

“Fresh Courage Take”: We are not Alone

Last semester I made a student cry. I had just introduced an assignment to the class when I saw a frightened Rebecca trying to hold back tears. Much later she told me that the assignment seemed too overwhelming and that she didn't know how she could do it, especially on top of everything else she was supposed to do. I wasn't trying to make her cry, but as a teacher, I give students assignments. I work hard to make the assignments meaningful, challenging, and authentic to the type of activities they'll do in their careers and in life. I try to prepare students for the assignments and to help them along the way as they struggle, and I often insist that they work together with a partner. I continue to encourage students as they work through the assignments. Just as assignments are central to this university, so are assignments central to life—both on the temporal and eternal scales.

Imagine the Prophet Joseph Smith's reactions to some of his assignments. Can you imagine as a college-aged student being told by an angel from God that you will translate an ancient history from gold plates? Certainly Joseph has feelings of being unprepared and inadequate for such an undertaking. But just as certainly, the angel and our Heavenly Father know that Joseph can do the assignment with hard work and with help—help from heaven and help from people.

Joseph works so hard at fulfilling this assignment. For a while, Joseph, with the help of the Urim and Thummin, does the translating on his own, but he just isn't making much progress. Emma begins to help as a scribe, but her daily activities prevent her from helping as much as she wants. The Lord tells Joseph that He will send another scribe if Joseph is patient. In the meantime, the Lord prepares and directs Oliver Cowdery to assist Joseph. Imagine the sense of gratitude Joseph feels when Oliver arrives and offers help with this daunting assignment.

Day after day, the two work on the translation. One day Joseph receives inspiration through the Urim and Thummin to send a letter to David Whitmer asking for David to take Joseph and Oliver from Harmony, Pennsylvania, back to David's home to finish the translation in Fayette, New York, near Palmyra. David receives the letter, not knowing what to do because he is in the middle of a big job that needs to be finished before he can leave. David also has a difficult assignment he must complete. He needs two days of heavy work to finish harrowing and planting the rest of his wheat and then at least another day to spread the much-needed plaster of paris on his land. David has at least three days of work ahead of him before he can help Joseph. However, David feels he should leave sooner—a difficult assignment.

The next morning, David goes to the fields to begin his pressing assignment. At noon, when he stops for lunch, he discovers to his surprise that he is half finished with the work, and by evening he has finished the job that would normally take him two days to accomplish. The next morning when he goes to the plaster of paris heap to spread it on another field, the pile is gone. He asks his sister what has happened to the plaster, and she explains that the day before she and her children have watched three men spread

plaster in the fields faster than they have ever seen it done before. She assumes David has hired the men. Of course, he has not. David goes door-to-door trying to determine who has helped him, but no one knows. David begins to recognize that he has been receiving heavenly help with his duties at home so he can carry on his assignment to help Joseph.

David leaves immediately to help Joseph. After three days of making good time traveling, David meets Joseph and Oliver on the road outside Harmony. David is surprised to meet them, but Oliver explains that Joseph has known the exact time David left Fayette and even where David has stopped for lunch and watered his horses.

They return to Harmony for Joseph to say goodbye to Emma who will be following later. Joseph prays for guidance about what to do with the gold plates; he receives the answer that he should give them to an angel who will return them to Joseph when he arrives at the Whitmer farm. Joseph gives the plates to an angel before they leave for New York. On the way they see an aged man walking along the road with a knapsack that seems heavy on his back. Joseph tells David to stop and offer the man a ride in the wagon. The old man politely refuses and tells them that he is just going over to Cumorah. David turns to Joseph confused because he knows the area well and has never heard of Cumorah. Joseph explains that the man is a Nephite and in his knapsack are the gold plates. When David turns to look at the man, he is gone.

When they arrive at the Whitmer farm, the angel returns the plates, and Joseph and Oliver are able to finish the translation (Turley and Littke 74-78). Both David and Joseph have received help from others and help from heaven in fulfilling their individual assignments.

