They were in the middle of the sea, in the dark, in a raging storm, and they saw what they thought was a spirit (or ghost) coming toward them.

But Christ tells them, “Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid. And he went up unto them in the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered” (Mark 6:46–48, 50, 51).

In his book, *When Your Prayers Seem Unanswered*, author S. Michael Wilcox calls himself a first-watch type of person. Then he asks the question, “Aren’t we all?”

He goes on to say...

Sometimes I pray: “Lord, I know you’re a fourth-watch God and that I’m a first-watch person. Couldn’t we compromise and have you come at the end of the second watch or at the beginning of the third watch? Wouldn’t that be fair?” But the compromise rarely comes, and in my better moments I know it’s good that it doesn’t. He’s a fourth-watch God.⁴⁶

46 Wilcox, S. Michael. *When Your Prayers Seem Unanswered*, p. 10, 25, 26, e-book version. © Wilcox, S. Michael. Deseret Book, Salt Lake City, UT, 2006.

The reality is that God often shows up in the fourth-watch moments of our lives—when we’re at the point when we don’t know if we can keep going.

There are numerous scriptural examples of this. Here are a few:

- When Abraham is commanded to sacrifice Isaac, God stops him at the very last second. God then blesses Abraham for his unwavering faith and promises him that his seed will be as numerous as “the stars of the heaven.”
- The prophet Elijah meets a widow collecting sticks to make the last meal for her and her son before they die of starvation. Elijah blesses her that they would never go hungry again.
- David, a teenage boy, shows up to fight against the giant, Goliath. God blesses his slingshot to hit its mark, causing the tide of the battle to change between the Israelites and the Philistines.
- Moses and the Israelites reach the Red Sea in their exodus from the Egyptians and have nowhere to go. Moses places his staff in the water, and God parts the sea so they can escape.

Even Joseph Smith, when he went to pray to God for the first time, was initially overcome by a dark force that threatened to destroy him. He wrote, “At the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . just at this moment of great alarm, I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head. . .” (Joseph Smith—History 1:16).

It was in this moment that Heavenly Father and Christ appeared—not before.

Further on in his book, Brother Wilcox sums up the concept of the fourth watch perfectly.

He writes:

When we advance into the second watch and he doesn’t

come, a certain cold fear often begins to spread through us as the wind's velocity does not diminish.

As we move into the third watch we may be tempted to make some assumptions that are very dangerous and foolish to make. "God is not listening to me. He doesn't care." Or, more dangerous yet, "He is not there." At times the universe can seem so very empty—all that dark space filled with cold stars.

Or, very common to Latter-day Saints, we assume, "I'm not worthy. He's not listening. He doesn't care. No one is there to respond." Because if he were there and if he were listening or if I were worthy, he would certainly come.

When you feel somewhat desperate, when it seems like your prayers aren't answered and the winds still blow, take comfort in the knowledge that he is on the hillside watching... and he will come. But he generally comes in the fourth watch—*after we have done all we can do*. (Emphasis added.)

The Two Wolves

Right before I went on my mission, I worked for an irrigation company.

The job required the crew I was on to travel to remote locations. I usually drove with another employee, but on one particular day, for whatever reason, I was assigned a work truck and told to drive to the job site on my own.

I drove out to the site and did some prep work on a canal that we were doing improvements on. At lunchtime, I went back to the truck. As I was eating, I noticed some magazines on the seat. I picked up the top one and saw an adult magazine underneath it.

At that moment, I was presented with a choice. Do I look at the

magazine, or do I leave it alone?

There was no one around. I could have easily looked at that magazine and nobody would have ever known.

But I would have known, and God would have known.

It was then that I made a pivotal decision. I chose not to look at the magazine. I put the other magazine back on top of it and finished my lunch.

That one decision changed my life, because I realized in that moment that I had the inner strength to make the right decision when no one else was watching.

I also realized I had the strength to avoid that temptation, which gave me even more strength to say no the next time.

Because of this and many other experiences throughout the years in other facets of my life, I've concluded that there is real power in every good decision we make.

And the more good decisions we make, the easier it becomes and the more power we have to make even more good decisions.

When I was serving as a bishop, there were several occasions when members of my ward came in to talk to me about struggles they were having that were affecting their faith.

At some point during my calling, I happened to come across the parable of The Two Wolves.

It is an old Cherokee Indian allegory that goes like this:

One evening, an elderly Cherokee brave told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He said, "My son, the battle is between two 'wolves' inside us all.

One is evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed,

arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.

“The other wolf is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one that you feed.”⁴⁷

The moment I read this, I realized it was a true principle that applies to each of us every single day of our lives.

In some ways, it relates to the idea of the story we tell ourselves, because the more we entertain certain ideas or stories, the more they become internalized and a part of who we are and what we believe, regardless of whether they are true.

So, when we're faced with two opposing realities or choices, we often follow the path on which we focus most of our time and attention.

In other words, if you want to change your life, change what you focus on, and consistently make better decisions based on your desired outcome.

Let's put this principle in the context of the wolf example:

- If we choose to feed the self-control wolf over the addiction wolf, the self-control wolf eventually wins.
- If we choose to feed the faith wolf over the doubt wolf, the faith wolf eventually wins.
- If we choose to feed the forgiveness wolf over the hate and resentment wolf, the forgiveness wolf eventually wins.

47 “The Tale of Two Wolves,” Author Unknown; possibly originating from the Cherokee Indian tribe, but no original sources were found.

You get the point.

The bottom line here is that whenever we experience personal struggles or issues in our life that go against what we know is right, it may help to look internally and try to see what wolf we are actively feeding.

In other words, it may help to ask ourselves what we're focusing the majority of our thoughts and time on.

Are we focusing on feeding the right wolves? Are we feeding the wrong wolves without even realizing it?

And if we are feeding the wrong wolves, what would have to happen to start feeding the right ones? What would that look like?

As we shift our focus on feeding the good wolves in our life, amazing things can happen.

The stories we tell ourselves can change in profound ways—and, surprisingly, we will often find ourselves where we truly wanted to be all along.

Chapter 8

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

Both Sides of the Table

I remember a time in my youth when I made some bad choices and experienced the weight of guilt and regret separating me from God.

