

F.I.R.S.T.

THE POWER
OF SPIRITUAL
PRIORITIES



ROBERT G. ALLEN

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Editing and typesetting by Katie Carter.

*Dedicated to my mother, Amy Judd Allen,
who died in giving me life.*

Contents

Introduction	7
1: What Comes FIRST in Your Life?	9
2: How Firm Is Your Foundation?	19
3: Awe-some	27
4: I Have No Hands but Yours	41
5: Spiritual Math: The Ultimate Leverage	47
6: The Second Most Important Word in the Dictionary	55
7: Seeking to Be “Broken”	63
8: Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!	71
9: Living a FIRST Life	79



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Introduction

I have been on this planet for seventy-seven years. When you reach this stage of life, your perspective broadens. You look back and notice patterns—what worked, what didn't work. You ponder how blessed your life has been despite serious challenges and setbacks. You look forward to the next life.

In my previous bestselling books, such as *Creating Wealth* and *Multiple Streams of Income*, I shared specific systems for achieving financial success. But underlying everything I taught was a foundation of spiritual principles that I believe are integral to success in life. This understanding is not unique to me. It's something that anyone can put into practice and that many people have benefited from for thousands of years.

When I speak about financial success to audiences around the world, I try to “hint” at the importance of spiritual beliefs without putting off listeners who are generally interested in creating material wealth. During one speech in China, I was prompted to ask, “How many of you believe in a Higher Power?” China holds a policy of state atheism, and the Chinese government has strongly discouraged religion at times in the past. I was shocked when ninety percent of the hands in the audience went up. I continued, “You came here today to learn about creating wealth. Before we begin, I thought it would be wise to acknowledge the Author and Creator of all wealth.”

I have since asked this question to dozens of audiences from South Africa to Russia to Hong Kong to Italy to Australia to Taiwan to Japan to Singapore to Kazakhstan. I'm always amazed to discover that belief in a Universal, unseen Power is so prevalent.

So, this book is my way of having a deeper discussion about the importance and power of spiritual priorities. When one puts God first, things are

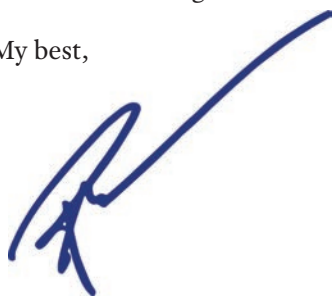
generally better. All kinds of research proves this.¹ Spiritually minded people are usually happier, healthier, wealthier, more peaceful, and more successful in relationships. That's certainly been the case in my life. So, if you want a better life, this book explains my personal attempt to put God first.

I am writing this book from a Christian perspective. When I was nineteen years old, I served for two years as a voluntary Christian missionary in French Polynesia for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have many fond memories of serving the wonderful Tahitian people. You have probably seen missionaries riding their bicycles or walking through your neighborhood two-by-two as they share messages of hope and peace in countries all over the world. That was me from ages nineteen to twenty-one.

I draw on several volumes of scripture within these pages that are sacred to myself and other members of my faith. These books include the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Pearl of Great Price. If you want to read larger portions of any of these books, you can go to churchofjesuschrist.org and click on “libraries” in the top search bar. You can also stop the missionaries as they are peddling by on their bicycles and ask them for a free physical copy of these scriptures. They'll love you for it. 😊

Without a doubt, the foundation of any worldly success I have been blessed to achieve has been built upon the bedrock of spiritual beliefs and principles that I share in this book. Whether you share similar beliefs or not, I hope you can find a few valuable insights here to help you in your journey through the world.

My best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'R. Allen', with a long, sweeping flourish extending upwards and to the right.

Robert G. Allen

1. “Spirituality Linked with Better Health Outcomes, Patient Care,” Harvard TH Chan, July 12, 2020. <https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/spirituality-better-health-outcomes-patient-care/>

Chapter 1

What Comes FIRST in Your Life?

Do you like acronyms? Or do you think they're kind of "cheesy?" *The New Oxford English Dictionary* defines *acronym* as "an abbreviation formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a word."

Teachers often use acronyms to help their students remember the concepts they are trying to share. For example, the acronym SMART was first popularized by George T. Doran in a 1981 magazine article entitled "There's a SMART Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives."¹ Goals are more attainable when they are SMART: **S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**imely.



