Hold Christ as holy in your hearts, always being prepared to offer a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, but do so with meekness and fear, maintaining a good conscience so that those who speak against your behavior in Christ may be put to shame when they slander you.

(1 Peter 3:15–16)
THE HOPE THAT IS IN ME
THE HOPE THAT IS IN ME

What It Means to Me to Be Religious and to Believe in God

M. Gerald Bradford
For JeNeal, for Peter and Suzette, and for Danielle and Ryan.
For Jackson and Megan, Elizabeth, Susannah, and Abigail, and for William, Mary, and Miles.

All of whom I love more than life itself.
CONTENTS

Preface ix

1. What It Means to Me to Follow the First and Second Great Commandments 1

2. What Living in the New and Everlasting Covenant Means to Me 13

3. What I Believe About the Good News and the Restoration 30

4. What It Means to Me to Be Religious 42

5. What It Means to Me to Believe in God 53

6. My Core Beliefs About God 74

Notes 85

Works Cited 117
Hold Christ as holy in your hearts, always being prepared to offer a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, but do so with meekness and fear, maintaining a good conscience so that those who speak against your behavior in Christ may be put to shame when they slander you (1 Peter 3:15–16).¹

Recently, while coming to terms with some experiences that challenged my faith, I decided to take stock and determine which things matter most and ought to come first in my life. I turned to Jesus’ teachings about the first and second great commandments. I read and reread his Sermon on the Mount where he describes the form of life that he wants us to strive to live so as to love God and relate properly with him, while also loving others and relating and dealing properly with
them. In time, I made the decision to endeavor to live my life this way. It has made all the difference. My life is more meaningful and purposeful than ever. I have wanted to tell the story of this transformation. The result is this book. It is the long-form answer I give to anyone who asks about the hope that is in me.

In chapter 1, I reflect on the importance of the first and second great commandments, on what I get out of reading Jesus’s famous sermon, and on what it means to me to try my best to follow these two commandments. In chapter 2, I deal mainly with the concept of the new and everlasting covenant and how I relate with God, my loved ones, and others in terms of it. I also examine what living in the new covenant means to me.

In chapter 3, I share some thoughts on what I believe about the Good News and the Restoration. These two series of events are unique and are linked tightly together. By means of the first, God gave us the gift of the atonement and the resurrection and began the process of reconciling all of creation, including all of us, to himself. By means of the second, God has again made it possible for all of those who elect to follow him (on both sides of the veil) to reconcile themselves to him.

By striving to abide by the mandate of the first and second great commandments, by electing to relate with God and others by means of the new and everlasting
covenant, and by trying my best to lay claim to the blessings that have and will yet come to all of us as a result of the Good News and the Restoration, I have come to a more informed sense of what it means to be religious and a greater appreciation for what it means to believe in God. With the help of others, I spell this out in chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

Finally, in chapter 6, I summarize the main points I make in the book by identifying and briefly discussing what I call my foundational or core beliefs about God. I describe each of them in turn and, thereby, the central role that God plays in my life.

While working on the book I read what scholars have written about these same ideas. It is heartening to discover how some can express their thoughts on a range of topics important to them in a way that helps me see the things that I hold dear in a new light. I am grateful to all those who have helped me along the way.

I am solely responsible for what I have written. My views are not intended to represent the position of the restored Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Nor is it my aim to describe what others in the Church do or adhere to, much less to say what they ought to be doing.

My goal is to convey a sense of how one scholar has found new meaning in how he lives his life. I hope
the subjects that I have singled out for attention, and the manner in which I have dealt with them, will help those who have questions or may be struggling with similar issues. I hope that the book will prompt readers to determine which things matter most and ought to come first in their lives.
The Hope That Is in Me
CHAPTER I

What It Means to Me to Follow the First and Second Great Commandments

One among them, a lawyer, questioned him in order to test him. “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Laws?” He said to him, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and in all your understanding. This is the greatest and first commandment. The second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire Law and Prophets depend on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:35–40).

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of what Jesus is teaching us in this epigraph.¹ I read him as telling us that of all the things we have to deal with in life, from our deepest hopes and desires to our most fervent cares and concerns, we need to focus first on
what matters most—*getting and keeping ourselves right with our Father in heaven by loving him and trying our best to do what he asks of us, while also loving others even more than ourselves and striving to relate and deal properly with them.*

Jesus taught us about the first and second great commandments by the manner in which he lived his life in mortality. He also made these commandments the subtext of his Sermon on the Mount, where he described the distinctive form of life he wants us to live (see Matthew 5—7).²

I endeavor to live my life this way.³ Living in the particular social, cultural, and political world that I do, I must confront the specific challenges of this way of life. The path I have chosen is a demanding one, but it is also a profoundly rewarding one. Among other things, it has resulted in my coming to a deeper sense of what it means to be religious and to believe in God.

### The Sermon on the Mount

*The Beatitudes*

Jesus begins his sermon by commending and calling blessed those who are living according to certain moral virtues (what we call the beatitudes). He tells them what is in store for them.
Thus, blessed are:

• The poor in spirit (that is, those who are teachable, devoid of pride, and poor as to the things of this world) for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
• Those who mourn (that is, are empathetic, quick to grieve at the loss experienced by others), for they will be comforted.
• The meek (that is, those who are strong, steadfast, and patient in the face of adversity or provocation), for they will inherit the earth.
• Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (for justice), for they will be filled.
• The merciful (quick to forgive and to not accuse or judge others improperly), for they will receive mercy.
• The pure in heart, for they will see God.
• The peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.
• Those who are persecuted (for righteousness’ sake), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
• Those who bear with those who insult them and who falsely say all manner of evil things against them, for their reward is great in heaven (see Matthew 5:3–12).

Jesus tells us that living this way of life is an end in itself. He explains how to live a life that is full of meaning and purpose, a life that is good, one that will teach
us, in the fulness of time, how to become like him and our Father in heaven. Jesus refers to those who live this way as the salt of the earth, a light to the world, a city set upon a hill.

*The Weightier Matters of the Law and the Higher Ideals of the Commandments*

Next, Jesus reminds us that he did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17–20). He highlights what he means by turning to some of the Ten Commandments and explaining how they must be understood according to the weightier matters of the law and the higher ideals of the commandments. I can briefly summarize each of the points that he makes.

We need to:

* Affirm a culture of life by turning our backs on all forms of needless and senseless violence and killing, taking of innocent life, even committing acts of character assassination (Matthew 5:21–26).
* Uphold the sanctity of marriage and the family by loving and honoring our spouse, our children, our parents and our siblings; by not committing adultery; by being chaste; and by being diligent in keeping the promises we made to God and to one another when we marry (Matthew 5:27–32).
• Avoid making false promises; instead, keep or carry out all the promises we have made to the Lord (Matthew 5:33–37).

• Renounce all acts of vengeance and retaliation by turning the other cheek, returning acts of unkindness with kindness, and going the extra mile in helping those in need and serving others (Matthew 5:38–42).

• Shed all vestiges of racial, ethnic, or tribal rivalries and hatreds by loving those who hate us and praying for those who persecute us, so as to be perfect, even as our Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:43–48).5

Jesus also cautions us that in doing other things that are required of us, such as giving alms (that is, having compassion on those in need and helping them, as well as providing for them materially) or praying and working to discipline ourselves through fasting, we need to proceed in the proper manner—to act in a way that glorifies our Father in heaven, rather than drawing attention to ourselves (Matthew 6:1–4, 16–18).

Prayer

For the most part, Jesus’s sermon focuses on what is required of us to love one another and to deal properly with each other. However, when he turns to the subject of prayer, he tells us about our Father in heaven and
calls our attention to what we need to do to relate and interact properly with him, thereby helping us understand better the central role that he must come to play in our lives.

We are to:

• Trust fully in and depend solely on the Father. His very name is sacred and we must never take it in vain.

• Pray for the coming of his kingdom. Many of Jesus’s followers in the Old World may have realized that their prayers for the coming of the Lord’s kingdom had been answered, at least in part, when he organized them prior to his death and ascension. When Jesus appeared as the resurrected Savior to minister to some of the Nephites and Lamanites in the New World, he organized his kingdom among them, too. And he has reestablished it once again, in our day, as the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Yet we must continue to pray for its coming as we long for the time when the things Christ undertook more than two thousand years ago are accomplished, when the distinction between the kingdom of God in heaven and the kingdom of God on earth collapses, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

• Acknowledge that his will prevails on earth as it does in heaven.
• Look to him (day in and day out) for all that we need or ever hope to have, for all that we are or ever hope to be.
• Look to him to forgive our debts, sins, and trespasses, as we forgive those who are in debt to us and who have wronged us.
• Ask him to suffer us not to be led into temptation or into a time of trial, but to deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:5–13).6

*The Things of Heaven*

Next, Jesus urges us to treasure the things of heaven, the things that matter most and should come first in our lives, rather than the things of this world, the things that matter least and will not last. He reminds us that our hearts will be wherever our treasure is and likens this to our either serving God or money. We cannot do both. If we elect to serve God, to trust fully in him and depend solely upon him, we have no need to worry about things like what to eat or drink or what to wear, since he will provide (Matthew 6:19–34).

*Judging*

Later on, Jesus warns us against judging or accusing others improperly, lest we be judged the same way and found to be hypocrites.7 He reminds us that our
Father in heaven gives us good things if we ask. We should also give good things to those who ask us. He repeats this important overall counsel: “In all things, do the same to others as you desire them to do to you. This is the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12).

Warnings

Finally, Jesus concludes by calling our attention to things that will occur in the future. He talks about a time of testing and shifting that is coming and tells us that we will need to “enter through the narrow gate, because the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to ruin, and there are many who find it” (Matthew 7:13–14). He warns of false prophets who will come among us. They will appear as gentle sheep but are, in fact, hungry wolves. He tells us to test them in terms of their good fruits—what they do, the life they lead, and so on—more so than by what they say, what they prophesy, or by the miracles they may appear to perform.

Likewise, Jesus cautions us that in the future it will not be enough for us to say, Lord, Lord or merely express our belief in God. Only those who do the will of the Father will enter into the kingdom in heaven. He likens such a person to the wise man who built his house on solid bedrock. That is, we need to live the way he asks us to live, to bind ourselves fully to him, and to
embark on the long course to become more and more like him. If we do not, we will be like the foolish man who built his house on sand (Matthew 7:15–28).

Following the First and Second Great Commandments

Jesus taught how to live so as to better keep the two great commandments. These teachings are among his so-called “hard sayings.” Still, they hold the key to how I can become more like him over time. Notice that, contrary to the prevailing traditions of his day, Jesus does not tell us how we should act at each moral crossroads at which we find ourselves. Many in Jesus’s day came to view God’s commandments as guidance in everything they did that shielded them from making the wrong choices, and so forth.

Instead, he teaches us to be responsible for the choices we make and to face up to the consequences that will flow from them. He teaches us how to live a distinctively moral life, knowing that in striving to do so we will learn, by trial and error, how to make the right choices. He draws our attention to some of the practical demands in the law, and he paints a portrait of the kind of person he wants us to be and the kind of life he wants us to live. The portrait is vivid enough for us
to clearly see the essentials of what we need to do (and what he does) to please our Father in heaven.

Some maintain that Jesus was only a great moral teacher. But not me. I know that what he asks of me is demanding. Parts of what he asks are impractical (especially when judged by the standards of the world). Still, I take him to be teaching me that in striving “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” (Micah 6:8), not only am I doing what is commanded, but my efforts will change the character and quality of my own life for the good, both now and over time.8

In dealing with others, I read Jesus as telling us that it is our responsibility to do all we can to resolve differences and do the right thing. It is up to us to discern the difference between what is right and what is wrong, between what is good and what is evil. I understand that I need to grasp the basics of what it means to be honest and moral in my interactions with others and act according to these benchmarks in my dealings with them.

I find that most of the time things go smoothly. However, on occasion, matters get complicated. It is not always clear which course of action I should take.9 Sometimes I am forced to make a decision quickly and act on it. In these instances, I do the best I can. When I have time to think things through, I mainly listen to
my conscience (to the promptings of the Holy Spirit),
make a decision, and then, with equal measures of hope
and courage, fear and trembling, I act. More times than
not, I sense that I have acted correctly. And yet there
are times when I know otherwise, when I am painfully
aware that I have calculated wrongly, made the wrong
choice, and acted the wrong way or said the wrong
thing. On these occasions, it is my conscience that con-
victs me. Looking back on such instances, I have to ad-
mit that, for a host of reasons, I acted impulsively and
selfishly. I forgot about God and my obligations to him
and the need I have to trust solely in him and depend
fully upon him at all times and under all circumstances.

Following such lapses in judgement and behavior I
have learned to do a number of things to get back on
track. I ask for God’s forgiveness. I ask others to forgive
me. I reread key passages in the scriptures (and pay at-
tention to key depictions in the temple), all of which
help remind me that this life is one in which I face real
challenges and where I will need to make choices, ones
that have real consequences, both for good and for ill. I
make a renewed effort to try my best to make the right
choices, face up to these challenges, and resolve them
as best I can.

What I am learning from this trial and error ap-
proach is that the more I am defined by God and the
things of God, the easier it is for me to relinquish my natural inclinations for self-aggrandizement in my dealings with others. I also realize how much I am dependent on others, especially my loved ones and friends, for help. This, in turn, reminds me of the profound obligation I have to always treat others as I would be treated—as a person and never as an object or a means to some other end.

All of this (and more) is included in Jesus’s teachings about the form of life that we need to endeavor to live so as to follow God’s first and second great commandments. Over time, I am learning that such efforts are virtues in and of themselves and that in teaching us about them, Jesus is also schooling us for something else: namely, that in the fullness of time he will judge us to be righteous (that is, find us dealing with others justly) and will take us by the hand and lead us and our loved ones into the presence of our Father in heaven.
Chapter 2

What Living in the New and Everlasting Covenant Means to Me

Verily I say unto you, blessed are you for receiving mine everlasting covenant, even the fulness of my gospel, sent forth unto the children of men, that they might have life and be made partakers of the glories which are revealed in the last days, as it is written by the prophets and apostles in days of old (D&C 66:2).

Trying to follow the first and second great commandments is closely linked to what Jesus teaches us about the distinctive way in which he and the Father want all of us to relate with them, namely, in terms of their new and everlasting covenant (hereafter, simply, the new covenant). Striving to live my life this way sets the pattern for how I endeavor to love others, relate...
with them properly, and deal with them honestly and morally.

In this chapter, I note how the concept of covenant is spelled out in the Old Testament and the early part of the Book of Mormon. Next, I describe how the concept of the new covenant is portrayed in the New Testament and the later part of the Book of Mormon. I note how the new covenant is an integral part of the Restoration and indicate what I take to be its two main dimensions. Finally, I discuss what living in the new covenant with God and others means to me.

The Concept of Covenant in the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon

The Old Testament tells us how God made known his commands anciently, first by calling patriarchs and then, in time, the whole house of Israel. He required those who responded to his call to accept him as their one true God, the Creator, the one who loved them and would eventually bring them out of bondage and exile and lead them to the Promised Land. Responding to God’s call meant they trusted in him, were willing to change their lives, always remembered him, and depended on him at all times and under all circumstances.
It meant they loved and worshiped him and were willing to become his people, an example of how others ought to relate with God and one another, a light to all the world.

In calling them in this manner, God brought them into covenant with him, according to his terms and conditions (his law and commandments). That is, he adopted them, thereby making them a righteous people, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests and priestesses, children of the covenant. In doing so, he blessed and protected them on the condition that they remain true to the promises they made to him. If they forgot or broke their vows, if they chose to rebel against him, in other words, if they divorced themselves from him, they would no longer be under his protection and would suffer the consequences.

The ancient record speaks of this relationship with God in terms of how he was to be approached and worshiped in the temple. The making, maintenance, and renewal of the covenant became dependent on priestly (often temple) authority and on the performance of prescribed rituals or ordinances (sacrificing certain animals, offering a broken and contrite heart, and so forth). The covenant itself was symbolized in specific ways and was memorialized in sacramental meals.