I tried to pray and ask for forgiveness on my own, but I knew in my heart that it wasn't enough—I needed to go talk to the bishop.

It was the last thing in the world that I wanted to do. I absolutely dreaded it, and yet, I knew I couldn't be truly free until I did.

And so, I mustered up every shred of courage I had, and went in and sat across the desk from my bishop.

As incredibly difficult as it was to do, that meeting had a significant effect on my life.

It helped me to complete the repentance process, lift my burdens, restore light and peace to my soul, and provide me with a renewed appreciation for the Atonement.

Fast forward several years into the future.

When I was a bishop, there were many occasions when a young

man or woman would walk into my office to confess a transgression.

It was the last thing in the world they ever wanted to do. They absolutely dreaded it, and yet, they knew they couldn't truly be free until they did.

What a humbling experience it was for me to sit behind the bishop's desk—especially in those moments when I realized that I was sitting there because I had found the courage earlier in my life to sit on the other side.

It was a powerful testament to me that sincere repentance can truly redeem each and every one of us, regardless of who we are or which side of the table we sit on.

A Toss of the Coin

When you stop to consider repentance and forgiveness, they are really two sides of the same coin.

Today the coin might land on the repentance side because of something we did to hurt or offend someone we know or love.

Tomorrow, that same coin might land on the forgiveness side because of something someone we know or love did to hurt or offend us.

We never know which side of the coin we're going to have to deal with, because we're all imperfect beings who make mistakes every single day.

But the one thing we do know is that it takes humility, love, empathy, and compassion to both forgive and to be forgiven.

We also know that the moment that we stop either repenting or forgiving is the moment our spirituality becomes imbalanced and our faith begins to falter.

This imbalance can have serious consequences.

Let's look at an example on the repentance side. Someone who sins but tries to keep it a secret may be able to hide it temporarily, but over time it eats at them from the inside like a cancer. Finally, they either can't stand it anymore and confess, or they become spiritually numb or past feeling.

On the forgiveness side, someone who experiences a serious tragedy, gets taken advantage of, or is seriously hurt or offended by someone else may grow to despise or hate that person. They may even blame God for letting it happen. Over time, these feelings can rob them of trust, kindness, happiness, and joy—leaving them bitter, empty, and calloused.

Ultimately, if left unresolved, either a lack of repentance or a lack of forgiveness eventually leads to the same result—spiritual darkness.

Ask yourself:

- Can someone truly forgive others without repenting themselves?
- Can someone truly repent without forgiving others?

Ultimately, by doing only one and not both—at least from a spiritual perspective—we effectively say that Christ's Atonement is sufficient for others, but not for us. Or on the other hand, we say that Christ's Atonement is sufficient for us, but not for others.

In order to really appreciate and understand what Christ's Atonement truly means and to take full advantage of its incredible blessings in your life, we have to continually strive to do both—repent and forgive.

A Catalyst for Change

Ultimately, repentance is the primary catalyst for changing direction in our life whenever we go down a path that takes us away from God.

In order to repent, we have to fundamentally believe that God exists and that Christ atoned for our sins. Otherwise, what would be the point?

Repentance, therefore, is an act of faith where we personally acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Savior and Redeemer. By doing so, we fully and completely rely on the eternal sacrifices He made for us in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross for our salvation.

Through His grace and mercy, we are redeemed, cleansed from sin, and able to return to live with Him, Heavenly Father, and our family and loved ones in the next life.

It is also through the grace of Christ that we will one day be judged worthy to be exalted and eventually become like God.

This additional, restored knowledge makes the benefits of repentance and living a Christlike life much more rich, meaningful, and rewarding.

We don't repent just because we want to live a good life. We repent because we want to live a *Christlike* life, which is very different.

Anyone can live a good life—even without repentance. However, as members of the Church, we fundamentally know that living a life where we continually strive to emulate the Savior is where lasting happiness, fulfillment, peace, joy, and salvation are found—and repentance is the key to making that happen.

Why We Need to Forgive

In the Doctrine and Covenants, Christ shares with us a very important teaching about forgiveness: “Wherefore, I say unto you, that ye ought to forgive one another; for he that forgiveth not his brother his trespasses standeth condemned before the Lord; for there remaineth in him the greater sin” (Doctrine and Covenants 64:9).

This idea of the person being sinned against committing the greater sin if they don't forgive the sinner seems completely unfair on the surface—that is, until we consider why it's being said.

Christ is trying to teach us that the sins that are committed against us, and our forgiveness of those sins are *mutually exclusive events* as far as either person's salvation is concerned.

The transgressor's salvation lies 100 percent in their ability to feel genuine remorse for what they've done, and sincerely asking for forgiveness from the person they've sinned against and from God.

The victim's salvation lies 100 percent in their ability to truly forgive the transgressor, regardless of what the transgressor did and whether the transgressor ever repents.

This is where a lot of people get stuck, because they feel like if they forgive someone who they feel hasn't fully repented or doesn't deserve it, that somehow that person is better off—like they got away with it. But that is not the case with God.

Throughout the scriptures, it very clearly states that unrepentant sinners will pay for their sins. Here are just a few examples:

- “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper” (Proverbs 28:13).
- “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).
- “Wo unto all those who die in their sins” (2 Nephi 9:38).
- “When we undertake to cover our sins, the heavens withdraw themselves” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:37).

Sometimes it's difficult for us to consider that certain people who transgress against us have feelings of pain, regret, remorse, anguish, or sadness for what they've done—especially if they don't appear to be sorry or ask us for forgiveness.

And in some cases, it might be incredibly difficult for us to forgive someone, even when they do fully and sincerely repent.

But regardless of whether they truly repent, or even show an ounce of regret or remorse for what they've done, we must still forgive them—not for their salvation, but for our own.

It's probably important to note that this goes both ways.

If you choose not to forgive someone for whatever reason, but they go through all the steps of sincere repentance, they will still be forgiven by God.

If that offends you, then you're only focusing on one side of the coin.

Mercy and Justice

One of the stories that has always stood out to me in the scriptures is the parable of the ungrateful servant.

In this parable, a servant owes the king of the land 10,000 talents, which is estimated to equal 60,000,000 pence.