An acronym is often confused with a similar convention—an acrostic. An acrostic takes the first letters of the words in a sentence to spell out a message. While some people feel that acrostics should mainly be used for

1. Doran, George T. "There's a SMART Way to Write Management's Goals and Objectives," *Management Review*, November 1981, 5.

literary purposes, such as in an acrostic poem, many people use them as mnemonic devices. Here are a few examples:

FOMO = Fear of missing out.

ASAP = As soon as possible.

KISS = Keep it simple, Stupid.

When someone says those words, you know exactly what they mean. Here is an acrostic sentence that doesn't mean anything until you know the context:

Every Good Boy Does Fine.

This acrostic is a mnemonic created by music teachers to help their students remember the notes on the lines of the treble clef—E, G, B, D, and F. If you had a piano teacher, you're probably already familiar with it. I, myself, prefer **Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge**. ☺

The most famous acrostic in history is the declaration,

Jesus Christ, God's Son, is Savior.

It is formed from the first letters of the ancient Greek word for fish—

ΙΧΘΥΣ (ΙΧΘΥΣ) Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ

“Iēsoûs Khrīstós, Theoû Huiós, Sôtēr.”



This acrostic still influences the symbols we use to represent Christianity today. When you see a bumper sticker with the fish sign, you know the owner is Christian.

So, acronyms and acrostics are useful in teaching and remembering the important aspects of any subject. One of the most important subjects in life is our spiritual beliefs. With the blast of daily responsibilities, it can sometimes be hard to keep our priorities straight. That's why Moses taught the Ten Commandments. It was a simple list of dos and don'ts to keep His people on the straight and narrow. The first of the Ten Commandments is, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3 KJV²).

Let's design an acronym to deepen our personal commitment to live this first commandment—to constantly remind us to put no other gods before our Father in Heaven. To *always* put God first—in everything.

Thus, the title of this book—*FIRST: The Power of Spiritual Priorities*.

The word *first* is used dozens of times in the scriptures. Here is one of the most memorable: "But seek ye *first* the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33, emphasis added).

The word *first* could be an excellent acronym to represent five important reminders.

F _____
 I _____
 R _____
 S _____
 T _____

What words could we use for each letter of the acronym? There are many concepts starting with the letter *f* that one could use as the **first** letter.

Faith, Family, Father, Focus, Foundation, Fun, etc.

From the fourth Article of Faith³, we learn "that the first principles and ordinances of the Gospel are: first, *Faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ; second,

2. Cited Bible verses are from the King James Version unless otherwise specified.

3. The Articles of Faith, 1:4. Pearl of Great Price. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Repentance; third Baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; fourth, Laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost” (emphasis added).

Yes, *faith* is the word we need. It makes perfect sense. We can’t put God first without faith.

The Abraham Pattern

The universal example of someone who excelled at putting God first by exercising faith was Abraham. We celebrate Abraham today as the Patriarch of three of the great religious traditions in the world—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Over half of the people on the planet today identify with one of these traditions.

Indeed, the Lord predicted Abraham’s influence in history when He said, “Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee” (Gen. 17:5–6).

As we study Abraham’s story, we see that whatever God instructed Abraham to do, he did—following a pattern that we could refer to as the Abraham Pattern.

When living in Haran (which would be in southern Turkey today, north of Syria) the Lord told Abraham to do something difficult—to abandon most of his family and friends and travel over four hundred miles south into a foreign country inhabited by unfriendly, idolatrous people: “Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him” (Gen. 12:1,4).

At today’s travel speeds, a family could make such a journey by car in a day or two. But in Abraham’s day, it would have taken many months. As later reported in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, when Abraham “was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance,” he “obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went” (11:8).

The first part of the Abraham Pattern is simple. When God instructed that Abraham do something, he made it a priority. He just did it.



The root word of the word priority is *prior*, meaning “earlier; preceding, as in order of time, in front of, before, or first.” If something is a priority in your life, then it usually gets done “prior” to anything else—“before” any other activity. It gets done first. If you *say* something is important to you, but you don’t *do* it—then is it actually a priority?

Abraham is our model. When the Lord spoke, Abraham made it a priority. He faithfully put God’s will first.

When Abraham was eighty-six years old, his childless wife, Sarah, encouraged Abraham to start his posterity with her maid, Hagar. Their first son, Ishmael, was soon born.

