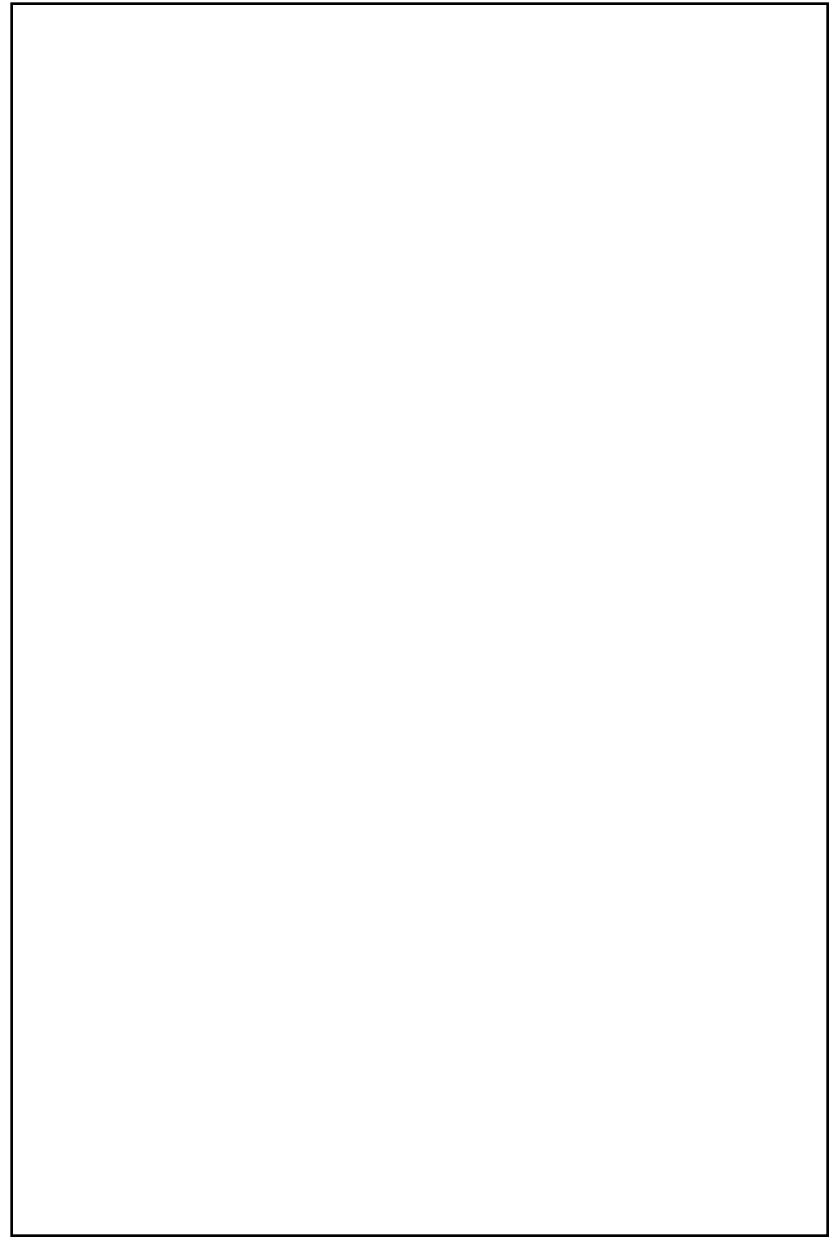


**M**y Testimony of  
miracles



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*Please note: I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and because what follows is based upon my own unique personal experience, I will be referring to that frequently. However, it should be understood that I am merely a lay member of the church, and hold no special calling or authority to speak on behalf of the church in any official capacity. Any interpretation of church doctrine and/or the scriptures is only my personal opinion, which may or may not be correct. This is a work of philosophy, not revelation.*

Many people today do not believe in miracles. Some of this skepticism can be traced back to David Hume (1711-1776 A.D.), who wrote a very influential essay on the subject. Hume defined a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. He did not believe that miracles were impossible, but he did think that they were highly improbable. Thus, he says:

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle.

Hume is not saying that we cannot ever gain reliable information from testimony; in fact, that is where much of our knowledge comes from. We trust testimony because we have found through experience that it usually works for us to do so. However, one must acknowledge that testimony tends to be far less reliable than the laws of nature, which, based upon our experience, rarely, if ever vary.

There are many possible reasons for why a testimony could be false. Someone may be trying to deceive us for personal gain, or perhaps they have been deceived themselves. The report may have been exaggerated, or perhaps a well-intentioned person was simply mistaken in believing that they had perceived a violation of the laws of nature, but in reality, it was just a misperception.

If one must choose between a testimony in which someone claims to have witnessed a violation of the laws of nature, and the laws themselves, Hume says he would ‘always reject the greater miracle’, or in other words, the less probable outcome, and believe that the testimony was incorrect. This would seem to be far more likely than that an actual violation of the laws of nature occurred. Moreover, Hume says that even if we did believe the testimony over our experience with the laws of nature, we would still have to weigh the evidence of one against the other, and at best, the probabilities would nearly cancel each other out.

On its surface this argument appears very levelheaded and reasonable, but if taken to its logical conclusion, it results in an untenably skeptical position. It would mean that one should not even believe that a miracle had really occurred if they had witnessed it themselves, as it would always seemingly be more probable that for some reason their senses had been deceived on that particular occasion than that the laws of nature were actually violated.

One of my favorite stories from the Bible is about Thomas, one of Christ’s original Apostles. According to the story, Christ appeared to many of his disciples after his death and resurrection, but Thomas was not present when it happened. Even though many of his fellow disciples testified to him of what they had experienced, Thomas, like a good Humean skeptic, refused to believe them. He ended up earning the moniker ‘Doubting Thomas’ as a result, but I cannot say that I really blame him. It must have been a very confusing time. They had all just witnessed the gruesome death of the man who

they had believed was the promised Messiah that would deliver them from Roman captivity. Thomas was probably questioning everything at that point, and maybe feeling like a fool for ever having believed any of it. Thomas told the others that unless he could see and feel the marks in Christ's hands, and touch the wound in his side, he would not believe it. He may have thought that the other disciples had just seen someone who looked like Christ, and thought it was him, or that it was just wishful thinking, or an overactive imagination on their part. Perhaps they wanted to believe it so much that they had simply talked themselves into it. Hume would have approved of these sensible-sounding explanations. But then, eight days later, Christ appeared to them again when Thomas was there, and he had him feel the marks in his hands, and in his side. Well, this was finally enough for Thomas; he said, 'My Lord and my God' and believed ever after (JHN 20:24-28).

Now imagine that Hume had this same experience. Do you think he would have believed it? His argument suggests no. It would always be seemingly more probable that the other disciples had paid an actor to portray Christ, and had intentionally put the wounds in his hands and side to make it look more like him; or maybe it really was Christ, and he was just never actually dead when they took him down from the cross; or perhaps Hume was hallucinating, or dreaming, or had too much wine at dinner, or maybe he was going crazy. Any explanation, no matter how improbable, would seem to be more probable than that Christ had actually died, and then several days later, stood there in front of him, very much alive.

But then I wonder whether even Hume would have truly been so skeptical that he would not have believed it while it was happening to him. My guess is that he probably would have believed it at the time, because it would have been so utterly astonishing, but then after some time had passed, and he had gotten over that initial shock, his natural skepticism would have returned, and eventually he would have come to 'reject the greater miracle' and he would have assumed that there had to be some other explanation for what he had experienced. A skeptic could walk across the Red Sea on dry ground and then only a few years later tell you that it was all just one big coincidence. That is just how skeptics are. I know, because I am one. And yet, I once had what could only be described as a truly miraculous experience that would rival anything recorded in the Bible.

### **My Miracle**

This experience happened almost exactly fifteen years ago. It was an extremely difficult time for me. I had turned 19 earlier that summer, and I really wanted to serve an LDS mission, but my Bishop and Stake President felt that I had to work on some things before they would allow me to go. I had been telling everyone for over a year that I would go on a mission as soon as I turned 19, and now I was 19, and I could not go, and everybody knew it. I was really embarrassed. I had a low self-esteem anyway, and it took a major hit. Most of it was probably my imagination, but it seemed like I could feel everybody talking about me. But the members of my family knew exactly what I was struggling with, and I knew for a fact that they were talking about it. It was all terribly humiliating.

There were times when more than anything in the world I just wanted to pack up a suitcase, get in my car, and just start driving and never come back. At that time I felt like I never wanted to see anyone that I knew ever again. I thought about doing that a lot, but I knew that I would not get very far. I had been working all summer, but I only had a few thousand dollars to my name. I knew that I could not afford to live on my own for very long. I thought a little bit about joining the military. I did not want to do that very much, but it would have been a realistic way to escape. A more attractive option to me would have been to just put off the mission for a year and start college. I thought I could probably borrow enough with student loans to be able to make it along with working. The problem was that by then it was August, and I had not applied to any colleges in the Spring because I had assumed that I would be on my mission by the Fall semester. I thought about just going wherever they would have still accepted me though, assuming that it would only be for a year.

My Stake President wanted me to be free of the problem I had for a full month before he would send in the required paperwork. When he told me that it felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. He may as well have said 10 years. I did not think I would ever make it. The worst part was that every time I failed I had to start all over again, and I knew that it would be at least another full month from that day. I felt guilty, and unclean, and pathetic because I could not do it. It is awful to fail, particularly in front of an audience. It may have been better if I had just known that I would have to wait 6 months or a year, and then just planned on that. But I was always hopeful that it would be sooner, so whenever anybody

asked me when I was going to be leaving, I would tell them that I would be turning in papers in about a month or so. I thought of it as an act of faith to do that, but it was embarrassing when people would notice that it had been longer than what I had previously told them.

Finally, after failing and starting over a few times, I somehow managed to make it two and a half weeks. It took everything that I had. Spiritually, physically, mentally, emotionally, in just about every way imaginable, I felt completely exhausted. I was not sleeping well. I had fasted multiple times during that period. I would miss two meals and not drink anything for 18-24 hours, and then I would eat and drink normally for a day or two. But soon I would feel tempted, and had to do it all over again. I knew that I had some self-control, though, or I would not have been able to do that. I was becoming better at fasting than anyone else in the church because I was getting so much practice. My body was having some serious cravings, and it was constantly on my mind by that point. I had a hard time thinking about much else. It had been a constant 24/7 battle for two and a half weeks, but I had resisted, and now, after working so hard to get there, I had finally made it - or so I thought.

That Sunday I told the Bishop about my progress and asked if I could finally turn in my papers. For some reason, I was extremely confident that I would be able to, I guess because I felt like I had made so much progress. He contacted the Stake President, and the Stake President told him that if I made it to the next Sunday, the Bishop could interview me then, and if he felt that I had made sufficient progress, then the Stake President would interview me the week after, and if he also felt that I had

made sufficient progress, then he would turn in the papers. I was truly devastated by this news. My Bishop could not understand my reaction. It was just one more week, he said. He did not see why it was so important to me that it had to be that week. But in reality, they were not asking me to wait just one more week, it would be at least two before meeting with the Stake President and when the papers would actually be sent. That meant that I was barely over half way, and it would actually be four and a half or five weeks before he actually sent them, so now he was saying it would be even longer than the 30 days that he had initially told me. I also noted that he was not even guaranteeing that he would send them then, it was only 'if he felt that I had made sufficient progress'. Every additional day that I had to wait felt like an eternity, and now this?

The worst part was, that was the best case scenario. What neither of them understood, what maybe no one else really could understand, was just how much I had sacrificed to get to that point. I had already resisted for almost three times longer than I had gone for quite some time, and by then I was running on fumes. I knew that I would not last another week, let alone two. I was obviously going to try, but it had taken everything that I had just to get to that point, and I knew that I would not make it. If I failed (and I knew that I probably would) it would be at least another 30 days from that point. I felt like it was asking too much. Here I was trying my best to do a good thing, I had worked so hard, and I really had shown some dramatic improvement, and yet it was still not enough for him. Realistically, I began to have serious doubts about whether this man would ever let me turn in those papers and serve a mission.

One of the reasons that I had a hard time not feeling a lot of resentment during all of this is that I knew of at least three young men my age who had committed sins far more serious than what I was dealing with, and yet their Bishops and Stake Presidents had not made them wait for their missions. So far as I could tell, no one ever found out about what they had done except those they had told themselves. Two of them in particular told me all about what they had done in graphic detail, and it did not seem to me as though either one of them really felt bad about it at all; in fact, they were basically bragging to me about it. But in both cases, they had told their Bishops about it, and they did not face any kind of disciplinary action at all, or even had to miss the sacrament. They had not been publicly humiliated like I felt like I had been. It all seemed so arbitrary and unfair. It made me wonder whether church leaders are really even inspired at all. It has always bothered me (and even does today, to an extent) that it seems like different Bishops and Stake Presidents have different standards. If it is the same Spirit directing both Bishops, why is it that one would handle the same situation differently than another one? Does the Lord change his mind about whether you are worthy based upon the geographical region that you live in? I realize that they need to have some leeway in handling individual cases, but it all just seemed very arbitrary and inconsistent to me. Some suggested that I move to a different Stake and just try to work with a different Bishop and Stake President, and I seriously considered it, but the idea that other church leaders might treat the situation differently bothered me as well. That made it seem even more unfair. It was very difficult for me not to become bitter, both towards these two men personally, and towards the church in general.

There were times when I wanted to go into the Stake President's office and really tell him off, probably with a few choice swear words. At other times I would get so discouraged that I felt like a worthless pile of garbage. Maybe my friends really were worthy to be missionaries, and I was not, and perhaps I never would be. I knew that most of them had committed sins that were equivalent to mine, and in some cases, significantly worse. But the difference was that they were able to stop doing it and I could not. Maybe I really was the lowest of the low. The Book of Mormon speaks of people who felt lower than the dust of the earth, and that was exactly how I felt that Sunday after I heard the news. When I got home from Church, I didn't even want to move. I just laid down on the couch and stayed there staring at the ceiling for a few hours, feeling as sad as I ever had in my life.

And sure enough, just as I had feared, I did not make it until the next Sunday. I had gone over three weeks, but now I would have to start all over. I was so discouraged that the Bishop spoke with the Stake President about how I was handling it, and he had me come meet with him that Sunday. He did finally relent a little bit, and told me that if I could go another three weeks from that point, he would send in the papers. This willingness to compromise just a little helped me to not feel as resentful towards him as I had.

