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For those who may feel somewhat discouraged about their faith or lack of it, we are all blessed with the gift of agency, the capacity to choose. We can choose to believe. Faith is a choice.

Faith in Jesus Christ

SUSAN W. TANNER

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Address at the Wheatley Institution's fall 2018 Reason for Hope Conference, 29 November 2018.

I am glad to express some of my feelings about “a reason of the hope that is in [me]” (1 Peter 3:15). I will speak a bit about my journey of faith, which really is, I believe, a journey or quest of a lifetime for all of us.

I feel that one of the great blessings of my life is that I was born a believer. As for all of us, my faith has been tried or stretched at times. But my convictions of God as my loving father, of Jesus Christ as my Redeemer, and of the restoration of his gospel have been sufficiently certain to carry me steadfastly through over half a century of life's inevitable questions and challenges.

The three greatest influences or gifts to me on this journey are (1) having the spiritual gift of knowledge, (2) having the gift to believe on the words of others who know, and (3) having agency—the opportunity and ability to choose to have faith, to believe. Each of these gifts is efficacious in my life only through the companionship and power of the Holy Ghost. He is a testifier and has witnessed truth to me. He is a guide and has helped me in my choices

to believe. He gives peace and comfort “when life’s perils thick confound [me].”¹

1. The Gift to Know

In our era of secularism and skepticism about anything religious, it is not vogue or even believable to use the phrase “I know.” But we are told in the scriptures that some are given the spiritual gift to know: “To some it is given by the Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13). Testimony experiences are often very personal and sacred. So talking about this gift may be as inexplicable as it is undeniable. Elder Marlin K. Jensen once said this about trying to tell someone how we know something: “Such explanations are often challenging because they involve the ineffable—that which is too great, too sacred, or too personal to be put into words.”

Having said all this, I want to share a couple of unsolicited experiences where knowledge by the power of the Holy Ghost has swept over me. On three very different occasions, I knew by the Spirit that Joseph Smith did indeed see the Father and the Son in response to his fervent supplication. It happened once when I was listening to a talk on the subject in a sacrament meeting in Paris. Although I couldn’t even understand all of the words of the speaker, the Spirit testified to my heart that this event did happen. Another time, my husband, John, was memorizing Joseph Smith’s own words about his experience. As he said them to me, I was deeply moved and impressed again by the Spirit of their truthfulness. On another occasion, our missionaries in Brazil were giving a spontaneous lesson on the First Vision. That familiar warmth of the Holy Spirit confirmed to me yet again that it was true. I cannot deny those powerful witnesses to my mind and heart.

Similarly, I have had spiritual convictions about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon on many occasions. I have also had specific answers to many other prayers, like Enos, through a voice to my mind. In addition, I have been carried through other types of storms as I exerted faith in Christ. These blessings and mercies have no earthly explanation. I can only describe them as miraculous. I know that the day of miracles has not ceased, and that miracles are wrought by faith in Jesus Christ. I humbly acknowledge these miracles. I am aware that with the gift of knowledge comes the responsibility to share that witness.

2. The Gift to Believe on the Words of Others

An equally beautiful spiritual gift is the gift to believe on the words of one who knows. “To others it is given to believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:14). This too is a spiritual gift and constitutes a viable testimony. One of my daughters did not recognize for years that her belief in others’ testimonies was her own special spiritual gift and a witness of truth to her soul.

In my weakness, my questions, my doubts, or my afflictions I too rely on the words of those who tell or show their strong faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Ghost confirms to me the truth of their testimonies in word and deed. Leaders of the Church have blessed me with their testimonies. Scriptural prophets have witnessed to me either by word or by their life’s example. I am moved by the words and examples of my ancestors and the deep faith in Christ that they exhibited through physical privations and spiritual apostasy. Let me tell you of such a faith-promoting story about Emily Partridge.