Thirteen years later, the Lord appeared to Abraham and informed him of a new covenant with the Lord that required Abraham to do something very difficult and very unusual:

And God said unto Abraham...This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. (Gen. 17: 9–14)

Upon hearing this strange request, notice Abraham's pattern:

*And Abraham took Ishmael his son and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin **in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him.** And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. **In the selfsame day** was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. (Gen. 17: 23–27, emphasis added)*



Not only did Abraham do as he was instructed, but he did it immediately, without question. Can you imagine the meeting on his farm that day when Abraham broke this painful news to his son and his many hired hands?

About this time, Abraham was informed that Sarah, his barren wife, would miraculously give birth to a son within a year's time. After this miracle baby, Isaac, was born, Abraham was given yet another test. The scriptures tell the story:

When Isaac grew up and was about to be weaned, Abraham prepared a huge feast to celebrate the occasion. But Sarah saw Ishmael—the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar—making fun of her son, Isaac. So she turned to Abraham and demanded, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son. He is not going to share the inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won’t have it!” This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son. But God told Abraham, “Do not be upset over the boy and your servant. Do whatever Sarah tells you, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. But I will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar’s son because he is your son, too. (Gen. 21:8–13 New Living Translation)

As the biblical record later shows, Abraham knew that exiling his son and his son's birth mother would probably be a death sentence for them. Without divine intervention, they would most likely die of thirst alone in the wilderness. But even though he knew of the danger, he had faith that God would prevail. Notice the Abraham Pattern—not only did Abraham put the Lord first, he did it fast:

*So Abraham **got up early the next morning**, prepared food and a container of water, and strapped them on Hagar's shoulders. Then he sent her away with their son, and she wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water was gone, she put the boy in the shade of a bush. Then she went and sat down by herself about a hundred yards away. "I don't want to watch the boy die," she said, as she burst into tears. But God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, "Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants." Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well full of water. She quickly filled her water container and gave the boy a drink. (Gen. 21:14–19 NLT, emphasis added)*

Ishmael and Hagar were miraculously rescued, but it didn't *appear* that things would go well when Abraham sent them away. However, he trusted God and still did it.

Many years later, after his son Isaac was a young man, Abraham was asked to kill his beloved son—the priority of his life—to tie him to an altar and sacrifice him. Realizing that the Lord required the life of his irreplaceable son, Abraham had a choice to make: “Is God’s request a priority in my life? Even ‘prior’ to the life of my own son? Should I ask God to reconsider? Lord, are you sure you want me to do this? Is this sacrifice *that* important to you?”

The story tells us simply, “And Abraham rose up *early in the morning*, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him” (Gen. 22:3, emphasis added). Abraham not only put God first—but he also did it first thing the next morning.

Thank Heaven an angel appeared to forbid Abraham from following through with the sacrifice:

And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. (Gen. 22:10–12)

We often forget that the Lord asked Abraham to sacrifice both of his sons—his firstborn with Hagar, Ishmael, and his firstborn with Sarah, Isaac. And following his pattern, Abraham made it a priority—he did it first and fast. Faithful Abraham. This is why he is the patriarch to billions.



As with Abraham, God provides ways to test the faith of each of us to see if we will live the first commandment. This is not easy. We are distracted by the immediacy of the world. We are immersed in it. It buzzes and interrupts and tugs at us almost every minute. Too much information. Too many opportunities. Too many challenges. Too many distractions. It's easy to be diverted from remembering God. But no matter how busy we are, there is always time for what we put first.

Is building faith in God and Christ the *first* item on our daily to-do lists? After all, the *first* commandment is, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

Abraham rose up *early in the morning*. He put God first and fast.

So, following the Abraham Pattern, let us *rise up early in the morning* and put *no* other gods before Him. Not the Google god, or the texting god, or the email god, or the TV god, or the newspaper god, or the iPhone god, or the Apple News god, or the hot chocolate god. He comes *first*—before everything else.

In this **first** symbolic act of the day, we can commit to postponing our goals, our interests, our curiosities, and our pressing problems to have faith enough to prioritize first things first. We can take time to just be with God. We can prioritize the reading of sacred words. We can ponder and pray. That's a great way to start any day.

One day, we'll all take our final breath. When we meet that Being of Light, we will be able to say, "I put you first *today*, like I do every day."