In those days, one day of wages for a common laborer equaled one pence, which means it would take the average laborer nearly 200,000 years working 6 days a week to make that much money.

Obviously, there was no possible way that the servant could repay that amount, so he and his entire family were going to be sold into servitude.

But the servant begged for mercy from the king, and he had compassion on him and completely forgave the incredibly massive debt.

This servant, now forgiven, shortly thereafter found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 pence, which was 100 days' worth of wages, or 1/600,000th of his forgiven debt.

The fellowservant asked him for mercy, but the servant would not forgive the debt and cast him into prison.

When the king found out, he brought the servant back and said:

O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me:

Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?

And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses. (Matthew 18:32–35.)

Why is this parable relevant to the topic of repentance and forgiveness?

Because we are the servant who owes the 10,000 talents!

Each one of us owes an immeasurable debt to God that we can never possibly repay.

But rather than casting us aside as a bad investment or a wasted opportunity, God instead shows us incredible mercy and compassion and provides us with a way for all our debts to be forgiven.

All He asks is that we do the same for others—to treat them the way we want God to treat us.

So, what will we do when faced with a situation where someone owes us a debt that they can't repay? Or has committed a grievous sin against us that they can never make right?

Will we be like the unwise servant and demand justice at all costs?

Or will we be like the king, and show mercy and forgiveness to those who really don't deserve it?

The Ultimate Gift

As I conclude this chapter, I can't help but feel a deep sense of humility and gratitude for the incredible gifts of repentance and forgiveness.

How wonderful it is to know that they are a fundamental part of His plan for us.

His plan to save us.

We were born to this earth as children of God. God—the creator of the universe, the galaxy, the solar system, the earth, all life, and we are His most precious creation!

We are literally surrounded by an infinite number of wonders and miracles every single day—all created for us, because He loves us.

This is the ultimate gift—to give the best of what we have to those that we truly love.

Every father and mother want to give their children the best life possible, and leave a legacy that will enrich and improve their lives for the better.

That's what Heavenly Father wants for us.

God gave us his Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ—knowing full well the pain, suffering, and cruel death He would have to endure—because God knew that we needed a Savior in order to fulfill His plan and ultimately receive all that He has.

That's also what Christ wants for us.

Christ gave us everything He had as a mortal—even His very life—so that He could give us everything He has as a God—the gifts of immortality and exaltation.

These are the most wonderful gifts we could ever hope to receive!

And they are free gifts.

The gift of immortality is already ours, regardless of what we do in mortality.

And the gift of exaltation is made available to us as we strive to live a Christlike life by keeping the commandments and living up to our priesthood and temple covenants.

By striving to live a Christlike life, we are attempting to see the world from His perspective, and trying to do what He would do if He were in our shoes.

We are choosing to look past worldly views, politics, scientific theories, and the latest socially accepted norms and trends in an effort to see all of the people in the world as equals—our true brothers and sisters.

We are choosing to look past people's flaws, facades, opinions, false ideas, and biases so we can see each person's true potential.

We are trying to see who people are meant to be, regardless of who they are now.

We are choosing to look inside our own soul, take an honest inventory of our spiritual standing and commitment to God, and then take necessary steps to change the parts that we know need to be changed—even if we can take only baby steps today.

As we strive to live a Christlike life, we naturally develop Christlike attributes.

Those attributes include, but are not limited to, love, compassion, kindness, selflessness, charity, longsuffering, goodness, grace, hope, virtue, and, of course, forgiveness.

All of these attributes combine to bring us closer to God and Christ, which ultimately strengthens our faith.

If there is someone out there who has hurt you, I plead with you to find it in your heart to forgive that person—unconditionally—especially if they don't deserve it.

And if you have hurt someone, please try to find a way to seek forgiveness and mercy, and to repent and make amends if possible.

There is no greater feeling of freedom and joy in this world than having heavy burdens lifted from your soul!

If you need help removing these burdens, remember that parents and close friends are always good to lean on and can give you great advice.

Bishops are also incredible resources. During my service as a bishop, I saw so many people's lives dramatically and fundamentally change for the better through repentance and forgiveness. I know that your life can change too.

Remember that God loves you, no matter what.

Remember too that Christ is there to bridge the gap, no matter how wide or deep the chasm may seem.

There is no divide He cannot and will not cross to save you!

Chapter 9

YOUR FUTURE— WITH AND WITHOUT THE GOSPEL

Seven “Big-Picture” Principles of Life

In this chapter, I will share seven principles, ideas, and concepts that will hopefully help you take a step back and see the big picture of how your life might look in the future, both with and without the gospel.

This is a good exercise in perspective that can help you appreciate the gospel more fully in your life.

I had some fun with the titles—see if you can make the connection.

1. The Legacy

My wife, Darla, and I were at a movie when she got the phone call from her mom.

“I don’t think your dad is going to make it to the end of the week.”

Beverly—or Bev for short—had successfully battled prostate cancer for several years, but it had finally caught up to him. Now it looked like he had taken a turn for the worst.

We headed to Alberta, Canada, the next morning, hoping that we would make it in time to say our goodbyes.

Fortunately, Bev was still alive when we arrived, and we were able to visit with him occasionally as he moved in and out of consciousness.

He held on for several more days, but eventually his struggle came to an end.

Bev was one of the best people I have ever known.

He was a teacher and school principal by trade, but his real passion was building things.

I can't think of a time in the twenty years I knew him when he wasn't helping someone build something, whether it was a kitchen or bathroom renovation, a shed, a deck, or even an entire house—all for little or no pay.

He just loved helping people, and building things was his way of serving others.

He was kind, funny, and loved meeting and befriending new people. And he was truly loved by all who knew him.

On the day of his funeral, the chapel was filled to capacity with people whose lives he had touched—all coming together to remember his countless acts of service, and to thank God in their own way that they had the opportunity to know him.

It was incredible to see so much love and support for such an amazing man.

As I reflect on that day, I realize now that Bev didn't just build sheds, decks, and houses; he built people.

He made everyone's life that he touched better.

Without even realizing it, he brought them all closer to God,

because God was with him everywhere he went.

He loved Heavenly Father and the Savior with all his heart, and it showed.