My ninety-one-year-old angel aunt Marion, collector of family photos and folklore, recently presented an unfamiliar picture at a family reunion. What a treasure it is! It shows four generations of faithful women, all my grandmothers: Grandma Alma at three years, Great-grandma Ada at twenty-nine years, Great-great-grandma Carlie at forty-eight years, and Great-great-great-grandma Emily Dow Partridge Smith Young at seventy-five years. This photo is taken in Salt Lake City in 1899 several months before Emily Partridge’s death.

I am drawn to Emily Partridge because of the legacy she has left me of testimony, diligence, sacrifice, and faith in Jesus Christ. As I learn more of her story, I am humbled that her blood is coursing through my veins, and I feel her righteous example coursing through my heart. I feel an urgent responsibility to learn from and follow her example of faith—her knowledge, her belief, and her choices to continue to have faith.

Let me share just a few details of her early life. In 1830 the Partridge family, Edward, Lydia, and their five daughters, lived in a nice two-story home northeast of Kirtland, Ohio, with a flower garden and fruit trees. Her father’s nearby prosperous hat shop was full of colorful ribbons, dyes, and tools to make wonderful hats for his customers. Life was comfortable for six-year-old Emily.

Her parents were seekers of Christ’s true church, and when Edward met Joseph Smith and learned the doctrines he taught, he felt the Spirit confirm

to him that this was the truth they had been searching for. He was baptized almost immediately and then began teaching his family and friends.

About three months after his baptism in February of 1831, Edward Partridge was called to be the first bishop of the Church. This meant that he was to devote his time completely to building the kingdom of God on the earth, which he faithfully did. Later that spring, Joseph Smith received a revelation that the Saints should gather to Missouri. Although Edward's family members were sick with the measles, he was called to Missouri to help establish Zion. So, at the early age of seven, Emily and her family left their comfortable home and prosperous circumstances forever to follow their father to Missouri. This valiant leap of faith led them on a trail of years of poverty and persecution, evacuations and exoduses, sickness and death, but also refinement and added strength to their testimonies.

When she was nine, Emily watched from a nearby spring as mobs set fire to her family's haystacks. They then surrounded and vandalized her home, kidnapping her father and finally tarring and feathering him in the town square.

At age twelve, she and her family lived in Clay County, Missouri, sharing a one-room log house (formerly a stable) with another family and going to school in tattered clothing. During the next three years, all the Saints were driven from their homes in the state of Missouri.

As they began their new life along the Mississippi River in Commerce, Illinois, the Partridge family again lived in a makeshift house while their father began building a new house for them. A malaria epidemic struck many in the community, including their family. Sixteen-year-old Emily was mildly sick most of the spring of 1840 but recovered. However, in May the disease took the life of Emily's older sister Harriet. One and a half weeks later, her worn-down and sick father Edward also died. Emily was grief-stricken.

After six years of building the city of Nauvoo and establishing the Church there, the Saints would again be driven away from the community they had toiled to build. Emily had to leave in the bitter cold of February 1846 with a four-month-old baby. The book *Saints* describes this scene:

With snow swirling around her, Emily Partridge shivered as she sat on a fallen tree along the western bank of the Mississippi. Her mother and sisters had crossed the river six days earlier and had camped nearby, but Emily did not know where. Like many Saints who had left Nauvoo, she was tired, hungry, and anxious about the journey ahead. This was the fourth time she had been driven from her home because of her faith.

For almost as long as she could remember, she had been a Latter-day Saint. As a young girl, she had watched her father and mother suffer persecution and poverty to serve Jesus Christ and establish Zion. By sixteen, when mobs forced her family out of Missouri, Emily had already spent much of her life searching for a place of refuge and peace.

Almost twenty-two now, she was starting another journey. After Joseph Smith's death, she had married Brigham Young as a plural wife. The previous October, they had a son, Edward Partridge Young, named for her father. Two months later, Emily entered the temple and received her endowment.