I had finished the entire Book of Mormon for the first time a few days earlier. At the end of it, there is a promise that if you will read it, and then pray about it, God will let you know that it is true. I had been praying about it since I had finished it, but no answer had come. I had quite a bit of faith back then, even

though I was struggling in other ways, and actually there was not the least doubt in my mind that it was true. Though that was the first time I had read the entire Book of Mormon all the way through, I had studied the Gospel quite a bit already. I had read the New Testament, parts of the Old Testament, all of the Doctrine and Covenants, and parts of the Book of Mormon. I believed that it was true, but I had still not received the confirmation that had been promised.

As I prayed that night, I told Heavenly Father how exhausted I felt. I was pretty worried that I would not be able to make it another three weeks. I told him that I already knew that the Book of Mormon was true, but an answer had been promised, and I felt like I really needed something to give me the strength to endure. I asked for the promise to be fulfilled so that I would know with certainty that the Book of Mormon was true, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, and that Brigham Young and his successors were really prophets. I had full confidence that I would get an answer.

Nothing happened during the prayer. I was a little disappointed by that, but I remained undeterred. I still fully expected it to come eventually. Not long after the prayer was over my faith was rewarded and something did indeed happen. Unfortunately, I do not think it would be appropriate to say any more than that about what actually took place. In the church, we are taught that the most remarkable spiritual experiences should be kept sacred, and not shared publicly. Honestly, you probably would not believe me anyway. If you do not believe in the miracles of the Bible, why would you believe me? Not that I would necessarily blame someone for that; there have been times since

then when I was not even sure whether to believe it myself, and I was there. I have only infrequently kept a journal, but I had one next to the bed, and I quickly recorded my experience as soon as it was over. I am really glad that I did. It has helped me to go back over what I wrote then both to remember the experience better, and to confirm that it really did happen.

The answer that I received was quite unexpected. I did believe that I would get an answer of some sort, but everybody had told me that it would probably come as a feeling of peace, or joy, or a 'burning in the bosom'. I did experience the 'burning in the bosom' which was actually quite strong. I described it in my journal as such an overwhelming feeling of pure joy that I could barely breathe. This was important, because it helped to confirm to me that what I was experiencing was real. It was what I received in addition to this that I never would have expected. Even shortly afterwards I began to marvel, and wondered whether it could have actually been real, because it did not seem as though something like that would happen to someone who was not even worthy to serve a mission. Ironically, though, maybe that is why it did happen. I had been humbled to the dust, more so than I have ever been in my life. At the same time, I was also striving with greater diligence than I ever have before or since to keep the commandments. I was truly giving it everything that I had. I also had greater faith back then, not yet being plagued with doubts as I was later. Finally, and perhaps most important, I had made what was the greatest sacrifice anyone could have asked of me at that time, which was simply to keep waiting. I am not going to suggest that this was equal to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, but it felt like that to me at the time. Try as I might, I

have never quite been able to get back to that level of spirituality.

This experience helped immensely to rejuvenate me spiritually. I was strengthened, and though it was still not easy, I made it through those next three weeks, and was finally able to turn in my papers and go on my mission. I was an okay missionary, but certainly not a great one. I will always have some regrets because there were many things that I could have done a lot better. I had been quite humbled at the time of my miraculous experience, but unfortunately, I had a difficult time being able to handle it well going forward. I began to realize from what others said that they had not experienced anything like what I had. I became prideful, and began to think of myself as far more spiritually advanced than I really was. I could kind of recognize that this was happening, and I tried really hard to fight it, but it still did. This caused me to put a lot of pressure on myself to be the perfect missionary. I thought of myself as superior to the others, so I believed that more was expected of me, and that I needed to push myself (and them) to live up to a higher standard.

This prideful attitude led me into a number of foolish errors and mistakes. For example, when I was nearing the end of my mission, I was contemplating what our baptismal goals should be one morning, and while I was studying the scriptures I happened to turn to a passage in which over 200 people were baptized at one time. It must have just been a coincidence, but I came to believe that the Holy Ghost had revealed to me that this should be our goal. I felt quite certain of it, and I believed that if I had enough faith, it would happen. It did not. I even



extended my mission an extra 6 weeks, thinking that perhaps my faith was being tried, but that if I stuck it out, it would happen. I could have returned home on December 18th, just in time for Christmas, and started college the next semester. But instead, I ended up staying out almost 26 months. Some of the other missionaries had come home 6 weeks early so that they could begin college during the Spring semester, so I ended up being out a full three months longer than them. I did not really mind staying out longer, but I sure felt foolish when it ended up being for nothing. I believed and hoped until the very day I went home that somehow it would still happen. But I was just plain wrong. There is nothing else I can say.

Unfortunately, that was not the only thing that I got wrong during that time. The last few months of my mission, and for about a year after I returned home, was almost as difficult as the period before I went out, but for different reasons. It was a very confusing time. I had felt so certain that these promptings were genuine revelations from the Holy Ghost, but they were not fulfilled. After it had happened multiple times, and in a few instances, had resulted in some significant embarrassment for me, I finally had to face reality. As difficult as it was for me to admit, I finally had to just acknowledge that it was all wrong. These things were not from the Spirit at all.

My Patriarchal Blessing warned me that Satan knew of my potential for good, and that he would make efforts to lead me astray. It said that I would have the promptings of the Holy Ghost to alert me when his efforts were very subtle. Perhaps I did not listen to those warnings well enough. Honestly, though, I really do not know whether these promptings were actually

false revelation from Satan, or just my own overactive imagination (and maybe wishful thinking) but if it was him, then I have to give credit where credit is due, he really got me. It put me down on the canvas and was nearly a knockout, as you will see.

### **A Period of Doubt**

I began to doubt everything. If these things were wrong, what else was wrong? Was any of it actually real? I did not trust promptings anymore; in fact, I did not know whether I would ever be able to trust them again. I even started to wonder about my own sanity a little. Right around this time I watched a movie called *A Beautiful Mind* about John Nash, a Nobel Prize winner who had schizophrenia, and then I read a biography about him. My experiences were not really like the delusions that he had, but it still kind of freaked me out. How would you know if you were going crazy? I became quite worried about this. I did some research, and was somewhat comforted to learn that most of the time the people who question their own sanity are in fact sane. The ones who really do have something wrong usually have no idea. That helped some, but I was still a little worried for awhile, and kept myself under careful observation.

Gradually, though, I started to wonder if maybe the problem was not me, but rather the whole idea of revelation and religious experience. I knew that I was not the only one who had ever been wrong. There were several instances that I was aware of in which someone claimed that they had received revelation from the Spirit and it had not been fulfilled. Of course there was always some excuse for this. If someone has a

disease and you are praying for them to be cured, or perhaps they even receive a blessing that says they will be healed, but then it does not happen, a believer will just say that it must not be God's will. If someone has a Patriarchal Blessing in which they are told that they will have children, but then it never happens, there is always some elaborate explanation for why. Perhaps the person was not obedient enough, or if that cannot be questioned, one could always just interpret it to mean that it would be fulfilled in the next life. That is a very common explanation. Whenever a blessing has been foretold but is not fulfilled, the fall back answer is always that it will happen in the next life. And you know, those explanations could turn out to be true. We won't know until we get there. But there is also another possibility that most believers refuse to even seriously consider: maybe the whole damn thing is completely made up, and we are simply discounting the evidence that proves it.

I thought of it like a science experiment. What if you were conducting an experiment and every time the results were not in accordance with your hypothesis you decided to simply ignore them and found ways to explain them away? But then, of course, every time your predictions were correct, you told everyone in the world about it, and took it to be solid evidence that confirmed your hypothesis? Surely this would not be good reasoning. It clearly shows a bias in only acknowledging the results that one wants to see. It seemed to me that this was what we were doing in religious matters. Compared to predictions in science, prophecies and promptings tend to be vague and ambiguous, sometimes only meant figuratively (or at least that is what people say), and other times literal, or both. This makes them very difficult, if not impossible to test.

If someone felt inspired to go talk to a person and an amazing experience happened as a result, they would surely think that it must have been a prompting from the Holy Ghost. But no one ever talks about the times in which they felt prompted to do something and nothing significant happened from it, or it went badly. They just find some way to explain it away, and it is soon forgotten. Perhaps we are just fooling ourselves. If you only focus on those times when it works out, and ignore the others, it could make it seem as though a mere coincidence is more than that. Maybe 'the Spirit' is just a figment of one's imagination, and the times when it seems to work out are just coincidences and the results of one's own efforts.

The seeds of doubt had been sown in a testimony that, as a missionary, I had believed was unshakable; they soon began to sprout. During those first few years of college, I learned a lot more about evolutionary theory from some of my classes. At first I considered it heretical. I read Darwin's original work mostly to try and prove him wrong. But Darwin himself makes a better case for evolution (at least for the layperson) than just about anyone else, and it seemed like he had a pretty good answer for any of the objections I could think of. Over the course of a year or two, I kept thinking on it, and finally came to believe that the argument was quite strong. I did not know whether it was true, but I could not refute it, and I had no better theory that would account for the evidence.

The implications of this were startling. I was attending college at an LDS school, so the professors who were teaching me the theory obviously felt that you could believe in the church and evolution at the same time, but I wondered how consistent that

position really was. I asked a paleontology professor once, during a geology course, whether he believed that humans had evolved from lower life forms, and he said yes, but God definitely did it. I was not able to ask any follow-up questions to get him to elaborate, but I wished that I could have, because I found that answer to be very confusing. I thought the whole point of evolutionary theory was to show how everything could have come to be without God. Darwin certainly did not think that evolution was directed by any intelligent being. It seemed to me that this professor must have had some sort of hybrid theory that was not completely Darwinian evolution. But then, I guess a religious person who believes in evolution would have to think something like that. It would not make any sense to say that there is a God who did nothing.

I wondered, though, if perhaps these people were simply unwilling to accept the full ramifications of the theory. Maybe they just could not bring themselves to face the truth because of social or psychological reasons. To me, it seemed like if you accepted evolutionary theory at all, you had to accept the entire thing. I began to seriously wonder if the whole idea of God was just a myth. Here I had spent two years teaching people about God and the church, testifying of it, and trying my best to convince them that it was true. At the time, I sincerely believed it. But now I was having some very serious doubts. I knew all of this was heretical, so I kept the doubts to myself for the most part. I still did not feel certain about it either way, but it was on my mind a lot.

In the middle of my junior year I took my first philosophy course. I found it to be very interesting and I did really well, so

I signed up for more classes as a senior, including one in the philosophy of religion. It seemed to me that when it came to philosophical arguments for God's existence, the atheists had the better of it by a wide margin. I have never really felt like the theistic arguments for God's existence were very persuasive, even though back then I had not yet formulated specific objections to them. I had struggled for a long time before that with the problem of evil, though in a more informal way. It seemed like the world was so cruel and unfair sometimes. Evolutionary theory could explain that quite easily, even though the answer might not be very pleasing. So, we could either believe the complicated theological answers meant to explain why a perfect God who cares about us would allow evil (none of which seemed entirely satisfying, at least to me), or believe that there is no such being, and that is the real reason why there is evil. To my mind, this argument, coupled with evolutionary theory, seemed far more plausible than any theological account.

More than anything, though, it was Hume. The cornerstone of my religious belief was the miraculous experience that I had. Hume's essay on miracles had me questioning even that. It seemed like Hume's argument, if extrapolated to my situation, would be to ask which was more likely, that I had experienced a genuine miracle, or that I had somehow been mistaken? Particularly given my track record in other instances, I figured that it had to be the latter. I felt that my own credibility as a witness, even to myself, had taken a major hit because of those missteps. It seemed to be evidence that there was something that was not entirely right with me. Sometimes creative people, especially artists and writers, tend to be a little unhinged, and maybe just a little out of touch with reality. Perhaps I had

somehow invented the whole thing in my own mind. I did not really know. I still could not fully explain it, but I figured that it must have been something like that.

All of this had a very destabilizing effect upon my other beliefs. That experience was the rock upon which everything else was built, and once I did not really believe in it anymore, my testimony began to erode rapidly. If evolution was true, and strong evil people usually get away with it, while the weak suffer and never really receive justice, and miracles are so improbable that one is never really justified in believing them, then what was left as a reason to believe? The *ontological argument*? Are you kidding me? The cosmological and fine-tuning arguments were a little more persuasive, but it still seemed to me that the arguments against God's existence, taken as a whole, represented a complete picture that was far more probable.

It was around this time that I decided to read the literary classics (a project that I am still working on) and I was starting at the beginning with the *Illiad*. I also happened to be reading the Old Testament for my scripture study, and I found the similarities between the two to be quite disconcerting. The ancient Greeks used the gods to explain natural phenomena, their success or failure in battle, etc. They even offered animal sacrifices concerning these things just as the ancient Hebrews did.

For some reason, I was particularly struck by the comparison between Achilles' talking war horses and Balaam's talking donkey. I do not know why that one bothered me so much, the

story of Balaam is just a minor one in the Old Testament that may even be apocryphal, but I did not see any way to interpret it metaphorically, and the whole thing just seemed so absurd all of a sudden. I am really supposed to take these stories seriously? That Jonah actually spent three days in the belly of a whale? That the entire earth was flooded, but every species was saved on the ark? That people used to live for nearly a thousand years, and so on? And even in the New Testament, that people are cured of blindness by rubbing spittle on their eyes, and some are raised from the dead, and actual evil spirits from an unseen world were cast out of others? This was supposed to be genuine factual history? I was starting to think that it was no more reasonable to believe in the Bible than in Greek mythology. Religious belief was beginning to seem not only incorrect, but actually kind of silly to me.

I was turning into a skeptic. I had not yet stopped attending church, or praying, or reading the scriptures, but inside, I was changing. I felt like I was just going through the motions without really believing that there was any real substance to it. When I left college and went to graduate school, I finally decided that I was not going to attend church anymore. However, because I had gone to a church-owned school, everyone knew that I was a Mormon. I actually considered myself to be more of an agnostic at that point, or perhaps even an atheist, but I did not bother to correct them. If anybody asked me what my religious beliefs were, my official answer was 'confused'. And really I was. I still did not entirely know what to make of the miraculous experience that I had. That was the one thing that I could never completely dismiss, though I did not completely believe in it either. After several years have

passed, and the memory has faded, it is difficult to know whether what you experienced was real or not. I assumed that something had happened, but that there had to be some other explanation for it. However, I never felt entirely satisfied with that either.