There was a light in his countenance that not only made you want to be around him, but to be better and do better in your own life.

And while it was incredibly sad that he had passed on, there was an overwhelming feeling of peace and joy that day that was indescribable.

At the time of his passing, all seven of his children were active in the Church and had met together in the Cardston Alberta Temple just a few years earlier.

I remember watching as they all embraced in a big circle in the celestial room, hugging and loving one another—a true eternal family.

Thank you, Bev, for showing me and so many others what living a Christlike life truly looks like.

Thank you for demonstrating the incredible, lasting impact that living a Christlike life can have for good in this world.

As a bishop, I personally conducted, spoke at, or attended dozens of funerals, which provided me with a unique opportunity to experience first-hand how all kinds of different people chose to live their lives.

It really got me thinking about what really matters in the end, and how the choices we make along the way can have a profound impact on our family and the legacy we leave behind.

I've concluded that at the end of our lives, there are only two things that really matter.

The first is whether we lived a Christlike life.

By continually striving to live a Christlike life, we align our will to God's will, effectively turning our lives into beacons of truth and light.

As we do, those we love can depend on us to help guide them away from worldly paths and toward what is good and right. This is a great and noble cause that all Christians hopefully try to emulate.

The second is whether we “endured to the end” as active members of the Church.

This is a much higher standard than just living a Christlike life.

It involves actively living the restored gospel *on top* of living a Christlike life, which includes things like attending church, paying a full tithing, fulfilling our callings, sharing the gospel, honoring the priesthood, attending the temple regularly, and keeping our temple covenants.

The reason that enduring to the end is so important is because by holding ourselves to this higher standard throughout our life, not only do we truly live our life to its best and highest purpose, but we also maximize the opportunity and ability for those we love to do the same.

In doing so, we lay the foundation to create a legacy of righteousness for generations to come.

2. The World

I don't know about you, but to me it seems that the more time goes on, the faster the world is becoming more chaotic and unpredictable.

During my lifetime, I feel like I've seen the prophecy in Isaiah 5:20 literally come true before my eyes: “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isaiah 5:20.)

And right in lockstep with Isaiah is Nephi's prophecy in 2 Nephi 28:7–8:

Yea, and there shall be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die; and it shall be well with us.

And there shall also be many which shall say: Eat, drink, and be merry; nevertheless, fear God—he will justify in committing a little sin; yea, lie a little, take the advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this; and do all these things, for tomorrow we die; and if it so be that we are guilty, God will beat us with a few stripes, and at last we shall be saved in the kingdom of God.

Something that really stands out to me about this scripture is the phrase, “take advantage of one because of his words, dig a pit for thy neighbor; there is no harm in this.”

I have read that verse dozens of times throughout my life, and I always thought of it as an abstract concept. But as I read it now, I can't help but think of how well it describes the social media shaming, bullying, and cancel culture movement that has become a plague on our society.

Never before have people gone to such great lengths to take advantage of, harm, or even destroy a person's reputation over things they disagree with, or something they did or said.

Now, everything we publicly do and say can and will be used against us by those who don't like what we believe or stand for—creating irreparable damage with just the click of a button.

Nephi continues to prophesy in 2 Nephi 28:20-21:

For behold, at that day shall [Satan] rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that

which is good.

And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.

These verses are also being fulfilled in our lifetime.

Christianity is in a steady decline, while atheism is experiencing record growth.

During this same time, the modern world has experienced decades of unprecedented prosperity, and evolution has become mainstream classroom doctrine—pushing God and religion to the side and treating them like bedtime stories instead of recognizing that they are the very reason we all exist.

Because of all these things and more, our faith as God-fearing people is in jeopardy like never before.

It's so easy to forget God when things are good. And it's so easy to get caught up in the latest ideas and social influences of the day when we literally have the world in our pocket.

Ultimately, more and more people are relying on the arm of flesh and less and less on God. If left unchecked, it will lead to our eventual downfall.

In 2 Nephi 4:34, Nephi writes, “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm.”

I know that for me personally, as time goes on, it becomes increasingly more difficult to resist the temptations of the world.

That doesn't mean that I'm on the brink of abandoning my faith or

morals by any means; it just means that I feel the constant pull of the world all around me.

I don't know about you, but it feels like the world is continually:

- Pulling at my personal faith and spirituality
- Pulling at my family, my kids, and their spirituality
- Pulling at my dedication to be an active member of the Church
- Pulling at my testimony
- Pulling at my resolve to avoid watching certain TV shows, urging me to be ever slightly more tolerant to social norms, bad language, and inappropriate scenes that are easily justified due to their constant presence and acceptable public rating
- Pulling at my view of society, because of the news that I watch or read
- Pulling at my time, making it difficult to prioritize what I should be spending it on
- Pulling at my perception of what is socially right and wrong and weighing that against what is spiritually right and wrong

For some reason, these worldly influences felt so much smaller in the past than they do now, and they just keep intensifying.

It almost feels like I'm in a constant tug-of-war between the ever-increasing pull of the world and my faith in God. And I'm pretty sure that I'm not the only one that feels this way.

I would venture that most Christians also feel this continual battle against Satan, with the influences of the world becoming more and more difficult to fight.

The reason all of this matters to me, to you, or to anyone who believes in God is because the more powerful the influence of the world becomes in our lives, the more important our faith in God and our testimony of the gospel have to become.

They are the only tools we have to effectively counteract the world's pervasive effects.

In a recent talk, President Russell M. Nelson said:

I am optimistic about the future. It will be filled with opportunities for each of us to progress, contribute, and take the gospel to every corner of the earth. But I am also not naive about the days ahead. We live in a world that is complex and increasingly contentious. The constant availability of social media and a 24-hour news cycle bombards us with relentless messages. *If we are to have any hope of sifting through the myriad of voices and the philosophies of men that attack truth, we must learn to receive revelation.*

Our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will perform some of His mightiest works between now and when He comes again. We will see miraculous indications that God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, preside over this Church in majesty and glory. *But in coming days, it will not be possible to survive spiritually without the guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost.*⁴⁸ (Emphasis added.)

Ultimately, this “guiding, directing, comforting, and constant influence of the Holy Ghost” requires faith in both God and His Son Jesus Christ, in addition to actively living a Christlike life.