The Old Testament tells how God intervened in
the course of history by establishing his covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David (and their followers), thereby situating pivotal events at particular times and places in the past—events his followers could recall for meaning and direction in their lives, even for a sense of their identity. The book demonstrates how God’s covenantal dealings could become the means by which followers could discern the true meaning of important past events, as well as significant, prophesied future events. It recounts how God purifies his followers so that they can perform their priestly duties in the temple and thus worship him properly. And it explains how following his gift of the law and obeying his commandments become the conditions under which they can stay within the covenant and deal properly with God and others.

The Old Testament understanding of covenant is likewise found in the Book of Mormon. The earlier part of the narrative tells how a group of people in the ancient New World lived according to terms contained in God’s covenant with Moses, while experiencing the many marvelous things that God did for them. Like Old Testament prophets, Book of Mormon prophets also anticipated the coming of the Messiah and his great work of salvation and reconciliation. They prophesied that key promises contained in God’s earlier covenantal dealings with ancient prophets and their follow-
ers would eventually be fulfilled in God’s new covenant that would come forth. Centuries before his coming, they identified Jesus of Nazareth as the long-awaited Messiah. And, importantly, they first foretold and then confirmed teachings in the New Testament that the covenant God presently calls us to must be understood not in terms of how it had been known in the past, but in a new way—in light of all that the Son and the Father have done, are doing, and will yet do for all of us, both individually and communally, in this life and in the life to come.

The Concept of the New Covenant in the New Testament and the Book of Mormon

At the heart of the New Testament are accounts of what Jesus did in ancient Palestine under the direction and guidance of our Father in heaven. They are summed up in the phrase “the Good News” or the Gospel of Jesus Christ—the name for a unique series of events that began when Jesus was born, took place during his ministry and especially at its culmination, are still unfolding, and will ultimately become the means by which the Father and the Son reconcile the whole of creation unto themselves.
The New Testament records how Jesus told those who have ears to hear and eyes to see about the righteousness of God—the love and grace of God reflected in all that he has done, is doing, and will yet do in keeping his earlier covenantal promises, namely, that he will act to renew all of creation, that is, reconcile the whole of it and all of us unto himself and bring justice and mercy first to Israel and then, through her, to all the world. In numerous ways, Jesus tells his followers that God will do this, not in terms of age-old nationalistic, political, legalistic, or militaristic agendas, as most believed, but in a profoundly new way, by virtue of specific and unique things he himself would accomplish as the long-awaited Christ. It records how Jesus tells followers that the terms and promises contained in the earlier covenants have begun to be fulfilled in God’s new covenant that has come forth.

Jesus, following the pattern outlined in the scripture of his day, called on his followers to love their Father in heaven and trust solely in him. He commanded them to love their neighbors as themselves. He called on them to repent (that is, radically change their lives), and demonstrate this by living a new, higher form of life and by entering into the new covenant. Jesus tells them that this is the way to become members of the new kingdom of God on earth, the new house of Israel. He promised
those who accepted his call and bound themselves to him and to the Father—Jew and Gentile alike—that after he left them they would be given the Holy Spirit, who would be their advocate with the Father, a companion and the means by which they could draw closer to the Father, to him, and to one another, a source of healing and comfort in life, a gift given to help them be true to the promises they made to God when they came into the new covenant, and an aid to help them make the right choices in their ongoing efforts to become more like Christ, both now and in the spirit world.

The subject of God’s new covenant is the subtext in the later part of the Book of Mormon narrative, especially in 3 Nephi, which recounts what Jesus did during the brief time he spent with some Nephites and Lamanites, shortly after his resurrection. The covenant is behind what he taught them concerning the proper manner of performing the ordinances of baptism and the sacrament. It is woven into the version of the sermon he gave them, patterned after his Sermon on the Mount. And it is implied in what he says about the law of Moses being fulfilled in him. While quoting Micah, Isaiah, and Malachi, Jesus tells the people how, in the latter days, the fulness of the gospel (in the form of the new covenant) will again be brought forth among the Gentiles and how those who come into it and stay
true to its principles will be counted among his other sheep, all of whom will eventually be gathered together into the new house of Israel. What is more, he tells them about the glorious events and conditions that will prevail when the terms of the Abrahamic covenant are finally fulfilled.

Jesus tells them how another record, this other testament, of what he has done and will yet do in the future, when it comes forth, will be an added witness, not only of him but also of the Father and of the fact that all the terms and promises contained in previous covenants are being fulfilled in the new. Finally, he shows his love for them by binding them to himself, thereby establishing in the New World what he had put in place in the Old—the new kingdom of God on earth.

The New Covenant in the Restoration and Its Two Dimensions

A reemphasis on the new covenant and on what it symbolizes, the fulness of the gospel, is an integral part of the Restoration. On the basis of God’s reestablishing his divine priesthood authority, he is presently calling individuals from all over the world, as well as on the other side of the veil. He has made it possible for those
who heed his call and accept it to avail themselves of ordinances of salvation and comfort by entering into the new covenant.

Having joined the new and everlasting covenant, I experience my life with God in terms of what could be called the new covenant’s two dimensions—the individual or devotional dimension (where the focus is on the magnificent things God has done, is doing, and will yet do for all of us, and where the emphasis is on what is required of me so as to lay claim to all of these gifts) and the communal dimension (where the emphasis is on what is required of me to join with other members of the Church in furthering its worldwide missionary/gathering efforts, while joining with members and others in doing what we can to look out for, care for, and serve those in our ward and stake, in our surrounding neighborhoods, and in other locales throughout the world). Both dimensions complement one another. I try my best to pursue and cultivate both of them.

Those of us in the new covenant experience the individual dimension in terms of the simple, practical things that we do in worshiping God on the Sabbath. We pray and sing hymns to him. We give talks and tell stories about the acts of God in our lives. On Fast Sundays, we bear testimony of him to one another. On Sundays we share the emblems of the Lord’s Supper
with one another. Doing this in an attitude of repentance and forgiveness, with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, we witness to God our intent to keep the commandments (make them real in our lives in light of all that they have come to mean to us) and to keep the promises we made to him when we first entered the covenant and subsequently bound ourselves even tighter to him. We express the hope that by so living we may continue to have the companionship of the Holy Spirit. Partaking of these emblems nourishes and renews us (it is a meal, after all) in our ongoing efforts to follow him. We also assemble in groups as adults, young adults, and children to learn more about God by reading and discussing together the scriptures and the teachings of our living prophets.

Then during the week, we are afforded opportunities to experience the communal dimension when some of us join with other members in pursuing various missionary efforts, while others join with members and those not of our faith (or of no faith at all) in doing what we can to care for and serve one another, only to discover a pearl of great price—we have knit ourselves tighter together as individual families, as a branch or ward, as a stake or mission, and as a community of friends and neighbors by sharing in God’s love for all of us and the many ways in which he blesses us.
All of this (and more) is prefigured in the theme of the new covenant that I described earlier. It is woven into the tapestry that our life with God and others has become, as we were taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Indeed, according to one scholar “it is the unifying center of the Book of Mormon.”

What Living in the New Covenant Means to Me

Finally, permit me to share a few thoughts on what living in the new covenant means to me. Like others born in the Church, I was only eight years old when I entered into the covenant. I vaguely remember doing this. It happened long ago. I am confident that at the time I understood very little about what I was doing and knew very little about God. In time, I made additional promises to him when I agreed to take on the responsibility of having, first, the lower priesthood and then, eventually, the higher priesthood conferred upon me.

Shortly after graduating from the university, I found myself in graduate school in San Francisco, while also working in the city. This is where I met and fell in love with JeNeal. In time, we were engaged and went together to the temple for the first time so that each of us
could make even more promises to God. That first time in the temple I was washed and anointed and donned a new, sacred undergarment. It is symbolic of many things, but mainly of promises I made to God from the time of my baptism, up to and including the ones I would make to him that day. In addition, it would symbolize promises JeNeal and I would make to him (and to each other) in the days to come. This happened when we were married in the temple. Both of us are now fully bound to God, to each other, and to our family.7

I view all of what goes on in the temple from the universal perspective of the new covenant. I see it centered on the Son and, through him, on the Father. Today, the House of the Lord is situated in various locales around the world. JeNeal and I go there to be even closer to God. Here we make what we hope will be an acceptable offering unto him (our broken hearts and contrite spirits). Here we are instructed in the first principles and ordinances of the restored gospel. We are reminded of the mighty things God has done for us, especially in our family, and contemplate what he is presently doing and will yet do for all of us. Initially, we went there to further the process of binding ourselves to him by means of sacred ordinances. Subsequently, we go there to worship God by means of the priesthood service we perform on behalf of those who have died.
On occasion, we do this for members of our own extended family who, for whatever reason, never entered into this relationship with him during their lifetime.

We hope, by this means, to make it possible for them to join with us in forming a family lineage that will be linked to God forever, what one historian refers to as the “distinctive Mormon chain of belonging.” But most of the time we do this for others who are not directly related to us. In each case, we hope that those on the other side of the veil of death will accept what we and others have done on their behalf and that the Savior will do for them what we hope he will do for us—eventually lead all of us into Heavenly Father’s presence.

If God has revealed in our day that the things we do in the temple for our kindred dead and for others are emblematic of how we are to relate with others, what does this tell us about how important it is that we do the right thing by all those we encounter day after day? What does this tell us about the need for us to love them as God loves us? Indeed, what does this tell us about how important it is, at the end of the day, that we find ourselves living under the protection of the new covenant, the divine environment within which all of these things are sought for and made real and meaningful in our lives?
Now I can see the point of it all. As he always has, God continues to call us in a number of ways. What we need to do is quit focusing so much on ourselves. We need to stop leading such busy, compartmentalized, and social media-driven lives. We need to turn our backs, more often than we do, on the things of this world. We need to get ourselves into a position where we can hear his call, and then, with hope and courage, we need to respond and embark upon a quest to radically change the way we live our lives. Put another way, we need to admit to him (and to ourselves), in the words of St. Augustine, that “our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee.”

Endeavoring to live my life the way I do guides me in specifics, especially in my dealings with others. It helps me to withstand the false and evil things I am confronted with. It enables me to see God’s hand in life, both the good and the bad. It represents my efforts at being the kind of disciple he wants me to be. And it evidences to him my hope that my loved ones and I can continue to experience his influence and presence not only in this life but in the spirit world as well.

For me, living such a life does not mean following in the footsteps of those who, because of envy, anger, hatred, or ignorance, the undue influence of other individuals, the powerful sway of various ideologies, and
so on have so distorted, even perverted, their love and dependence on God that they zealously commit all manner of offense, slander, ridicule, abuse, violence, and even murder in his name. Neither does it mean withdrawing or separating myself from the world (as attractive as this may seem at times when social, cultural, and political sea changes are taking place all around us) and thereby defeating the whole point of mortal life. Nor does it mean accommodating myself uncritically to the powers that be in this world or aligning myself indiscriminately with its prevailing norms and values.

What it does mean is coming to terms with the inherent realities and tensions, the good and the evil of this world. It means learning to be guided by the gifts that God has given me so I can, on a continual basis and in accordance with the principles and practices of the restored gospel, reason, and civility, educate and prepare myself to be in a position to better the lives of my loved ones, friends, and those with whom I interact in any significant way. I am building on a sure foundation, and Jesus has promised that my efforts will not have been in vain.

Living such a life means proclaiming (by deed and by word) the glorious message of the gospel to all those who will listen and inviting them to join with me and others in coming into the new covenant. And it means
viewing the world and living in it in this distinctively
different way.

Still, while it is one thing for me to recall key steps I
took while coming into the new covenant, and to con-
vey something of what it means to me to endeavor to
live my life in terms of it, it is something else again
for me to actually do this. I often fail at what I am
trying to do. I know just enough about self-deception
and self-doubt to appreciate how such things can cloud
my thinking. Owing to these and other failings on my
part, I sometimes stray from God. Not in the sense of
being in rebellion against him, but in the fact that too
often I focus on things of little import or on the wrong
things. I find myself making the wrong choices and do-
ing what I know I should not do. In other words, I sin
against or transgress the law. I miss the mark. I find
myself attracted to the flood lights on center stage. I
forget about God and how much I am dependent upon
him every day and instead find myself treating others as
objects and not doing right in my dealings with them.

When this happens, I make an effort to make
amends. I endeavor to keep God in my thoughts at
all times. I strive to not always focus on myself. I seek
God out in prayer and fasting, listen to and follow the
promptings of my conscience, repent and plead for his
forgiveness and the forgiveness of others. I acknowl-
edge my whole-hearted reliance on him and on his love and grace which he freely bestows on my loved ones and me. And I worship him with full intent and strive all the harder to interact and deal properly with him and with those I come into contact with.
What I Believe About the Good News and the Restoration

*All these things are from God, who changed us through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation so that in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not accounting to them their sins, but entrusting the message of reconciliation to us* (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).

Given the importance I place on the particular things that I endeavor to do in following God, I often find myself thinking about him in terms of things that he has done, is doing now, and will yet do for all of us. The more I read the scriptures the more I am convinced that they are mainly about the love and care that God has for the whole of creation, as evidenced by his ongoing efforts at reconciling all of it unto himself. They
are also about what we are required to do in showing our love for him and others, so as to reconcile ourselves to him.

In this chapter, I reflect on two specific things that God is doing. The first is known as the “Good News” or the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is cosmic in scope, rivaling the creation itself. The New Testament scholar N. T. Wright refers to it as “the new creation.”\(^1\) The second is the Restoration, wherein God reestablished his divine authority, kingdom, and temple on earth—the means by which those (on both sides of the veil) who hear his call and elect to respond can begin to be reconciled to him.

**The Good News**

More than two thousand years ago, in ancient Palestine, the Father, acting through Jesus, did what he has always promised—he commenced to set things in the world right by inaugurating what amounts to a renewal of the whole of creation. Integral to this renewal was fulfillment of ancient promises wherein Jesus willingly consented, in the garden and especially on the cross, to take upon himself the sins of the world, to atone for or cover over our transgressions. Whereupon the Father raised him from the dead, and together they took the first steps in conquering death, overthrowing evil and suffering, and forgiving sin!
In thinking about the Good News this way, I look to what the Gospels and the Book of Mormon teach us about it and to those scholars, such as Wright, who view Jesus and his initial followers within the setting of ancient Jewish practices and thought that prevailed at the time. In Wright’s book *The Challenge of Jesus*, he shares some of his thoughts on the subject in an unusual way. He tries to imagine what the disciples on the road to Emmaus (as recounted by Luke in Luke 24:13–35) may have been going through and tells us what he makes of what the stranger said to them when he joined them on the road. Wright thinks the two on the road may have been husband and wife, Cleopas and Mary. I like to think so as well.

Wright frames his treatment of the subject within the context provided by Psalms 42 and 43, just as Luke did, and suggests that the couple would have been living out a story. It was the well-known story of the children of Israel, who, time and time again, found themselves in bondage to foreign rulers and oppressors, who longed for God to do for them in their day what he had done for the Israelites in times past—free them and bring them out of exile. The couple knew the exile was not over because they still lived under Roman domination. They knew that “Israel still needed ‘redeeming’”—which, in their language, was an obvious code for the exodus.
The exodus was the great covenant movement; what they now needed was covenant renewal.”³ Under these conditions, Wright imagines the two may well have prayed the prayers found in these two psalms.

The couple, like others who followed Jesus, no doubt hoped that the end would happen with him, but their hopes were dashed when the Romans crucified him. They had thought that Jesus, as the Messiah, and his followers, the holy remnant “with God on their side would defeat the pagan hordes. Thus it had been in Scripture; thus, they believed, it would be when the great climax came, when Israel’s God would become King of all the world.”⁴ But the crucifixion changed everything for them—in more ways than one.