Now, I know that we don't have the assignment to translate the Book of Mormon, but we do have our own assignments that for us are also significant and essential and so very difficult. These assignments pertain to family, church, school, work, and life. So often these assignments seem overwhelming and impossible to complete; so often we feel alone and discouraged; so often we doubt our abilities and our success. But we are not alone. Joseph Smith is not alone. David Whitmer is not alone. And my student Rebecca is not alone. President Hinckley has also given us the promise: "We will not be left alone. . . Pray for guidance and protection of the Lord. He will never leave you alone. He will comfort you. He will bless and magnify you and make your reward sweet and beautiful" (83, 84).

Think of scripture stories when individuals have received help with their assignments, often assignments they feel inadequate to do. Imagine the uncertainty and fear Adam and Eve feel as they leave the Garden of Eden for the "lone and dreary world." But they are not alone in the dreary world. They have each other. They also have help from their Heavenly Father:

And Adam and Eve, his wife, called upon the name of the Lord, and they heard the voice of the Lord from the way toward the Garden of Eden, speaking unto them, and they saw him not; for they were shut out from his presence. (Moses 5:4)

Although they are no longer in Father's presence, they can still hear His voice. And they have help from the Holy Ghost and from messengers who come to teach them the gospel and the plan of salvation (Moses 5:6-9). Adam and Eve, after incredible work, suffering, and pain, are able to recognize their blessings and to recognize that they have not been alone with their difficult assignments.

Think of the widow suffering in the drought who has only a "handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse" and who is preparing the last meal before she and her son die from starvation. Elijah, the prophet who has sealed the heavens and caused the drought, is no longer being fed by ravens beside the brook because it has dried up. He goes to the widow and asks that she feed him before she feeds her son and herself:

And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake first, and bring it unto me, and after make for thee and for thy son.

For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.

And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days (1 Kings 17:13-15).

Notice the difficulty of her assignment—to give the last of what she has to someone else. But because of her faith, she acts and begins her difficult assignment, and as she does so, she also receives help from her Heavenly Father to bless someone else's and her own life. Jesus even spoke of this woman when He said:

But I tell you a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias [Elijah], when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; but unto none of them was [Elijah] sent, save unto Serepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow (Luke 4:25-26).

This nameless widow, who is praised by the Savior, through her faith and action, is able to fulfill her impossible assignment with the help of others and of heaven.

Think now of Elisha's servant who knows that the king of Syria's vast army is just outside the city gates waiting to destroy them:

And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do?

And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them.

And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.” (2 Kings 6:15-17)

The servant knows that Elisha has an assignment from God, and the servant knows that the army of Syria is about to destroy them. What the servant does not know is that he and Elisha are not alone, that an army of angels waits to help them. Notice the help that is on their side even if the servant doesn't initially see it. Similar help is also available to us even if we don't always see it or feel it.

Think of the help that Lehi receives as he fulfills the assignment to leave his home in Jerusalem and to travel with his family in the wilderness for eight years before being led to the promised land. He receives help from Sariah, his daughters, Nephi, and Sam (and much of the time from Laman and Lemuel), from Ishmael and his family, from the Holy Ghost, and from the Liahona. Think of the help Nephi receives as he fulfills the assignment to return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates: help at times from his brothers, especially Sam, help from the Holy Ghost, and help from Zoram. Think of the help Nephi receives in obtaining food when his bow is broken, help from his contrite father and from the Holy Ghost. They receive help—both physical and spiritual help—with their assignments.

One of my favorite examples is that of Peter. At the end of the day after the miracle of feeding the thousands both physically and spiritually near the seashore, Jesus instructs Peter and the disciples to go by boat to the other side while Jesus sends away the multitude and prays alone. Then we read in Matthew 14:24-31:

But the ship was now in the midst of the sea, tossed with waves for the wind was contrary.

And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea.

And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out in fear.

But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid.

And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water.

And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus.

But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand and caught him. (Matthew 14:24-31)

Notice that what is happening with Peter frequently is happening with each of us. We are all on a sea tossed by contrary, even boisterous, winds and waves with some assignments too difficult for us to complete on our own. It's night, deep night, and we feel far removed and isolated from anyone and any type of help. The wonderful Peter sees his Savior coming toward him walking on the water. Following Jesus's invitation and assignment to "Come," Peter jumps overboard and begins to walk on the water towards Jesus. Peter begins to walk in faith. Part of the "not being alone" is having the faith to begin the assignment on our own. Peter is walking on water! He's soon afraid and begins to sink. How often are we afraid and begin to sink? But notice that when Peter exercises his faith and begins his assignment but then becomes afraid and sinks, Jesus immediately reaches out to him, holds Peter's hand, and catches him just as He catches us. Jesus tells us to "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." We are not alone.