My family was very concerned about me through all of this, and they tried hard to get me to go back to church. From their point of view, I was potentially facing a fate that was far worse than death, and they tried to convince me that I was making a terrible mistake. Those conversations were quite difficult. I knew that they cared about me, and wanted what they believed was best for me, but I just did not believe in it anymore, or at least I did not think that I did.

I did not go to church for about two and a half years, but I actually did not live too much differently than I had as an active member. I was aware that this was a little strange. There are not very many chaste atheists out there. Looking back on it now, I think it was important that I did not do anything that would have put my church membership in jeopardy during this time. I knew that if I took a step like that, I would be excommunicated, and it would be very difficult for me to come back. It is not that it is impossible to repent of such sins, but I just do not think that I ever would have done it. I probably would have been so committed to non-belief at that point that there would have been no turning back for me. Perhaps I knew this. I did not think that it even mattered to me at the time; in fact, I even thought about having my name removed from the church's records voluntarily, but it must have mattered more to me than I was acknowledging. I did not even try to date outside of the

church because I knew where it might lead. I came up with all sorts of excuses for this, and part of it was that I was shy, but really I think I was just never quite ready to take that step because I was still so unsettled about what to believe.

I did not even drink alcohol, except when I bought some very cheap wine from the grocery store just to try it, and honestly it tasted awful. I am guessing that the more expensive stuff is better, but give me grape juice or a grape soda any day over that. There was also one other time when a friend convinced me to try it when we were all hanging out at a bar. I could not really give him a good reason for why I did not want to, so I did. It was an interesting experience, being drunk, I do have to say that, but I never ended up doing it again. My friends always wanted to go to the bars, and sometimes I would come along and just not drink, but I always felt awkward about it. I remember after one afternoon class that I had, several of the students and the professor liked to go out for a beer at a pub close to campus. They were nice enough to include me, and I went a few times just to socialize with them, though I did not drink. But I felt really out of place. I still remember heading home after one of those occasions feeling like a man without a country. It did not seem like I belonged with members of the church, but I also did not feel like I really belonged with anyone else either.

I did make some different choices as far as entertainment. Church members are counseled not to watch R-rated movies, but that just meant that there were a lot of really good ones that I hadn't seen, so I was catching up. One of them was *The Godfather*. I also watched a few others about organized crime,

and I was struck by the similarities between the mafia and street gangs, and what the Book of Mormon describes as ‘secret combinations’. I somewhat dismissed it as coincidence, but it still got me thinking. I had a friend who had been raised as a born-again Christian, and we were joking one time about how sometimes it felt like some of those Biblical prophecies about the end times were actually being fulfilled, and it was freaking us both out a little. Either one of us took it very seriously, but the thought stayed in the back of my mind nonetheless. Could it really be possible that it might actually be true after all?

Right around this time I flew home to visit my parents for Christmas break. My dad had decided to try talking to me again about church. After I had been home a few days, one night he turned off the TV and just asked me what I thought about it. So, I gave him some of my objections. I told him about many of the things in the Old Testament that seemed silly and implausible to me. Warren Jeffs, the leader of the Fundamentalist LDS church at the time, had been arrested and was in the news quite a bit then, so I asked him why he believed that Joseph Smith was a prophet and Warren Jeffs was not. We both agreed that Warren Jeffs was not a prophet, but my dad still believed that Joseph Smith was. Could he really say, though, that if he had met Joseph Smith in person that he would still feel the same way? If he and I had been born into the fundamentalist sect rather than the more mainstream part of Mormonism we would have been taught all our lives that their leaders were prophets. How would we have known that to be false? Was that really a different situation than the one that we were actually in? I also talked about the theory of evolution and why I thought it was incompatible with religious belief.

As far as a debate, I felt like I had definitely gotten the better of it. I found out later, though, that my dad was playing possum a little bit. He had decided beforehand to make sure that it did not turn into an argument, because, as he said, you could make an argument for just about anything, and he did not think that the discussion would accomplish very much if that happened. So he held back a little. I think he was wise to do that, and perhaps even inspired, because when we first began to talk about it I automatically kicked into philosopher-mode. My sole focus was on coming up with good arguments to win the debate. But he was very respectful of me and calm, and I tried to be as well. He heard me out, asked some questions about evolutionary theory that he did not understand, and asked me about some of the other things that I had said. I felt like he really listened to me and did not just dismiss or ignore what I had to say. He acknowledged that he did not have answers for most of my questions. In fact, he said that he had not even thought about some of them before, and he acknowledged that they were legitimate concerns. But he bore a simple testimony of the Joseph Smith story, and told me why he believed it and a few of his own personal experiences. My mom then came in and joined the conversation. I could tell how much they both cared about me. Even though I did not think that they were right, I knew that they were only trying to talk to me about it because they loved me, and they were concerned about me. Their kind and respectful demeanor eventually softened me up so that I was more open to listening to them. It had been a long time since I had felt the Spirit, but I felt it pretty strongly then. It is a different feeling than anything else, and cannot be fully explained in words, but I recognized it when I felt it again. I do not think that my parents even realized that I was receiving a

message from the Holy Ghost that confirmed and went far beyond what they were even saying, but that was the case. It was not so much what they said that convinced me, it was what I felt as they were saying it.

My dad gave me a simple invitation to try going back to church, if nothing else, just so that I could have more friends to do things with. I brushed it off at first. I had no intention of going to church merely for social reasons. If I did not believe that it was true, I was not going to go. I did not make any promises that I would do it, but the conversation had given me a lot to think about. I had definitely felt the Spirit, and it stuck in my mind that I needed to go back to church. Within a few days I started to read the scriptures again, and a few days after that, I started to pray again. Once I went home, I did begin attending church again.

One of the main things that I felt during that conversation with my parents was a witness from the Holy Ghost that the miraculous experience that I had was indeed true. In fact, I realized that part of it had already been fulfilled, and this made me think that the rest would be in due time. We will see. In light of this, though, I began to reconsider Hume's argument against miracles.

### **Rethinking Humean Skepticism**

Recall that on Hume's account, a miracle is a 'violation of the laws of nature'. That is not a bad definition, but it has to be understood in context. Hume is perhaps most famous for his views on causation. Unlike many of his contemporaries, and

those who had preceded him, Hume realized that we learn about causation strictly through our experience with the world. He separated claims into two types, *analytic* and *synthetic*. Analytic claims are *a priori*, or in other words, it can be known whether they are true or false without relying upon experience. If a claim is true by definition, such as 'a triangle has three angles' then it is analytic; to deny it would result in a contradiction. Analytic claims are true or false by necessity. But Hume realized that a law of nature, such as gravity, or that all people die, is not *a priori*, it is only known through experience. Hume says that we come to believe that A causes B simply because of the 'constant conjunction' of the two events in our experience. This expectation eventually becomes so firm that we consider it a 'law' of nature, but there is no actual necessity that it must be that way. We consider it to be law-like simply because it has always been that way in our past experience, but it would not result in a contradiction if it did not hold in a present or future instance. Thus, a miracle, or 'transgression of the laws of nature by a particular volition of the Deity', in the Humean sense really just turns out to be a violation of one's expectations of how the natural world behaves, based upon their past experience with it, and, to a lesser extent, the testimony of others concerning their past observations.

We should not understand a 'violation of the laws of nature' to mean doing the impossible. Hume acknowledged that miracles are logically possible, or maybe another way to say this is that it is not *a priori* that such claims are false. Miracles could in fact be manifestations of a higher natural law that is not understood by those who witness it. Those witnesses consider it to be a violation of the laws of nature, as they understand them,

but since their understanding of nature is far from complete, no one should assume that the generalizations they have made to 'laws' are truly inviolable.

In fact, these generalizations based upon experience can often be mistaken. In his essay, Hume used the example of an Indian prince who refused to believe testimony concerning the effects of frost. The story seems to have originally come from the work of John Locke (Essay 4.15.5). In Locke's version, a Dutch ambassador told the King of Siam (Thailand) that sometimes in Holland the water would become solid during cold weather so that people could walk on it, and that it was so firm that it would bear the weight of an elephant, if any were there. To this the king replied, 'Hithero I have believed the strange things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man, but now I am sure you lie.' It is not that surprising that the king did not believe it. He had never lived in a climate where it got cold enough to have experienced ice for himself. It would have been impossible for him to tell *a priori* whether such a claim was true or false, and based upon his own constant and uniform experience, and that of nearly all of the people around him, such a claim would sound absurd. But of course ice is a common well-established phenomenon in other parts of the world, and today we all know the claim to be true. In this case, the testimony was indeed accurate.

Hume does not consider ice or frost to be miraculous because it is a natural phenomenon in other parts of the world. He says that those in warm climates would not know for sure what happens to water in other parts of the world, such as in Russia or Holland, so though it would take a strong testimony to

convince them, he believes that it would, and should be possible to do so. He instead calls it 'extraordinary' - at least for the King of Siam - and, I suppose, simply ordinary for those of us who have lived in cold climates. He also makes a distinction between the 'marvelous' and the 'miraculous'. 'Extraordinary' would be the most probable, and 'miraculous' would be the least. In order for an event to be considered 'miraculous' it would have to be contrary to nearly everyone's uniform experience all across the world, and that is precisely why Hume thinks that a story of a 'miraculous' event has a lower probability of being true than an account of something that is 'extraordinary'.

These distinctions ultimately break down, however, because each of us would be relying upon our own personal experience to categorize the event. The whole point of Hume's analysis is that one should trust one's own experience with the 'laws of nature', as he or she knows them, over testimony, so having never experienced it for himself, the King of Siam would have no way of knowing whether ice was really 'miraculous' or merely 'extraordinary'. We might be able to make that distinction from our point of view, because of our familiarity with ice, but the king has not experienced the same things that we have. I fail to see how, from his perspective, a claim that an elephant could walk on frozen water without breaking through would be any different than someone relating a story of a miracle. To say that there would be a distinction would mean that the king would have to believe the testimony of people from other parts of the world (even supposing that he had access to this additional testimony) and conclude from that testimony that the story was more probable than a story of a



miraculous event because there would be more witnesses to confirm it. But relying upon testimony to say that one thing which has never been experienced is more probable than another thing that has also never been experienced makes no sense according to the argument. The king should not believe any testimony that seems contrary to his experience with the laws of nature no matter how many witnesses there are for it. If someone were to tell him that things are different in cold climates he would not even know what a 'cold climate' was; that claim itself would rely on testimony rather than experience. Before he was told such an outlandish story it probably would not have even occurred to him that water could be in anything but a liquid state (he may or may not have been aware that it could turn into steam) because he would never have experienced it any other way. For the king, this would be what Hume calls a 'natural proof', or among the most certain and fixed laws of nature, and based upon his personal experience, it would be. A report that violates this would be 'miraculous' for him because it would seemingly be universally true that water never does this.

It is different for each of us what is considered 'extraordinary', 'marvelous', or 'miraculous' based upon the regularity of how often that event occurs in our own experience. Those that happen rarely, but still with some frequency would be considered extraordinary, or marvelous, while an account of something that has never happened in our experience, or that we do not even think could happen, would be considered miraculous. The same event could be considered extraordinary or even common and ordinary to one person, and miraculous to another, as ice was for the Dutch ambassador and the king.

Imagine that you were one of the explorers who accompanied Marco Polo on his expedition around the world and when you returned you tried to tell your fellow Europeans who had never been more than 50 miles from where they were born about a giraffe, or an elephant, or even a camel. While the King of Siam marveled at the notion that an elephant could walk on solid water without sinking, Europeans would have been just as astonished by reports of the elephant itself (which ironically would be quite ordinary to the King of Siam). Ice would have been very common for them, but the idea of an animal as large as an elephant, that could pick things up with its very long and flexible nose would have sounded truly ridiculous to anyone who has not seen it for themselves. They would surely have thought that you were drunk, or trying to tease them if you tried to relate such a story.

What if someone had seen all sorts of animals during their lifetime, but for whatever reason, they had never seen nor heard of a snake. Think about how difficult it would be to describe them to that person. He or she would think you were a total lunatic. They may even have some practical questions that you would probably have a difficult time explaining adequately, such as how an animal with no legs would be able to get around. How could it extend its jaws to swallow something much larger than its entire head? Now you are saying that some of them not only bite, but spit poison, and others (which are, of course, gigantic) wrap themselves around something and squeeze it to death? Are you insane? You really expect this person to believe this? Would you, if you were them? It is interesting that such claims seem so obvious to those who have a familiarity with snakes, but they would seem so absurd to

anyone without that familiarity. One who reports a religious miracle to those who have never experienced anything like it themselves is in much the same position.

Arguments that in some instances seem quite absurd are viewed very differently once one has access to different empirical data. A good example of this is the debate about whether the sun rotated around the earth or vice versa. It does look as though the sun rotates around the earth with the naked eye. It is no wonder that people believed that for so long. It is a view that is solidly based upon empirical observation, and if you and I only had access to that empirical data, that is probably what we would believe too. Today we laugh at the thought that anyone ever actually believed that, but it was really only after we started to have better telescopes and other instruments that gave us a much wider range of empirical data that the theoretical explanations for why the earth was rotating around the sun were believed.

An argument for why the earth could not be spinning was that, if it was, we would fly off. And you know, if tiny people lived on a softball that was spinning rapidly, they would fly off. Not to mention that when they were on the bottom of the ball they would simply fall off. They also believed anciently that if the earth was moving we would feel the wind. Such arguments are obviously wrong to us today only because our empirical knowledge has substantially broadened and deepened. If you were simply trying to extrapolate based solely upon your everyday experience, they would actually seem pretty reasonable, and would be solidly supported by the empirical data that you were familiar with.

We must remember that our experience is limited. If one has not had the same experiences, then what they perceive as the 'laws of nature' could be different. This does not necessarily mean that such generalizations are always false, but they may turn out to be more narrow and restricted than we believe them to be. For example, Euclidian geometry is not false, it is just restricted only to flat surfaces. Euclidian geometry could be considered a specialized case of Riemann geometry, which can be used for both flat and curved surfaces, and thus is more general and complete. Galileo's insights into the motion of falling and thrown bodies near the surface of the earth, and Kepler's insights into the laws of planetary motion are both mostly correct within their frame of reference, but Newton's theory brought the laws of celestial motion and the laws of motion for objects close to the earth into one complete system. Newton's theory has now become a limiting case of Einstein's theory, which in turn may one day become a limiting case, along with quantum mechanics, of some other yet more general and comprehensive theory. Though the newer theories may be thought of as slightly more accurate, the older ones are not necessarily false, they are just more limited in scope. Perhaps the laws of nature are law-like only within the narrow frame of reference that we have experience with.