Sitting along the Mississippi, Emily grew colder as large snowflakes collected on her clothes. Brigham was still in Nauvoo overseeing the exodus, so she rose and carried her baby from one campfire to another, searching for warmth and a familiar face. Before long, she reunited with her sister Eliza and joined her in an encampment of Saints at a place called Sugar Creek. There she saw families huddled in tents and wagons, clinging together for warmth and comfort against the cold and an unknown future.

No one in the camp knew what the morning would bring. Yet they were not leaping blindly into the dark. They had made covenants with God in the temple, strengthening their faith in His power to guide and sustain them on their journey. Each trusted that somewhere to the west, across the summits of the Rocky Mountains, they would find a place to gather together, build another temple, and establish the kingdom of God on earth.²

Not everyone who went through these challenges of the early Saints remained faithful. Many became disheartened, discouraged, and disaffected with the Church. But not Emily Partridge! She continued strong in her faith in Jesus Christ as she faced trials and obstacles. Her faith did not eliminate the hardships, but it gave her courage, strength, and peace. Her faith strengthens mine as well. While I have not faced mobs like she did, I have been uprooted several times to answer the call from God to help build the kingdom. Knowing of Emily's example has made me want to do so with courage and strength like my ancestor. Emily determined to stay true to her spiritual witness and testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This has inspired me to try to stand as a witness and defend my faith. It makes me want to live valiantly, even amidst possible persecution, as she did. The covenants she made with God strengthened her faith and gave her power and sustenance. My covenants have provided a firm foundation for me, too. Like a group of Book of Mormon people, Emily and many early Saints in this dispensation "were converted unto the true faith; and they would not depart from it, for they were firm, and steadfast, and immovable, willing with all diligence to keep the commandments of the Lord" (3 Nephi 6:14).

Elder D. Todd Christofferson has taught that this steadfast faith in the Savior will provide sustenance and healing in our lives:

To persevere firm and steadfast in the faith of Christ requires that the gospel of Jesus Christ penetrate one's heart and soul, meaning that the gospel becomes not just one of many influences in a person's life but the defining focus of his or her life and character.

It is challenging but vital to remain firm and steadfast when we find ourselves being refined "in the furnace of affliction," something that comes soon or late to all of us in mortality. Without God, these dark experiences tend to despondency, despair, and even bitterness. With God, comfort replaces pain, peace replaces turmoil, and hope replaces sorrow. Remaining firm in the faith of Christ will bring His sustaining grace and support. He will convert trial into blessing.³

As I see my great-great-grandmother remaining firm in the faith of Christ during her dark hours, I learn from her valiant example. As the Apostle Paul teaches in Romans 10:17 and then the Bible Dictionary explains, "Faith is kindled by hearing the testimony of those who have faith."⁴ I believe Emily's words of testimony and her example of living her testimony. Her conviction in both word and deed is turning my heart to my fathers in appreciation for such sacrifice, testimony, and faith. And it is turning my heart to my children and posterity in pleading and prayers and preaching that they may follow firm in the faith of Jesus Christ like those who have shown the way. Many of you have ancestors or other family members, friends, or leaders who have strengthened your faith by their testimonies. Believing on the words of those who know is a spiritual gift and constitutes a valiant testimony. And "seeking earnestly" to receive this and other spiritual gifts is encouraged, "for there are many gifts, and to every man is given a gift by the Spirit of God . . . , that all may be profited thereby" (Doctrine and Covenants 46:11–12).