According to Wright, this explains why the couple were arguing so vigorously. “They had been traveling up a road they thought was leading to freedom, and it turned out to be a cul-de sac.”⁵ Wright reconstructs Luke’s account by having the couple point out to their new traveling companion that:

All the signs were right: Jesus of Nazareth had indeed been a prophet mighty in deed and word; God had been with him, and the people had approved him. Surely he was the one through whom the story would reach its climax, and Israel would be free! How could they possibly have been so mistaken—as his execution by their leaders
and the rulers showed they had been? And now confusion has become worse, confounded because of strange reports about a missing body and a vision of angels. This has nothing to do with what they have been hoping for. It is a disturbing extra puzzle on top of the deep sorrow and disappointment they were feeling.6

But then the stranger told them the story differently. He showed them that “within the historical precedents, the prophetic promises and the psalmists’ prayers there lay a constant theme and pattern to which they had hitherto been blind.”7 He reminded them of all the times in the past when Israel was “cast down, walking about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy, then her God will act.”8 He told them that the prophets had always pointed to gloom such as they were now experiencing under Roman rule, and declared that it was through such darkness that redemption would come:

Israel would be narrowed down to a point, a remnant, a Servant, one like a Son of Man attacked by monsters, and this little group would pass through the raging waters and not drown, through the fire and not be harmed. Somehow, strangely, the saving purposes of [the Lord] for Israel and through Israel for the world would be carried through the most intense suffering, to emerge the other side as exile was at last undone, as sins were at last forgiven
as an act in history, as the covenant was renewed, as the kingdom of God was finally established. This then was how the story worked; this was the narrative the prophets had been elaborating. Yes, the Scriptures were indeed to be read as a narrative reaching its climax. They never were a mere collection of arbitrary or atomized proof texts. But no, the story was never about Israel beating up her enemies and becoming established as the high-and-mighty masters of the world. It was always a story of how the creator God, Israel’s covenant God, would bring his saving purposes for the world to birth through the suffering and vindication of Israel. “Beginning with Moses and all of the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” This could never be a matter of so-called “messianic” proof-texts alone. It was the entire narrative, the complete story-line, the whole world of prayer and hope, focused on Israel as the bearer of God’s promises for the world, then focused on the remnant as the bearer of Israel’s destiny, and focused finally on Israel’s true king as the one upon whom the task even of the remnant would finally devolve. He had been the servant for the servant people. He had done for Israel and the world what Israel and the world could not do for themselves. Their slowness of heart and lack of belief in the prophets had not, therefore, been a purely spiritual blindness. It had been a matter of telling and living the wrong story. But now, suddenly, with the right story in their heads and hearts, a new possibility, huge, astonishing, and breathtaking, started to
emerge before them. Suppose the reason the key would not fit the lock was because they were trying the wrong door. Suppose Jesus’ execution was not the clear disproof of his messianic vocation but its confirmation and climax. Suppose the cross was not one more example of the triumph of paganism over God’s people but was actually God’s means of defeating evil once and for all.

Suppose this was, after all, how the exile was designed to end, how sins were to be forgiven, how the kingdom was to come. Suppose this was what God’s light and truth looked like, coming unexpectedly to lead his people back into his presence. Then something unusual happened. It was eventide and the couple invited the stranger to stay with them. He accepted. At the meal he was the one who blessed the bread and broke it, and when he did their eyes were opened. Not only did they recognize him, but the story he told them earlier on the road began to make even more sense. They asked, “Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked to us on the road, as he opened the Scriptures to us? (v. 32).” Then he vanished from their midst.

Luke concludes his story by telling how the couple quickly returned to Jerusalem, sought out the eleven and others, and told them the things they learned from the Lord while he walked with them and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. Next, Wright returns to his earlier suggestion that
in their despair the couple may have prayed the prayer, for instance, in Psalm 43:3, “O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles” and observes:

Notice what has happened. Their prayer has been answered. Their longing has been satisfied. They have returned to God’s holy hill and to his dwelling. God’s light and truth have led them back, and their sorrow has been turned into praise.12

Importantly, Wright points out how Luke intended that his story be compared and contrasted with the story told about the first couple in Genesis 3. That first couple, in that first garden, were to be “God’s image-bearers in his newly created world, that is, of bringing God’s love and care and wise ordering to bear upon the whole creation.”13 But first the woman and then the man ate the forbidden fruit and “the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Genesis 3:7). As Wright puts it, “they began in sorrow and shame to argue about responsibility and to go out into a puzzling world of thorns and thistles.”14 According to our authority, Luke, in effect, tells this same story, only in reverse.

The thorns and thistles of their world have been puzzling enough, and they stand in sorrow and shame with their hopes in tatters. Following Jesus’ astonishing exposition
of Scripture, they come into the house; Jesus takes the bread, blesses it and breaks it, “and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.” (The Greek is very close to the Septuagint of Genesis 3:7.) They thereby become part of the vanguard for God’s project of restoring the world in which his image-bearers take his forgiving love and wise ordering—that is, his kingdom—to the whole of creation…. The meal in Emmaus is the eighth meal-scene in the Gospel, where the Last Supper was the seventh; the week of the first creation is over, and Easter is the beginning of the new creation. God’s new world order has arrived. The exile is over—not just Israel’s exile in actual and spiritual Babylon but the exile of the human race, shut out of the garden. The new world order does not look like people thought it would, but they must get used to the fact that it is here and that they are not only its beneficiaries but also its ambassadors and witnesses.15

What Jesus told the couple on the road to Emmaus is true! What he and the Father began to do anciently, in reconciling the whole of creation unto themselves, will change everything—all of creation, including us. What they did then, are doing now, and will yet do is truly, in Wright’s words, “huge, astonishing, and breathtaking.” Elsewhere, Wright points out that the Good News is not a system or theory of how people get saved. Rather it names a cosmic series of events, the new creation. The announcement or preaching of it results in
people being saved. We live today in the interim, between when the series commenced and when it will be completed, at the end times. The onus is on us to so live as to avail ourselves fully of what they have done and will yet do for us and to be thankful for the gifts of love and grace that they give us.

What Wright says about the renewal of the whole of creation is true! All of us are living in the midst of it and are its beneficiaries. Those of us who accept it and bind ourselves to the Son and the Father are, as he says, ambassadors and witnesses of both the event and those who are bringing it about.

By following Wright’s careful reading of such passages in the New Testament, I have come to appreciate even more the calculated things Jesus did that last fateful week in the temple and in the upper room (all of them full of symbolic meaning), the things he achieved in the garden and on the cross, and the glorious thing that happened that first Easter morning when Heavenly Father raised him from the dead. Thinking about the Good News as a series of unique events helps me to focus on the marvelous things the Father and the Son have done for us, are now doing for us, and will yet do for us. This, in turn, helps me try all the harder to do the things I need to do here and now, living in covenant with them, communing with other members of
the Church, and interacting with those of other faiths (or those with no faith at all).¹⁷

The Restoration

Nearly two hundred years ago, in the United States, the Father and the Son, through the Prophet Joseph Smith and others, launched the Restoration.¹⁸ Initially, it included the divine epiphanies that Smith and eventually others were privileged to experience. In time, it included the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and other sacred scripture. Later on, it included the restoration of divine priesthood authority and an unbroken succession of living prophets/apostles who presently hold its keys. It also included the reestablishment of their kingdom, new covenant, and temple on earth.¹⁹

The Father and the Son selected the particular time and place to once again reveal themselves and to once again call attention to the mighty things they launched anciently. As a result, they are today calling individuals from all over the world, as well as those on the other side of the veil. They have made it possible for those who heed their call and accept it to avail themselves of ordinances of salvation and comfort by entering into the new covenant. They are making the same gracious promises as they did before and are expecting the same from all of those they adopt.
When God calls us, he does not do so on the basis of racial, ethnic, gender, tribal, creedal, or any other form of identity or orientation (political, nationalistic, ideological, or otherwise), but simply because we are his children. This is why there is no basis (and never has been) for viewing others in terms of various gradations of human worth—all of us are alike unto him. In this and numerous other ways, God teaches us how to love and relate properly with him and with one another what it means to be truly human and what it means to be children of God.
Living my life the way that I do has enabled me to come to a more informed understanding of what it means to be religious. I have been helped by something the philosopher James Faulconer wrote recently.¹ He contrasts two meanings of history, describes how they influence two different ways in which the scriptures are said to be meaningful, and then ties each of them to two different views of what it means to be religious.

According to Faulconer, the modern understanding of history (especially in its academic guise) assumes that events exist prior to and independent of their meaning.² He shows how this way of thinking has resulted in most of us maintaining that scriptural narratives are meaningful to the extent that they can accurately portray past events, places, and people. He then points out that because of this, and for at least one other reason as
well, most of us think about being religious in terms of what we believe.

Faulconer has serious reservations about this modern position and asks us to consider another possibility, what he refers to as the “premodern” position. This stance sees the scriptures as a means by which a symbolic order is incarnated or enacted in our lives, more so than in terms of the accuracy of their references to things past. It follows, according to this mode of thinking, that we misunderstand what it means to be religious if we view it as primarily adhering to certain beliefs. Instead, being religious is better thought of as a distinctive way of ordering and experiencing the world, in and through symbols, and by living one’s life in accordance with this ordering, one that is given by what is taken to be ultimately real—God. On the basis of this position, beliefs are seen as a consequence of this ordering, rather than as constituting it in the first place.

What it means to me to be religious is akin to Faulconer’s depiction of this premodern position, especially in the sense that God is as inescapably real for me as I assume he is for others who likewise see things from this vantage point. I spell this out in more detail in what follows.
Faulconer’s portrayal of how most individuals view what it means to be religious sums up how I used to think about the issue, that is, when I thought about it, which was not very often. When I did, it was usually on the occasion of being asked whether or not I was religious. I replied the way most others did. I talked about my beliefs (what many in the Church like to refer to as doctrines). They accounted for how I thought about God, others, and the world. I looked to them to determine what was, for me, of ultimate value, meaningful, and true. They were the means by which I tried to explain things. In a word, they defined me and my world.

I paid little attention to the religious practices that I engaged in while living my life the way I did. I was obviously aware of such activities but, for the most part, took them for granted. I presumed they were routine things required of me as dictated by my many beliefs.

At the time, it never occurred to me to respond to the question the way I do today, by suggesting that those who wonder whether or not I am religious look at the specific practices I engage in while worshiping God, or at some of the particular things that I endeavor
to do while relating and dealing with others, and so forth. In other words, I ask them to become familiar with the distinctive form of life that I am trying to live.

In any event, the important thing for me is that a while back, things began to change. I cannot pinpoint a specific time when I began to think differently about what it means to be religious, nor can I identify one specific thing that pointed me in a different direction. What I do know is that while dealing with some troubling experiences, I began to think more about God and endeavored to relate with him, others, and the world in a different way.

Before this, I was awash in religious beliefs. I assumed (wrongly, as it turns out) that all of them were on a par with one another. I relied on a steady stream of articles and books telling me what they all meant, how they all fit together, how they could be used to explain things about God, and so forth. Upon closer inspection, I began to realize that these beliefs quite naturally fell into two groups. The first group consists of a small number of what I call foundational or core beliefs about God, supported by a few other eternal teachings or claims scattered throughout the scriptures. The second group was made up of other beliefs, ones that deal with a range of subjects, all of which are peripheral to those in the first group. I have since learned to focus on my
beliefs in the first group. Doing this helps me see them in light of the life I am striving to live with God and others and thus makes them even more meaningful.

One way to describe this change is to note that I began to question one of my long-held assumptions, namely, that being religious is mainly a theoretical, speculative activity, where matters of the mind dictate that the emphasis is on striving to know things about God. Eventually, I set this view aside in favor of the pronounced impression I got out of carefully reading the scriptures, the teachings of our modern prophets, and what Faulconer and others have written along these lines, to the effect that being religious is much more of a practical, concrete endeavor, where matters of the heart place the emphasis on particular things that we are required to do in the course of loving God and others, relating properly with them, and so forth.6

Another way is to point out that before I would spend hours thinking about and talking with others about my various beliefs, comparing them with other beliefs, all in an effort to somehow prove, justify, or defend them. Eventually, I began to wonder how such efforts were related to what I understood Jesus was teaching me about how I should live my life. I questioned whether continually trying to defend my beliefs was really the first thing he expected of me as his dis-
ciple. In other words, I soon realized that the world of my religious beliefs, as such, is fleeting compared to the kind of permanence that results from my endeavoring to do what God commands—to love and reverence him and others, to relate properly with them, to love them and try to do the right thing in my dealings with them, and to join with others in doing whatever we can to make this a better world.

Now I understand that these tangible, practical, everyday efforts on my part leave indelible footprints. In light of this, I started paying closer attention to the particular things I did. I prayed about and thought carefully about what it means to join with others in worshiping and reverencing God, partaking of the sacrament, participating in giving or receiving priesthood blessings, caring for those in need, helping and serving others, and doing other such things. I did the same thing in terms of what JeNeal and I do when we go to the temple and participate in temple worship and service aimed at helping those who have passed on. I read and interpret the scriptures, the teachings of our living prophets, and others with these questions and concerns in mind. And I talk with friends and colleagues about these matters.
What Being Religious Means to Me Now

Now I understand that my recent journey to this point amounts to my having discovered something that has been in plain sight all along, something I failed to fully appreciate in the past, in part, because it was so obvious and, in part, because I was not really looking for it. Like others, who pay attention to their beliefs first and foremost, I paid attention to mine. But in doing this I neglected to give proper heed to the things God was asking me to do. I focused instead on my beliefs that were many and varied, that seemed to come and go in terms of importance, resulting in my experiencing my life with God and others in ways that were occasionally in focus but more times than not seemed blurry. Finally, after much reflection and by daring to follow promptings from the Holy Spirit, I began to live my life differently—the way I do today.

Now I understand that in living this way, I am ordering my life according to the emblematic meanings found in particular religious practices that I engage in, ones that symbolically incarnate (or enact) God and the things of God in my life, ones that result in my inhabiting or orienting myself to the world in a distinctively different way. In doing so, I, of course, continue to
rely on my ability to reason and on my best judgment in dealing with others and the world, only now I appreciate more than ever how such efforts are informed by my reliance on God’s many gifts and my adhering closely to my core beliefs about him, ones that take on their full meaning and import precisely because of the life I am endeavoring to live with him and others—just the opposite of how things were before.

In spelling out what premodern religiosity entails, Faulconer looks back to a time long before the Enlightenment when those who were religious thought about God, their lives, and the world in a decidedly different way than most do today. According to our guide, most individuals today, for whom modernism is the common-sense way of viewing the world, see their lives as divided into a number of separate regions or aspects, such as work, politics, family, morality, the academic or scholarly world, economics, leisure, and religion. What is more, while these regions overlap to some extent, most seem to assume that they are ordered or pulled together, to the extent that they are, not by religion, but by reason, guided by our personal preferences, desires, interests, and the like. From a premodern perspective, however, religion is not merely one of these regions of life, it is the field within which other regions or aspects are marked out and related to each other. Religion, in Faulconer’s words:
Is that which makes regions possible and which enacts the world as a whole, giving it unity, order, and meaning in and through symbols. To use Platonic language, religion reveals the “form” of the world. On this view, we can still speak of regions of human endeavor and interest, but ultimately those regions, such as economics or morality or politics, get their meaning in themselves and in their relations to each other, as well as their relative weight and importance from religion, rather than from our valuing.9

As Faulconer makes clear, premoderns achieve this mainly by doing a number of things, that is, engaging in certain practices which have one thing in common—they each contribute, in their own way, to how a person orders her or his life symbolically. Moderns, on the other hand, order their lives according to their own personal preferences, along with their own best sense of how things are, guided by reason. Faulconer describes the former this way:

The most obvious place to find symbolic ordering is in the rituals of religions and in their sacred objects, though symbolic ordering also encompasses more ordinary aspects of life, including such things as peculiar idioms and patterns of deference—and assertions of belief. Especially in religion, systems and sets of belief are part of the orders in question, but they are not foundational to those orders. To be religious, therefore, is not to assent to particular propositions or assertions, though that assent follows from the
fact that one is religious. Instead, to be religious is to recognize— to reverence—the holy and to live in a world of which the contents, including beliefs, are ordered by the holy. For the religious, the holy is the ordering principle, the “form” of the world…. For premodern thought, both religious and nonreligious, the real is primarily “formal.” There not only can be, but must be, a variety of manifestations of what I call here form, but each is an instance of the “same thing.” The form of something is the real manifesting itself in the world. For religious premoderns, the sacred is the real manifest in the symbolic order of things—it is the form not just of individual things but of things as a whole—and religion gives us that form/order.¹⁰

Finally, Faulconer makes another important observation. Such symbolic ordering does not come about as a result of mental acts on our part or because we simply elect to adopt a particular attitude. Rather, in my case, it is what accounts for them in the first place; it is precisely what makes possible my conscious efforts to relate properly with God, others, and the world in the distinctive way that I do. However, if I take an unqualified modern view of such things, if, for instance, I understand symbols as referential signs, then I understand signs of God as substitutes for him and assume, implicitly, that I have direct access to him. But the trouble is:

Signs of God do not work that way, for if they refer, they do so across a chasm with seemingly “nothing available”
on the other side. Of course, religious people will deny that nothing is available on the other side, but that makes my point rather than contradicts it.

