

Willow Creek Stake Conference
General Session – March 19, 2017
Talk Given by Joe Staples

Good morning brothers and sisters. Elder Packer, past President of the Quorum of the Twelve said, “You can’t tell me worrying doesn’t help ...because the things I worry about never happen.” I don’t know if that gives you comfort, or dissuades you from worrying – I don’t think it does for me.

This morning, I’d like to spend time talking about the challenges we face in life and how we get to choose, get to choose, if we face those challenges with faith or with fear.

I think we would all recognize that most, if not all of us, will face what would be considered significant challenges in our lives. I remember as a Bishop one Sunday looking out over the congregation and realizing, without exception, that every single family there was facing, or had faced, significant challenges.

It’s irrelevant, and even a bit damaging, to compare our challenges to those of others. But suffice it to say that we all have them. And these aren’t minor setbacks, like hitting a bunch of red lights in a row, missing the bus, finding water in the basement, or getting a paper cut. These are serious and real challenges – things that try us to the core. Facing life after a divorce, worrying over a child who is making poor choices in their lives, struggling with significant health issues, marriage troubles, losing a job or being underemployed to the point that you can’t meet your financial obligations, looking for but not finding someone to marry, not being able to have children, falling into a bad habit that you just can’t seem to break.

Navigating these challenges isn’t easy. Even if you look at your neighbors in admiration for the way they work through their challenges; more often than not, you only see what is on the surface. For most, maybe all, it isn’t easy. Here’s an example from President Hinkley, potentially one of the most positive people of our time. He was known for a phrase that he said often, “Don’t worry. It will all work out”.... Shortly after his wife Marjory died, he did an interview with a news reporter. When the interviewer asked President Hinkley how he was doing after losing his wife, I was certain he was going to give an uplifting answer and talk about the strength he gets knowing they will be together after this life. Instead, he said, “It’s hard. I miss her every day.” So when you face challenges and don’t think you’re coping with them very well... don’t be too hard on yourself.

Here’s another example, one that I thank BYU professor Gregory Clark for sharing. It has to do with the Savior and his disciples on the sea of Galilee. You’ll remember the words from the fourth chapter of Mark as the disciples pleaded...

“Master, carest thou not that we perish?” (Mark 4:38).

Jumping forward, you'll remember how the Lord calmed the storm and then asked them in response, "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?" (Mark 4:40).

Indeed, how is it?

Before we try to answer that, think about this: Why did they *need* faith?

They had the Savior present in the boat with them. How could they possibly fear anything? I think they were fearful because, at that moment, the only things they had perfect knowledge of were the intensity of the storm, the fragility of their boat, the depth of the water, and their distance from the shore. At that moment their mortal senses were filled with fear: They could see and hear and feel the threat of their present circumstances.

They had, in days prior, witnessed for themselves the Savior's power. He had promised them the Father's blessings. Yet their memories of His works and His words and their hope in the future reality of His promises were not, at that moment, nearly so real to them as the storm.

How similar is that to the way we face our challenges? This story helps us understand something important about faith. **Facing our challenges with faith instead of fear is not about just staying positive... akin to smiling through a root canal.** Instead, faith is founded upon our memory of divine witnesses and blessings received in the past – or in other words, our ever-needing-to-be-nourished testimonies; and upon our hope in divine promises for the future. Founded upon promises of the past and the future, **STILL** our faith can be vulnerable when experiences in the present seem to contradict both. So even with knowledge of the truth, in the present moments of our day-to-day experience, we remain subject to fear. It doesn't mean your testimony is faulty or broken. It simply means that you are mortal, living in a mortal experience – and that the fear of those challenges is real! So we must consciously choose again and again and again to believe, to remember, to hope, and to have faith.

So as we face challenges, it is a choice for us. Will we choose faith or will we choose fear? Now here is where I struggled. I was one who was quick to raise my hand... "I choose faith!" But how? What does that mean? Go beyond the words "choose faith" and look at how we practically apply that in our lives. Let me give you a symbolic answer from my life; one that illustrates the importance of understanding both faith and fear – and one that I've reflected upon countless times.