It is easy to recognize the help that is given to those in the scriptures. After all, these are prophets and apostles—somehow important people. However, we should also recognize that the help that is given to those of old is given to each of us today. Since receiving this devotional assignment, I have been blessed with students providing me with their own stories of not being alone, of being supported and comforted and lifted as they battle the wind, the waves, and their assignments of life. These generous, faithful students have allowed me to share their experiences with you. Pay attention to how these every day experiences are miracles, and I promise as you listen, you will be touched to know that similar moments have happened in your own lives. You will recognize and acknowledge that you have not been alone with your difficult assignments that focus on family, school, church, or life.

Family Experiences

For example, do any of these examples ring true to you as the following students discuss being homesick, uncertain, distraught, and lonely?

Shannon remembers her feelings of coming here to school. "I left my whole family and came here all by myself. The homesickness overwhelmed me, and I started to have doubts about if I really wanted to be here or not. I have never felt so alone in my life. I prayed that I would not feel this way anymore, and the Spirit comforted me by bringing different people into my life. I knew that everything would be okay after that."

Heather is here at school alone while her husband is in the military. She writes, "I have never felt so alone as I did at that time. I hadn't received a letter from him, and we weren't able to talk on the phone. One night I started crying and crying. I just felt so hopeless and lonely. I just knew I couldn't make it on my own. So, I prayed, and I really prayed. I told Heavenly Father all of my concerns and worries and fears. I prayed for a long time asking if we had made the right choice and when would things get better."

Suddenly, I felt such peace that we had done the right thing and this was a trial that would be worth it in the end. My heart was so warm and I felt like I had just received a big hug. It was hard the next few days because I found myself getting back into my old sadness. However, I remembered the answer I had received and that gave me peace. That answer has stuck with me during the continued hard times. Because of that answer and peace, I have not felt such despair and loneliness since.”

Gabriela describes her peace: “When my father died, I was very young, and it was very hard for me. He was my best friend; he was my strength; he was my hero; he was everything to me. When I found out what had happened, I felt that I just wanted to run and run and never look back. I felt that the world suddenly dropped in my shoulders. My little brother was scared; my mom was like a zombie; she was in shock. I had to be the strong one; I had to be strong for my brother and my mom. That night I hugged my brother until he fell asleep, telling him that everything was going to be all right. I remember seeing my mom rocking back and forth on a chair, crying silently, staring at me without seeing me. I kissed her good night and told her how much I loved her and how much I needed her. I prayed with all my heart that night; I prayed for my mom, for my dad. I asked Heavenly Father to take care of him and to tell him how much I loved him. I went to bed and hugged my brother so hard, like I was hoping to squish all the pain away. In my heart I wished to sleep so much and not ever wake up to the nightmare that was waiting for me in the morning. [But soon,] I was warm, very warm. Suddenly all the pain was gone, my heart was filled with peace and with the assurance of good news, I knew things were going to be all right. I knew it was going to be hard, but still I was going to be all right, my brother was going to be fine. I felt a love that I have never felt before; I recognized it. This changed the meaning of things. I was not alone any more. I was never alone, and I will never be.”

And Julianna describes her experience two days after her mother’s death: “I remember sitting at the kitchen table thinking, ‘Why is she gone? Why did she have to leave? Where is she? Who’s going to watch me go to the prom? Who will see me turn sixteen? Who is going to see me get married? Who will see my children?’ I continued to cry until I felt something. It was my mother. She was in that kitchen with me. I could feel her, I could smell her, but I couldn’t see her. My family noticed it, too. We gathered together in the kitchen and waited quietly. One of us mentioned a funny incident about her, and we laughed. We soon started talking. We talked about the things she did, the things she said, the notes and stories she wrote. And she was right there, laughing and smiling with us. I then heard the answers to my questions: ‘I will see you go to the prom. I will be there when you turn sixteen. I will be there in the temple when you are married. I will take care of your children until they come to you, and I will see you hold them and love them. I will be with you every step of the way.’ I knew I wasn’t alone.”