The religious person can see and listen to and be commanded by the Being to whom the religious symbol refers, not because it refers in the same way that an ordinary sign does (in other words, to something public, something that anyone can see or hear independent of the sign), but because, being enlightened fundamentally by the Divine rather than by reason, they see the “other side” in and through the symbol.¹¹

Now I understand that the answers to questions such as: What things matter most and ought to come first? How can I best live my life honestly and morally? And what are the most rewarding things about the life I am endeavoring to live? All have one thing in common—my struggling to do what is required of me to relate properly with God and others and to keep myself securely bound to God. This is how I have come to know my true self. This is how I am truly free. This is how I find meaning in life. This is what makes life worth living. This is what brings my loved ones and me the joy and purpose that we experience in life. This is what it means to me to be religious.
Striving to live my life the way I do has resulted in my gaining an added appreciation for what it means to believe in God. D. Z. Phillips has written an insightful essay on this subject.\(^1\) In it, he notes that, for some, believing in God means putting forth arguments aimed at proving that God exists as well as trying to explain his ways in the face of evil and suffering in the world. This approach, according to Phillips, is akin to science in that it is basically a theoretical or speculative endeavor, one intent on learning things about God. He advances a sustained criticism of this position.

In its place, Phillips argues for the idea that believing in God is more a particular form of response to or a mode of acceptance of the way things are. For me, believing in God is striving to follow him, more than trying to come to know things about him. It is a matter
of trusting fully in him, depending solely upon his love and grace, and responding to the challenges and vicissitudes of life from this vantage point.

One Sense of What It Means to Believe in God

Phillips reminds us of the stance taken by the atheist on the question of God. He notes that it is not that the atheist simply does not believe in God. The atheist cannot see the sense in talking about God at all. This is because the way he talks about physical objects has a tenacious hold on him and he stays within these limits when he talks about God.

The atheist needs to realize, Phillips insists, that there are other ways of determining what is real and meaningful and, hence, true. Phillips refers to these other ways as a “spiritual reality.” Thus, “finding God would be finding this spiritual reality. Struggling to believe would be struggling to find it. Rebellion would be defying or hating this spiritual reality.”

Phillips focuses on those he calls “theistic apologists.” These are individuals who maintain that to believe in God means putting forth various hypotheses or arguments aimed at either proving that he exists or explaining his ways. Phillips notes that these apologists are like
the atheist in the sense that they stay within their particular limited way of thinking when talking about God. In trying to prove God exists, they maintain that since we have no direct experience of him, we must infer that he exists from the pattern of things in the world that do exist and that we experience (in other words, they utilize the traditional argument from design). They also argue that God can be inferred from the fact that there is something (the “universe as a whole” or “all there is”) rather than nothing (based on the long-standing cosmological argument). They also reason that since God is the sum of all perfections, and existence is a perfection, it follows that he exists necessarily, that is, by definition, so to speak (using the ontological argument).³

As noted, the apologists take for granted that we have no experience of God. However, for those of us who have experienced his influence in our lives and continue to do so, he is inescapably real. Because of this, I have no need of inferring that God exists from the things I experience in the world, neither do I think of him as the answer to the question of why there is something rather than nothing, nor do I think that he exists necessarily. And while I speak about God in personal, human-like terms, following the pattern in the scriptures (see endnote 13 in chapter 6), I do not make the mistake of thinking of him as a person in the ordi-
nary sense of the term. Instead, I accept the testimony of those who, on the rare occasions in which he has revealed himself to them, speak of him as an embodied being or person who is glorified (exalted) and eternal.⁴

In the end, Phillips rejects the use of hypotheses and evidence in this context, since there is simply no way of checking such claims made about God. “The position is not that we must remain agnostic about any hypothesis proposed. The point is that since anything can be proposed, the whole enterprise is shown to be a senseless aping of those contexts in which hypotheses are properly advanced and in which there are resources for their proper consideration.”⁵

Next, Phillips concentrates on the challenge faced by those who believe in God in light of all the evil and suffering in the world. He looks at how the apologists deal with this by relying on arguments known as “the- odicies,” ones aimed at explaining or justifying God in the face of evil and suffering. According to our guide, they do no better here than they did in trying to prove that God exists. They either falsify the reality of evil, wrongly attempt to justify it, demean the suffering of others, or a combination of all three.⁶ In addition, relying on this line of reasoning often amounts to their having to admit that, judged by normal standards of human decency, God appears to be found wanting.⁷
Following his analysis, Phillips turns his back on the position of the theistic apologists. But first, he summarizes his thinking up to this point by observing that:

From the suggestion that to believe in God is to advance a hypothesis about the existence of something, to the efforts to express this hypothesis in the argument from design and the cosmological argument, and finally to the efforts to confront the problem of evil, by advancing hypotheses which would justify the presence of evil, one common assumption runs through all the arguments—that religion offers us an explanation of human life.8

For him, the question is: Why do some assume that explaining something will always make things better? The greatest divide in the philosophy of religion, one not always recognized “is not between those who give religious explanations and those who give secular explanations for the contingencies of life. The divide is between those who think it makes sense to look for explanations in these contexts and those who do not.”9 For Phillips, the issue comes down to this:

Faced by the vicissitudes of life, the blind forces of nature, unpredictable visitations of disease and death, the fickleness of human beings and the interventions of bad luck, people have asked, “Why is this happening to us?” It is important to note that this question is asked after what we normally call explanations have been answered.10
In other words, those who continue to ask such a question under these circumstances are not asking for further explanations. They are trying to make sense of things in a different way. Some never find such a way. But some do. Phillips observes that the same vicissitudes of life, the same limitations of space and time, the same encounters with the destructive forces of nature, and the same confrontations with the horrendous acts of others that cause some to despair of ever finding any meaning in such things, are experienced by others as meaningful. This is because they have accepted God’s gift of faith and have come to acknowledge and understand their trust in and dependence on him in a particular way—they have learned to view the world in a way that enables them to recognize their encounters with God’s love and grace.

I include myself among this group of believers. This acknowledgment and understanding, begins with me striving to follow the first and second great commandments and endeavoring to live a covenantal life with God and others. It ends with my being convinced that my belief in him does not function for me the way it does for the theistic apologist. I have never placed any stock in trying to prove that God exists by using various arguments. And now, thanks to Phillips (and others), I have learned not to try and explain his ways
when encountering all manner of negative things that happen to my loved ones, to others, and to me. Instead, I view and respond to the world as one in which such things will invariably happen and have come to terms with evil and suffering.

Like many others, most of the time I view the world as peaceful and sublime, even at times majestic. But on too many occasions, as we all know, it can be a frightening and dreadful place where the forces of nature combine in a flurry of violence and destruction, disease and death. Most of the time I find myself surrounded by evidence of human goodness—everything from ongoing efforts to improve all aspects of the human condition to occasional acts of kindness and charity shown to my loved ones and me by others. Yet, on a seemingly regular basis, we are reminded that the world can be a place where humans are capable of treating others in the worst possible ways by committing acts of slander and ridicule as well as unspeakable acts of horror, mayhem, and even murder. We live, in other words, in a mixed world.

I hasten to add that seeing the world this way does not mean that I take a contemplative or quietistic approach to instances of evil and suffering. Just the opposite. If and when I find myself in a situation where I can help someone caught up in a natural disaster or
in harm’s way because of others, I do whatever I can to help, often by joining forces with others. Still, the truth is that in this veil of tears no matter what we do there always seems to be more evil and suffering (some of which appears to be needless suffering) to deal with. Nevertheless, the course for me is clear—when called upon, I must do whatever I can, without judging or accusing others, to help minimize the impact of terrible things in the lives of those caught up in such situations.

Furthermore, I agree with what the scriptures teach us about dealing with evil and suffering, namely, that if properly discerned and approached, even these things can be turned to our good. Such is the grandeur of the Father’s plan that we are experiencing. In any event, I try never to minimize or explain away the reality or starkness of different forms of evil or the grief and suffering that results from them. Indeed, it is precisely because of how I try to relate with God and others, how I have come to be solely dependent upon his love and grace, and how I have learned to view and respond to this mixed world, that I take the position I do on the need to come to terms with these negative realities in this particular way.

Phillips observes that many philosophers (both believers and nonbelievers) agree with him that theodices cannot provide the kind of sense that some of us are
looking for. Unfortunately, some of them often con-
cede that all we can do is shake our fist at heaven. They
suggest that perhaps some people who respond in this
way may be prepared to speak of a god, but if they do, it
would be a god of caprice. Phillips, on the other hand,
contends that the same limitations of space and time,
and so forth, can lead others to speak of a God of love
and grace. I agree. Phillips devotes the balance of his
chapter to making the case for this stance.

Another Sense of What It Means
to Believe in God

Phillips begins by asking what it means to say that
God is love. He notes that when we say this, we are not
ascribing love to God in the same way we ascribe tall-
ness to John. Rather, when we say “‘God is love’ we are
giving one rule for the use of the word ‘God.’” 13 And
while this may not resolve the problem of evil and suf-
fering, it does enable us to understand better how some,
faced with the same vicissitudes in life that we all face,
are able to speak about a God of love and grace. The key
thing, for Phillips, is that whatever the circumstances,
these believers speak of the love of God. What does
this mean? Where does such talk about God enter for
these believers? For Phillips:
It does not enter as a form of explanation which tells us why one person is struck by lightning and another is not, why one person returns from the war and another does not.... It enters as a response to a world in which such things happen. It is not the only kind of language that enters life this way. “It’s fate” and “That’s life” also enter in the same way. After all explanations are over concerning why this happened rather than that, some people are still bewildered about the sense of it all and ask, “Why?” “That’s fate” or “It’s the will of God” are not explanatory answers to that question, but they come to replace the asking of it. They are modes of acceptance, not methods of explanation.14

He then describes how talk of the love of God is a mode of acceptance, beginning with instances of natural evil.

*Natural Evil*

Phillips asks us to contemplate a believer who finds himself caught in a small boat at sea in a violent storm. When this poor fellow says things like “my life is in the hands of God,” Phillips urges us to take him to mean that in the midst of all he faces, the believer is not only struck by his dependence on God, but also by a sense of the sheer majesty of God. This is part of what I take Phillips to mean when he says that some believers respond to the world in a *deeper way*. For him:
The believer is the creature in the hands of the Creator; his life, whether he is going to live or die, is in God’s hands. Not that externally related to the storm is a God who decides to send it in order to test the believer’s faith or in order to give the believer a sense of the majesty of God.... No, the majesty of God is revealed in the storm and in his reaction to it. God’s will is in the life or death of the person caught in the storm, in the same sense as it is in the storm itself.¹⁵

Phillips reminds us that the scriptures, especially narratives such as the book of Job, teach us to see God in this way, to deal with evil and suffering in this way. Job came to see the wonder of it all in the face of what he suffered. He eventually gave up on his friends (those he called forgers of lies and physicians of no value) and their seemingly endless, fruitless attempts at explaining what was happening to him. He eventually (and this is key) stopped placing himself in the center of things and stopped asking, “Why is this happening to me?” Instead, he came to acknowledge his sole dependence on God. He came to see the world and all of its contingencies as gifts from God. He patiently admitted that God is at the center of things. God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. Job eventually confessed that everything that comes to him comes as a gift, as a form of God’s grace, as an expression of his love—the
good things and the bad. Things that come as trials, things he did not want or like, are gifts nonetheless. Job’s wonder at the whole of creation, his newfound dependence on God who is at the center of all things, and his acceptance of what comes to him, good or bad, as gifts from God, is conveyed in his famous claim, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

There are those, Phillips observes, who are fatalistic, who contend that whatever happens, happens, and who insist that those of us who talk about God in such situations change nothing. He rejects this view. So do I. My birth happened. My death will happen. What I make of them and what I am striving to make of my life as a whole makes all the difference. Job initially cursed the day he was born, and then he came to see his dependence on God and the wonder of it all. Coming to God in this manner made the difference for him; it changed the meaning of things for him. Coming to live in the world in a distinctive way such that I can see the hand of the Lord in things, both good things and bad things, makes all the difference and changes the meaning of things for me as well.
When dealing with instances of human evil, Phillips likewise contends that it is the believer’s trust in God, his wholehearted dependence on God’s love and grace, that distinguishes him from the conventional moral person. The latter fights against evil and strives mightily for the good but always understands that he does such things on his own. The religious person does these same things. The difference is that he confesses that all he does and whatever he achieves is because of God’s grace.

Phillips illustrates his point by telling the story of Peter who promised he would never deny Jesus and yet he did. Then he asks: When did he deny Christ? The popular answer is: When he broke his promise. But the deeper answer is: When he made it. According to Phillips, Peter’s self-sufficiency was a denial of the grace that should have informed his and all of our endeavors as believers. This is what evidences a deeper response to the world on our part, one that, among other things, reflects both our strengths as well as our weaknesses as human beings. It is what steels us for our inevitable encounters with the evil one, particularly in the form of all manner of indifferent, depraved, human actions. And, importantly, it is what enables us to avoid the inclination to judge or accuse others and to be quick to
forgive and seek forgiveness from others. Phillips puts it this way:

If the believer’s endeavors are informed by grace, this will affect his view of forgiveness of others and of himself. When he sees betrayal on the part of others, he will say “But for the grace of God go I,” and when he is guilty of such betrayal himself, hope of redemption is in that gracious mercy which he is invited to humbly accept, a mercy in which he is seen as something other than moral expectations alone would make him; a creature unworthy of, but in need of grace.¹⁷

Phillips concludes on this note of forgiveness. He asks us to consider that, for the most part, Jesus was silent when his tormentors unjustly tried him, when they mocked and scourged him, and nailed him to a tree. While he hung on the cross and before he died, Jesus blessed the two who were hanging beside him and he asked his Father in heaven to forgive those who had persecuted him:

At the heart of Christianity is the figure of a crucified God. The idea that God could suffer such a fate is repugnant to many believers of other religions. Yet Jesus, it may be said, dies an informed death. He says, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.” A wonderful prayer was found in one of Hitler’s concentration camps; it ended by asking that the love they had known
should be the forgiveness of their persecutors. Perhaps not many could say that prayer, but it is a prayer that testifies to a death informed by love of God. Sometimes, by the time disasters or death comes, the world’s persecutors have crushed faith out of a person. But if that person believed, knowing that such things could happen, we may still say, in this extended sense, that the believer embraced his death in faith.¹⁸

Phillips goes even further and raises the issue of suffering children.

What we have appealed to in these cases is a religious reflection informed by grace. But what of the suffering and death of children? These are limiting cases for many, since even if they appreciate the differences between the religious responses that I have been talking of, and spurious attempts to justify suffering in the name of religion, these differences depend on an appeal to religious reflection which the child obviously does not have. What, then, can be said of the persecution of children? Many of the adults executed in Hitler’s camps made gestures of defiance as they died. But, for the most part, the children who were executed were silent. How could they be otherwise? Whatever religion says here, these deaths must not be falsified.¹⁹

And then he ties both of them together in terms of the suffering, pain, and death of Jesus.
To witness absolute evil, as we do in this persecution of children, is to feel at the same time that an absolute good is being outraged. An absolute good does not triumph when violated by absolute wrong: it suffers. It can offer no explanation, no end to which the evil is the means. On such matters, it is dumb. In the religious responses that we have been discussing, God and absolute good are one. If absolute good can suffer, so can God. The presence of the divine does not explain away suffering or justify it in any way. The divine suffers. It was said by Jesus that to do this to children was to do it to him. The suffering of innocent children is the suffering of God at the same time. In Isaiah we read the following words: “He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearsers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth.”