And as we begin to exercise our faith and feel the guiding influence of the Holy Ghost more abundantly in our lives, we become more receptive to the personal revelation necessary to help us through these difficult and trying times.

48 Russell M. Nelson “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives.” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/04/revelation-for-the-church-revelation-for-our-lives?lang=eng>

3. *The Wager*

As you know, while I was a bishop, two active couples in my ward left the Church.

- Both times, I met with them and did everything I could to encourage them to stay.
- Both times I was unsuccessful.
- Both times they took their children with them.

In my attempt to try to get these couples to stay, I unknowingly presented them with what I later discovered to be a concept called “Pascal’s Wager.”

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Pascal’s Wager was created by seventeenth-century French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal.

As part of his writings on the subject, he devised the following decision tree:

	You Believe in God:	You Don’t Believe in God:
If God Exists:	Eternal Salvation	Eternal Damnation
If God Doesn’t Exist:	Nothing Happens	Nothing Happens

Pascal argued that people can choose to believe in God, or they can choose to not believe in God. Then, at some point in the future, the truth about whether God exists will be revealed.

Depending on where you fall in the decision tree, there are four

potential outcomes:

- If God exists and you believe in God, you will attain eternal salvation.
- If God exists and you don't believe in God, you will receive eternal damnation.
- If God doesn't exist and you believe in God, nothing happens.
- If God doesn't exist and you don't believe in God, nothing happens.

Based on these outcomes, it's to your significant advantage to believe in God. Or, as Pascal wrote, "Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is."⁴⁹

In my personal discussions with these couples, I unknowingly used Pascal's wager, presenting it from the perspective of a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The resulting decision tree looked like this:

	You Live the Gospel:	You Don't Live the Gospel:
If God Exists:	You Obtain Eternal Salvation	You Limit Your Eternal Progression
If God Doesn't Exist:	You Live Your Best Possible Life	Nothing Happens

In my version, I discussed living the gospel instead of believing in

49 "Pascal's wager," Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://britannica.com/topic/Pascals-wager>

God.

Upon reflection, I think I did that because as members of the Church, we believe that what we do—our works—are just as important as what we believe.

That's not necessarily because we think our works are going to be tallied up in the next life, but because they show our true intent, desire, and willingness to follow the example of Christ.

I actually like this version better, because being actively engaged in living the gospel provides us with additional physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual benefits that come with living our lives to the highest standards.

For example, studies have shown that it allows us to live much longer, healthier, more productive lives on average (9.8 years longer for men and 5.6 years longer for women).⁵⁰

Let's look at the decision tree now through the lens of the gospel.

- If God exists and you live the gospel, you obtain eternal salvation.
- If God exists and you don't live the gospel, you limit your eternal progression.
- If God doesn't exist and you live the gospel, you still live your best possible life (and statistically live a longer and healthier life).
- If God doesn't exist and you don't live the gospel, nothing happens.

The ultimate conclusion? It's to your significant benefit to live the gospel, because if God exists, you receive the best possible eternal outcome.

50 Deseret News, "UCLA Study Proves Mormons Live Longer," 13 Apr. 2010, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/4/13/20375744/ucla-study-proves-mormons-live-longer>.

And even if it somehow ends up that God doesn't exist, then you still lived the best, longest, healthiest, regret-free life you possibly could have.

4. The Choice

One of my favorite quotes of all time is from William Shakespeare.

In a moment of inner struggle, a man is about to make a highly regrettable decision that he knows will have very serious consequences.

However, before he gives in, he pauses to weigh the true cost of his actions and asks himself:

What win I, if I gain the thing I seek?
A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy.
Who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week?
Or sells eternity to get a toy?
For one sweet grape who will the vine destroy?
Or what fond beggar, but to touch the crown,
Would with the sceptre straight be stricken down?⁵¹

It's incredible to think that even though this was written more than four hundred years ago, it's still just as relevant today as it was back then.

I especially love the first line, "What win I, if I gain the thing I seek?"

In my opinion, this is one of the most important questions we can

51 William Shakespeare, "The Rape of Lucrece," <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/Poetry/RapeofLucrece.html>

ask ourselves when we're facing a decision that goes against what we know is right.

I also find it significant that the second line ends with a period instead of a question mark—showing he already knew the truth.

He wasn't confused or uncertain. He knew full well that what he was about to do was wrong, and that whatever fleeting pleasure he might gain would be short-lived.

This matters, because the same is true for us.

We all have the light of Christ to help us recognize right from wrong. But even when we know what's right—even when the Spirit prompts us—we still sometimes choose the wrong path.

My hope is that anyone seriously considering leaving the Church would take a moment to weigh the true cost—and ask themselves the same kinds of soul-searching questions:

- What do I really win (or gain) if I leave?
- What possible joy can the world offer me that isn't fleeting (or temporary)?
- Am I truly willing to sell eternity (something of infinite worth) for a toy (something cheap and meaningless in comparison)?

The bottom line here is that when weighed against the blessings of the gospel, the world—while often enticing and attractive on the surface—has no redeeming value beneath its deceptively shallow skin.

My purpose in sharing this poem with you is to help you to visualize the stark difference between the two paths, and how vastly different the outcomes are.

5. The Gift

I started off this chapter with the story of my father-in-law, his funeral, and my wife's family coming together in the temple just a few short years before his death.

But there's more to the story.

When Darla's sister Cammie was a young adult, she fell away from the Church and ended up being completely inactive for more than thirty years.

But God had a plan for her. And after three decades of inactivity, He softened her heart, and she came back!

That day in the temple with her family was the day Cammie received her endowment.

It was a miraculous and wonderful day.

Unfortunately, that joy was to be short-lived, because not long after, my wife's oldest brother, Delyle, was diagnosed with Stage 4 Lung Cancer. He died a few months later, leaving behind his wife and their three children.

It wasn't fair.

But in hindsight, the timing is curious.

A long-time inactive daughter. A son with a short time left to live. And a small window of opportunity that only God knew existed.

Was it just a coincidence, or did God give my wife's family a precious gift that day?

My point is this: Life is never going to be perfect.

The reality is that there are going to be a few amazing highs and a lot of unexpected lows in life.