At age 19, I was called to serve a mission to Brazil. In my day, visas to Brazil were hard to come by. So after 4 ½ months in the MTC, and another 4 month

stint in the Massachusetts, Boston mission, our visas to Brazil finally came through and we arrived in Brazil. 4 ½ months in the MTC! So Elders and Sisters, no complaining about your time in the MTC. While I was there, they'd taught us every language lesson they had – many times over. Leaving the MTC I thought I was pretty much a native Portuguese speaker. I arrived in Brazil, heard people speaking, and thought, "Wait, I think the plane must have landed in the wrong country!" I understood nothing that these native Brazilians were saying. My first area was a little town called Resende. Not a single stop-light in the town. There was only one member of the little branch that even had a telephone. We lived in the converted meeting house that had 5-6 short rows of church benches. But the worst part for me... my companion didn't speak a word of English. This good companion would work with me on my language skills, but I was afraid. I wouldn't talk to anyone. Why? – because they might talk back to me! I was glued to my companion's side. I knew there was safety there. If anyone said anything to me, I'd look at my companion with a confused look on my face and let him carry on the conversation. Then here was the turning point for me... One day my companion and I went to our little market to buy food. He told me, "Elder, you go over there and get the bread and I'll go over here and get the milk and I'll meet you at the front of the store." In my broken Portu-Englese, I told him "I have a better idea, let's you and I go over here and get the milk and then let's you and I go over there and get the bread." I love this companion, Elder Barretto, for his wisdom well-beyond that of a 19 year old. As I recall, he physically put his hands on my shoulders, turned me around, and gave me a gentle but firm push in the direction of the bread. I took a step, then another step, then another. I got to the bread counter and asked for the bread. And to my amazement, the guy behind the counter actually gave me bread! I made it. As simple as it was, I made it. Those steps were symbolic for me. They weren't steps in a store. They were steps of faith. And those steps allowed me to face bigger challenges as they came along.

Here is what I believe the secret sauce is brothers and sisters. It is all about where we turn for help. So often, I try to figure it out on my own. To rely on my own talents. Next thing I know I'm overwhelmed. I'm fearful. I feel like I'm going under. I've learned that for me, it's as important for me to learn to recognize fear when it comes knocking, as it is for me to focus on faith – When fear is driving us, we feel a lack of the Spirit. We become paralyzed to act. We doubt things we had confidence in in the past. These are all signs that fear is guiding us.

The times when it works for me – and it isn't often enough – is when I turn to the Lord. When I acknowledge to Him that I can't do this alone. When I humble myself. When I seek His guidance in the scriptures, on my knees, and in the temple. But most importantly when I ask Him to carry my burden. When I turn to Him.

That means that it is so much more than simply hanging on, hanging in there, and hoping the challenge will soon end. It isn't simply enduring... instead, it's enduring well and learning and growing from our challenges.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell, a past member of the twelve said "... Part of enduring well consists of being meek enough, amid our suffering, to learn from our relevant experiences."

And in the gospel doctrine class last week in the SA ward a comment was made that we should learn to replace the phrase in our vocabulary that says, "Why is this happening to me?" and replace it with the phrase, "What do you want me to learn from this?"

From Elder Bednar of the quorum of the twelve: He said, "Consider the example in Mosiah 24 as Alma and his people are being persecuted by Amulon. As recorded in verse 14, the voice of the Lord came to these good people in their affliction and indicated: "And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs."

You'll see in verse 15 the process the Lord used to lighten the burden: "And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, *the Lord did strengthen them* that they could bear up their burdens with ease.

What was changed in this episode? It was not the burden that changed; the challenges and difficulties of persecution were not immediately removed from the people. But Alma and his followers were strengthened, and their increased capacity and strength made the burdens they bore lighter.

This happened because Alma and his people turned to the Lord, and relied on the power of the atonement, for the strength they needed. THAT, is what facing our challenges with faith means.

I testify that our Heavenly Father and His Son know us and know our challenges. I testify that through the atonement of Christ those challenges and burdens that we face can be made light. And I testify that to unlock that power of the atonement requires that we be meek and humble, that we turn to the Lord and acknowledge that we can't do it alone and that we need Him to strengthen us.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