We ought to consider how a Deity would perform miracles. 'The glory of God is intelligence' modern revelation tells us (D&C 93:36). The LDS view is that God is a perfected man. At one time he lived on an earth much like ours and was in the same state that we are in right now, but ultimately he was perfected and became a God. The way that it is stated is: 'As man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may become.'

What has not been revealed is how the whole process began, or whether there even was a beginning. It seems as though there are only two possible options. One is that some civilization developed purely by chance on a planet similar to ours, with no intelligent being guiding the process. Once this civilization had advanced to a certain level, it would have begun creating others. The other option is that the process has always been going on: there was no beginning, or first generation, and there will likely be no end, or final generation. We are not told which way it is. One might speculate that our Heavenly Father would also have a God that he worships, who is the father of his spirit, just as he is the father of ours, but none of that is certain. For all we know, he was part of the first generation of Gods (if there was a first) or he is the only being this advanced, though that seems unlikely based upon what we have been told. All that we know for sure is that at one point he was as we are now, and that we have the potential to become as he is now.

I want to be very clear that I am *not* saying that God is an alien; the claim is instead that he is a human being who is much more advanced than we are. Or, perhaps a better way of putting it is that we are like him. Mormons take the scripture in Genesis 1:26-27 literally: ‘And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.’ In other words, we look just like him (or them, as ‘us’ would indicate that there was more than one person helping with the creation).

If God created the earth and everything on it, then obviously he would have a complete knowledge of the laws of nature, and

how to manipulate them if he chose to do so. Miracles such as turning water into wine, parting the Red Sea, or healing someone who was born blind would have been accomplished in accordance with some higher natural law not yet understood by man. (Of course, this does not mean that everything that we do not understand is a miracle. Miracles would only be a small subset of phenomena that is not understood.) These works may seem impossible to us, but they probably are not if one had a complete understanding of nature. The prophet performing the miracle would likely not even understand themselves how it was accomplished, and would thus be doing it through faith, but the actual cause of the event would be God acting upon the natural world through his knowledge of chemistry and physics, etc.

I watched a television program once in which they were discussing the miracles of Exodus and scientists were trying to find naturalistic explanations for them. Of course there would obviously have to be a naturalistic explanation for them if they really happened, but I disagree with the assumption that finding such an explanation would prove that God did not do it; perhaps all that you would have found is the way in which he did. There would ultimately have to be a naturalistic explanation for all miracles, but since those who witness them would not understand how they were done it would still be considered a miracle by them. It is a transgression of the laws of nature, but only in the sense that it transgresses the laws of nature as they currently understand them, and that is why it creates wonder and awe.

Do we really think that we are the only ones who have reached the level of technological and scientific advancement that we presently have? Many scientists are more than willing to acknowledge that there could be extraterrestrial civilizations somewhere out there that may be far more technologically advanced than ours. But what if there have already been other human civilizations that have reached a much higher level? What if the father of our spirits, and the being whom we worship (well, some of us anyway) is part of such a civilization?

Knowledge and technological advancement in our own society is currently growing at an exponential rate. The estimates are that scientific knowledge doubles about every 10-20 years. There is no way to know whether that will continue, but imagine how much our overall knowledge could continue to expand once we begin to colonize the solar system and explore other nearby systems. What if our civilization continued to exist for another one million years? Think about all that would be learned in that much time, and just how far technology and civilization could advance. Geologically speaking, one million years is not that long. Carbon dating suggests that the dinosaurs had their mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period, roughly 65 million years ago. Assuming that our civilization can avoid mass extinction, imagine where it will be 65 million years from now. And really, even that is not all that long in terms of geologic time. The estimate for how long the earth has existed is 4.5 billion years. Think of how far our society would be able to advance if it continued to exist for another 4.5 billion years. Perhaps by then they would have found a way to completely conquer death. They would have long ago attained

complete mastery over the earth's weather, and could control it at will. Imagine that a member of such a society went back in time (which is also something that they would probably be able to do) to Biblical times, or even to our own day. They would be able to do things that would astonish us, and may even appear to be impossible. But just because they are impossible for us does not mean that they are actually impossible. If it is true that God created and seeded the earth, then he has been God longer than the earth has existed; in fact, probably much, much longer.

I think everyone would have to acknowledge that the *Pearl of Great Price* is truly remarkable in its scale. Few people (even astronomers) in the 19th century would have had an understanding of the vastness and immensity of space that Joseph Smith had. Of course he claimed to have known it through revelation. Moses chapter 1 says that God has created 'worlds without number', that many have already passed away, and that there are many that now stand. In fact, there are so many that they are said to be 'innumerable to man' but are numbered to God, because he created them, and cares about them. As one earth passes away, another comes, and there is no end to his works. How might this be accomplished? Well, with enough energy, he could create new matter. We usually only think of it going in the other direction, in which the enormous amounts of energy stored in matter can be released, but Einstein's equation also indicates that a being who was advanced enough to do so could also go in the other direction as well. Consider the implications of that: with access to an enormous store of energy, and the knowledge to do it, one could literally create and organize new worlds. Is there any doubt that the being described here, the creator of so many

worlds that we cannot even count them (let alone count all of the people on them) would be more than capable of parting the Red Sea or raising someone from the dead if he chose to do so? Such a being would have the knowledge to manipulate and control matter and energy in any way that is possible. Perhaps this gives us some idea of what it means to be omnipotent.

I am not entirely in agreement with Hume that we learn causation merely by the 'constant conjunction' of two events; I would quibble with him over the details of that, because I do not feel that mere conjunction is enough to show causation, but I do agree with his general point that we learn causation by recognizing that in our experience the two events are inextricably linked together. This raises an interesting question for miracles. How many times would one have to witness a miraculous event before it would stop being miraculous? Presumably, the first few times it was observed it would be 'miraculous', then merely 'marvelous', then 'extraordinary', and finally, it would simply come to be expected as an ordinary part of one's everyday experience in much the same way that we learn causation.

This is probably how it would actually happen, but there is a potential problem with this model when it comes to miracles. Consider the epistemic perspective of Christ's chief disciple, the Apostle Peter. According to Hume's position, not only should we not believe in Christ's miracles, based upon what we read in the Bible, but Peter would not have justification to believe in them either, even if they happened right in front of him; he ought to just assume that it is some sort of trick or misperception rather than a true violation of the laws of nature.

By that standard, one would never believe that they had witnessed a genuine violation of the laws of nature, even if it kept happening over and over again, day after day. Peter would be obliged to never consider the event to be any more probable than the first time that it happened. This is because each and every time, he would 'weigh one miracle against the other' and conclude that it must not be a genuine violation of the laws of nature. No past instances of the supposed violation would be considered credible, so we reach the absurd conclusion that nothing which was initially labeled 'miraculous' would ever be believed, no matter how many times it was directly experienced by that person.

Even if the experiences were considered to have more of a cumulative effect, in which each had a very slight probability - say millions to one that it is true - even thousands of such experiences combined may not be enough to tip the scale over a 50% probability so that we would say that it is more likely to be true than not. The problem with this kind of thinking, though, is that we do not really know what the probabilities actually are. You may think that the odds are millions to one, based upon your experience, but there is no guarantee that is really the case. Perhaps the event is as common as ice, and you have just always lived in a warm climate.

Peter followed Christ for three years, and based upon the Biblical account, he would have probably witnessed thousands of miracles during that time. He may not have had any idea how they were being done, but eventually it would have become just a normal part of his everyday life. At what point would his belief in miracles be epistemically justified?

Later on, Peter even performed some miracles himself through Christ's name. He healed a beggar who had been lame from birth, and he even raised a woman named Tabitha from the dead. (He also struck two people dead who attempted to lie to the Lord and withhold some of their possessions when they had promised to give them up; not all miracles are in favor of the people for whom they are performed.) Surely Peter's belief that these were genuine miraculous events would be justified, would it not? I suppose it is always possible that someone had hired actors to deceive him, or that the people who were healed were never really sick to begin with, or that it was some sort of placebo effect, but would that really be the most probable and reasonable thing for him to believe? I do not know about you, but I kind of think I would be a Christian by that point, no matter what the skeptics said about it. At some point it would become absurd not to believe. Even Pyrrho would probably think you were being ridiculous if you still did not believe after all that.

I consider Peter's knowledge of miracles to be a baseline. After all that he experienced his religious knowledge would be as certain and fixed as any belief based upon empirical data can be. So, considering this a standard for belief to which all reasonable unbiased persons would assent, if they had been given the same experiences, let us now evaluate the reasonableness of belief for some of the other disciples. Consider, for example, Tabitha's friends and family. Let's assume that most, if not all of them had never had the opportunity to meet Christ in person, but had only learned of him through the preaching of the Apostles. According to the story (Acts 9) they had not even sent for Peter until after she

had already died. It was not a coma, she had not merely passed out, she was dead, and had been for some time. Once Peter got there the widows showed him all of the things that she had made for them. Then he had them all leave. When he came back out, he presented her to them alive. The story says that the whole thing became known throughout all of Joppa, and that many believed in the Lord as a result. Would you have been one of them if Tabitha was someone that you knew?

Those stories that the believers in Joppa had heard about the miracles that Jesus performed during his life would now have been somewhat confirmed to them, because they had experienced something similar themselves. Those incredible, seemingly far-fetched stories would suddenly sound much more plausible. They would not have seen the miracle themselves, but they would know that something had happened. Before, she was dead, and now she was alive. We would assume that those involved were considered trustworthy people, not given to exaggeration or lying. The level of certainty that those in Joppa would have had would not be as great as Peter's, because, among other things, this may have been only a one time event for them rather than a frequent occurrence, as it was for him, but while belief in this miracle would not be infallible, it would still be reasonable, would it not?

Now suppose that you lived somewhere else and had simply heard this story from the people in Joppa. We do not generally consider testimony to be as reliable as one's personal experience, and that seems reasonable. There is always a possibility that someone is trying to deceive you for some reason, or they may have simply gotten it wrong. It is natural to

trust yourself, and your own judgment, a bit more than what you hear from others. Still though, if a friend or associate whose judgment you trusted, and who you would believe if they had told you just about anything else, had a story about a miracle, wouldn't you be more likely to believe them than if it came from a random stranger? Even if you did not know with certainty whether to believe it or not, it would at least make you wonder, wouldn't it? It may not be appropriate to just believe the story entirely without reservation either, but at least you ought to be open to the possibility that it could be true.

Now Hume does correctly point out that the stories in the Bible are from a very long time ago, among a 'barbarous' people unfamiliar with modern scientific knowledge, and we do not have firsthand accounts of these events. We do not personally know any of the people who say that they experienced them, or those who wrote about them. This places them one step further removed even from hearing the story from a trusted friend. But if one has had some faith-promoting experiences of their own, and those that they know have had some, those experiences tend to confirm the stories from scripture. We would not know that they are true with one hundred percent certainty, of course, but one would be more open to thinking that such things are at least possible.

One final point on Hume. He argues that the probability that miraculous experiences are true is further lowered by the fact that different denominations claim to have them. Such experiences would be competing claims that cancel each other out. I believe this to be the weakest of Hume's objections. Does the fact that there are five hundred philosophers throughout

history that have philosophical views that differ from Hume's somehow lower the probability that Hume's position is correct? If various empiricists disagree over the finer points, does this somehow lower the probability that the overall view is correct? The fact that there is disagreement does not really prove anything.

Thomas Aquinas claimed to have had some kind of revelatory spiritual experience. Though usually very prolific, he abruptly stopped writing. When the friend and secretary that he usually dictated his work to tried to get him to return to writing, he told him, 'The end of my labors has come. All that I have written appears to be as so much straw after the things that have been revealed to me.' He never was persuaded to continue writing, and died not long after that. Would his experience be mutually exclusive with mine? Hume seems to think so, because Aquinas was Catholic and I am Mormon; Hume thinks of them as contraries (they are contraries rather than contradictories because both cannot be true at the same time, but both could be false at the same time). If that is the case, then they would cancel each other out, thereby further lowering the probability for both.

However, I would disagree with the idea that Aquinas' experience is necessarily contrary to mine. It is true that the two denominations have many significant disagreements over a number of different points of doctrine. I would agree that the two churches make contrary claims in some areas, and because of that, both churches could not be fully correct in all of their doctrines at the same time. But we need not conclude from this that both are false, as that is only one of the possibilities;

perhaps one is completely true, and the other is completely false; or, it may be the case that each is correct on some points of doctrine and incorrect on others. Furthermore, religious experiences are not necessarily the same as philosophical views, or points of doctrine. Are we going to say that if a Republican and a Democrat witnessed a bank robbery that both of their testimonies concerning it are nullified because they would strongly disagree on other matters? Unless the two accounts themselves are directly contrary, there is no need to say that; and, even if they were, once again, we should not overlook the possibility that one of them could still be fully true, or both could be partially true.

In reality, disagreement between two or more accounts does not lessen the probability for each one individually, it merely lowers the probability that all of them are true at the same time. Hume seems to be thinking of the odds in this way:  $1/10 \times 1/10 = 1/100$ . Or, he may be thinking of it in terms of subtraction, as in:  $1/10 - 1/10 = 0$ . I am not entirely sure exactly how he thinks that each experience would detract from the probability of the others, but the point is that the claim was never that all of them are true at the same time, it is just that at least one among them is true. If anything, perhaps it would be more appropriate to add the fractions together, as in:  $1/10 + 1/10 = 1/5$ . This is because if any individual miraculous experience turned out to be true it would be enough to prove the overall thesis that there is a supreme being who sometimes intervenes in the natural world. The combined probability represents the likelihood that this overall thesis is true. Each individual testimony of a miraculous event would be sufficient to establish the truth of that thesis, even if reports of other miraculous events turned out to be false

(and surely even if there is a God who performs miracles many of the accounts of miraculous events would in fact turn out to be false). I would not want to overstate this point however. I am not suggesting that probability overwhelmingly indicates that you ought to be a believer in miracles, only that it does not necessarily indicate that you should not be one either.