School Experiences

If we’re not alone with family experiences, I’m also confident that we are not alone with our school assignments.

Weston, who is now in law school, shares this experience: “As a freshman at Ricks College, I remember blindly studying for my first exams. I studied everything! Everything! I knew *exactly* what grade I needed to get on the final. After a grueling week of weeping, wailing, gnashing of teeth, and finals, I came to my last test—American Heritage. Those who have prepared for this final know what wrestling in fervent prayer feels like. Before taking my exam, I decided to say a prayer to calm my anxieties and ask Heavenly Father to help me remember what I had studied. Immediately, I experienced great peace. . . The grade I received wasn’t the crowning part of that particular experience; walking outside of the testing center, I felt an overwhelming spiritual presence of my Heavenly Father. I felt He was watching over me particularly in that moment. A great love and concern for my success, happiness, and well-being enveloped my soul. Every semester since—whether at Ricks College, BYU-Idaho, BYU, and now in law school—I have drawn and still draw on this experience to give me strength in knowing that others beyond this life know me and care for my success. I still begin every test and paper with a prayer for comfort and assurance that I will be able to succeed because I know God listens and will help me.”

Levi describes being at end of his first semester of law school when he was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. He was too afraid to speak in class, in church, or even on the phone. In law school, professors commonly pick on one student and spend the entire class period drilling that student on what he is supposed to know, and often, the finals are oral exams. Levi just couldn’t go on. But with the help of his law school advisor, he withdrew from school for a year to receive professional help and to force himself to find jobs that would help him such as working at a phone center calling people and to participate in church by volunteering to read a scripture. Levi is back in law school, and he writes: “The Lord really does watch out for us. I am so aware of heavenly help in my life right now. I feel like I am being lifted up and carried through some days. For example, today I was called on in one of my classes. I started out all right and then got very nervous and just felt shaky and awful. When I was finished “being on the hook” as we law students say, I just shook it right off. I didn’t hardly even give it a second thought, and I went on and had a productive day. I am learning to do this regularly and am able to do it because I ask the Lord if my performance is acceptable to Him. The answer I am always getting is yes. I am doing things that I once doubted that I could do.”

Church Experiences

Often our church assignments seem to bring us much uncertainty, but we are not alone as we fulfill those assignments.

Tiffany shares moving into an apartment with no one whom she knew. A week into school, her bishop called her to be a Relief Society president. “Needless to say I was terrified. However, something special happened during those first weeks that I’ll always remember. My roommate and I became good friends; however, I didn’t realize that until one Sunday night. I was worrying about who I was going to call into the Relief Society organization. I was sitting around the table when my roommate walked up to me and told me not to worry. She knew that I would be great at this calling and that I would touch

someone's life during my eight months as president. She lifted my spirits that night. She later left a note in my room telling me how much she appreciated me and how much faith she had in me. I know that if it hadn't been for her last year, I would not have had my best year at school so far."

Missionaries also experience that same homesickness and loneliness and uncertainty. Stephen writes about being at a branch party in Taiwan at the end of a rough day. "Tons of people came. Tons of food was served. But even sitting down among all the food and being surrounded by people didn't ease the feeling of loneliness in my heart. As a matter of fact, I think it was making it worse. I missed home. I missed speaking a language that could easily be understood. It all came to a head at this supposedly happy event. I gave up. I couldn't fight it anymore, and I sat there just defeated and alone eating my now cold noodles. A funny thing happened next. I looked up with that blank, defeated look on my face and saw Brother Kang. He turned, looked at me, smiled, and gave me a tilt of the head. Despite my desire to give up and conviction that I wouldn't be comforted, I smiled and nodded back. A thought came into my head, 'Hey, maybe I'm not alone.' I looked to my right to see members of our little branch all over the big room. I knew and loved them all. They all knew and loved me. They were my family and surrounded me in a way that I felt like I was in the middle of a big force field of love, almost like a hen after having gathered her chicks, would hold them tight in the warm embrace of her wings. The Savior had me in His wings that night, and I couldn't even get up to get a drink without being blitzed by warm smiles and the Taiwanese sweet way of sharing their love."