That's why a simple acronym might help us remember.

F aith How can I have **faith** to put God first and fast?

I

R

S

T

In the next chapter, let's discuss what faith is and how to build a firm, faithful foundation.

Chapter 2

How Firm Is Your Foundation?

What is faith? We learn in several essays titled *The Lectures on Faith* that appeared in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants that faith is the “first principle in revealed religion, and the foundation of all righteousness.” *The Lectures* go on to explain that “three things are necessary, in order that any rational and intelligent being may exercise faith in God unto life and salvation. First, that God does actually exist; Secondly, a correct idea of his character, his perfections and attributes; and Thirdly, that the course which we pursue is according to his mind and will.”¹

If you’re reading this, you probably agree with the first item: that God actually exists. You’re not alone. People worldwide were asked in a 2023 Gallup Poll, “Do you believe in God?” Seventy-four percent of the people on the planet answered “yes” to this question.²

The second necessary step is to understand, “Who is this Being in whom we place our faith? We need “a correct idea of his character, perfections, and attributes.”

The *Lectures on Faith* highlight many aspects of His character and attributes. He is eternal, merciful, unchangeable, truthful, fair, loving, powerful, and knowledgeable.

1. *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Covenant Communications, 2008)

2. “Religion,” Gallup, May 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx>

We could summarize all of His characteristics and attributes into this one word: *omni*. He is...

Omnipotent

What does the word *omnipotent* really mean? *Omni* comes from the Latin word *omnis*, meaning “all.” And *potent* comes from the Latin word *potis*, meaning “powerful, able, capable.”

God is all-powerful. He wills it, and it is done.

Sometimes we doubt God’s strength like Laman and Lemuel in the Book of Mormon who were tasked with confronting a wicked ruler named Laban. Even after being reproved by an angel, “Laman and Lemuel again began to murmur, saying: How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands? Behold, he is a mighty man, and he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty; then why not us?” (1 Nephi 3:31).

Their younger brother Nephi reminds them, “let us be *faithful* in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands?” (1 Nephi 4:1).

The obstacles we face in the “world” distract us so that we often forget that He is...

Omniscient

What does *omniscient* mean? Here, the Latin word *omnis*, meaning “all,” combines with *scient* from the Latin word *scientia*, meaning “knowledge.” In other words, God is all knowing. He sees the past, present, and future. Does He know our future? Yes. He sees it, but He lets us choose it.

Thus saith the Lord your God, even Jesus Christ, the Great I Am, Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the same which looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven, before the world was made; The same which knoweth all things, for all things are present before mine eyes; I am the same which spake, and the world was made, and all things came by me. (D&C 38: 1–3)

God is all-powerful and all-knowing, but let’s remember that God is also...

Omnipresent

What does *omnipresent* mean? He is everywhere and in everything in the universe through His spirit. Because He is everywhere, He knows exactly how to align our needs with the appropriate solution at the right time—even if it's outside this earthly time frame.

Speaking of time, He is...

Omnitemporal

This is a word we don't hear often: *omnis tempus*. He exists in all times. He is timeless—eternal. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, Moses asked Him for His name. He said, “I Am Who I Am” (Exod. 3:14 NLT).

In the original Hebrew of Exodus, God uses the Arabic term *YHWH*, or *Yahweh*, to refer to Himself here. This is also similar to the Hebrew word for “I am/I was/I will be.”³ In other words, God is saying, “I just AM.”



Yes, He is eternal. The angels, who live in the timeless space of heaven must have a hard time understanding us temporary-minded creatures.

3. Knohl, Israel. “YHWH: The Original Arabic Meaning of the Name,” The Torah.com, <https://www.thetorah.com/article/yhwh-the-original-arabic-meaning-of-the-name>

In the history of the universe, two plus two has always equaled four. It's an eternal truth. God is like that. He has always equaled God.

He is. He was. He will be.

He is also...

Omnibenevolent

Omni means “all,” *bene* means “good,” and *volens* means “willing.” He is the source of perfect or unlimited goodness. In a word, He is love. He always has our best interests in mind. He is the Ultimate Father. If you're a parent, you know what you're willing to do for your kids—almost anything. (Although, it's harder with teenagers. 😊)

Well, we are God's teenagers, yet He still loves us.