What are we to make of the enormity of evil and suffering in the world, especially human evil? What are we to make of Phillips’s proposal for how to come to terms with it? Phillips has stressed that his approach is grounded in our believing in God rather than trying to explain him. It rests on our recognition and acceptance of his love and grace. It includes elements of forgiveness and silence, along with the requirement that it is incumbent upon us to emulate God in our encounters with evil and suffering. Phillip’s main point, as I read
him, is that, after all is said and done, there is only one sure way to deal with the enormity of evil and suffering in the world and that is in reference to the grandeur and scope of God’s love and grace. And, in his words, there is only one sure way to do this and that is to give ourselves to God.21 This is what I have done.

Still, for those of us who persist in our faith in the face of evil and suffering, we face another ongoing challenge: How do we comfort others when they are confronted head-on with such things? What can we do for them in such situations? I do not know, but one thing is sure, we need to be there with them and listen to them, regardless of what else we do. What can we say to them without lapsing into trying to explain God? I do not know, but one thing is sure, our vulnerability and fallibility will be on display in such moments, and our trust in and dependence upon God needs to be as well. The Holy Spirit will tell us what to do and, in the very moment, what to say—if anything.

This same message of patience and faithful endurance is found in modern-day scripture. Writing from Liberty Jail in the winter of 1838–39, the Prophet Joseph Smith told how the Lord assured him that all of the anguish, suffering, and death that he and his loved ones and other members of the Church were being forced to undergo at the time, at the hands of others,
would “give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). The Prophet, in turn, admonished those he was writing to (and us) that we need to “cheerfully do all things that lie in our power” and then “stand still, with the utmost assurance” in God (D&C 123:17, emphasis added). One of the many things the Prophet and others may well have learned (or relearned) at the time about life in this mixed world is the age-old truth that in times like these we need to wait patiently upon the Lord—even in silence, if this is what is called for.

A few years ago, Phillips gave a brief lecture that was posted on YouTube. He contrasted two positions on what it means to believe in God—the first could be called the modern, scientific position and the second the premodern, biblical position. His observations amount to a good overview of what we have been considering, especially in this and the last chapter:

Do you believe in God? If you say you do, you’ll be asked why you believe in God. Probably you won't object to that question. After all, if you say you believe something, you think it reasonable that you should be asked for your reasons for believing it. The reasonableness of giving reasons for your beliefs is something you take for granted. A reasonable request isn’t it?

But now, listen to this:
Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yet, the darkness hideth not from thee, but the night shineth as the day. The darkness and the light are both alike to thee.

For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well (Psalm 139:7–14).

Here it is clear the psalmist testifies to the inescapable reality of God. Inescapable? But what about the evidence? What about the reasons? It never occurred to any prophet or writer in the Old Testament to seek evidence for the existence of God, let alone to prove it. For them, this would be quite pointless, even senseless. The movement of thought in the Old Testament is not from the world to God, but from God to the world. The whole world declared God’s presence, not because it gave excellent evidence for God’s existence but because the world was seen, from the start, as God’s world.
The hills are girded with joy, the pastures are clothed with flocks. The valleys also are covered with grain. They shout for joy. They also sing.

Let the floods clap their hands. Let the hills be joyful together.

Oh Jehovah, how manifold are thy works. In wisdom hast thou made them all. The earth is full of thy riches (Psalms 65:12–13; 98:8;104:24).

How far away that seems. That world is not our world. It hasn’t been our world for quite some time. Ever since the Renaissance and through the Enlightenment, the view of the world as God’s world has been under attack. As a result, it has become natural for us to look on religious belief as a conjecture, a hypothesis. And we look for evidence to justify it. Philosophers who write on such matters are busy weighing the probabilities. Some say the probability is that there is a God. Others say that the probability is that there is no God. And despite allegedly weighing the same probabilities, they never agree. How very odd. In this scientific age one would at least expect people to be able to calculate. Did the Psalmist miscalculate? But really is that our problem? A difficulty in weighing probabilities? Surely not. Our difficulty is that the majority of us no longer naturally see the world as God’s world. It’s all too easy to escape from God’s presence. If we ascend into the heavens, well even Bishops tell us he’s not there. If we descend into the depths, again psychoanalysts tell us he’s not there either. Our problem,
it seems, is not how to escape from God, but how to find him. We all too easily rise in the morning and lie down in darkness without him. The heavens no longer declare his glory for us, and the hills no longer sing for joy.²²

What Phillips says about how most people think and talk about God today is no doubt true. In the past, it was true for me. But not anymore.
My core beliefs about God are an expression of the things that matter most to me and that come first in my life. They constitute the controlling narrative on which I live my life. I came to them as a result of my experiences with God and my trying to live my life as Jesus would have me live it. They are grounded in my faith in and dependence upon God. They account for how I think and talk about him. I have identified a handful of these beliefs, and in what follows I will comment briefly on each of them.

I believe that:

* In the premortal realm, before the world was, all of us became adopted sons and daughters of our Father in heaven. In this life, we can become adopted sons and daughters of the Son as well, by binding ourselves to him (and to the Father) in the new covenant. This means striving to live the form of life that Jesus
would have us live, trying our best to abide by the first and second great commandments, and endeavoring to keep the promises made to both of them and to our loved ones when we came into the new covenant.

* “In the beginning,” the Son, under the direction of the Father (and at a key point, jointly with him), created “the heavens and the earth” and all the things that are in them.

* What Jesus did in the garden and especially on the cross evidences to the world that he is the Lord and Redeemer of all of creation. What the Father did in raising him from the dead evidences to the world that their kingdom on earth had been established, that sins and transgressions were atoned for, and that together they would, in the fulness of time, conquer death, and overthrow evil and suffering.

* In launching the Restoration, the Father and the Son reestablished their divine authority, kingdom, new covenant, and temple on earth. Because of this, individuals on both sides of the veil can enter into the new covenant, bind themselves fully to both Father and Son, endeavor to reconcile themselves to them, and strive to become like them.

* The Father and the Son are distinct, glorified (exalted), embodied beings.
Fathers

When I contemplate what the Son and the Father accomplished in inaugurating the Good News and the Restoration, they seem distant and it is difficult to relate with them. However, when I think of them as fathers, they seem closer, and I experience my relationship with them in more personal and intimate terms. The important thing for me is that the scriptures teach us that in the premortal realm, all of us found ourselves in a unique relationship with the Father such that he became our Father and we became his children. This belief grounds my very sense of who I am in him. It means that I have a divine heritage and potential. It is part of the reason why I strive to maintain and cultivate the covenantal relationship that I have with him.

The scriptures also teach that in this mortal realm, those who hear the Son’s call and respond affirmatively are likewise adopted by him and he becomes our Father as well. When I entered into the new covenant I took upon myself his name, made promises to him, and I am striving to follow him in terms of the distinctive form of life that I am endeavoring to live. Doing this accounts for why and how I view others as my brothers and sisters and work hard to love them and to do right by them as well. It explains why and how I view and relate to the world.
Over time, I have learned that asking the wrong questions or pursuing the wrong lines of inquiry about God can side-track me in terms of what I have come to know about the life I am living and what is expected of me. My focus needs to be on doing what is required of me to relate properly with God and others. I am aware, of course, of passages in scripture and in the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith and others that describe what it will be like and what we may be able to achieve were we to become like God and be exalted in the life to come. Nevertheless, I tend not to dwell on such things. It is enough for me to think of myself as a child of God and to strive to live as full and balanced a life as I can in covenant with him.

Creators

The main theme in the creation narratives, as recorded in the scriptures and depicted in the temple, is that the whole act of creation is a gift from the Father and the Son in furtherance of their plan of salvation. Put differently, efforts underway by them to redeem us are of a piece with the very point of creation in the first place.

On occasion, when the subject of creation comes up, someone will ask me how I square my view of creation with various scientific or theological cosmolo-
gies. I am interested in these other perspectives and occasionally pursue such inquiries. However, in doing this I am dealing with the subject in a different way than I am here. While I am interested in scientific insights on a range of subjects, my studies along these lines often bring to light instances where my views and the views of some scientists clash, just as studying various theological cosmologies often highlights how my view of God differs from others. For instance, my view is informed, in part, by how I read and interpret the various creation accounts noted above. These sources speak of God as a being who organized the heavens and the earth by bringing order out of chaos, by separating light from darkness, the waters above from the waters beneath, the dry land from the seas, and by bringing forth all living things, including man and woman. I follow the Prophet Joseph Smith and find myself at odds with the traditional theological idea of creation *ex nihilo* and with the idea of God associated with it.

The important point for me is that my belief about the Father and the Son as Creators does not rest on how my view of creation relates to or differs from other cosmologies—scientific or theological. As with other things about God, there is much about the idea of creation that I do not understand and cannot grasp. In any event, as I have noted, my goal is not to fully un-
understand him or explain his ways, but simply to follow him. I express my thanks for creation (and especially for the new creation that he has undertaken) by striving to do what is required of me to relate properly with him and others, in the hope that in so doing I can draw closer to him and become, even now, in some small measure, like him.

Redeemers

In chapter 3, I spelled out what I believe about the Good News and the Restoration. Together, these two unique series of events constitute the sum and substance of God’s gift of redemption. Knowing what I do about these events, however, does not mean that I can grasp all the particulars surrounding them, any more than I can fathom how the heavens and the earth came to be by reading the scriptures or watching and listening to temple depictions.

Some individuals are vitally interested in such matters. They go into great detail accounting for how these things came about and predicting what will happen in the future as a result of them. Reading such accounts, I sometimes get the impression that the writers may not be able to fully appreciate these marvelous accomplishments or accept them as heavenly gifts until they have thoroughly explained them. For instance, some argue
that justice and mercy are best reconciled in reference to certain self-existing, immutable laws, ones to which God himself is subservient, rather than in reference to the mighty acts of God aimed at achieving these ends, as recounted in the scriptures. Still others, when writing about the last great sacrifice, rely on various theological theories to explain it. Often these theories go well beyond the theme of reconciliation that is contained in the scriptures that both anticipates and accounts for this supreme act.

My acceptance of something that God has done (or will yet do) is not conditional upon my first acquiring an understanding of how it came to be or how it will play out in the future. Having acknowledged such things, I do not need to have them explained in detail in order to appreciate their incalculable worth. It is sufficient for me to know that because they are of God, my loved ones and I have the meaning, joy, and hope that we do in our lives.

In believing in the Father and the Son as redeemers, it is enough for me to know that they are fulfilling the purposes of creation and are bringing about the great and final exodus, something they have always promised they would do. When I contemplate these profound truths, these magnificent expressions of their love and grace, my first thought is not to speculate about how
these gifts were or will be accomplished, but simply to thank them and to show my love and gratitude by trying all the harder to live my life in the manner they have prescribed, by having unqualified trust in them, by depending solely upon them, and by worshiping and reverencing them with full intent.8

Distinct, Glorified (Exalted), Embodied Beings or Persons

My first four core beliefs about God have one thing in common—they are based in what I make of the things that God has done, is doing, and will yet do for all of us, as recounted in the scriptures. However, my fifth belief is different. Here, I make a claim about who the Father and the Son are, in and of themselves. The claim rests on two pillars. The first is comprised of the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and others who, at the beginning of the Restoration, spoke of seeing both of them,9 on the declarations of special witnesses in our day who testify of this truth about them,10 on the teachings of scripture on this point,11 and on the witness I have received from the Holy Spirit.12

The second pillar is the fact that if the Father and the Son were not glorified (exalted), embodied beings or persons, along the lines of what being a per-
son means to me, I would be at a loss as to how to meaningfully relate with them. My sense of who I am is inextricably bound up with my sense of embodiment and is grounded in a network of divine and human relationships (made up principally of language and other forms of communication). I am able to relate to them precisely because I think and talk about both of them as persons (in this exalted sense). I agree with professor Edmund Cherbonnier when he says that we “share the same kind of existence which God himself enjoys.”

Because of this (and because others have experienced the Father and the Son the way that they have), I am able to relate with them in ways ranging from worshiping the Father with full intent, to building on this in my efforts to deal properly with others; from praying to the Father, in the name of the Son, and receiving answers in countless ways made known to me by the Holy Spirit, to loving them and knowing they love and care for my loved ones and me and thereby having the confidence to love, care for, and serve others; from viewing and dealing with the world the way that I do, to reading and interpreting the scriptures from this vantage point, and so on.

I agree with Paul and the other New Testament writers who maintain that the tomb was empty. Whenever I think about the idea of resurrection, I anticipate
that the Father will bring us forth from the spirit world as fully embodied persons, only our bodies will be changed, transformed. Our former corrupt frames will become incorrupt (following the pattern he established when he brought forth his Son).  

I look forward, as I assume those who initially followed Jesus may have done, to the time when my loved ones and I will be exalted, when we will have become like him and the Father and are able to dwell in their presence. There is much about the Father and the Son as distinct, exalted, embodied persons that I do not understand (what is more, I am convinced that what little I do know about them pales in comparison to what I do not know), this much I affirm.

At the same time, I endeavor to keep in mind how much they are alike. The Father is behind all that the Son does, and everything the Son does he does in the name of and to the glory of the Father. Furthermore, both of them are united with the Holy Spirit as one God.

Beyond this, I avoid dwelling on subjects such as how the Creation took place, or how the Son was born into this mortal realm in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (the Incarnation), or how he worked out the last, great sacrifice (the Atonement), or how the Father raised him from the dead (the Resurrection). For me, it
is enough to believe that, worlds without end, the Son will always be my Savior, my Divine Redeemer. I think of the Father the same way, that is, worlds without end, he will always be my Heavenly Father.¹⁶

As a result of my studies of the scriptures and the teachings of modern prophets, by following promptings from the Holy Spirit, but most of all by striving to do what is required of me to live my life the way that I do, I have come to think and talk about the Father and the Son as Fathers, Creators, Redeemers, and as distinct, glorified (exalted), embodied beings or persons. This is the best way in which I can express the hope that is in me.
NOTES

Preface


2. A word at the outset about how I use the term God: Most of the time, I use it to refer to our Father in heaven (who I also refer to as Heavenly Father, or simply the Father). On occasion I use it to refer to Jesus (who I also refer to as the Savior, or simply the Son). At times I use it to refer to both of them acting in concert. On one occasion, I use it to refer to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one God. For Latter-day Saints, making these distinctions is important, given the particular ways in which we think and talk about all three of them and make reference to them in our ritual performances and our private acts of devotion.

Chapter 1

1. In addition to this passage in Matthew, each of the other Gospels makes reference to the first and second great commandments (see Mark 12:28–34 and Luke 10:25–37). John tells us that Jesus taught the second great commandment in a new way: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you will also love one another. In this way, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35).

2. A comparable version of this sermon (but with some important differences) is found in the Book of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 12–14).

3. While trying my best to do this, I keep in mind that this cannot be forced. To be genuine, such affection and efforts on my part need
to come from my heart, more than from my mind. They need to be an expression of my willingly submitting to divine counsel, rather than acquiescing grudgingly to God’s commands.

4. Professor Michael Austin observes that the beatitudes “are probably the most well-known, and the least understood verses in the Sermon on the Mount.” His insightful commentary on them is included in part 1 of a three-part series, “Blessed Are Ye,” that he published on the site By Common Consent, https://bycommonconsent.com/2019/02/17/blessed-are-ye-bccsundayschool2019-1-of-3/# more- I 08228.

5. In renouncing the ancient teaching of “love your neighbor, but hate your enemy” and teaching us instead to love “those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus tells us we will be the children of our Father in heaven; that is, we will be like him in the sense that we will be complete or finished in this specific thing, just as our Father is complete or finished in all things. In a word, perfect.

6. Wayment renders the Lord’s Prayer this way:

Our Father in heaven,
  let your name be holy,
  may your kingdom come,
  may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us
  enough bread for today,
  and take away our debts, to the extent we have forgiven our
  debtors, and do not lead us toward temptation, but save
  us from evil.