There will be times when we feel on top of the world—like nothing could shake our faith—and then there will be moments when we feel utterly alone and forsaken.

However, we can take comfort knowing that God knows us and loves us individually, He will never leave us, and He gives us—or even better, “gifts” us many tender mercies along the way.

Most of the time we don’t think to look for God’s tender mercies, but it’s been my experience that when we do, we start to find them in abundance.

6. *The Movie*

Sometimes in order to change our future, it’s important to look into our past.

For example, one of the most spiritual moments in my life occurred several years ago on a family trip.

Darla and I had decided to drive up to Alberta, Canada, to visit friends and family.

We were about four hours from the Canadian border when the transmission in our van went out. We were just outside Butte, Montana—an old mining town in the middle of nowhere.

The van broke down late on a Thursday afternoon, but we were able to find a local shop that was still open and willing to help us.

The good news was that they were able to track down a transmission in a town only a couple hours away. The bad news was that it was going to take them four days to replace it.

So, my wife’s sister came and picked up my family, and I was left alone to wander the streets of Butte.

At the time, we had young kids, my business was struggling, and we didn’t really have any savings to speak of. Fortunately, we had just enough on our credit card to cover the cost of the new transmission, but it was a big financial hit that we weren’t expecting.

To try to save money, I stayed in an older motel. My room was a

throwback to the seventies, but it had been well maintained.

Ironically, even though I had nothing to do and didn't know anyone, I never turned on the TV.

Instead, I found myself walking around the town, visiting historic locations and old bookstores, and occasionally catching a few minutes of the annual Riverdance festival that happened to be going on (yep, you read that correctly).

For the first time in years, I had nothing to do but ponder my life.

On Sunday morning, I walked to church. Once back in my room, I decided to kneel down by the side of the bed and pray.

Then something completely unexpected happened.

During my prayer, I started to reflect on my entire life as if I was watching a movie.

It started with some of my earliest memories and continued to unfold from there.

As the movie played, I could see and feel God in virtually every aspect of my life.

Even in the darkest times, I could feel Him there where I couldn't always before.

I could see His love through the lives and actions of those who had known me. And I could feel His love through all those who had supported me.

And as the memories came to an end, I knew that God truly loved me and had been watching over me my entire life, and I broke down in tears of gratitude.

That single experience in that old motel room in Butte, Montana, fundamentally changed me as a person.

As I knelt on the floor, I sincerely thanked God for every

experience—good and bad—that made me who I was, and I made a commitment to Him right then and there that I would show up for Him for the rest of my life, no matter what.

I've tried my best to keep that promise ever since.

The Rest of the Story. . .

Prior to that experience, I wasn't headed in a good direction spiritually.

I went to church and paid my tithing, but I felt like I was just going through the motions.

I didn't feel very spiritual—almost disengaged—and for some strange reason, I had developed an irrational fear of home teaching (now called ministering), so I almost never went.

But because of that experience in Butte and the personal commitment I made to show up for God, I had a change of heart. And instead of just putting in the least amount of effort, I started to become more actively involved.

One of the first things I started doing was visiting my home teaching families every month.

This was a bit overwhelming at first, but instead of letting my fear stop me from going, I would try to think about Christ and how much He loved each of these individuals and families.

When I started, all four of my families were completely inactive. But through consistent visits, and by showing sincere, Christlike love, two of the families eventually found their way back to church.

The other two families never returned to full activity, but they were always kind and welcoming when I came to visit.

One of these individuals was an elderly single woman named Lucille.

Even in her late 70's, she had bright red hair and a electric personality to match.

At first she would only talk to me on the phone, but eventually she agreed to a visit.

As we became friends, I started bringing my family with me. My wife and kids immediately took a liking to her, and over time adopted her as an honorary grandma.

Over the next few years we all became quite close.

Eventually Lucille's health took a turn for the worst, but before she passed away, she asked if I would speak at her funeral—or what she called her “shindig”. I told her that I would, and it was an honor and a privilege to be able to do that for her.

A Change of Heart

Within a year of returning home from Butte, to my surprise I was called to be the Elders Quorum President.

Because of the incredible experiences I had been having with my own home teaching, I made it a goal for our quorum to also strive for 100 percent home teaching, which we were able to do several times.

While it was a lot of work, I believe that this helped to bring the quorum and the ward closer together.

After three years as the elders quorum president, I was called to be the Bishop of our ward. I served in that calling for more than five years.

It was during that time that I was inspired to write this book.

When I look back now, it's almost unbelievable how much has changed.

Had you asked the man sitting alone in that Butte motel room if he

wanted any of this—the challenges, the responsibilities, the spiritual stretching—I probably would have said no.

But looking back, seeing the incredible experiences I've had, the people I've been blessed to know, the lives I've been able to impact, and the difference it has made in my own family—I wouldn't trade it for anything.

And even though it was a difficult trial at the time, I'm truly grateful that our van broke down all those years ago.

As a result of the experience I had in Butte, I've come to the realization that just like me, every single person has their very own highlight reel of all the times in their life when God has been there with them.

And if you take the time to watch yours, you'll discover numerous experiences when God's been there with you.

Consider all the times you've felt His presence through family and friends who have shown kindness, service, and love.

Or personal experiences where you've felt the light and truth of the gospel and have tasted for yourself the goodness of the fruit—perhaps at your baptism, a baby blessing, a patriarchal blessing, an answer to a sincere and heartfelt prayer, a powerful scripture, attending the temple, a miracle, or a talk in sacrament meeting or general conference.

If you feel inspired and there's no one around, I encourage you to take a moment to close your eyes in prayer and ask God to remind you of some of these precious moments in your life.

Then sit back and watch the movie unfold.

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7. *The Crossroads*

There's a great poem called *At the Crossroads* that really sums up this chapter, and I'd like to conclude with its inspired words.

He stood at the crossroads all alone, the sunlight in his face;

He had no fear for the path unknown, he was set for a manly race.

But the road stretched east, and the road stretched west,

There was no one to tell him which road was best;

So he took the wrong road and it led him down,

Till he lost the race and the victor's crown,

He fell at last in an ugly snare;

Because no one stood at the crossroads there.