But love can be tough. What did He do for us, His kids? He asked His firstborn Son to pay an unbelievably expensive price for us—an atoning price that we could not afford to pay for ourselves. What a Brother! What a Father!

As King Benjamin taught,

Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth; believe that man doth not comprehend all the things which the Lord can comprehend... I would that ye should remember, and always retain in remembrance, the greatness of God, and your own nothingness, and his goodness and long-suffering towards you, unworthy creatures, and humble yourselves even in the depths of humility, calling on the name of the Lord daily, and standing steadfastly in the faith of that which is to come. (Mosiah 3: 9–11)

God shows us endless “goodness and long-suffering” even though we are “unworthy creatures.” Yes, we are His offspring, yet we have a *lo-o-o-ng* way to go for our divine DNA to fully manifest.

In addition to being omnibenevolent, God is...

Omnificent

God is not just magnificent. He is omnificent: *omni* plus the Latin word *facere*, meaning “to do.” He is all-creating. His creative power is unlimited. And the evidence is *everywhere*. Just imagine the *trillions* of stars in the universe multiplied by a trillion distinct, individual forms of life on this planet and on trillions of other planets. Then, multiply that by the trillions of cells in each human body—a body patterned after that of our Father in Heaven.

What additional proof does one need of God’s omnificence?

Omneity

Where should we put our **first** faith? In the omni-ness, the all-ness—the omneity—of God. This is the God we worship: *Omniscient*. *Omnipotent*. *Omnipresent*. *Omnitemporal*. *Omnibenevolent*. *Omnificent*.

Yet, in this profane world, we often *under*-estimate Him. We *under*-remember Him. We *under*-appreciate Him. We *under*-honor Him. We *under*-respect Him. We *under*-admire Him. We *under*-praise Him. We *under*-awe Him.



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Since He is omni-everything, He is the *perfect* resource to help us determine the third necessary step to faith from *The Lectures on Faith*: “that the course which we pursue is according to his mind and will.”

Another word for faith is trust. Sometimes it takes a lifetime to learn to trust God. We usually exercise our *free agency* and **first** try to do things our way. And when things don’t work out, we eventually learn to exercise our *faith* and trust His way. As Solomon wrote, “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Prov. 3:5–6).

And Christ said it best: “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38).

Once again, we can learn from Nephi: “O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his trust in the arm of flesh” (2 Nephi 4:34).

As Alma taught, “faith is not to have a perfect knowledge of things; therefore if ye have faith ye hope for things which are not seen, which are true” (Alma 32:21). Faith means to invest time and effort—to put Him **first**—even when the evidence is sometimes limited or “not seen.”

Faith is trusting that God exists and that His promises will be fulfilled. In these modern times, it seems like people of faith are being challenged on all sides by those skeptical people in the “great and spacious building” of the world.

Rather than exercising faith, people seek **first** for a sign. And when the proof is “not seen,” they immediately feel entitled to “do their own thing”—to break the commandments right and left. It appears that those who have faith to keep the commandments are being left behind—as if their investment in faith is not paying off.

But notice this conversation that the prophet Malachi reports between God and those struggling with their faith:

“You have said terrible things about me,” says the LORD.

“But you say, ‘What do you mean? What have we said against you?’

“You have said, ‘What’s the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying his commands or by trying to show the LORD of Heaven’s Armies that we are sorry for our sins? From now on we will call the arrogant blessed. For those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them suffer no harm.’”

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and the Lord listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name. “They will be my people,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. “On the day when I act in judgment, they will be my own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient child. Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.” (Malachi 3:13–17 NLT)

I want to have my name on that Scroll of Remembrance, don’t you? When we think of the word *faith*, it can help us to remember...

F aith How can I have **faith** to put God first and fast?

I
R
S
T

Yes, God exists.

Yes, He is Omni.

Yes, He stands ready to direct the course we pursue in accordance with His mind and will.

Yes, we still have a *long* way to go. That’s why we need Him now more than ever.

Yes, faith is the straightest path back to Him.

Yes, He is Awe-some.

Let’s dig a little deeper into why we should put Him **FIRST**.

Chapter 3

Awe-some

Just a little history: in March of 1830, almost two hundred years ago, a young man named Joseph Smith published a book that changed the world for a lot of people—The Book of Mormon. A month later he organized the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He was just twenty-four years old.