Life Experiences

So if we receive help with our assignments connected with our families, with school, and with our church callings, we also will receive help with our assignments in other areas of life that seem too difficult to complete.

Megan shares a painful experience of discovering that a dear friend was choosing a devastating life style. For months Megan was angry with her friend and was worrying how to talk him out of what he was doing. She explains: "I had never really felt like I had received an answer on what I was supposed to do. I felt very alone. There was no one I could discuss it with, and I couldn't let him know that I knew for fear of getting someone else in trouble. What happened when he told me was completely unexpected. All I did was tell him that I loved him and that I would be there for him no matter what the future would bring. I was astonished that those words were coming out of my mouth. I know now that that was the best thing I could have said. I know I was guided by the spirit not to say what I had felt before. I know that if we seek an answer with an earnest heart that we will be answered, even if it is not in the way we were thinking it would be. I was looking for validation of the way I felt, when really I needed to think about him and how he was feeling and what would be best for him. I am grateful for the gift of the spirit and for its guidance."

And Luke remembers his car breaking down on the freeway as he was returning to Rexburg from Utah. The car just stopped and wouldn't start. Other cars didn't stop or slow down. He didn't have a cell phone. "My 'gut' told me to try the car again, and so I did. It started back up, and I was able to continue driving to the next exit. As I was heading into town, the car died completely next to this nice little home. I walked to the door and found probably the only pastor of another church in the entire city. He invited me in to call a tow truck. It would take an hour for the truck to reach me, so he invited me to stay in and even eat dinner with his family. While [this experience] wasn't truly a life-threatening situation, all the pieces of the puzzle eventually became manifest and everything worked out fine. So many times in life, when I don't know how something will work out, the Lord takes care of it, on His timetable."

You know from what you're now feeling and remembering that these experiences are so very like your own experiences. Each of you could add your own stories of your times of sorrow, concern, fear, and inadequacies when others have helped you and you've felt your Heavenly Father's presence through His Holy Spirit.

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin has promised us that "The Lord does not sit in His Heavens, silent and sealed behind impenetrable walls" (*Ensign*, November 2003, p. 80). Heavenly Father is with us. Now, let's not forget to recognize the significance and necessity of each of us helping ourselves and each other. Notice in nearly all of these examples the individuals have been willing to go forth on their own, have done all that they could do on their own before "angels" in the form of other people or divine help have reached out to help them. Some of the stories you could also share would include stories of when you have been the one, like David Whitmer, who have been prepared spiritually or physically to help someone else. Many of you may have read Sara's letter to the editor in *The Scroll* describing how she and her friend after attending the temple were stranded at a gas station without acceptable checks or cash, and a gentle man, a stake patriarch, and his wife handed them a \$20 bill and said, "Angels come in all different forms, don't they?"

We need to be those angels appointed by our Heavenly Father to "succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees" (D&C 81:5). One of my favorite quotations by Spencer W. Kimball is on the display wall in the Kimball building, and it reads, "God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs" (5).

Notice now the significance of the covenant we've made at baptism of helping other people, of not letting other people being alone, and of being "willing to bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort." Now notice the next part of the verse: "to stand as witness of God at all times and in all things; and in all places that ye may be in" (Mosiah 18:8-9). As we are willing to do this, I am confident that as we bear others' burdens, as we mourn with them and comfort them, we are witnesses of God in their lives and in ours. I also believe that as we strengthen others, our very own burdens will be made lighter and we will also receive comfort and divine strength and blessings and help from others. We will not be alone in our difficult assignments

So, as we face these assignments, or trials, or conflicts, or uncertainties, that may last a moment, a week, a semester, or even a lifetime, know that we are not alone. The Lord has promised us

I will go before your face, I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up. (D&C 84:88)

Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be afraid. . . : for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. (Deut. 31:6)

And again, He has promised

I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying. . . ,Fear not; I will help thee” (Isaiah 41:13).

My dear brothers and sisters, I bear my testimony based on my own personal witness of a loving Heavenly Father and of an Atoning Savior and of many, many experiences in my and my family’s life, that we are not alone, that through our faith, through our efforts, through our service, we are not alone in our families, school, church, or life assignments. Fear not; fresh courage take; we are not alone. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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[Student experiences are personal correspondences used by permission.]