Another boy on another day, at the selfsame crossroads stood;

He paused a moment to choose the way that would lead to the greater good.

And the road stretched east and the road stretched west,
And one was there to show him the best;
So he turned right and went on and on, and he won the
race and the victor's crown;
He walks today the highway fair,
Because one stood at the crossroads there.⁵²

God's plan is so simple!

But at the end of the day, we must choose the path we take.

Down one path lies the world with all its fleeting pleasures, subtle distractions, and empty promises.

Down the other lies the path back to God, where true happiness, and eternal life await.

When we take time to really step back and look at our life from a 10,000-foot view, it becomes clear which path we are on—and where that path is leading if we don't change course.

And if look closely, we will see God standing there at the crossroads of our lives, lovingly pointing us towards the right path.

But the great thing about God's plan is that even if we take the wrong road, He gives us the ability to change it at any point in time!

So let me ask you:

Which path do you truly want to take in life?

And in your heart of hearts, where do you want your path to end?

Only you can decide.

52 "At the Crossroads," Author Unknown. No original sources found.

Chapter 10

KEEPING THE FAITH

Choosing To Stay

I recently attended a sacrament meeting where one of the speakers shared a story of her friend, Carter Ellis, who at the time was serving a mission in Chile.

While he was there, he posted a message on social media that ended up going viral.

Here's what it said:

I've seen a lot of posts lately from people talking about their individual decisions to leave the Church. I guess I feel like this is as good a time as any to share my decision to stay.

I'm a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It's not a club. It's not a fraternity. It's not just some organization with crazy rules meant to restrict my freedom. It's not a buffet from which to pick and choose which principles you want to believe and which ones you want to throw in the trash.

This is a gospel. This is a plan. This is happiness. This is the truth. It's all or nothing.

I want to share a little bit of my perspective on the word freedom. It seems like the moment people leave the

Church, one of the first things everyone says is something like “I’ve never felt more free.” Interestingly, I can’t think of a time in my life where I’ve felt more free than right now, serving as a missionary for the Church, ironically with more rules placed on me than I have ever had. But I think I feel free for some different reasons.

Free from sin, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Free from guilt because the rules I have for myself help me stay clean.

Free from sorrow, because I know I’m going to see [those who have passed away] again someday.

Free from confusion because of a living prophet who gives us direction on where we need to go.

This gospel is a gift. Our ancestors walked thousands of miles through icy rivers and snowy plains, leaving footprints of blood and many giving their lives along the way. Why? Because they knew this gospel is true. They wouldn’t have given up what they did if it wasn’t.

I also know that it’s true. That Joseph Smith really saw what he said he saw. That the Book of Mormon is true. That God lives. That He loves each and every one of us. That this path is true. It’s the only way. It’s for everyone.

Stay.⁵³

What an incredible message of hope and faith this young man has to share with the world. It is so inspiring!

Don’t stay for family and friends.

Don’t stay out of obligation.

Stay because it’s true!

53 Carter Ellis, “I’ve seen a lot of posts lately...” Instagram.com, 26 July 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRzNioKl8Uj/>

There is nothing like The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints anywhere else in the entire world.

- No other church fully understands the divine, eternal nature of God and the Savior.
- No other church has been restored to the earth with the fullness of the gospel and a knowledge of the incredible plan that He has for our salvation and exaltation.
- No other church has a second book of scripture written by prophets to help establish and clarify the truth of God and His teachings.
- No other church has modern-day prophets and Apostles who have the priesthood of God and who receive direct revelation to lead and guide the inhabitants of the earth in the last days.
- No other church allows for everyone that has ever lived or will live on earth the opportunity to be taught the gospel and be saved in the kingdom of God.
- And no other church has temples that cover the earth and provide the ability to seal families and generations together for eternity.

We stand alone in so many ways, and yet we stand alone in all the right ways.

As the world continues to spiral out of control into darkness and confusion, the light of the gospel will continue to shine brighter—bringing peace, comfort, and hope to all those who put their faith and trust in God.

If you're struggling with something that's currently affecting your faith, please don't wait any longer to resolve it. Share your burden with God and allow Christ to carry it for you.

If you struggle with doctrinal issues and secondary questions, pray to God that He might help you to either resolve them or let them go. Then focus your time and effort on the primary questions and all

the delicious fruits of the gospel that come with the knowledge of a loving Heavenly Father, the Savior, the Restoration, the Church, and the Book of Mormon.

If you struggle with personal sin, turn to God, your bishop, or your parents or spouse for strength and guidance. Let them help you unshackle those chains of bondage so you can be free.

If you've been hurt and are unable to forgive, pray to God that He might heal your broken heart. Ask for a priesthood blessing. Talk to your bishop and ask for counseling if necessary. Do whatever it takes to lift that heavy burden from your soul.

If there is anything that is causing you to struggle, you don't have to live even one more day in darkness, sadness, misery, or doubt. Simply exercise your faith—even if all you can do is desire to believe—and Christ will be there to lift you, strengthen you, soften your heart, ease your burden, and bring peace and comfort to your soul.

As Christ himself says, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

Enduring to the End

Whether we like it or not, our faith was always meant to be tested.

And this life was always meant to be a test—to see if we would be faithful to God when presented with our own personal obstacles, challenges, temptations, and trials.

So, as you come to the end of this book, the final question I'll leave with you is this:

What are you going to do now?

At the end of the day, one of the most precious gifts the gospel gives us is an eternal perspective.

When we look at life from an eternal point of view—knowing that we’re all eternal beings having a brief mortal experience—then whatever faith crisis we may be experiencing today simply becomes another test along the journey.

Having an eternal perspective makes trials more bearable.

It takes away the bitter sting from death, loss, and hate.

It allows us to be more patient, loving, and forgiving.

It helps us truly appreciate our blessings and the good things that life has to offer us.

It adds more depth and meaning to our relationships.

And it provides us with incredible hope for the future, both in this life and the next.

As we strive to do what’s right and maintain an eternal perspective, we’ll have the insight, fortitude, and courage we need to endure future tests of faith—and ultimately, to endure to the end and receive our eternal reward.

And someday, when we reach the end of our mortal lives, we will be able to say, just like Paul, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

May God truly bless you on the rest of your life’s journey, and may you find the courage and strength to stay true and faithful to the end.