Two months later, in June 1830, in pondering the account of the creation in the Bible (Genesis 1) Joseph was inspired to record a vision experienced by the prophet Moses:

The words of God, which he spake unto Moses at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain. And he saw God face to face, and he talked with him, and the glory of God was upon Moses; therefore Moses could endure

his presence. And God spake unto Moses, saying: Behold, I am the Lord God Almighty, and Endless is my name... And behold, thou art my son; wherefore look, and I will show thee the workmanship of mine hands; but not all, for my works are without end... and worlds without number have I created. (1:1–4, 33)

Think of it—worlds without number. Now, in 1830, when Joseph walked out of his house at night and looked up in the Milky Way, he could see thousands of stars—and even some planets—with his naked eye. On a clear night, if he had known where to look, he could have seen the Andromeda Nebula. It would have looked like a fuzzy star just between the constellations Cassiopeia and Pegasus. But beyond that, scientists and astronomers had no idea how deep and how vast the universe extended.

And yet, because of this vision, Joseph had an extra glimpse at the sheer size of the cosmos:

For behold, there are many worlds that have passed away by the word of my power. And there are many that now stand, and innumerable are they unto man; but all things are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them. (Moses 1:35)

Innumerable.

In November 1924—ninety-five years after Joseph received this vision of Moses—an article appeared in the *New York Times*. It was about an astronomer working with the largest telescope in the world at Mount Wilson observatory above Pasadena, California.

This astronomer's name was Edwin Hubble.¹

Hubble had been studying the Andromeda Nebula, and with a stronger telescope, he began to realize that Andromeda wasn't just a nebula within our own galaxy—it was an “island of stars” *outside* our own Milky Way galaxy.²

According to the *New York Times*, these “spiral nebulae which appear in the heavens as swirling clouds are in reality distant stellar systems or island universes... and their number, is very great, amounting to hundreds of thousands.”

1. Sharov, Aleksandr Sergeevich and Igor Dmitrievich Novikov, *Edwin Hubble: The Discoverer of the Big Bang Universe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 34.

2. “Edwin Hubble,” *Biography*, last modified May 20, 2021. <https://www.biography.com/scientists/edwin-hubble>



Andromeda is the elliptical patch of light in the center of this photo, directly above the tree. (Included with permission by Miguel Claro. Explore his amazing photos at miguelclaro.com.)



The Andromeda Galaxy, image copyright by Miguel Claro (miguelclaro.com).

And the Lord God spake unto Moses, saying: The heavens, they are many, and they cannot be numbered unto man; but they are numbered unto me, for they are mine. And as one earth shall pass away, and the heavens thereof even so shall another come, and there is no end to my works, neither to my words. (Moses 1: 37–38)

It's almost too large a concept for our mortal minds to comprehend. Hundreds of thousands of galaxies *outside* our Milky Way galaxy? This was shocking news in the world of astronomy in 1924 and was strongly disputed by astronomers at Harvard and other institutions. But today we all know that Hubble was right. The Milky Way was not the only galaxy in the universe.

When the Hubble telescope was launched into space in 1990, and we could see deeper into space than we had ever been able to see, we learned that there are not hundreds of thousands of galaxies. No, not even hundreds of millions. But hundreds of *billions* of individual galaxies like Andromeda and the Milky Way—each galaxy containing hundreds of billions of stars like our sun.

So, a trillion trillion is the number one followed by twenty-four zeros: 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. How can we understand a number like that?

In October 2011 LDS General Conference, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf stated, “Astronomers have attempted to count the number of stars in the universe. One group of scientists estimates that the number of stars within range of our telescopes is ten times greater than all the grains of sand on the world’s beaches and deserts.”³



Unbelievable.

And it came to pass that Moses looked... And he beheld many lands; and each land was called earth, and there were inhabitants on the face thereof. (Moses 1: 8, 29)

Hmm—many lands called earth? So, google this question: How many potentially habitable planets are there in the Milky Way galaxy?

Astronomers at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, claim that there are actually around one hundred billion habitable, Earth-like planets *just in our Milky Way galaxy*.⁴ Think of that—one hundred billion planets in just one galaxy? Now, expand that thought outward into the universe, and there could be trillions of planets like ours.

Unfathomable.