I think that it is certainly possible that God could have given personal revelation and answers to prayers to both Aquinas and to me. In fact, I would consider Aquinas to be a fairly credible witness. He appears to have been an intelligent man who would not have been easily deceived, and so far as I can tell, he lived according to the light and knowledge that he possessed. I obviously would not consider him a prophet (nor do Catholics, nor did he himself) but it would not be shocking to me to learn that God had given him revelation. God is the God of the whole earth, not just my particular denomination, and I believe that others can receive answers to their prayers and help from him as well. So far as I know, Gandhi did not claim that any miraculous experiences happened to him, but it would not be shocking to me to find out that God had inspired him in many of the things that he did as well. If it is true that there is a God, then he would probably inspire most (if not all) of the good works that people do, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, whether they are even aware of it at the time or not.

### **Scientific Skepticism**

Along with Hume, most modern scientists would entirely dismiss religious experience. Some brain scientists, in fact, believe that visions and other types of religious experience can



be attributed to temporal lobe epilepsy. Schizophrenics have also been known to believe that God has spoken to them, or in some cases, even that they themselves were God. If you had experienced something like what Thomas did, and you talked about it with a psychiatrist, some of them would probably just dismiss it as a hallucination or an overactive imagination, but others would probably be prescribing some medication for you. In any case, they most certainly would not believe that it was a legitimate miracle, because things like that do not happen in the scientist's world. They have to explain the event somehow, though, so they would just assume that there had to be some naturalistic explanation for it.

The question of whether there are miracles is not really a scientific one at all, because we already know what science would say. A fundamental assumption of the scientific paradigm is that there is always a naturalistic explanation, whether it has been discovered yet or not. If the natural cause of an event is not at that time known, they have the utmost confidence (one might even call it faith) that eventually one will be found. Scientists are committed to the principle of Ockham's razor, so any explanation that goes outside of nature is immediately dismissed.

The issue is really more of a metascience question. By that I mean that it is deeper and more fundamental because it questions an assumption that the scientific paradigm simply takes for granted from the outset, which is that it is always more rational, reasonable, and probable to believe a naturalistic explanation for an event over a supernatural one.

Imagine that Christ appeared at a meeting of the National Academy of Sciences. Do you think they would believe that it was really him? Some of them would probably be so shocked at the time that they would initially, but within hours their natural skepticism would begin to kick in (especially after their colleagues who were not present had gotten hold of them), and they would very quickly, and probably quite desperately, be looking for alternative hypotheses. Perhaps they had been served some bad cocktail shrimp or something. Maybe some religious nut had somehow managed to spike the punch with a hallucinogenic drug. Maybe someone had created a 3D holographic image that one can speak with and touch. Once their colleagues had set them straight, any of these explanations would seem more reasonable to a scientist than that it was really him.

How would you would react if it happened to you? Would you say, as Thomas did, 'My Lord, my God' or would you say 'Oh, I'm not going to fall for any of this nonsense. I know that you are not real because that would be far too improbable. It must be my dang temporal lobe epilepsy acting up again.' That is your position? That even if you saw and spoke with Christ, and felt the marks in his hands and feet, you still would not believe it? And you think *that* is epistemically virtuous? One wonders what it would take to convince you then. What kind of evidence would you need?

Can one really call themselves an empiricist and reject direct sense impressions simply because they are not in accordance with theory? Perhaps one should consider the bird watcher's proverb of John James Audubon, which says, 'When the bird

and the book disagree, always believe the bird'. (Some sources omit the word 'always'. For our purposes, we might say if not always, at least usually.) A true empiricist would believe what they are perceiving over and above any opposing argument or theory because sense impressions are considered more basic and fundamental. Theories are based upon generalizations and past experience, but when there is new and even surprising data, an empiricist has to adjust the theory. At least that is what is supposed to happen, though often it does not.

Suppose that someone at that hypothetical meeting had collected DNA samples so that there was hard scientific evidence to back up the claim that he was really there. Would it even matter? I am not so sure that it would, because even if you could somehow find a matching sample, wouldn't it still be considered more probable that someone had faked the sample somehow than that it was really Christ's DNA? Most atheists would simply reject the evidence. One DNA sample would not be enough to get them to change their entire worldview.

The Pharisees said to Christ 'Show us a sign, and we will believe.' But he did not give them one. This is interesting because according to the Biblical account, he must have performed thousands of miracles over the course of three years, and he had already performed some of them right in front of the Pharisees. Yet, when they asked for a sign, he did not give them one; instead, he told them that a wicked and adulterous generation seeks after signs. We might wonder why he did not just perform a miracle for them. I think it is because he knew that they would not believe it anyway, no matter what he showed them, at least not in the long-term. What most people

do not realize is that it takes faith to interpret a miraculous experience as such. Skeptics often say 'I will believe it when I see it' but in fact, most of them would not believe it even then. That is why miracles do not convert. They are simply dismissed by the doubters, who interpret whatever happened based upon their own particular worldview, and argue that it does not prove what it is meant to prove, even if they cannot deny that the event occurred. When the Pharisees could no longer deny that Christ had performed miracles, then they said that he must have done them by the power of the devil. They would not believe that it was true no matter what they were shown as evidence, because then they simply denied the evidence.

Most of us do not change our minds, we just change our arguments. When an argument is found to be unsatisfactory, we tend to just regroup, reformulate it, and try again. We rarely give up on our most fundamental core beliefs as long as there is any hope of saving them. This is true of both sides. The same 'facts' are interpreted through different lenses so that each side sees the evidence that they want to see.

There is a story from LDS church history that illustrates this point well. Martin Harris took a piece of paper on which Joseph Smith had written several lines of characters as a sample of the 'Reformed Egyptian' contained in the Book of Mormon to a linguistics expert named Charles Anthon. After examining the characters, Anthon told Harris that they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic, and that the translation of them that had also been provided was indeed correct, even signing a document that verified its authenticity. But then he asked how the record had been found, and after Harris had told him the

story, he asked for the document that he had signed, and when it was returned to him, he tore it up and said that there was no such thing as angels in modern times. He told Harris to bring the plates to him instead, and he would translate them. When Mr. Harris replied that he could not, and that part of the record was sealed, he reportedly said 'I cannot read a sealed book'. The story is thought by believers to be a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy (See Isaiah 29:11-14, 2 Nephi 27).

As one might expect, Anthon's version of what happened is much different. He gave two different accounts of the meeting, one in 1834, and another in 1841. In the 1834 letter he claimed that he knew all along that it was a hoax, and that he told Mr. Harris that he was being deceived and that it was a scheme to cheat him out of his money. He claimed that Harris had requested an expert opinion from him in writing, but that he had declined to give him one of any kind. One wonders why Anthon would not have been willing to give him a written opinion stating the same, if that was the case, but perhaps he meant that Harris only wanted a document certifying that the translation was correct, and that is what he declined to give him. In the account that Anthon gave in 1841, he did say that he had provided a written statement to Harris saying that in his opinion the document which he had analyzed was false. He claims to have done this for Mr. Harris' sake, so that he would realize that he was being deceived, and to let the fraudster know that someone was on to him, and knew of his attempted deception. He claimed that in this written statement he had said that the marks which he analyzed appeared to be merely an imitation of alphabetical characters that had no apparent meaning or translation, and were simply nonsense. To my

knowledge, no such written statement from Anthon has ever been found, nor is there any other evidence for it. But, I suppose if Anthon was telling the truth, it is possible that Martin Harris, or someone else later destroyed it.

Who knows what the truth really is. But in any case, Martin Harris decided to continue his financial assistance to Joseph Smith to help him get the Book of Mormon published. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Martin Harris was telling the truth about what happened. What would explain such strange behavior from the professor? Would it not arouse the interest of a scholar to find out how a person with no formal training in ancient languages could have correctly translated those characters? After some reflection, though, it becomes quite obvious why he would have reacted the way that he did: he was concerned about his professional reputation! Imagine what his colleagues would have thought if his name had become associated with this crackpot who was claiming to have had visions and gotten the record from an angel. Such a thing would have ruined him. At that time, Charles Anthon was considered one of the preeminent scholars of his day, which is why Martin Harris sought him out, but it would not have been so for long after that got out. He would have been ostracized and mocked by his peers, and society at large, just as they mocked Joseph Smith himself. Does anyone have any doubt of this, no matter which side of the story you believe? His peers would have assumed that the whole thing was a hoax, because the alternative would have simply been too unpalatable for them, and that Anthon had been deceived by it, which would have made him the laughingstock of the scholarly community. I have little doubt that when Anthon later wrote those two

accounts, he fully believed that the whole thing was a hoax, whether he had actually provided a letter of authenticity at the time or not. He probably assumed that they had tried to perpetuate the fraud by forging some ancient document and tricking him into signing a certification of it, and he was having none of it. The same reason that he did not want his name associated with such an outlandish story is probably also why he wanted to translate the records himself: professional reputation.

It does make me wonder what Anthon's translation of the Book of Mormon would have been like. While (according to Harris' version of events) he acknowledged that Joseph's translation was correct when he did not know any other details of the story, I am sure that would not have lasted for long. No one would have been able to deny that the plates existed then, but they still would not have believed Joseph's story for how he had gotten them, or that it proved that he was a prophet. The 'experts' would have considered just about any explanation more plausible than that, and they would have dismissed that as even a possibility from the very beginning. They would have assumed that he had just found them somewhere, and made up the rest. Soon there would have been all sorts of alternative theories for where the records had actually come from, and what the correct translation really was. The record was supposed to have been written in 'Reformed Egyptian', as languages tend to evolve and change over time, especially when a group is geographically isolated. Undoubtedly many Egyptologists would have come to think that Joseph's translation was a mistranslation of Egyptian rather than a correct translation of a new language based upon Egyptian.

Since hardly anyone knows these ancient languages, few ordinary people would have been able to verify any of this for themselves, and they would have been forced to rely on expert opinions. If the 'experts' said that it was wrong, it would have entirely discredited Joseph Smith.

Is it any wonder that the Lord did not want him to turn over the plates to them? Can you see how it really would not have mattered, even if 'hard evidence' had been given to them? When evidence is provided it is simply dismissed and explained away by the other side. On the other hand, I am sure that if this story turned out to be false, most believers in the Book of Mormon would still be believers in the Book of Mormon. Other kinds of empirical evidence against it would not likely hold much sway either. So it happens on both sides. However, skeptics seem to think that it is only religious people who do this, and that they themselves are entirely unbiased and only look at the evidence. But in reality, they do exactly the same thing. We all do it to an extent. We do not just passively receive data. For some of these questions there is a certain outcome that we want to be true, for various reasons, and this tends to create a bias when we analyze the evidence.

What the Lord did instead of letting those 'experts' at the plates was to allow 11 witnesses in addition to Joseph Smith to see and handle them for themselves. All of them were fairly well-respected upstanding members of the community, at least before they became Mormons. None of them knew the language, so obviously they could not check the translation, but at least they could see for themselves that the plates did actually exist. Three of those witnesses (including Martin Harris) were

even shown the plates by an angel, and heard the voice of the Lord himself declare to them that it had been translated by the gift and power of God, and they were commanded to bear record of it.

If you think about it, twelve witnesses is actually quite a lot. Typically, if twelve people told you that they had seen something, you would probably believe them if you thought that they were credible at all. Admittedly, it is a pretty remarkable account that they give, but does it not at least make you wonder? Certainly the claim is more credible with eleven other witnesses than it would be if it was only Joseph Smith. If you still think it is just too far-fetched to believe, how many witnesses would it take for you? 500? How about 5,000, or even 10,000? Would there ever be enough witnesses for you?

Atheism in the academic world is like an exclusive club that all the cool kids belong to. It has become part of the culture, especially in the sciences. They love to flatter themselves about how much smarter they are than everybody else, and how their views are based solely upon the evidence. Some evolutionary biologists even claim that the entire theory of evolution would be overturned in one day if they found a single fossil that was out of place in the fossil record. Of course the suggestion is that they would immediately discard any theory that was not supported by the evidence. I do not believe them. Not at all. The history of science shows that is simply not how paradigm shift takes place. There can be all sorts of gaps, anomalies, unanswered questions, and problems for a theory, and members of that paradigm will not discard it because that is still considered to be the best explanation that they have. They will

stick with it until someone develops a rival theory that is thought to explain the data better. They never just discard a theory because of an anomaly and replace it with nothing, they will only discard it to adopt a rival theory. And sometimes even when there is a rival theory that explains the data better, it is still not accepted, at least not initially. One of the reasons that geniuses are often not appreciated during their own lifetime is because they go against the conventional wisdom of the experts of their day. In many cases, members of a paradigm refuse to ever accept a new rival theory even if there are serious problems with the old one. The paradigm only shifts once younger generations evaluate and compare the two views, and because they are not so steeped in, and committed to the old one, they are more willing to make the change. But the old dogs usually will not change their minds no matter what.

If there is no rival theory available that has the ability to attract more followers, then the theory that they have is simply modified to account for the new data, and that is probably what would happen in this case. Evolutionary scientists would just say that perhaps the species in question evolved earlier than previously thought, or multiple times, or that the dating of the fossil is off for some reason. There would be a number of theories to account for the new data, but none of them, at least from within the paradigm, would include rejecting the theory entirely. It just would not happen. Many of these people have dedicated their entire lives to studying the theory of evolution. They are not going to abandon it simply because of a few fossils that seem to be out of place in the fossil record.

As I already said, there is a lot of evidence for evolutionary theory, I cannot deny that. But I find the haughty, smug, and condescending attitude of many scientists to be very irritating. Many of them look down on philosophy as well as religion (or really anything that is not science) even though science is actually just a small subdiscipline of philosophy. Technically, they are all natural philosophers. But to hear them talk, no one outside of their little specialized niche is worth listening to. Perhaps if they studied the history of science more it would humble them a bit. They like to mock religious beliefs of the past, but it was scientists who used to say that you should put butter on burns, that bleeding someone out with leeches helped them to heal, that black people were not as intelligent as whites because they had smaller brains, that female orgasm was a type of mental disorder, etc. At one time, all of these views, along with many more just like them, were the accepted view of the scientific community. It is still a relatively young discipline, and sometimes they remind me of an impertinent teenager disrespecting their elders. I know that you think you know everything, but just get over yourselves a little bit. If you are not careful, you may trip over that purple carpet you keep expecting everyone to roll out for you.

The skepticism of the scientific community does serve a purpose. It prevents them from buying into every crazy new theory that is proposed until it can go through this vetting process, of sorts. But sometimes it also causes problems. The idea of continental drift, for example, was not only rejected, it was ridiculed when it was first proposed, only to become well-accepted later, once more empirical data was discovered, and other empirical data was reinterpreted. This has been the case

for many scientific theories.