7. Wayment renders Matthew 7:1–5 as follows:

   Do not judge so that you may not be judged.
   With the judgment you administer you will be judged, and
   with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
   Why do you look at the splinter in the eye of your brother
   or sister and do not consider the log in your own eye?
   Or how do you say to your brother or sister, ‘Let me take
   the splinter out of your eye,’ when there is a log in your
   own eye?
   Hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then
   you will see clearly the splinters in the eye of your
   brother or sister.
Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf deals with these ideas in his important conference address, “The Merciful Obtain Mercy,” Ensign, May 2012, 70–77.

8. Before I came to appreciate what it means to relate with God and others properly, I took the injunction that we should liken all scriptures unto us (1 Nephi 19:23) to mean that I should look to them for guidance in living my life the way I always did, that is, in a thoroughly modern, compartmentalized, self-centered sort of way. At the time, I did not understand how much Jesus calls into question this way of being in the world and commands us to live our lives in a distinctively different way.

9. This is because, in this mortal realm, there is no final authority whom we all acknowledge and can turn to for guidance in resolving such issues (see endnote 2 in chapter 4). This self-evident truth accounts, in part, for why there is no one particular way or form of life that we are all required to follow. It is also one of the reasons why I have the confidence to live the form of life that I do. Despite claims to the contrary, it does not follow from this truth that all things are relative. We all need to strive to know as much as we can about any subject that we set our minds to by following long-established and well-proven procedures. At the same time, we need to keep in mind that we cannot know anything fully or with absolute certainty. We need to search continually for what is true and distinguish it from what is false. And we need to have faith. Modern scripture tells us to seek out “words of wisdom and to seek learning by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). This is something the Church has always taught us. Consider the following:

The Mormon view of truth is grounded in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, but that doesn’t mean truth is limited to the Mormon experience…. President Hugh B. Brown… in 1969, said “there is an incomprehensibly greater part of truth which we must yet discover. Our revealed truth should leave us stricken with the knowledge of how little we really know. It should never lead to an emotional arrogance based upon a false assumption that we somehow have all the answers—that we in fact have a corner on truth. For we do not (“Treasuring All Truth,” 2–3, emphasis added).
NOTES

An expansive vision of truth can bring more depth, clarity and love into our lives and make us more willing to listen, more able to understand and more inclined to build up rather than tear down (“Treasuring All Truth,” 4).

This wise, short-form commentary (along with dozens of others, dealing with various subjects) is accessible on the Church’s Newsroom site. The purpose of this commentary series is to deepen conversations surrounding the Church, explain Latter-day Saint teachings and practices, and contextualize Latter-day Saint interactions with the broader society.

Chapter 2

1. The Doctrine and Covenants equates the new covenant with the fulness of the gospel that has been restored in these latter days (see the epilogue to this book, sections 132:6, and 133:57–58, and endnote 9 below).

2. On the missionary/gathering aspect of the communal dimension, see Robert L. Millet’s “The Gathering of Israel” in Book of Mormon Reference Companion (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 403–06. President Russell M. Nelson refers to this as “the greatest challenge, the greatest cause, and the greatest work on earth,” and invites the youth of the Church and, by extension, all the rest of us in the Church “to be part of it” (Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” 3).


4. Smith wrote: “It was my endeavor to so organize the Church, that the brethren might eventually be independent of every incumbrance beneath the celestial kingdom, by bonds and covenants of mutual friendship and mutual love” (History of the Church, 1:269).


6. Both of us were working at the headquarters of the Bank of America in San Francisco. I had noticed her several times either entering or leaving the building, but did not know who she was. One day I found myself in her office, standing in front of her desk. She asked if she could help. I was so flustered at this sudden, unexpected encounter that I simply said, “No thanks” and walked away. Later, I asked a friend
(who worked on the same floor as she did) to find out who she was. Sometime later the friend called, told me her name was JeNeal and that she was a member of the Church. I called her, introduced myself, and asked if we could meet. She eventually agreed and we had lunch together. Although at the time I did not grasp it, I now can see the hand of the Lord in his setting me upon a course that led me to be living and working in this particular city and eventually meeting and falling in love with JeNeal. From that day to the present she means everything to me. Because of her, my life changed and continues to change for the good.

7. The scriptures and the temple make reference to our entering into a number of covenants with God. I sometimes talk about my relationship with God in these terms. However, of late, I find myself simply referring to being in the new covenant. Then, as noted, instead of referring to various covenants that I have entered into with him over the years, I speak of making promises to him over time. This helps me to focus on them and remember to keep them. Elder Marcus Nash speaks of the new and everlasting covenant in this expansive way: “this covenant, often referred to by the Lord as the ‘new and everlasting covenant,’ encompasses the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, including all ordinances and covenants necessary for the salvation of mankind” (Nash, “The New and Everlasting Covenant,” 42).

8. Whenever we have the opportunity to do this for those in our family who we know well, or even when we do this on behalf of those we have never met, the experience is especially moving and meaningful. It affords us an opportunity to express a special kind of love for them.


10. Augustine Confessions, Book 1, 3.

Chapter 3

1. Wright is research professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St. Mary’s College at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. His book The Challenge of Jesus is a summary of conclusions he


11. Just as he is made known to us when we partake of the broken and blessed bread of the Sacrament.


15. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 164, emphasis added. Wright carries even further Luke's comparison of the new creation with the first creation, and of the couple on the road to Emmaus with the first couple in the first garden, when he calls our attention to how John, in his Gospel, likewise makes reference to another couple, in another garden:

On the sixth day of the week, the Friday, God finished all his work; the great shout of *telēlασταί*, “It is finished!” in John 19:30 looks all the way back to the sixth day in Genesis 1 when, with the creation of human beings in his own image, God finished the initial work of creation. Now, says John (19:5), “Behold the Man!” here on Good Friday is the true human being. John then invites us to see the Saturday, the sabbath between Good Friday and Easter day, in terms of the sabbath rest of God after creation was done…. Then on Easter
morning it is the first day of the week. Creation is complete; new creation can now begin. The Spirit who brooded over the waters of creation at the beginning broods now over God’s world, ready to bring it bursting to springtime life. Mary goes to the tomb while it is still dark and in the morning light meets Jesus in the garden. She thinks he is the gardener, as in one important sense he indeed is. This is the new creation. This is the new Genesis (Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 175–76).

16. Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 134, emphasis added. Wright notes that, at the time, there were several views concerning what happens to people after they die. There were some who spoke of this as an ultimate nonphysical bliss (examples would be Philo and the book of Jubilees). Others insisted that the physical bodies of at least the righteous dead will be restored (the best example of this position is found in 2 Maccabees). Still others, such as the Sadducees, held that there was no life after death. But Wright’s main point is that when the word resurrection was used to refer to an individual who had died, it was only used to suggest or describe reembodiment, not the state of disembodied bliss. See Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 133–34.

17. For me, the atonement and resurrection is a gift:
• Given to all of those who have lived in the past, are living now, and will yet live in this mortal realm.
• Of salvation. God has made it possible for everyone to live forever as embodied beings.
• Of exaltation. God has also made it possible for those who bind themselves fully to him and who achieve, over time, their goal of becoming like him, to live forever as glorified (exalted), embodied beings.
• Of encouragement and support, healing and comfort. It is not a one-time gift meant to compensate for the onetime sin of Adam and Eve; rather, it is ongoing in the sense that it is one of the ways in which God continually blesses all of us, even though many may not recognize him as the source. God is with us in the high and the low points of our lives, in our joys and disappointments, when we do the right thing and when we miss the mark, in our moments of accomplishment and enthusiasm and in our times of defeat and discouragement,
when we are well and when we are sick, when we give up trying to improve ourselves and our situation and when we find the strength and courage to carry on, to change our life for the better and live it the way that we know we should.

That means everything to me. The main way in which I show this and express my thanks and gratitude for it is in terms of how I strive to live my life. Which brings me, full circle, back to God's first and second great commandments and the things required of me to love him and relate and interact properly with him, while loving others even more than myself and relating and dealing properly with them as well.

18. This happened in the early part of the nineteenth century. By then, the country was becoming fully involved in the emerging scientific and industrial revolutions and was well on its way toward implementing much of the Enlightenment agenda. Among other things, this meant that God and the things of God were being pushed further into the background. The evidence of this flight from God is readily apparent today. At the time, one of the first questions for the boy Joseph (and no doubt for many others) may well have been “Which church is true?” Today, the first question for many, maybe most, seems to be “Is there a God?” This phenomenon is often referred to as secularism. One of the things I try to do in coming to terms with it is get what I can out of books such as Charles Taylor’s influential *A Secular Age*. Taylor is emeritus professor of Philosophy at McGill University. In his book, he argues that there is much more contained in the concepts secular and secularism than many of us realize. I read him as suggesting that it is imperative that we go beyond the use of older distinctions that have today become too simplistic, such as religion vs. secularism, religion vs. science, or even believer vs. nonbeliever. According to Taylor, ours is an age in which we utilize a variety of ways to find meaning and purpose. Some clearly do this in reference to God. Others do this without any mention of him. But Taylor’s point is that in an important sense we are all believers now and yet no one particular belief system (science, for instance) is axiomatic. The philosopher James K. A. Smith reads Taylor as saying that our secular age is “messier than many would lead us to believe; that transcendence and immanence bleed into one another,”
and that while for some “faith is pretty much unthinkable,” for others “abandonment to the abyss is even more so.” In any event, Smith concludes, following Taylor, that we all “need to forge meaning and significance in this ‘secular’ space rather than embracing modes of resentful escape from it” (Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, x). David Brooks, who writes an opinion column in *The New York Times*, likewise notes that while Taylor “can be extremely critical of our society,” he does not think we are “moving to a spiritually dead wasteland” as some fundamentalists imagine; nor are we “sliding toward pure materialism.” Rather, according to Brooks, Taylor is arguing that “people are now able to pursue fullness in an amazing diversity of different ways…. Orthodox believers now live with a different tension: how to combine the masterpieces of humanism with the central mysteries of their own faith. This pluralism can produce fragmentations and shallow options…but, overall, this secular age beats the conformity and stultification of the age of fundamentalism, and it allows for magnificent spiritual achievement” (Brooks, “The Secular Society”). I agree.

Just as I am thankful for what we are learning about the Good News, I am equally thankful for what we are learning about the Restoration, especially God’s divine priesthood authority. A great deal was revealed about it around the time of the organization of the Church, early in 1830. We know, for instance, that it is patterned after the priesthood authority that was operative in the world anciently, during the time of Jesus. Since those early days in 1830, we have continued to learn more about it. For instance, consider Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s April 2018 general conference address where he provides important clarifications and offers wise counsel concerning the priesthood’s role in the lives of women and men in the Church. He points out that “priesthood keys direct women as well as men, and priesthood authority pertains to women as well as men” (Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” 49). He observes that “we are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their Church callings,” and then he asks rhetorically, “but what other authority can it be? When a woman—young or old—is set apart to preach the gospel as a full-time missionary, she is given priesthood authority to perform a function. The same is true when a woman is set apart to function as an officer or teacher in a Church organization…. Whoever functions in an office or
calling received from one who holds priesthood keys, exercises priesthood authority in performing her assigned duties. Whoever exercises priesthood authority should forget about their rights and concentrate on their responsibilities” (Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” 51). The issue of divine priesthood authority is one of several clustered together under the notion of “The Great Apostasy.” The best, most comprehensive treatment of this broad subject, to date, both from a scholarly and a faithful perspective is *Standing Apart: Mormon Historical Consciousness and the Concept of Apostasy*, edited by Miranda Wilcox and John D. Young and published by Oxford University Press in 2014.

**Chapter 4**


2. In other words, this understanding of history rests on the modern reference theory of meaning. The trouble is, as Faulconer carefully points out, reference is never enough to explain the meaning of an event:

   The modernist mistake is not in thinking that meaning requires reference, but in thinking that reference is sufficient to explain meaning as truth. There is meaning, but it always goes beyond what can be accounted for merely referentially.... We must use language to speak of what is beyond language. Nevertheless, we necessarily say what is, strictly speaking, impossible to say—namely, *that talk about the world and things in the world always involves something more than language. Something more than/other than language, something that cannot be said directly, accounts for any successful talk about things.*... The empiricism of modernism (not the only kind of empiricism) imitates the Sophists of classical Greece, for it pins its hopes for understanding on a supposed ability to fix the connections between ideas and words, on the one hand, and things on the other (Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” 158, 160–61, emphasis added).

Faulconer quotes theologian Catherine Pickstock to the effect that it is not possible to achieve fixity in this way. It is even dishonest to attempt
to do so. “Human life,” according to Pickstock, “is always in the midst of things; the clarity of empiricist conclusions is an illusion fostered by the falsely isolated and inert nature of its artificial findings.... The genuine ‘fixity’ parodied by the Sophists can be attained only in the unshakeable conviction of a certain way of life” (Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” 161–62). I agree with the conclusion he draws from this:

As Aristotle argues... the alternative to the fixity of ideas is fixity of character, the fixity of a lived life, a fixity that cannot be reduced to a fixed connection between ideas and things. By ignoring that alternative, when modernism discovers that it cannot nail things down as it wishes, that crucifixion is no more appropriate for ideas and values than it is for human beings, it concludes that nihilism is the only alternative.... Contrary to the expectations of the Enlightenment, we have no Archimedean point from which we can leverage our decision for or against a particular understanding of the world, much less history. It is important to note, however, that the consequence of the absence of such a risk-free leverage or standpoint does not result in absolute relativity and, therefore, in the meaninglessness of our decision. That relativist consequence would follow only if, contrary to fact, we have only two options: mathematical certainty or absolute relativity (Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” 162–63, emphasis added).

But, as Faulconer points out, there are other options. One of them is found in his idea of a premodern perspective, where God and the things of God not only form the basis for a particular view of the world, but also become the basis by which meaning and value are determined and truth is revealed.

3. According to Faulconer, this other reason is based on a voluntaristic view of God that was advanced centuries before the Enlightenment. It maintains that:

God’s will is coextensive with his knowledge, which is ideal and is at least a representation of the world. Thus, since humans image God, human knowledge (i.e., representation of the ideal), like God’s knowledge, is prior to or fundamental to human action and life. (This explains why Western thought consistently values theory over praxis.) On a voluntarist view, religious beliefs are representations
to ourselves of the religious aspect of the ideal world. As such, they make it possible for us to act in religious ways. Therefore, beliefs are fundamental to religion. We generally take recognition of and adhere to a particular set of beliefs to be identical with being an adherent of that religion. (Note that it is possible to understand a good deal of modernism as an outgrowth of voluntarism in theology). To take religion to be a matter of symbolic ordering is to reject this understanding of the connection between religion and belief (Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” 165, footnote 20, emphasis added).

4. A recent example is LDS Beliefs: A Doctrinal Reference, published by Deseret Book in 2011. The dust jacket notes that the book contains entries on “nearly four hundred beliefs.”

5. I have in mind, for instance, the particular things the resurrected Savior did and taught during his appearances and ministry among some of the Nephites and Lamanites as recorded in 3 Nephi 11–28, or the eternal truths and instructions revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith concerning what God has done, is doing, and will yet do for all of us, and what we, in turn, need to do to fully avail ourselves of these gifts and blessings (see section 20 of the Doctrine and Covenants).

6. Ever since I was in graduate school at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I have taken an academic, theoretical approach to such things. Thus, when I recently became convinced that practical, concrete concerns and efforts on my part (matters of the heart as I referred to them, ones associated with the world of human experience, emotions, imagination, and so forth) are far more influential and consequential in all aspects of my life (for good or ill) than are the theoretical, speculative pursuits that I undertake (what I called matters of the mind, ones associated with forming theories, accumulating evidence, putting forth arguments dictated by logic, and so forth), this represented a major change on my part. I now view my life and the world in this very different way. Faulconer has helped me to realize this. So has the philosopher William James, someone I have been reading and studying for a long while now. I point out how he came to value the practical over the theoretical in my manuscript. The philosopher D. Z. Phillips (who I turn to in the next chapter), and the philosopher Charles Taylor
(who I cited in the previous chapter; see endnote 16), both favor the practical over the theoretical. Both have influenced me.