3. The Gift to Choose to Believe

Now, for those who may feel somewhat discouraged about their faith or lack of it, and this is each of us at certain times, we are all blessed with the gift of agency, the capacity to choose. We can choose to believe. Faith is a choice. We can hope to feel greater testimony. We can desire to have stronger knowledge. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said, "Fan the flame of your faith."⁵

The early pioneers who stayed in the Church were grounded in Christ and his true restored gospel. But then they had to continue to choose faith not only through their extreme physical trials but also through the rough terrain of seeing many of their peers apostatize. Elder L. Whitney Clayton said:

"Belief and testimony and faith are not passive principles. They do not just happen to us. Belief is something we choose—we hope for it, we work for it, and we sacrifice for it. We will not accidentally come to believe in the Savior and his gospel any more than we will accidentally pray or pay tithing. We actively choose to believe, just like we choose to keep other commandments."⁶

Several years ago, near the end of our mission, all of our children called us with news of close friends who had been active members of the Church and were now choosing not to believe. These friends were dealing with gender questions, feeling upset with women's issues, facing divorce or immorality, and struggling with Church history and doctrine. Our children felt surrounded by apostasy but were striving to hold fast to their faith. They were saddened and needed bolstering.

So the day after we got home we had a family council to strengthen one another with our faith, to let our children discuss their questions in a safe



Four generations of faith.

place, and to give and receive counsel and love. One especially important teaching from John that night was that we must keep the first and second great commandments, in that order, beginning with loving God with all of our heart, might, mind, and strength. Some who stray put the second commandment first. They do not have their focus on God with his truths firmly planted in their hearts. Christ taught hard doctrines in his day too. Some left. As Christ said to the Twelve when many of the “disciples went back, and walked no more with him, . . . Will ye also go away?” And Peter said, “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:66–69). We need to choose to walk with Christ, having patience and faith while we try to understand hard doctrines.

Elder M. Russell Ballard reiterated this:

Never fail to give equal time to the Lord through honest attempts to understand what the Lord has revealed. As my dear friend and former colleague Elder Neal A. Maxwell once said, “We should not assume . . . that just because something is unexplainable by us it is unexplainable.”

So before you make that spiritually perilous choice to leave, I encourage you to stop and think carefully before giving up whatever it was that brought you to your testimony of the restored Church of Jesus Christ in the first place. Stop and think about what you have felt here and why you felt it. Think about the times when the Holy Ghost has borne witness to you of eternal truth.⁷

When we are making these choices, we begin with loving God with all of our hearts and minds. We need to choose to believe that Jesus Christ “hast the words of eternal life.” And we need to choose to remember the times when we felt the Spirit testify to us. When we feel unsure or weak, we must hold fast to that which we already know. As Elder Holland says, “When those moments come and issues surface, the resolution of which is not immediately forthcoming, hold fast to what you already know and stand strong until additional knowledge comes. The size of your faith or the degree of your knowledge is not the issue—it is the integrity you demonstrate toward the faith you do have and the truth you already know.”⁸ We can choose to have faith in Jesus Christ, even if it is only as a grain of mustard seed for a time.

The other lesson for our children on that night of bolstering faith was to keep the second great commandment after keeping the first. Love God and his doctrine first, and then love his children with his love. Show kindness and caring for others, even when differing with them or not accepting their doubts.

Now, in addition to those who “go away” over doctrinal questions or committing sin, others may feel their faith falter over the inevitable wounds of mortality. Life throws at us many challenges—struggles with emotional illnesses that are almost epidemic today, other unresolvable physical sicknesses or disabilities, divorce, unemployment, poverty, abuse, and so forth. Healing and the ability to endure require us to choose to believe in Jesus Christ and the power of his Atonement. In such difficult life events for me, I choose to exert all my faith while almost simultaneously feeling a pit in my stomach, something akin to fear.

The father who petitions Jesus to heal his son in Mark 9 professes his belief in Christ and his power to heal. He is grounded in the first commandment, in his love for the Lord. He says first, “I believe.” Then he acknowledges his weakness and moments of doubt and says, “help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). This man is a believer. But in tribulation his faith is stretched. Imperfect faith is still faith. My constant prayer is that I will choose to believe in the Savior like the father in the Gospel of Mark.