Scientific evidence requires following the scientific method to perform an experiment that is publicly available for others to scrutinize and replicate. A religious believer cannot repeat an experiment with verifiable empirical results in this way, as the scientific community demands. However, there can be empirical evidence for God's existence. Revelation and miraculous experiences are empirical, meaning that they are based upon *a posteriori* rather than *a priori* knowledge.

People often define faith as belief without evidence, or even in spite of the evidence. Sometimes those who are not believers will even derisively refer to it as 'blind faith'. But faith is not a belief that is contrary to, or without any evidence to support it; faith is hope, and the reason that we have that hope is usually because something similar has worked for us in the past. A farmer plants crops in the Spring because he hopes to harvest them in the Fall. Why does he have this expectation? Because it has worked for him in the past, and because of that, he has a reasonable expectation that it will work again this time. Faith in God is similar when it is based upon past experiences. If we prayed and it seemed to have worked for us before, then we come to have an expectation that it will work again, and our faith grows stronger. Spiritual experiences tend to bolster one's faith and trust in God. It is somewhat similar to how Hume thought that we learn about causation, except that it is less certain. What is believed through faith is not known with absolute certainty, or it would be knowledge. However, there is

still some evidence to justify the belief. It is not 'blind faith' based upon no evidence at all.

### **Mini-Miracles**

I will give a few examples of such experiences. I like to refer to these as mini-miracles because they inspire faith, but they are not so sacred that it would be inappropriate to talk about them publicly. When I was 9 or 10 years old, my friend Patrick and I rode our bikes to a canal a few miles outside of town to go swimming. The canal was used for irrigation, and it had a headgate where you could regulate the amount of water by putting in or taking out large thick boards that were laying off to the side. The water could be sent in different directions by opening one of the gates that would allow it to flow into the various ditches that connected with it. We just wanted to make the water deeper so that it would be more fun to swim, so we put in some extra boards to damn it up. The boards were large enough that, as I recall, it took both of us to set them in. We did not have anything to tamp them down, so we just pushed them down as far as we could.

We had a great time swimming, tossing a football, and splashing each other. But I made the mistake of getting too close to the boards. There was a fairly large gap between the ones we had put in and the ones that were set below, and the water must have been flowing through that gap with a fair amount of pressure because when I lifted up my foot to take a step the current sucked my foot in with enough force that my shoe was stuck solid between the boards. It was a bit of a precarious situation for me because the water was fairly deep

right there, and even when I stretched out to my full height it was barely below my chin. The water was also muddy, so I could not even see my foot. I twisted and turned and did everything I could think of to get my shoe unstuck, but it did no good. I even tried to untie it and get the shoe off so that I could just get my foot out. I was finally able to get the laces untied, but I still could not get my foot out of the shoe. I had to hold my breath and go under water to reach it, and I was worried that I might get caught further up on my leg and would be unable to get back up above the water to breath.

Patrick tried to help, but there was not much he could do. He tried to take the top boards out, but once the water was flowing over them, there was too much pressure, and he could not move them. We also tried having him come in from behind the boards and see if he could push my shoe back through from there. But there was still quite a bit of water flowing over the top board and he kept getting swept back and was unable to even find where my shoe was from there. We were trying hard not to become too alarmed, but we were both starting to worry. After trying everything we could think of, he finally asked me if I thought that we needed to get some help. I did not like the idea of being left alone in that predicament very much, and I was worried that we were going to get into trouble for putting more boards in, but I felt like at that point there was no help for it. So, after thinking about it, I reluctantly said yes. I was expecting him to get on his bike and go find a grown-up to come help us. That is what I thought he meant by 'help'. But much to my surprise, he then bowed his head and said a prayer that one would expect from a ten year old: simple, but very sincere and full of faith and trust. He just asked Heavenly

Father to please help me get my foot unstuck. That was about it. After the prayer, I began trying again, and sure enough, after a few minutes, I somehow managed to find the right combination of twisting and pulling to finally get loose. I did not even lose my shoe. We then went back to playing, but we went further upstream and kept a pretty good distance away from that spot.

The next experience is not my own, but it does come from my family. When my uncle, Richard Johnson, was a child, he had osteomyelitis of the bone near his ear, which they believe was probably from untreated ear infections. Penicillin had only been used in hospitals for about 6 months at that time, and he believes that without that, he would have died. He had to have an operation in which doctors took the infection out through his inner ear and forehead. Because of that, he lost most of the hearing in his left ear, and it left a large opening in the ear. The doctors said that under no circumstances was he to let any water get into that ear. They said that if he did, it could kill him. Because of this, Richard had not been baptized when he turned 8 years old. LDS church doctrine is that baptism must be performed by full immersion, and it is done when a person has reached an age of accountability, so a child must be at least 8 years old. In this little community, all of the LDS kids who had reached the age of 8 were baptized in one group, during the summer, in the Greybull River. My father was two years younger than my uncle, and when he turned 8 he was going to be baptized along with the other 8 year olds. When Richard realized that his younger brother was going to be baptized, he really wanted to do it as well. My grandparents were not sure what to do. They believed that everyone needed to be baptized, but it had to be by full immersion, so his entire body would

have to be under water. My grandmother actually tried to talk him out of it, or at least put it off for a while longer, but he had already waited two years and he wanted to do it very badly. Finally they were persuaded to let him do it, but she stuffed both his ears with as much cotton as she could jam in there.

Those who were present at the baptism knew of the risk involved, and everybody was a bit apprehensive as the ordinance was performed. After he had been baptized and made his way back over to the bank, my grandmother quickly began pulling the cotton out of his ears, but to her astonishment, the cotton was completely dry; it looked dry to all of the spectators that were present, and it felt completely dry to her when she touched it. That cotton had been completely submerged under the water for at least a few seconds, and yet it seemed as though the water had not even touched it.

It is really the circumstances surrounding this event that make me think that it could have been a miracle. Richard and his family had exercised their faith by taking a certain amount of risk in order to follow a very important commandment, and because of that, they were rewarded with a wonderful spiritual experience that boosted their faith. If a miraculous event were ever to occur, it seems as though it would be in circumstances such as these, when we are sincerely attempting to keep God's commandments, but there is some obstacle that is preventing us from doing so. The miracle allows us to complete the task that we have been asked to do.

The final experience I will relate occurred on October 4, 2012. I know the exact date because I kept the ticket stub as a reminder.



It was a Thursday, and there was a football game that night. One of the city buses had a stop that was only about a hundred yards away from my front door, so I thought I would be smart and use public transportation to get to the game to avoid having to drive in all of that traffic. However, I had only used public transportation a couple of times, and I was pretty unfamiliar with how it worked. The first time I used it I just assumed that they would make all of the stops listed on the schedule; I did not realize that you had to pull the chord to get them to stop. Because of that, I ended up going a mile or so beyond where I was supposed to get off and had to walk all the way back. So, I was a little paranoid about using it this time. I checked with the bus driver to make sure that I knew the correct stops to use, and she was very helpful. I made it to the game without incident, and had a pretty good time. When it was about 10:45 p.m., and the game was well in hand, many of the fans began to leave, including those from the group that I was with. I thought about asking one of them for a ride home, but I hardly ever got the chance to come to games, so I figured since I had paid that much for the ticket I may as well soak it all in and stay until the end. Once the game was over, though, I soon found out why people leave early. There was a line that must have stretched for half a mile to get on the MetroLink. When I finally was able to get on, we were crammed in there so tightly I could barely move. The Clayton Station was my stop, and I exited the train without any problems. However, when I looked at the bus schedule, I was shocked to find out that the last bus had left the Clayton Station at 11:35 p.m., and it was now 11:40. I had been careful to check the time for the last train, and knew that it ran until 12:30 a.m., but I did not realize that the buses stopped running earlier. I had just assumed that they would keep them

running long enough to get everyone home from the game. It was a sickening feeling. I felt really silly, and I realized that if I just would have left at 10:45 when the others did, I would not have been in that predicament.

I tried to think of something that I could do, but I did not know what. I knew how to get home from there if I was driving, but I did not think it would be smart to walk along the freeway at that time of night. There were some tight places where it would have been hard to get off to the side, and it just did not seem like a smart thing to do. I could have tried walking a different route, but I get lost fairly easily, and I was worried about getting turned around in an unfamiliar area in the dark. I did have my phone with me, so I started trying to call friends who might be able to come pick up. I did not want to do it at that time of night, but I was not sure what else to do. I tried several of them, but the only one who answered was out of town. To make matters worse, while I was talking to her my cell phone ran out of battery and my phone went completely dead. I let her know, though, before the call was dropped, and she said that she would call some people for me to see if anyone would be able to come pick me up.

The Clayton Station has a police substation, and the officer on duty was getting ready to go home at midnight. I briefly told him about my predicament, and asked if there was any way that he could give me a ride on his way home. He said no. He asked where I lived, and when I told him it was close to Delmar, he looked at the train schedule and told me to get back on the last train of the night and go to the Delmar station. I tried to explain that this would not help me because the Delmar station was

actually much further away from my apartment than the Clayton station, and that the buses would not be running there either, but he did not want to hear it. He did not care, he just wanted to get rid of me so that he would not have to worry about it. So finally I just said fine, and he left. I went over to get on the train as he had told me to do, but I knew that it would do no good, so I did not get on it when it came. A few minutes after that, though, another train came from the other direction and unloaded a new group of people from the game. I asked a couple of guys who were walking to their car if they would be willing to give me a ride after briefly telling them about how I had gotten stranded. I only had eight dollars in my wallet, but I offered it to the driver if he would just drop me off on his way home. He thought about it for a second, but then said no because he was driving drunk anyway. His friend laughed heartily at that, and they got in the car and drove away, no doubt putting everyone's life at risk. After that, I did not think there was much chance of getting a ride from anyone in the parking lot, and I thought that maybe I would not even want one from just anybody. I felt really awkward about approaching random strangers anyway. I did not know if I would have given someone a ride in that situation either.

I went downstairs and into the bathroom, and noticed that it was warmer in there. I figured at least if I got too cold during the night I could go in there. There was no lock on the door, though, and judging from the graffiti and the gang signs on the bathroom walls, it was not the most comfortable feeling in the world being there at midnight, after the police officer on duty had gone home. I knew that most likely nothing would happen, but you never know for sure. When a place has a police

substation, there is a reason for it; it means that they think they need one. I figured it would probably be worse walking around in the dark in unfamiliar areas though. The buses did not start running again until 5:30 a.m. at the earliest, so I just went outside and sat down on a wooden bench, and planned on spending a long cold night. I had not even brought a jacket. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, a bus pulled up. I was hopeful that I had just misread the schedule somehow, and that maybe the buses were still running after all. But when I walked over to talk to the driver she told me that she was going somewhere else and was not allowed to go off route to give me a ride.

After she left, I finally decided to say a prayer. I told Heavenly Father that I knew it was not a huge deal, and that if it didn't happen I would not lose my testimony over it, but I felt like I had done everything I could think of to help myself, and I would really appreciate it if he would help me get a ride home. After I said the prayer, I felt a little better, but I could not say that I had complete confidence that it would happen. It did seem like kind of a trivial thing to pray about. I am sure God would have a lot more important things to worry about than helping me get a ride home. I felt a little strange doing it, but I did anyway, I guess because by then I was desperate.

I assumed that if my prayer was going to be answered, it would be through my friend calling one of her friends on the phone, and then they would come to the Clayton Station to pick me up. But a few minutes after I had said the prayer, another bus came in. I went over once again to talk to the driver and was surprised to see the same driver who had first picked me up near my house and given me directions on the way to the game.

However, she told me the same thing that the other driver had. She was not going anywhere near where I lived, and she was not allowed to go off route. She was very nice, though, and I told her that I completely understood. I felt a little dejected, but I really did understand from her point of view. I told her it was fine, and I went back over to the bench and sat down, now fully prepared for a long night. I had little hope that what I had prayed for would be granted. She pulled the bus around the corner so that it was temporarily out of my line of sight (because of the stairwell) and she stopped at a Stop Sign, then began to pull away. But suddenly I heard the bus stop fairly abruptly. Could it be? I almost did not even get up, because I figured that she must have stopped for some other reason, but finally I did, just to see what was going on, and I saw that the doors were open and when she saw me she waved for me to come over. Once I did, she said that she did not feel like she could take me all the way back to my house, but she could take me to a supermarket that was close to it. That sounded great to me, because then I would know exactly where I was, and I could easily walk from there to my apartment. I was very grateful. I offered her the eight dollars that I had with me as a tip, but she would not take it. When she dropped me off I told her that she was a wonderful person, and that I would never forget her kindness towards me. It seemed to make her happy. As I walked through the door of my apartment, I could not keep from smiling. Not only was I grateful to this fine lady, I was also grateful to Heavenly Father. I really felt like my prayer had been answered, and I said another one to thank him for that. Then I called my friend (now that I could plug in my phone) and told her that I had made it home, and a little bit about what had happened.

I know it would not have been the end of the world if I had not gotten a ride home that night. When I looked at it later, the Clayton station was really not all that far from where my apartment was at the time. If I had just known where I was going, I could have walked. More than anything, though, I felt like Heavenly Father was aware of me, and that I was loved. I am not entirely sure how it is possible that he could be aware of me, and all my little insignificant personal problems, while also being aware of billions of other people out there as well, but I felt like he was. As glad as I was to get a ride home, it was more significant to me that my prayer had been answered.

During the following summer, I briefly mentioned this experience during a class. I believe we were discussing Egoism, and I used it as an example to show how occasionally, despite our best efforts, and no matter how independent we may think that we are, we all need help from time to time. I told them about all the people who had not helped me for various reasons, and then about the one lady who did, and how grateful I was. I did not mention the religious aspect of the story however. When we took a break, several of the female students began discussing whether they would have given me a ride if they had been in the same situation. They came to the consensus that I looked normal enough, but then again, ‘That is what they say about serial killers too’. Most of the students said they would not have given me a ride. One of them asked me if the bus driver was black (she was black herself) and I confirmed that she was, and then the student said, ‘Oh, that’s it. That’s why you got a ride Mr. Johnson. When that bus stopped it was ‘cause she was prayin’ “Oh Jesus, please help me ‘cause I’m ‘bout to give this man a ride. Please don’t let him kill me!”’ If

she woulda been white, you woulda been walkin.’ Everybody laughed at that comment, me included. The whole conversation was pretty amusing. Maybe she was right. The bus did stop pretty abruptly, and the driver told me on the way back that when she saw me sitting there on the bench that she wondered what I was going to do, and she felt like she couldn’t just leave me there. Was it the Holy Ghost that gave her that feeling? Perhaps it was. It reminded me of a quote from LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball, who said: ‘God does notice us, and he blesses us. But it is usually through another person that he answers our prayers.’ This is an important principle. I think we can easily miss the mark if we seek a grand miracle when a simple one will suffice. That would be a form of sign seeking. I suppose the Lord could have sent angels to carry me home that night, but why would he do that when he could simply inspire a real life Good Samaritan to do the same thing?