In reference to Taylor, note the conclusion that he comes to about Christianity in his *A Secular Age*. In a recent review of the book, Matthew Rose accurately describes Taylor’s position, even though he takes exception to it. According to Rose, Taylor thinks that the message of radical *agape* in Christianity has long been suppressed by dogmatic metaphysics. “Christian life has been impaired by a theoretical concern for certitude and rational justification; its renewal, he maintains, can be found only through a spirituality of transformative love” (Rose, “Tayloring Christianity,” 27, emphasis added). Rose reads Taylor as discarding the major Christian theological/philosophical tradition (by which he means the tradition founded mainly upon the writings of Augustine and Aquinas), given that it misconceives God as an object of speculative knowledge. Taylor claims that Christianity, as a historical reality, “wrought a transformation not in our speculative life but in our practical life. His goal, accordingly, is to reorient Christian faith around what he calls, in possibly the most important phrase of the book, ‘the practical primacy of life’” (Rose, “Tayloring Christianity,” 28, emphasis added). Taylor’s theology, Rose contends, sees human life in terms of practices, a concept that Taylor imbues with much more meaning than is captured in the term behavior.

The basic idea is that our relationship to the world is not theoretical, not something that arises from our capacities for rational insight and argument. Instead, it is one of involvement and concern. *The primacy he gives to the practical is not without warrant. The New Testament is not a primer in philosophy, and he is surely right that our concerns—our loves—often exercise greater power than our ideas* (Rose, “Tayloring Christianity,” 28, emphasis added).

I agree.

7. In the next chapter, I spell out in more detail why I no longer view my beliefs about God as a means of trying to prove things about him or explain his ways in the face of evil and suffering in the world. Consequently, I tend not to get involved in arguments over which religious belief system or theology is superior, in part, because there is no court of last appeal to which we can all turn to resolve such matters (see endnote 2 above) and, in part, because I no longer see the point in
pursuing such ends. What I do instead, as I have noted, is reflect what it means to me to believe in God, to trust in him by the way in which I strive to live my life with him and others. For me, the idea of God is not the result of some philosophical or theological argument. What is more, I no longer think of my beliefs about him as claims that I can use to shore up my faith in him or justify the life I am living. When it comes to matters such as my belief in God, my faith in him, advancing theories, amassing evidence, coming up with explanations, and so forth is the wrong approach. Such endeavors have to come to an end sometime and, for me, they come to an end in the life I am living with God and others. When describing my life, rather than going on at length about my beliefs, it is more than sufficient for me to say how much I love God and how much I aspire to love others, to call attention to the particular practices I engage in while trying to do right by him and others, and to point out how, for my loved ones and me, everything that is virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy comes to us as a result of living our lives the way that we do. The philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, once said that Christianity:

Offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as a result of a life. Here we have a narrative, don’t take the same attitudes to it as you take to other historical narratives! Make a quite different place in your life for it (Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 32e).

This is what I am trying to do.


9. Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” 168. According to Faulconer, the former (symbolic ordering) is not necessarily at odds with the latter (rational ordering):

Within a symbolic order, rational discourse is one of the forms in which the real is manifest. Therefore, it is not opposed to symbolic ordering but a possible part of any symbolic order. In contrast, in a rational ordering, symbolic discourse cannot be made an instance of reason, except as a parasitic form of reference, in other words, an ambiguous or “poetic” speech. As a result, though within a symbolic
ordering there is no necessary opposition between the rational and
the symbolic, that opposition may be necessary to a rational order
(Faulconer, “Scripture as Incarnation,” 167).

An interesting feature of such activity is that language, for the most
part, is used in these contexts performatively (that is, to make, name, or
establish something).


Chapter 5

1. See chapter 11, “Believing in God,” in his Introducing Philosophy.
Phillips died in 2006. At the time of his passing he held the Danforth
Chair in Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate University
in California and was professor emeritus of Philosophy at Swansea
University in Wales. Raimond Gaita, in an obituary notice in The
Guardian, points out that because Phillips resisted so relentlessly
the desire that philosophy should underwrite theories of religious belief,
or even the beliefs themselves, he was often accused of irrationalism
or what others referred to as Wittgensteinian fideism. According to
Gaita, Phillips “never denied that sincerely religious people believe in
the reality of their God,” but he did “deny that philosophers under-
stood clearly enough what it means to believe such things.” I think
Gaita gets Phillips right on both counts. Phillips was a critic of many
prevailing philosophical accounts of what it means to believe in God,
and he urged his fellow philosophers and the rest of us to think about
this more carefully. I have been reading Phillips for a long while now,
even more so recently. The way he dealt with these and related issues
is one of the things that drew me to him in the first place, that and
the fact that, years ago, I took a graduate seminar from him when he
was a visiting professor at UC, Santa Barbara. I find in him something
rare—a rigorous philosopher, well versed in the language about religion,
who, nonetheless, tried hard to understand those who speak about their
beliefs in the language of religion.


3. Phillips’s description of these traditional proofs for the existence
of God, and his detailed explanation for why we should reject them,
can be read as a primer on the subject. See his *Introducing Philosophy*, 147–52. He notes a particular claim that the apologists make about God, namely, that he is not a physical being but is a being in some other sense. They insist that since we cannot see God, this does not “mean that he is not there. God is like the invisible man, but with a difference. God is necessarily invisible, because God does not have a body. God is a disembodied self.” Phillips finds this way of talking about God full of “insuperable difficulties,” such as trying to conceive of any being as “separable from the body, the passive recipient of sense-experience set over against the world and other human beings” (Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 146).

4. Phillips puts it this way: “The paradigm for religious faith is not the entertaining of an hypothesis which may or may not be established. Believers do not believe in a God who may or may not exist. They say that God is inescapable: in him, they say, they live and move and have their being. God does not happen to exist. God is said to be eternal” (Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 150–51). I agree.


6. See Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 152–55, where he faults a number of these arguments, including those that claim that evil and suffering are somehow instrumental in achieving a higher good; those who contend that evil and suffering are needed so that we can develop as morally free individuals; that the amount of suffering in the world may only be a matter of our viewing it from our finite, limited perspective; that without the suffering of others, there would be no opportunity for us to develop our own moral responsibility; and, finally, that the greater good that will come from the evil and suffering in the world will only be achieved in heaven.

7. Phillips warns against pushing the comparison between God and man too far.

8. If we judge God by the standards of moral decency, God must stand condemned. God does not intervene in circumstances in which any half-decent human being would, and uses human beings as means to a further end in ways which are clearly immoral. On the other hand, if we say that it is a mistake to judge God by human standards, that God is somehow beyond the reach of moral criticism then, again, the
consequences for religion are dire. There is a place beyond morality, beyond the ordinary language of decency and indecency, where God might be located, but it is the place reserved for the monstrous and the horrific. So the choice [following this traditional line of reasoning] is either to find God guilty by our moral standards, or to find him too monstrous to be worthy of ordinary condemnation (Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 155–56).


12. Because I trust and depend solely upon God, I am independent of those individuals, organizations, or ideologies that would have me be reliant on them. My trust and dependence on God, together with the way in which I strive to live my life, combine to form the ultimate source of meaning and truth for me. Because of them, my moral agency is enhanced, not compromised, as some might argue. My moral compass, which I use to guide me in my dealings with others and the world, is grounded in them. Because of them, I know what it means to be truly human and who I really am.

13. There is suffering and there is suffering. All of us experience it; it is part of the very point and purpose of life in this mortal realm. For most of us, the pain and suffering we encounter and need to find the courage to endure, if properly approached and understood (that is, within our ongoing trust in and dependence on God), can be ennobling, refining, even sanctifying. Jesus taught this. But other kinds of unspeakable suffering, imposed upon the innocent, especially innocent children, are, by any measure, pointless, senseless, and evil. I find that one of the things that the Holy Spirit does for me, if I am living my life the way I should, is to help me to recognize instances of the former and give me the added strength needed to withstand it. He also aids me in discerning instances of the latter and emboldens me to fight against it with all of my might.


18. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 163, emphasis added. One of the most memorable talks on forgiveness was given by President James E. Faust in general conference not too long before his passing. This is a good way to remember this good man; see his “The Healing Power of Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 67–69.


20. See Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 164–65. I cannot comprehend the magnitude of Jesus’s suffering. Neither can I grasp why it was necessary for him to experience so much of it. What I am sure of, however, is that we should view it, first and foremost, as an expression of the breadth and depth of his love for us and the grace which he endlessly bestows upon us.

21. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 165. Note what Phillips does in the course of this chapter. First, he questions whether the idea of God as a disembodied being makes sense. Then, he faults the age-old practice of trying to prove the existence of God by means of various sophisticated arguments. Next, he dismisses the idea of trying to explain God in the face of the reality of evil and suffering by relying on arguments known as theodicies. And then, in this instance, he speaks about Jesus as one who experiences suffering and pain, in effect calling into question one of the traditional ideas about God, namely, that he is above or beyond such things. In light of this, I read Phillips as calling into question some theoretical or speculative approaches to God, best exemplified in various theological or philosophical ideas about him (for instance, the theological idea of God as the Infinite or the philosophical idea of him as the Absolute), in favor of a more practical or concrete approach, one that views him as a qualified or contingent being or person in some sense, best exemplified along the lines of the biblical view of God. This is the way I view him. Thanks to Phillips and others, I now appreciate why this is a much better way to think and talk about God.

22. Phillips, *Introducing Philosophy*, 165. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur spent a good deal of his distinguished academic career studying and writing about evil. In one of his essays, he maintains that the two major forms of evil, natural and moral (what I have referred to as natural and human evil), contain an enigmatic human element in whose shadow the distinction between the two tends to disappear.
speaks of a hierarchy of different levels of discourse about evil. It begins with the more elementary forms associated with various mythic accounts (both Western and Eastern). This is followed by ancient Wisdom literature “that forces myth to shift levels. It must not simply tell of the origin in such a way as to explain how the human condition reached its present miserable state; it must also justify the distribution of good and evil to every individual. Myth recounts a story. Wisdom argues” (Ricoeur, “Evil,” in the Encyclopedia of Religion, 207). Finally, more rational accounts began to surface in the form of various speculative theodicies. After a detailed exposition of these levels of discourse, Ricoeur (echoing Phillips) brings us back to the Book of Job and reminds us of a crucial insight that emerged from Wisdom literature, namely, that the point is:

_No longer to develop arguments or even to accuse God but to transform, practically and emotionally, the nature of the desire that is at the base of the request for explanation._ To transform desire practically means to leave behind the questions of origins, toward which myth stubbornly carries speculative thought, and to substitute for it the question of the future and end of evil. For practice, evil is simply what should not but does exist, hence what must be combated. This practical attitude concerns principally that immense share of suffering resulting from violence, that is, from the evil that man inflicts on his fellow man. To transform desire emotionally is to give up any consolation, at least for oneself, by giving up the complaint itself…. But it is not easy to give up the question “Why?” to which myth attempts—and fails—to reply (Ricoeur, 207, emphasis added).

23. Phillips’s lecture was posted on November 11, 2008. This is a verbatim transcript. See “Grace in the Devil’s Territory (l)a” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zej5zD4hg_U&feature=related.

Chapter 6

1. This is one of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s most important teachings. Key passages in the book of Moses (the dictation of which began in June 1830), in the Doctrine and Covenants sections 93 and 131 (dictated in May 1833 and May 1843, respectively), and in the book of Abraham (the dictation of which was first done in the summer of 1835 and then again early in 1842), all reflect his thoughts on the eternal
existence of each of us. Smith taught that in some manner, in the pre-
mortal realm, all of us found ourselves in a unique relationship with
our Father in heaven such that he became our Father and we became
his children. I follow Samuel Brown on what this means. He argues
that Smith’s teaching aligns with what he calls the “adoption theolo-
gy” theory. He contrasts this with a different interpretation of Smith’s
teachings, one that is often referred to as the “spirit birth” or the “bio-
logical parental” theory, patterned after the familiar process of human
gestation and parturition. This theory was apparently first put forth by
the Pratt brothers, (see Brown’s article, “Believing Adoption,” 45–65).
Faulconer weighs in on these two interpretations of Smith’s teachings
and contends that the dominant view among members of the Church
today is that each of us is like God in that we have always existed as
individuals with distinct personalities and moral agency. What is more,
he holds that this interpretation undercuts or makes obsolete older
nineteenth-century speculations about how God came to be God. “This
contemporary view doesn’t require that some force brought God into
existence. It allows that he has eternally been God” (Faulconer, “The
Mormon Understanding of Persons … and God,” 3). I read the passages
above (quoting Brown) as suggesting that, in the premortal realm, we
willingly agreed to be adopted by the Father in such a manner that we
each realized an enhanced or augmented sense of ourselves precisely
because of the profound and lasting relationships we found ourselves
in, first and foremost with him but also with his Firstborn Son, the
premortal Christ, and with each other as premortal brothers and sisters.
Brown puts it this way:

In the premortal world, God desired the further progression, de-
velopment, and happiness of the intelligent spirits who surrounded
him. In an act of intense metaphysical and sacerdotal power, Elo-
him claimed these intelligences as his own—he “adopted” them,
organizing them into a celestial kindred. Recognizing the ontolog-
ical affinities between himself and the uncreated spiritual beings
who became his children, God brought us out of our earliest exis-
tence and into the relationship that represented our development
as spirit children. Joseph taught that we are all self-existent in some
fundamental way but that we are interdependent, and God’s great
creative act was acknowledging and embracing that interdependence (Brown, “Believing Adoption,” 50–51).

Thus, the pattern for how we are to relate lovingly with the Father and his Son and with each other, both in this life and in the life to come, was set in this earlier realm. Furthermore, these passages teach us that in this premortality we eventually found ourselves choosing between following either the Son or Lucifer, in terms of what the Father’s plan of salvation meant and how it was to be implemented. I like to think that in the first instance and in this subsequent crucial instance, when most of us chose to follow the Son, that we strengthened even further our unique bond with him and with the Father by covenant, in anticipation of how we would need to do this again in the difficult and demanding conditions and constraints of this life.


3. I believe that by virtue of God’s grace and mercy, we can become like him in the life to come. Some Christians interpret teachings like this in the New Testament in terms of the theological idea of theosis or deification. This idea contrasts with what it means to me to become like God, owing, in large part, to the different ideas of God that inform each position. In any event, the more I consider such things, the more it becomes clear that the main challenge I face in life is doing what is required of me to live the kind of life I am aspiring to live, rather than dwelling on what it may be like in the life to come. It turns out that such a practical, this-worldly perspective has been taught by Church leaders almost from the beginning. For instance, President Heber C. Kimball told members, not long after they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley, to concentrate on striving to be Latter-day Saints, in the full sense of the term, rather than concern themselves with what it may be like were they to become like God:

Many think that they are going right into the celestial kingdom of God, in their present ignorance, to at once receive glories and powers…. Such people talk of becoming Gods, when they do not know anything of God, or of his works; such persons have to learn repentance, and obedience to the laws of God; they have got to learn to understand angels, and to comprehend and stick to the
principles of this Church.... We must be faithful and of one heart, and one mind, and let every man and woman take a course to build up and not pull down (Kimball, “The Saints Should Prepare for Future Emergencies,” 5–6).

4. Much later, President Heber J. Grant made a comparable point, admittedly rather dramatically, when he said:

There is but one path of safety to the Latter-day Saints, and that is the path of duty. It is not testimony, it is not marvelous manifestations, it is not knowing that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that it is the plan of salvation, it is not actually knowing that the Savior is the Redeemer, and that Joseph Smith was His prophet, that will save you and me, but it is the keeping of the commandments of God, the living the life of a Latter-day Saint (Grant, “The President Speaks,” 659, emphasis added).

This is what “living the life of a Latter-day Saint” means to me.

I maintain a distinction between thinking about things from, in this case, the perspective of science (or from any other view of the world), and doing so from the vantage point of my faith. Consequently, I do not get embroiled in the endless clashes between science and religion. I have no quarrel with modern science. I am thankful for all the ways that it, technology, and modern medicine are improving the human condition, provided, of course, that such efforts are pursued in responsible and ethical ways. I do, however, part company with those scientists and others who, on the basis of their studies or for other reasons, come to a reductionistic or naturalistic view of the world. This does not mean, of course, that I necessarily reject their insights on various subjects. What is more, I can appreciate something of how and why they have arrived at their end position, namely, that whatever they make of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, they have concluded that there is no God or that they no longer have any need for the idea of God. This is their position, but it is not mine.