I want to be like one mother I know who is choosing faith in the healing power of Christ’s Atonement as she helps her son also to choose faith. He has anxiety, depression, and low self-worth. The boy is faithful. No one would suspect the things he suffers. As a favorite hymn suggests, “In the quiet heart is hidden sorrow that the eye can’t see.”⁹ Bishops help; therapists help. But the compassion and guidance of his mom is paramount in his ongoing healing. Sometimes all she can offer him is her listening ear, loving heart, and eternal faith and hope in Jesus Christ that he will never forsake us:

The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!¹⁰

Elder Robert C. Gay testifies that trusting in Christ will help us overcome any burden in life:

Each of us may always understand that His love is greater than our fears, our wounds, our addictions, our doubts, our temptations, our sins, our broken families, our depression and anxieties, our chronic illness, our poverty, our abuse, our despair, and our loneliness. He wants all to know there is nothing and no one He is unable to heal and deliver to enduring joy.

His grace is sufficient. He alone descended below all things. The power of His Atonement is the power to overcome any burden in our life. In any of life’s travels, why would you ever turn away from the only Savior who has all power to heal and

deliver you? Whatever the price you must pay to trust Him is worth it. My brothers and sisters, let us choose to increase our faith in Heavenly Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ.¹¹

In our family, we have a new opportunity to choose to increase our faith. We received a diagnosis about eighteen months ago that our three-year-old grandson Jack has a rare chromosomal deletion called Phelan-McDermid Syndrome. He has disabilities because he is missing a gene. Because this syndrome has just been recently discovered, the studies are either incomplete, unknown, or bleak. And the ability of doctors' help is limited. Jack requires so much and the future looms long.

Our daughter has cried and suffered, feeling "so alone, so isolated." I believe her and feel these things with her. But she is choosing faith in the Savior as our Healer, as am I along with her. As we have sought for the healing hand of the Lord, we have recognized some small mercies and miracles.

For example, they have found an understanding, loving preschool teacher and a neurologist who studies nothing but this rare Phelan-McDermid syndrome. In addition to clinical blessings, we have felt Jack's sweet personality touching the heart of each member of our family. Teenage grandchildren—who sometimes struggle to get outside their own feelings of inadequacy, depression, or anxiety—forget themselves as they serve Jack and are in return blessed by him. Maybe one special purpose for his being sent to our family is to give us the opportunity to choose faith and hope in Christ and his healing power.

I choose to have faith in a Father who has the wisdom and eternal perspective to give us experiences for our growth. I am grateful that he knows what is best for us. I know he knows us, loves us, and hears our prayers.

Currently, John and I have the wonderful privilege of dwelling among modern pioneers who live by God's wisdom and vision for them. Just as I have been taught by my faithful ancestors, I am also moved spiritually by our BYU–Hawaii students and their faith in Jesus Christ. They are not immune to doubts, emotional and spiritual illnesses, physical struggle, or poverty. But they are choosing to put their trust in him.

Our international students often come from dire circumstances. Many of them are first-generation members of the Church, often the only member in their family; others are first-generation university students; some are orphans with no family support or background. Most of them speak English as their

second language. And most of them have little or no financial means to support a college education.

But they are bright, hardworking, prepared, humble, grateful, and full of faith. Recognizing that they are at school, when so many of their friends and family members are not, they desire to maximize every educational and spiritual opportunity so they can return to their nations to bless others. They come to us with complete trust in the Lord, that he will carry them through this experience, no matter how challenging.

And it is challenging! As I listen to their faithful stories, my own faith is strengthened. One woman from Korea wanted to come to BYU–Hawaii for ten years before her dream was realized. When she finally was able to come, she was married and had a baby. She and her husband are both getting degrees. They are on the IWORK scholarship, which means that in addition to taking a full load of classes, they each work for nineteen hours a week. They are juggling school, work, family, church responsibilities, and very meager means.