I realize, of course, that these stories are not as remarkable as the parting of the Red Sea, or raising someone from the dead, which is why I referred to them as ‘mini-miracles’. I am sure that a skeptic would dismiss them as mere coincidences, or just a misinterpretation of the facts. Sometimes I have even wondered that myself. It is true that sometimes the things that happen to us really are just coincidences. It is possible that my grandmother was so relieved that her son was okay that how the cotton looked and felt was exaggerated in her own mind, and that of the others who were present. Perhaps the story grew with the telling of it so that eventually they remembered it differently than how it really was. My uncle is now 76 years old, and my father is 74. This happened a very long time ago, and maybe that is just how everybody remembers it now.

Perhaps it is also merely a coincidence that I happened to cross paths with the same bus driver that I had met earlier in the day, and it just so happens that she gave me a ride a few minutes after my prayer. I cannot dismiss that as a possibility, nor that it may have been a coincidence that I could not get my foot unstuck back in that canal, but I was able to after my friend Patrick prayed for help. As I said, one of the troubling aspects of whether to believe religious experiences is that believers tend to only remember and acknowledge them when they seem to have worked out in their favor. It is possible that I am only focusing on and remembering the experiences in which it seems to have worked, and ignoring or forgetting the many times in which it did not. If that is the case, then really it is simply a matter of probability that sometimes it appears to have worked, and other times it does not. If we are simply cherry-picking the results with the benefit of hindsight, it could erroneously give the appearance that these events have greater statistical significance than they really do. We have to realize that occasionally improbable things do happen.

But if you say that it is all just coincidence I guess I just wonder what kind of evidence you are looking for. What kind of proof would you need then, oh great skeptic, before you would not dismiss it as a coincidence? If you pray, and it seems as though the prayer was answered, but then you reject this as mere coincidence, then what exactly were you expecting to have happen? What would it take for you to finally acknowledge that the prayer was answered? Is there *anything* that would cause you to do that? If so, what would it be? Now you may think that if you saw a greater miracle, then it would be obvious to you that it must all be true, and you would surely

believe then; but actually, that is probably not the case. For a mini-miracle, you most likely believe that the story happened at least somewhat the way that I have related it, you would simply reject my interpretation. But the more that the experience that I would share with you deviates from common everyday experience, the less credible it would appear to the skeptic, who would probably dismiss the entire thing as a complete fantasy or an outright lie. It actually takes more faith to believe a truly extraordinary miraculous event than it does to believe a mini-miracle (which is probably one reason why we are told not to share the most remarkable things that happen to us with just anyone). Surprisingly enough, this is also true even if we have experienced it ourselves.

It seems to me that the skeptic has impossible standards. If I had prayed for a ride home and it did not happen, they would surely accept that as proof that there is no God who answers prayers, but when it does seem as though it was answered, then they just say that it was merely a coincidence. Skeptics like to accuse believers of having unfalsifiable beliefs, but they are just as biased towards their own position. Their beliefs are essentially unfalsifiable as well, because they will only acknowledge evidence that fits in with their overall worldview, simply dismissing any countervailing evidence.

Perhaps it really is the case that you just had to be there. I cannot completely describe the feeling that I had when I heard that bus stop, and there was a tiny glimmer of hope that maybe my prayer was actually going to be answered after all. But I would not say that I know with absolute certainty that it really was an answer to prayer. It is still certainly possible that it

could have been a coincidence. I think that such experiences only give us a reasonable basis for belief and hope, not a perfect knowledge that it is true. But this does provide a foundation for faith. Any apparent answer to prayer provides some evidence that there is a God who cares about us. Each experience induces greater faith, and as one continues to have them throughout their life, that individual's faith and trust in God grows. We come to have an expectation that our prayers will be answered because it seems to have worked for us on multiple occasions in the past.

### **Levels of Spiritual Knowledge**

One might wonder, though, why faith is even necessary. If there is a God, why wouldn't he simply make it known to everyone? As a matter of fact, 'God's hiddenness' is a hot topic right now in the Philosophy of Religion. The question is why God would choose to remain hidden when there would seem to be so many benefits to just letting us know that he is there. The implication, of course, is that he would not remain hidden, and thus the argument is that there must not be such a being. However, LDS church doctrine provides an answer for this. We are judged based upon the amount of spiritual knowledge that we have. He who sins against the greater light will receive the greater condemnation. It would be better for us to have never known at all than to know and then turn away from it (2 Ne 31:14-15). While we are still in mortality, we are subject to temptation, and this is true even after we have experienced a miraculous event. We must be tested and tried to prove that we can handle it first. God's hiddenness is in part like a safety net for us. He

will not give us more knowledge than what we are ready for, or it would only condemn us.

Do you really want to see a miracle? Are you willing to give up all of your sins from now on in order to see one? If you were given a certain knowledge that God exists, would you be willing to completely change your life? Would you sacrifice everything, if necessary, to do his will? If not, then you are not ready. But if you think that you are, then prove it by giving up your sins now, before receiving that witness. Anybody can talk; actions show that you are serious.

The level of spiritual knowledge at which nearly everyone begins is to receive a witness from the Holy Ghost. It cannot fully be described in words, but it is a kind of feeling. Sometimes it can be very strong, but most often it is subtle. It can be quite difficult to know whether one is receiving a prompting from the Holy Ghost or whether it is merely one's own thoughts or feelings. That uncertainty means that one's knowledge is not perfect at this stage. It may also be the case (though not always) that someone at this level of spiritual development would have experienced at least a few mini-miracles and heard the testimony of others regarding their experiences.

The next highest level would be to experience a miraculous event for yourself. This could be a dream or a vision, a divine healing, hearing an actual voice in answer to prayer, etc. Faith is still required, even in these cases, because one would not have a perfect knowledge that it really was a miracle. There could still be a little room for doubt, because the senses can be

deceived, but usually the witness of the Spirit accompanies such events to let us know that it is true. These experiences provide strong evidence for belief. There can be some significant variation within this category as far as how strong the witness is. For example, the eight witnesses who saw the Book of Mormon plates for themselves would have strong evidence to believe Joseph Smith's story; however, there would still always be at least some possibility that Joseph had made them himself, or that he had found some ancient record, but made up the rest of the story. These eight people would have had strong evidence for belief, but not a perfect knowledge. But if instead of just seeing the plates, an angel appeared and showed them to you, and the voice of the Lord himself verified that Joseph Smith's translation and the story concerning how he had acquired them was true, and that same voice commanded you to bear witness of it, as reportedly happened to these three men, according to their testimony, there would be very little room for doubt. Indeed, they themselves said 'wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true.' And they would. The Eight Witnesses had strong evidence that the work was true, but they had less spiritual knowledge (and thus less accountability) than The Three Witnesses, whose knowledge of the work would have been nearly complete. There have been others who also saw and conversed with heavenly messengers, including many of the ancient prophets. Prophets are sometimes taught and given messages from angels, as the angels themselves are usually former prophets from earlier ages who were faithful while they were in mortality. Joseph, Mary, Zacharias, and the shepherds who were told of Christ's birth are just a few examples from the New Testament in which someone was

given a message by an angel. To have an experience like this would provide a very high level of certainty.

The highest level of spiritual knowledge is a personal visit with God, in which one gets to converse with him ‘face to face, as one man speaketh with another’ as the Bible says Moses and others did. Those who have been in God’s presence know that he exists with the same level of certainty that they know that the people around them exist. It would be as sure as any belief based upon empirical data that they have, and in some ways, perhaps it would even be stronger because the witness of the Holy Ghost would also likely accompany it. As recorded in the Old Testament, Abraham saw or spoke with God at least three times, for Jacob it was at least twice, Isaiah at least once, for David it happened at least twice, for Solomon twice, and there were many others. An equivalent experience would be seeing and conversing with the resurrected Christ, which happened many times and to many different people in the New Testament.

It actually seems to be a relatively frequent occurrence for God to communicate directly with prophets. It is likely that many such experiences were not recorded in the Bible or we do not still have them. A person who has had an experience like that has no more need for faith; they would have full knowledge that God exists and that what they had been taught about him was true. Such individuals are greatly blessed, but they must remain faithful or the penalties for them are more severe. One of the reasons that David’s sin was so grievous is because he had a great deal of spiritual knowledge when he did it. If a king who had little to no knowledge of the true God had done something similar, it would have been just as bad in terms of

what was done, but he would not have been judged as harshly for it because not as much would have been expected of him. Much the same could be said for Solomon, though he did not commit murder.

Joseph Smith compared apostates to someone who would look up into the sky, point directly at the sun, and tell you that it is not there. I take from this that they have knowledge that God exists, and that the doctrine about him is true, with the same level of certainty that all of us know that the sun exists, but they would lie and tell everyone that it is not true. They would be actively trying to get everyone not to believe in God or keep his commandments all while having a full knowledge of the truth. At that point they become an open enemy to God, just as Satan is, who also has a perfect knowledge of God, and yet does all he can to oppose him. As a protection to us, we must reach a certain level of spiritual development before we would be given this much knowledge. Most people will not reach the level of faith and obedience required while in this life and still subject to temptation. But there are a few, including many of the prophets and Apostles, who do, and they are then supposed to help the rest of us get there.

In *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (p. 150-151) he said:

After a person has faith in Christ, repents of his sins, and is baptized for the remission of his sins and receives the Holy Ghost, (by the laying on of hands), which is the first comforter, then let him continue to humble himself before God, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, and living by every word of God, and the Lord will soon say unto him, Son, thou shalt be exalted. When the Lord has thoroughly proved him, and finds that the man

is determined to serve Him at all hazards, then the man will find his calling and his election made sure, then it will be his privilege to receive the other Comforter, which the Lord hath promised the Saints, as is recorded in the testimony of St John, in the 14th chapter, from the 12th to the 27th verses . . . [makes special note of 16, 17, 18, 21, and 23rd verses, quoting them] . . . Now what is this other Comforter? It is no more nor less than the Lord Jesus Christ himself; and this is the sum and substance of the whole matter; that when any man obtains this last Comforter, he will have the personage of Jesus Christ to attend him, or appear unto him from time to time, and even He will manifest the Father unto him, and they will take up their abode with him, and the visions of the heavens will be opened unto him, and the Lord will teach him face to face, and he may have a perfect knowledge of the mysteries of the Kingdom of God; and this is the state and place the ancient Saints arrived at when they had such glorious visions - Isaiah, Ezekiel, John upon the Isle of Patmos, St Paul in the three heavens, and all the Saints who held communion with the general assembly and Church of the Firstborn.

Note that he says the Lord may appear to such a person *from time to time*. I would imagine that it would not be a frequent occurrence, but not necessarily only a one time event either. Other visions and revelations would be opened to him as well. Those who attain this level of spiritual knowledge and development are also often given the authority to perform great miracles as they are sent to teach others.

### **Authority**

Not just anyone can perform a miracle. Sometimes people get the mistaken notion that faith is all that is needed. Faith is a necessary component, of course, but not all that is required (i.e.

faith is necessary, but not sufficient). Another component is worthiness. The Book of Mormon says that no man can perform a miracle in the name of Jesus unless he has been cleansed every whit from his iniquity (3 Ne 8:1). But even being clean is not sufficient. One must also receive authority from God to do such works. We require authority, certifications, and qualifications, even in our society. Someone cannot perform a marriage ceremony, write out a prescription for medication (or even fill a prescription for that matter), or write a speeding ticket without having the proper credentials, and one cannot get those credentials except through the correct channels. Even if one had great knowledge in that area, knowledge alone is not the same as authority. A judge may know more about the law than a police officer, but a judge could not write speeding tickets or make an arrest. It is true that greater authority is often accompanied by greater knowledge, but they are not the same thing. Priesthood is the authority to act in God's name, or on his behalf. To perform miracles, one must be called of God and given the authority to perform them. The Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 14:25-40 explains how a prophet would receive this authority:

26 Now Melchizedek was a man of faith, who wrought righteousness; and when a child he feared God, and stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire.

27 And thus, having been approved of God, he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch,

28 It being after the order of the Son of God; which order came, not by man, nor the will of man; neither by father nor mother; neither by beginning of days nor end of years; but of God;



29 And it was delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, according to his own will, unto as many as believed on his name.

30 For God having sworn unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas, to dry up waters, to turn them out of their course;

31 To put at defiance the armies of nations, to divide the earth, to break every band, to stand in the presence of God; to do all things according to his will, according to his command, subdue principalities and powers; and this by the will of the Son of God which was from before the foundation of the world.

32 And men having this faith, coming up unto this order of God, were translated and taken up into heaven.

Alma 13:1-19 also speaks of high priests of this order. One thing to note in particular is that it says in verse 29 that it is delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, and according to his own will. I understand this to mean that God himself is the one who gives this level of priesthood authority to someone. It would not come from anyone else. A passage in the Book of Mormon shows how this occurred for one prophet. In Helaman 10:4-10 the Lord gives Nephi the *sealing power*, which seems to be the same thing as what is described above. He said that because of Nephi's faithfulness, he knows that Nephi will not ask for anything that is contrary to his will, so he will grant whatever Nephi asks for. He told him 'All things shall be done according to thy word' and gave some specific examples of the remarkable works that Nephi was now called and commissioned to perform, which are similar to what is described above. Think for a moment about just how significant this would be. Literally anything that Nephi asks for, which is possible, will be done.

The Lord himself was of course the greatest manifestation of priesthood power. He is the creator and God of this world, and our Heavenly Father has given him full and complete authority over it, and everyone on it. During mortality he had authority from our Heavenly Father to perform any miracle that he wished because of the sealing power (sometimes it is also referred to as the fullness of the priesthood). He even had authority to forgive sins - he was, after all, the one who would be paying for them - but of course this infuriated the Pharisees, who considered it blasphemy. In a similar way to how he received authority from our Heavenly Father, the Lord also gives authority to certain prophets that he has chosen to represent him and act on his behalf. It was actually the Lord Jesus Christ, as Jehovah, who gave this priesthood authority to Nephi, and to Moses, and Noah, and all of the others.