5. A brief, helpful summary of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s teachings on creation, on the eternal nature of each of us, and on God can be found in Richard L. Bushman’s Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction. Bushman is emeritus Gouverneur Morris professor of History at Columbia University. He is an authority on early American history and has also published important work on the history of the Church,
focusing mainly on Joseph Smith. See, in particular, his *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, written with Jed Woodworth and published by Alfred A. Knoff in 2005. Bushman points out that because Smith hewed closely to creation accounts contained in biblical and other scripture, he rejected out of hand the traditional Christian notion of creation *ex nihilo* (see endnote 7, below). Instead, he taught that there was never a time when there was nothing. He claimed that matter (or the elements, as he sometimes put it) is eternal. See Doctrine and Covenants 93:33. “The book of Abraham says the Gods ‘organized and formed the heavens and the earth’ (Abraham 4:1). Creation was more like bringing order out of chaos than making something out of nothing” (Bushman, *Mormonism*, 71). Next, Bushman notes that to this particular idea of creation, Smith added unique ideas about human beings, namely, that each of us has always existed in some form and that we are, in this sense, like God (see endnote 1, above). “‘Man [that is, intelligence and/or spirit; Smith used these terms interchangeably] was also in the beginning with God. Intelligence, or the light of truth, was not created or made, neither indeed can be’ (D&C 93:29)” (Bushman, *Mormonism*, 72). Bushman observes that:

> Mormons differ among themselves about the form of man “in the beginning.” Were we distinct personalities or merely part of a great soup of intelligence? Whatever the exact form, Joseph Smith’s intention clearly was to assert that some essence of the human personality, like matter itself, has always been (Bushman, *Mormonism*, 72).

The important point, for Bushman, is that according to Smith:

> God, finding “himself in the midst of spirits and glory because he was greater [than they all] saw proper to institute laws whereby the rest could have a privilege to advance like himself.” And “God has power to institute laws to instruct the weaker intelligences that they may be exalted with himself” into a godly order (Bushman, *Mormonism*, 73).

These quotes are from passages in the so-called King Follett discourse, collected in Andrew Ehat’s and Lyndon Cook’s *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 360, 346. According to Bushman, in Smith’s cosmology, “God does not dominate existence as the conventional Christian God does.
He does not make the world out of nothing; he does not make human intelligence [or spirit]; he does not impose his law on his subjects.” Rather, “he invites them to join him in seeking the fullness of existence which he himself enjoys.” And while “God advances through the realms of unorganized matter, bringing order to this pluralistic universe... not everything can be reduced to his mind and will” (Bushman, *Mormonism*, 73–74). Finally, Bushman makes it a point to include the most speculative or open-ended part of Smith’s thinking about God, namely, that he has not always been God:

God himself learned to be divine. At the far edge of his theological speculations, Smith argued in the King Follett discourse that God was once a man and had a father like everyone else. He lived on an earth and was taught and advanced under the tutelage of a preceding God. In a few sentences, Smith postulated an alliance of divine beings stretching back in time and outward in space, working together to bring along lesser spirits to likewise become divine beings—a process that never began and will never end. . . . They are one as Christ and the Father are one. God invites humans to join in this alliance, much as Christ prayed that his disciples would be one in him as he is one with the Father (Bushman, *Mormonism*, 74).

I will forever be indebted to the Prophet Joseph Smith for the indispensable role he played in bringing about the Restoration. I find myself relying on his distinctive teachings about the eternal nature of matter. Furthermore, when it comes to the subjects of how we are all eternal and how we became offspring of Heavenly Father, I am even more indebted to Smith’s teachings. However, when it comes to his teachings about the beginnings of Heavenly Father, I am not sure what to make of it. I cannot get my head around it. Consequently, I have placed it on the shelf. This does not distract from the vastness of the Prophet’s revelatory vision, whether he looked backward into the ancient past or forward into the apocalyptic future, which is something that becomes increasingly evident the more he is studied.

6. Permit me to comment briefly on this idea. This will enable me to highlight differences between the traditional theological view of God and my own. As best I understand this well established view of creation, the emphasis is on the idea that the world is not self-existent,
nor is it the inevitable result of some process by which pre-existing elements or material were somehow changed. Rather it, and all that is, came into being out of nothing (ex nihilo), as a pure act of divine will. In other words, before creation there was only God. One of the many implications that flow from this is that while all created things have their being in God, they are not components of him. This is because, according to the traditional theological position, God is simple, immutable (unchanging), and impassible (not subject to suffering or pain). That is, God is identical with the single act by which he both creates and knows all things, whereas the products of creation, you and I and everything else, are complex and diverse. On this view, God is totally other than or transcendent to his creation. Furthermore, God is not a being or person the way we are, nor does he exist as you and I do; rather he is the ground of being itself, the simple and pure act of being. It is because this view of creation (and of God) is grounded in a particular, non-biblical, theological (or maybe better still, metaphysical) position that it is foreign to my way of thinking about God. In any event, while I am interested in such comparative inquiries, they take the subject in a decidedly different direction than the one I am pursuing here, which is to get clear about this particular core belief and how it contributes to my distinctive manner of following the Son and the Father and living my life the way that I do. My all-too-brief gloss on this idea of creation (and its associated idea of God) is based on Hugh J. McCann's article, “Creation” in The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought, published by Oxford University Press in 2000, 143–44.

7. Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf clarifies one aspect of this important truth in one of his April 2015 conference addresses. As important as obedience is on our part, he reminds us that “salvation cannot be bought with the currency of obedience; it is purchased by the blood of the Son of God” (Uchtdorf, “The Gift of Grace,” 109). He goes on to emphasize how crucial it is for us to realize that, after all is said and done, we obey the commandments of God because of our love for him. Once we come to this realization, “this form of genuine love and gratitude will miraculously merge our works with God’s grace. Virtue will garnish our thoughts unceasingly, and our confidence will wax strong in the presence of God” (Uchtdorf, 109). He refers to Nephi’s famous
teaching in 2 Nephi 25:23, rightly pointing out that we sometimes misinterpret the phrase “after all we can do.” He urges us to understand, “that ‘after’ does not equal ‘because.’ We are not saved ‘because’ of all that we can do. Have any of us done all that we can do? Does God wait until we’ve expended every effort before He will intervene in our lives with His saving grace?” (Uchtdorf, 110). Uchtdorf leaves it to us to provide the obvious answer to both questions. Our task, he concludes, is “to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God. After all, that is what we can do! And that is our task in mortality!” (Uchtdorf, 110.). His much-needed clarification and counsel on these vital points is particularly helpful. Each day I am more convinced than ever that the key to my understanding better what is required of me in my endeavors to relate with God and with others properly lies in my coming to a deeper realization of and a greater appreciation for his love for all of us and for his grace and mercy which he so fully proffers us.

8. Scripture sources, recounting the experience of Joseph Smith and others, include Joseph Smith —History 1:17, Doctrine and Covenants 76:23 and 110:2. I have never had such experiences and find myself, on this as on many other matters, among those who believe on the words and testimony of others (D&C 46:14).

9. See “Special Witnesses of Christ” and “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” both available on the Church’s website.


11. To this I can add the fact that some scholars see New Testament Christians making something like this distinction in their manner of referring to God. Wright, for instance, points out that “all the signs are that the earliest Christians very quickly came to the startling conclusion that they were under obligation, without ceasing to be Jewish monotheists, to worship Jesus” (Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 106). Wright notes that Paul never moves from the notion of Jewish monotheism found in the biblical and postbiblical sources into either a paganism (in which further gods would be added to a pantheon) or into
a Gnostic dualism (in which a good redeemer god would be in opposition to a bad creator god). Rather, he thinks Paul’s position is summed up in passages such as 1 Corinthians 8:6, “there is one God (the Father, from whom are all things and we to him), and one Lord, Jesus Christ (through whom are all things, and we by him)” (Wright, 107). Wright sees Paul’s adaptation of the first part of the Shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One,” found in Deuteronomy 6:4, as:

Emphasizing creation and redemption as equally originating in the Father and equally implemented through Jesus, [it] encapsulates, at the earliest stages of Christianity for which we have hard evidence, everything that later generations and centuries would struggle to say about Jesus and God (Wright, 107).

Furthermore, “in Jesus himself,” according to Wright:

We see the biblical portrait of YHWH come to life: the loving God, rolling up his sleeves (Isa. 52:10) to do in person the job that no one else could do; the creator God, giving new life; the God who works through his created world and supremely through his human creatures; the faithful God, dwelling in the midst of his people; the stern and tender God, relentlessly opposed to all that destroys or distorts the good creation and especially human beings, but recklessly loving all those in need and distress.... It is the Old Testament portrait of YHWH, but it fits Jesus like a glove (Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 121).

According to Wright, if we want to understand who the Savior is in reference to the Father we need to learn to think biblically and try to view both of them as the earliest Christians may have done. This is what I try to do.

12. Cherbonnier is an advocate of what he calls “biblical anthropomorphism.” He contrasts this personal, human-like way of thinking and talking about God (something I do throughout this book), with those who view him as the object of theological or philosophical speculation and talk about him using abstract terms such as the “One” or the “Ground of Being” (what I have referred to as the “absolutistic view of God,” see endnote 20 in chapter 5). When it comes to considering the central importance of the religious life and what counts as the proper
object of religious devotion and worship, Cherbonnier argues that the biblical view of God is the only real option. I agree. Consider some of his observations:

Anthropomorphism, frequently said to take away the mystery of God, may prove the best way to preserve it.... For the Bible, mystery is correlative with freedom. Though free to withhold himself, God can also make Himself known. The mystery resides in the fact that what he will say or do remains absolutely unpredictable. The still small voice that spoke to Elijah continues to confound human expectations.... It preserves neither the mystery of God nor the humility of man to insist a priori that God must be “wholly other,” or that “before God, man is always in the wrong.” To prejudge these questions is not to sit in judgement upon man, as is sometimes imagined, but upon God. It makes God the captive of human preconceptions.... One does not avoid hybris by adopting preconceptions which offend self-esteem. The only way to avoid hybris is to let God be God; that is, to rest all alleged knowledge of Him by reference to fact, by reasoning a posteriori. This a posteriori method is perfectly suited to an anthropomorphic God, who becomes known through word and deed.... For the Bible... human reason is a God-given instrument of self criticism.... Anthropomorphism, by placing man and God in the same universe of discourse, may be the only conception of God which invites rational scrutiny.... Finally, anthropomorphism provides a further advantage of a more practical nature; namely, its positive affirmation of human existence.... [Once a person] can at least entertain the possibility that God is anthropomorphic, he may attend to his word and mighty acts. When he discovers, upon doing so, that he has been created, his response distinguishes once and for all the biblical Weltanschauung from the mystic’s. Mystical enlightenment engenders a tragic sense of life. To be created, on the contrary, is to be the recipient of an inconceivable blessing. It is to share the same kind of existence which God himself enjoys (Cherbonnier, “The Logic of Biblical Anthropomorphism,” 204–06, emphasis added).

See also his “In Defense of Anthropomorphism,” in Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo Christian Parallels, edited by Truman G. Madsen

13. Wright thinks so as well. He argues that the belief that Jesus was bodily raised from the dead was the central driving force animating early Christianity. He points out that those who followed Jesus initially would have used the term in two ways: First, as a metaphor for the great return from exile, the need for covenant renewal and, second, taken quite literally, as one of the central elements in the dawning of the new age. Furthermore, whenever resurrection was used in the latter sense, it always meant reembodiment. “Resurrection was not a general word for life after death or for ‘going to be with God’ in some general sense. It was the word for what happened when God created newly embodied human beings after whatever intermediate state they might be in” (Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 134). And while what Wright calls the new creation did not come about as most first-century Jews anticipated it would, still the early church:

Busily set about redesigning their whole worldview—their characteristic praxis, their symbolic universe and their basic theology—around this new fixed point. They behaved, in other words, as though the new age had already arrived. This was the inner logic of the Gentile mission, that since God had now done for Israel what he was going to do for Israel, the Gentiles would at last share in the blessing…. The only explanation for their behavior, their stories, their symbols and their theology is that they believed Jesus had been reembodied, had been bodily raised from the dead (Wright, The Challenge of Jesus, 136–37).

Early in the Christian era, for most Gentiles (presumably even for some Gentile members of the church), this was simply foolishness, since nothing ultimately real could be physical, much less bodily. For most Jews (presumably even for some Jewish members of the church), the idea was blasphemous since, by definition, God must be seen as radically other than or transcendent to the world and hence to all things physical. These theological positions still prevail today. While many Christians today may think of God as some kind of person (and even use this term in some of their creeds), most seem to pull back from
talking about him as a person in any physical sense. Many emphatically draw a line at talking about him as embodied. But not me.

Wright summarizes what he thinks Paul, and, by extension, most of the early Church, may have believed about the resurrection of Jesus:

1. It was the moment when the creator God fulfilled his ancient promises to Israel, saving them from “their sins,” i.e., from their exile. It thus inaugurated the “last days,” at the end of which the victory over death begun at Easter would at last be completed.

2. It involved the transformation of Jesus’ body: it was, that is to say, neither a resuscitation of Jesus’ dead body to the same sort of life nor an abandonment of that body to decompose. Paul’s account presupposes the empty tomb.

3. It involved Jesus being seen alive in a very limited early period, after which he was known as present to the church in a different way. These early sightings constituted those who witnessed them as apostles.

4. It was the prototype for the resurrection of all God’s people at the end of the last days.

5. It was thus the ground not only for the future hope of Christians but for their present work (Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 145).

14. Furthermore, the scriptures teach us that while the Father and the Son are glorified, embodied beings or persons, the Holy Spirit is a “personage of spirit.” It is hard for me to grasp what this means, given that my idea of person is so entwined with the notion of embodiment. Because of my idea of person, I have some hold on what it means to refer to the Father and the Son the way I do here. Because of this, and for other reasons, I endeavor to maintain and cultivate the kind of loving relationship I have with both of them. At the same time, the kind of relationship I have with the Holy Spirit is different. Indeed, compared to all of the gifts of God that I have received in this life, my companionship with the Holy Spirit is by all measures the greatest. It is the basis upon which I strive to live the kind of life required of me so as to follow the first two great commandments. It accounts for how I have come to understand the importance of living in the new covenant.
with the Father and the Son, with my loved ones, and others. It is the basis upon which I have come to understand and value the things that both of them have done, are doing, and will yet do for all of us. It is the means by which I continually learn more about them, given that the Holy Spirit repeatedly testifies of them but rarely, if ever, of himself.

In any event, unlike with the Father and the Son, I elect not to pursue the question of who the Holy Spirit may be in and of himself. Rather, I simply acknowledge his profound influence in my life (along with all of the other gifts God has given me). I am thankful for it (and for them) and try to show this by endeavoring to live my life the way that I do.

15. That he was the Firstborn of the Father in the premortal realm; that he was selected and willingly agreed to implement the Father’s plan of salvation; that under the direction of the Father he created the “heavens and the earth” and all the things that are in them; that he is Jehovah (Yahweh), the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; that he raised up Moses and guided him in leading Israel out of bondage and revealed the law unto him and to all the world; that his birth into mortality, as the Only Begotten of the Father in the flesh, signaled the beginning of the renewal of the whole of creation and his kingdom’s inauguration work; that because of what he has and will yet accomplish he is Lord and Redeemer of all that is; that Heavenly Father raised him from the dead; that he sits next to the Father as a resurrected, exalted, fully embodied being or person, the great exemplar for us all; that he and the Father restored their authority, covenant, kingdom, and temple again in these latter days through the Prophet Joseph Smith and others; and that he will come again to rule and reign as King, and to finish what he and the Father began so long ago—to “make all things new.”
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Scriptural Sources
Quotations from the New Testament are from Thomas A. Wayment’s translation, see below. All other quotations are from the Church’s 2013 edition of the scriptures, which include the Topical Guide and the Bible Dictionary.

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