She explained to me that her only allotted time to study is from midnight to 3:00 a.m. while the baby and her husband sleep. She closes the door to the accounting lab where she works until 11:00 p.m. each night. As she walks back to her apartment, there is a little hill where she can see a perfect view of the lighted temple. She says that she often stops there to breathe deeply and thank Heavenly Father that she was able to come here and be sealed in the temple. Then she pleads with him to help her stay awake and be alert for the next several hours while she studies. Her faith and her discipline are remarkable. She will finish her degree in two years, and she has already received the highest grade on the standardized accounting test of any of our students in the past five years. Her goal is to return to Korea and build the Church, the community where she lives, and her family. She derives her strength from choosing again and again to exert faith in Jesus Christ.

Another modern pioneer is an orphan from Bangladesh. When an expat met him in a Christian orphanage, he introduced this teenage boy to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Isaac joined the Church and had to walk forty kilometers to the meetings and back again each Sunday. The people at the orphanage found out about his baptism and punished him by allowing him only one meal a day. Nevertheless, he continued faithful and was able to serve a mission in the Philippines. When he returned, he baptized about forty people in his hometown, growing the size of his small branch. Now he has been led to

BYU–Hawaii for school. He recognizes the Lord’s hand in his life. His goal is to become educated, return to his people and teach them the gospel, and translate the Book of Mormon into Bengali. This young man has had nothing temporally in life, but he has chosen to trust in Jesus Christ through every struggle.

John and I have been placed in a living laboratory of faith. We watch these modern pioneers suffer many privations, walk into the unknown, yet all the while choosing to believe in God’s love and sustaining power in their lives. As a beautiful Medieval Christian song suggests:

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart . . .
 Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
 Be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
 Be thou my great Father, and I thy true son;
 Be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
 Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
 Be thou my soul’s shelter, be thou my strong tower;
 O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power

High King of heaven, thou heaven’s bright Sun,
 O grant me its joys after vict’ry is won;
 Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
 Still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.¹²

Emily Partridge found her true vision in this “High King of heaven.” She believed that God would sustain her in her extremities. For our Korean, East Indian, and other international students, he is their “whole armour.” They trust in his “true might” as they fight and conquer their challenges. Our children in these modern, difficult times find their “soul’s shelter” in his “wisdom and true word.” I know that he is “ever dwelling with me” and that he is my “great Father.” For each of us we say, “Still be thou [our] vision, O Ruler of all.”

In the most recent general conference, President Russell M. Nelson’s final apostolic blessing upon us was “increased faith in [Christ] and in His holy work, with faith and patience to endure [our] personal challenges in life.”¹³ I know that we can trust in his blessing upon us.

I humbly testify that I *know* by the Spirit that God is our loving Heavenly Father and that his Son is our Savior and Healer. As I examine the witness in words and deeds of others who know, I *believe* them. The Spirit fills my heart and mind with the truths they teach. And in all things, I *choose* to have faith

in God our Father and in his Son Jesus Christ. The Spirit guides me in these choices. I know. I believe in others who know. And I choose to believe, to trust, to have faith. It is a journey and quest of a lifetime. **RE**

Notes

1. Jeremiah E. Rankin, “God Be with You Till We Meet Again,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), no. 152.
2. *Saints*, vol. 1: *The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 584–86.
3. D. Todd Christofferson, “Firm and Steadfast in the Faith of Christ,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 31–32.
4. Bible Dictionary, “Faith,” 669.
5. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign*, May 2013, 95.
6. L. Whitney Clayton, “Choose to Believe,” *Ensign*, May 2015, 38.
7. M. Russell Ballard, “To Whom Shall We Go?,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 91.
8. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” 94.
9. Susan Evans McCloud, “Lord, I Would Follow Thee,” *Hymns*, no. 220.
10. Robert Keen, “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, no. 85.
11. Robert C. Gay, “Taking upon Ourselves the Name of Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 99.
12. “Be Thou My Vision,” trans. John Rutter.
13. Russell M. Nelson, “Becoming Exemplary Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, November 2018, 114.