As I mentioned previously, angels are usually former prophets who were faithful in mortality. They would be translated beings, as Moses and Elijah were. Joseph Smith taught that the angel Gabriel in the New Testament (who was also sent to Daniel as well) was actually the prophet Noah when he lived in mortality. Recall that when he appeared to Zacharias in the temple and told him of John's birth, and Zacharias did not believe it, he struck Zacharias dumb. Gabriel would have received the authority to do such works during his mortal life and ministry, and then, having been faithful, retained it after he was translated. The three men that Abraham entertained and who then led Lot out of Sodom and Gomorrah were probably men of this priesthood order. This can be seen first from the fact that Abraham and Sarah were told that they would have a child, even though they were too old to have children (similar

to Zacharias) though it is unclear whether the three men told them this, or the Lord himself did while they were there. But if they had the sealing power, it would have essentially been the same thing. They also smote the men of Sodom who were attempting to rape them with blindness, and told Lot 'we will destroy this place' and 'the Lord hath sent us to destroy it'. It is unclear whether they were translated beings at that time or not. They are called messengers, but in Hebrew, the word for messenger could mean angel, or prophet, or priest, or simply a man of God. But it would not really matter. Either way, they must have had the sealing power. Perhaps Melchizedek was one of them.

The three Nephite disciples were also translated beings who received this sealing power, and used it (4 Ne 1:30-33). It says that there was a change wrought upon their bodies so that they would not die, and they were given power to do many miraculous works (3 Ne 28). They were sanctified while in the flesh so that they were able to perform whatever miracle was required. No one could kill them, though they tried many times. I have noticed that this is a general theme with many of these stories. It is usually the case that the Lord gives this authority to his servants when he wants them to go preach to a group of people who are so wicked that they will be trying to kill them.

Revelations chapter 11 and D&C 77:15 indicate that something like this will happen at some point in modern times as well. There will be two prophets who will prophesy in Jerusalem for three and a half years and they will do many of the same miraculous works that Moses and Elijah did. They will shut up the heavens so that it will not rain, and if anyone tries to kill

them they will be destroyed by fire (as happened with Elijah when Ahab's soldiers came to take him). They will have power to turn the waters into blood and to smite the earth with all plagues 'as often as they will' (similar to Moses). After they have finished their testimony, they will finally be overcome and martyred. Many people will rejoice at this, because they are wicked, and do not believe in them, and they were being tormented by the plagues, similar to the Egyptians of Moses' day. Their bodies will not be buried, and after three and a half days, life will be put back into them and they will be raised from the dead, and then translated and taken up into heaven.

It is difficult to tell with many of these prophecies what is meant to be symbolic and what is supposed to be taken literally. I have a hard time envisioning what some of this would actually look like. However, it does seem clear that the prophecy is that there will be two prophets who are given this sealing power which has been spoken of, and they will be performing miracles in Jerusalem during the last days that are similar to the miracles that were performed anciently. When I was serving my mission in Texas, I was once speaking with a man about modern day prophets and when he said that there would not be any more prophets after Christ, I showed him this chapter. He countered this by saying that they would not be prophets that lived in modern times, it would literally be Moses and Elijah. So I asked him how he would know it was really them. If someone introduced himself to you as Moses from the Old Testament, you are telling me that you would believe him? I mean, I guess it is possible that the prophecy could be speaking of Moses and Elijah, but does that really sound like a more plausible interpretation to you than that there will be two prophets born

in modern times who will have the same calling and authority given to them that Moses and Elijah had anciently? Moses and Elijah have already been translated; the fact that these two prophets will be killed indicates that they will be mortal during the time of their prophecy, and then translated afterward.

I have also heard some suggest that these two prophets would just be regular missionaries and that maybe we would not even know when this prophecy had been fulfilled; for all we know, perhaps it has been already. That cannot be right either, though, because most missionaries do not have the authority to perform the miracles that are described. It is clear that these prophets will have the sealing power. Most likely, it will be two Apostles, probably the President of the Church, and a counselor in the First Presidency. The President of the Church does hold an aspect of the sealing power already, meaning that what he seals on earth is sealed and honored in heaven, as with the ordinances that are performed under his authority. But it is unclear to me whether anyone in this dispensation has yet received authority over the elements and the natural world as described in the scriptures above. I would guess not, because we probably would have heard about it if they were out there performing miracles like these. No one today has done anything equivalent to sealing the heavens so that it cannot rain for three years, or parting the Red Sea. No one that we know of in modern times has been translated, and that is a sign of it. The LDS Church is thought to be a restoration of all of the dispensations of the past, but so far as I can tell, this aspect of the sealing power has not yet been fully restored in modern times.

But then again, perhaps it has been manifested at least to a degree in the modern day. There is a story about church president Lorenzo Snow, who went to St. George, Utah and asked the people living there to pay their tithing more faithfully. He promised them that if they would, the Lord would end a drought that they had been having and send them rain. When they were obedient, he prayed very sincerely for this to be fulfilled, and rain did come soon after that.

It may be the case that full authority over the elements is simply not needed right now. But when the Lord sends prophets to preach to the Jews in Jerusalem he will need to give them this level of authority to complete their mission, or they would very quickly be killed. This is the Middle East we are talking about. One can imagine the kind of anger that would be caused by preaching and calling to repentance those who live in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Probably after years of faithful service as Apostles, a prophet and one of his counselors will be called to go preach to the Jews, and they will receive this sealing power from the Lord just as Nephi did, and for the same reasons. Like many before them, they will be given power over the earth so that prisons cannot hold them, wild animals will not hurt them, they will have the power to break every band, and can even seal the heavens, remove mountains, or dry up seas, if necessary. The most remarkable stories from the scriptures are about those who have received this level of priesthood authority, and it would really be something to see if it does happen at some point in our day.

It is very important to understand that one must have authority from God to perform miraculous works. I heard a story once

about some missionaries who ran out of gas, and because it was a Sunday, they did not want to buy more on that day. Personally, I would think of that as an 'ox in the mire' kind of situation, and just go get some gas, but at any rate, they instead decided to pour water into the gas tank and then pray that the Lord would turn it into gasoline. I guess they figured if he could turn water into wine, he could just as easily turn it into gasoline if they had enough faith. Apparently they did not, though, because it ruined the engine. I do not know for sure whether this story is real, but it was supposed to have happened in the mission that I served in. So why didn't it work? These missionaries obviously had a lot of faith to have even attempted such a thing, but they would not have had the proper authority to perform a miracle of that magnitude. Turning water into gasoline (or wine) would require a very high level of priesthood authority, probably the sealing power.

The reason that Moses knew he could part the Red Sea is because God had told him so beforehand. When he was called to deliver Israel from bondage Jehovah said to him ' . . . thou shalt be made stronger than many waters; for they shall obey thy command as if thou wert God' (Moses 1:25). When the Egyptian army was pressing in on them, he must have remembered this. Moses was also shown many of the signs he was to give to Pharaoh and told exactly what he should say (or rather, have Aaron say). He was expressly called and commissioned to do those works; he did not just decide on his own to do them. If he would have attempted to perform miracles without the authority to perform them, God would not have honored it.

If someone were to ask me to perform some great miracle for them, such as curing blindness, or healing them from cancer, or causing someone who was paralyzed to be able to walk, I would have to confess that such works are above my pay grade. Miracles like that would require a higher level of priesthood authority than what I possess. I am an Elder, and as such, I am authorized to do things like administer the sacrament, baptize, confer the Gift of the Holy Ghost, and to bless the sick so that they might recover. I would not have permission from God to perform works that go beyond that. Now I have heard a few stories about times when an Elder has blessed someone who was sick and it resulted in a miraculous healing, or in one instance, even of bringing someone back who had died. Technically speaking, this is not outside of an Elder's authority, because he does have permission to administer to the sick. However, I think such instances would be exceedingly rare. In almost all cases, miracles of that kind would require the sealing power. I would assume that something like this would only occur in extraordinary circumstances, with a very faithful and worthy Elder, and when no one with higher authority was available, yet there was an extreme need.

As for this Elder, I would not even attempt such a thing, even in extraordinary circumstances. I have learned my lesson. Part of the reason that I went astray before, I think, was because I came to see myself as more spiritually advanced than I really was. I did have a miraculous experience, but that on its own does not confer any additional authority. Never again will I assume that I have reached a spiritual level that I have not reached, and attempt to go beyond what I have been specifically authorized

to do. I would just have to acknowledge that miraculous works are beyond me, at least at this point.

### **Doubting David**

Despite the arguments that I have given, I must admit that sometimes I still have doubts. I find myself asking whether I really believe all of this stuff. I mean not just as a story, but as true, accurate history; that it really did happen this way, and that the prophecies that have been made really will happen in the future; that there really is a soul, and that it lives on after the death of our bodies. Sometimes it feels like I live in two different worlds. In one of them it all makes perfectly good sense, and in another it sounds completely absurd. As a result, I feel this almost constant sense of angst as my beliefs repeatedly come into conflict with one another. Most people just pick a side and stick with it without thinking too much more about it, but I constantly keep going back and forth. I have been a doubter, but something troubled me even about being a doubter. Now I would say that I am a believer, but sometimes still a troubled one.

I think it is difficult for someone like me to trust a large organization like the church and believe that they are really different. I see through the rhetoric from politicians and big business, with their public relations and advertising campaigns. I know that they are trying to pull one over on me. When there are so many frauds, it can be hard to believe that anyone is truly genuine.

Choosing to be a member of the LDS Church affects nearly every other aspect of your life, from your political views, to what you watch for entertainment, to how you eat, and what you can drink, to how you dress, to paying ten percent of your income in tithing, to living a chaste life, etc. It is a big commitment that requires sacrifice. It can be difficult to make those sacrifices when you have significant doubts about whether any of it is actually true. I know of a member of the church who was born blind. He fully believed that the Prophet could heal him, and requested it. I would think that the President of the Church would be authorized to perform a miracle like that, if anyone would be, but this man was not healed of his blindness. Was this because that was not the Lord's will for him, or was that simply used as an excuse? Was it really the case that the President of the Church could not do it for him, because no one can actually do those things, now or ever, and those Biblical stories are all just made up? I wonder.

I also cannot help but wonder, if this sealing power over nature really exists, why the Lord would not have given it to Joseph Smith so that the early church would not have been overpowered and driven off their lands in the middle of winter, with their women being raped by the mobs, and many people being killed. The early saints had to suffer through so much abuse and mistreatment. Joseph said that the Lord had told him to have them gather there, but if that is really the case, I do not understand why the Lord would not have protected them more when they did as he had commanded them. Some say that the persecution was allowed to happen because the members of the church were unworthy, but they were far more worthy than the children of Israel in Moses' day. Yet, according to the Biblical

account, the Lord still protected the children of Israel from the Egyptians and performed great miracles in their behalf. So if all of this is really true, why wouldn't the Lord have given the same authority to Joseph Smith that he gave to Moses, and performed similar miracles for modern day Israel?

There are explanations for this, of course. There always are. Maybe the Lord wanted to try the people and see who would be faithful despite the hardships. But which sounds like the more likely explanation, that the Lord wanted to try the people and chose not to intervene, or that these stories from the Bible and the Book of Mormon are just made up, and nothing like this has ever actually happened in real life? If that is the case, then of course the reason that Joseph was not able to perform the kind of miracles recorded in Exodus is because they are just myths and no one can actually do them in real life. Now I guess it should be noted that performing miracles is not necessarily indicative of a prophet's rank. The Lord said that among those born of women (in other words everyone) no one was greater than John the Baptist, and yet he performed no miracles (at least not of the violation of natural law variety) because he held only the Aaronic or Levitical Priesthood, and thus would not have had the necessary authority. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob seem to have performed few miracles, at least not to the degree of Moses or Elijah, but the patriarchs would probably still have authority over them. So, maybe this does not really prove anything. Perhaps doing the works that Moses did was just not Joseph's or Smith's calling, but it does still make me wonder.

While I am inclined to believe that Thomas Aquinas did have some kind of revelatory spiritual experience that may indeed be

legitimate, there are also several reports that he had the ability to levitate. The sacristan Domenic of Caserta claims to have seen him levitating in ecstasy while in prayer before an icon of the crucified Christ, and conversing with it as though it were Christ. I do not believe this is true, or in other stories of miracles from the Middle Ages about holy relics healing someone, and other such nonsense. Hume mentions many miracles supposedly done on behalf of non-Christian gods, such as those from ancient Greece or Rome, and of course I do not believe that any of those stories are true either. I do not even believe in most of the miracles performed by televangelists because I do not think that they have the authority to perform the works that they claim to be doing, and I suspect that most of them are frauds that are just after money. Yet I realize that this may be somewhat inconsistent. I scoff at these stories, but how do I really know that I would not feel the same way about the miracles that I believe in if I had not been born into my current situation? How can I be sure that the stories from the Bible, and my own particular denomination, are really any more credible? I do not think that the existence of these false stories of miracles lowers the probability for the ones that I believe in, but it does undermine my confidence in them to an extent. Are they really any more plausible? Could it be that I am just biased? I do wonder.

Hume's position, and the scientific worldview still have some intuitive pull for me. It does seem like Hume's argument would be correct in most cases. If I had not experienced a miraculous event myself, I am sure I would be right there with him. But I did have that experience, and I cannot just dismiss it. When I prayed about the Book of Mormon, I know that *something* did

happen, and I believe that it was miraculous. I was not drunk at the time, or high on drugs; I had not been fasting for an extended period, as the Native Americans used to do when they had their visions; so far as I know, I do not have any mental disorders that would make me doubt my perceptions. So no alternative explanation that you could give me would be more persuasive than what I experienced for myself.

I have often pondered since that time why this event would have happened to me, and why it would have happened then, of all times. I know that it was not because of greater worthiness on my part. There are many people who have lived more faithfully than I have, and been far more consistent. I have even had times myself when I was doing a better job of keeping the commandments, at least in terms of the letter of the law, but nothing like it has ever happened before or since.

If I had to guess why it happened to me, I think it is because Heavenly Father must have known that I was really going to struggle, that my faith would be severely tested at times, and that I would need something really significant to overcome that, or I just would not have believed it. It would have been an honest mistake. I just sincerely would not have thought that it even could be true, that any religion could actually be true. But it did happen, and that experience has served as the cornerstone for my religious belief ever since. When I have doubts, and I have them frequently, I go back to that, and I realize that if anybody has justification for belief, it would be me, and I decide to believe the bird.