Special Gifts for You



Free “Take My Hand” Digital Prints

Since I first started writing this book, the title and cover design have gone through many different iterations.

However, about a year ago, I had a very distinct image come to my mind of Christ emerging from a violent storm with his hand reaching out in a sincere and urgent effort to rescue the viewer/reader from darkness.

I had no idea how I was going to make my vision a reality at the time, but it was very clear in my mind.

It was about this time that AI started to really take off, and so one day I tried my hand at it, and lo and behold the software I was using created a very low resolution, cartoon-like version of the image.

Although unusable for my purposes, I was surprised at how well it captured the essence of what I had imagined.

Then, about 6 months later, a new state-of-the-art AI tool came out that could turn drawings and low-resolution images into high-resolution, lifelike images.

So, I uploaded the original file, and to my surprise it created an image much closer to what I had envisioned. But, as with most AI-generated art, it had some glaring issues that needed a master's touch.

I then recruited an artist to help me refine the image. Working together we spent upwards of 40 hours editing and fine-tuning both His hand and face to create what you now see as the completed art print "Take My Hand".

This has truly been a labor of love, but after a lot of hard work and effort, my initial vision has become a reality.

For me, this image stirs my soul and gives me peace in knowing that Christ is always there to help me throughout even the most difficult challenges and storms of life.

I hope that it can provide additional comfort and peace to you as well, which is why I'm giving you access to a variety of high-resolution printable files for your own personal use.

I've included 4 different popular print sizes:

- 16x20 (large living room print/small poster)
- 11x14 (smaller living room print)
- 8x10 (bedrooms/bathrooms)
- 5x7 (desks/nightstands)

Simply choose the size or sizes that best suit your needs.

(Walmart.com has the cheapest and easiest print options that I've found. Their 5x7 print is around \$1, their 8x10 print is around \$3, their 11x14 print is around \$7, and their 16x20 print is around \$12.)

You are also more than welcome to print copies of “Take My Hand” to give to your friends and family as gifts and reminders of the Savior’s incredible love for them.

To access all of the prints, go to faithtostay.com/gifts, or scan the QR Code below:





Free “Faith to Stay” Digital and Audio Books

From the moment I first started writing this book, my only intention was to help people who are struggling with their faith—not to make money.

And while printing and shipping physical books costs money, digital and audio books are free!

So, if this book has inspired you, and you want to share it with others, you're welcome to share the digital book and the streaming audiobook with whomever you'd like, as many times as you like. I only ask that you do not edit the book or change it in any way.

For direct access to the digital book, audiobook, and prints, go to: faithtostay.com/gifts, or scan the QR Code below:



Also, if you want to purchase one or more physical copies of the book, just go to faithtostay.com and click on the link to Amazon.

Please note that 100% of the proceeds will go directly to support the Marcovia Project—a nonprofit organization that helps over 100 children attend school and provides micro-loans to dozens of families to start small businesses in Marcovia, Honduras.

We first met Emily Hemmert—one of the founders of the Marcovia Project—when she came on the *Latter-Day Lights* podcast back in 2022.

In that episode, Emily shared the story of her two-year-old son's battle with cancer, and how the generosity of others inspired her and her husband, Anthony, to start a non-profit in Honduras—it truly touched our hearts.

Since then we've had them on the show multiple times, and it's been so rewarding to see the incredible changes they're making in hundreds of peoples lives.

If you want to watch the original podcast where Emily shares their story, you can go to latterdaylights.com and search for “Emily Hemmert”, or you can scan the QR code below:



And if you want pay it forward and help support the Marcovia Project, you are welcome to make a donation by going to themarcoviaproject.org or scanning the following QR Code:



How You Can Help Share More Light

If this book has touched your heart or helped to rekindle your faith, I have a small favor to ask...

Would you help me share that light with others who might need it too?

Here are two simple ways you can make a real difference:

1. Write a quick post on social media—Even a few heartfelt sentences can inspire someone else to pick it up and read it or listen to it.
2. Leave a review on Amazon—You do not have to buy a copy on Amazon to leave a review there. Reviews help the book show up more often so it can reach the people who need it most. To leave a review on Amazon, search for “Faith to Stay”, then go to the reviews section of the page, and click on the “Write a Customer Review” button.

If this book brought you hope, healing, or inspiration, please consider doing one or both of these things. Not only would it mean a lot to me, but it could potentially help someone who may be lost and is searching for light.

Thanks again,

SCOTT

P.S. If you're looking for other ways to rekindle your faith, I highly recommend checking out *Latter-Day Lights*—a popular weekly podcast that I host with Alisha Coakley, where we invite members of the church to share their stories of hope and inspiration with others.

You can watch or listen to over 150+ episodes on YouTube, latterdaylights.com, Apple Podcasts, and all other podcast platforms.

Just search for “Latter-Day Lights” or scan the QR code below. We'd love for you to join us!



About the Author



(Feel free to skip this section. Really, it's fine—we can still be friends.)

Scott Brandley was born and raised in Southern Alberta, Canada, and later moved to Ogden, Utah after serving a mission in Cape Town, South Africa.

After settling in Utah, Scott started a successful online store with his dad selling Latter-day Saint-based products, which they ran for several years.

After selling that business, they launched Trust Guard (a website security company) and Shopper Approved (a rating and review company), where Scott has spent the past 20 years protecting ecommerce sites from hackers, while helping them boost their online reputation, traffic, and sales.

Professionally, Scott has co-authored multiple business books and received several prestigious awards and accolades, including the Inc. 500 Award (twice), the Utah 100 Award (three times), and the Utah Fast 50 Award.

In 2014, Scott was called to serve as a Bishop in Ogden, Utah, where he faithfully served for over five years.

In 2016, he felt inspired to begin writing *Faith to Stay*—a project that spanned the next nine years, and was published in 2025.

In 2022, Scott and his co-host Alisha Coakley launched *Latter-Day Lights*, a popular weekly podcast where everyday members of the Church share their personal stories of overcoming trials and strengthening their faith.

Scott has been married to his wife Darla for over 25 years, and is the proud father of four children.

He enjoys spending his free time golfing with his uncles and hanging out with his family.