3. Uchtdorf, Dieter. “You Matter to Him,” October 2011 LDS General Conference.

4. Byrd, Deborah. “100 Billion Planets, Say Astronomers” EarthSky, April 2013. <https://earthsky.org/space/100-billion-planets-and-we-can-help-find-them-say-new-zealand-astronomers/>

Now, in about 1300 BC when Moses had his vision and saw the entire universe, his fellow Israelites looking at the night sky near Mount Sinai had no idea how powerful was this God who had inspired Moses to lead them out of Egypt—or what His plan was for them.

And even in 1830 when Joseph Smith recorded Moses’s vision, his fellow Americans had no idea of the staggering vastness of the universe:

And the presence of God withdrew from Moses, that his glory was not upon Moses, and Moses was left unto himself. And it came to pass that it was for the space of many hours before Moses did again receive his natural strength like unto man; and he said unto himself: Now, for this cause, I know that man is nothing, which thing I never had supposed. (Moses 1: 9–10)

Think of it. Even the great Moses realized his universal insignificance.

Inconceivable.

In the vision, Moses also “cast his eyes and beheld the earth, yea, even all of it; and there was not a particle of it which he did not behold, discerning it by the spirit of God” (Moses 1:27). During this mind-blowing experience, Moses began to understand the omnipotence, the omniscience, the omnipresence, the omnitemporality, the omnibenevolence, the omnificence, and the omneity of God.

He saw the planet teeming with life—all forms of life on our special Earth—not just human life, but animals, plants, and fishes and all manner of creeping things.

Just how much life is there on this planet?

Let’s find out. Try googling, “How many different living species are there on the earth?” The estimates range from eight million to more than one hundred million distinct, unique living species. And we discover more every day.

Let’s just look at one category of life—the plant species. Five hundred years ago, “scientists estimated that there were 500 different types of plant species in the world. By 1623 this number had increased to 6,000. Today we

know 9,000 species of grass alone, 2,700 types of palm trees, (in all) over 500,000 different plant species.”⁵

Try to picture it—five hundred thousand species of just plants. Not to mention the animals. But most estimates of the different species of life overlook microorganisms, such as bacteria. When you include microorganisms, researchers from Indiana University estimate that there are a staggering one trillion species on Earth.⁶



A trillion—there’s that big number again.

And that’s just what we see alive today. But the fossil record shows evidence of vast amounts of extinct species of life—triceratops and trilobites and pterodactyls and strange-looking fossil fishes and ferns. Talk about *Jurassic Park*!

What we see alive today is less than one percent of what has existed on this planet. According to *National Geographic*, scientists estimate that more than

5. Levitin, Daniel J. *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* (New York: Dutton, 2015) 15.

6. “Researchers Find That Earth May Be Home to One Trillion Species,” U.S. National Science Foundation, May 2, 2016. www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=138446

ninety-nine percent of all species that have ever lived on Earth are now extinct.⁷ This earth has been the scene of an extraordinary explosion of life. And all of these billions of species—however they got here—began in the mind of the God with whom Moses spoke, face to face. And Moses saw this—absorbing it all at once. No wonder he marveled and declared,

Now, I know that man is nothing. (Moses 1:10)

Yes, God created the galaxies, planets, animals, and plants...

But wait—there’s more:

And he beheld also the inhabitants thereof, and there was not a soul which he beheld not; and he discerned them by the Spirit of God; and their numbers were great, even numberless as the sand upon the sea shore. (Moses 1:28)

Let’s google that: “How many people have lived on the earth?” By one estimate, over 107 billion people have taken a breath on this planet. When Moses had his vision (probably in the Sinai desert), there were people living all over the world—in Egypt, India, China, Mesoamerica, Babylon, and more.



They lived in wildly creative and different civilizations and spoke six thousand different languages, living and breathing and learning and discovering the secrets of the earth. And organizing their discoveries into many divisions of specialized knowledge: biology, chemistry, geography, geology,

7. Greshko, Michael. “What Are Mass Extinctions, and What Causes Them?” *National Geographic*, Sep 26, 2019. www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/mass-extinction

physics, oceanography, mathematics, medicine, technology, philosophy, music, painting, literature, jewelry, astronomy, and more.

And out of these great numbers of human beings, there were many “noble and great ones” (Abraham 3:22). Not just intelligent leaders but brilliant scientists and creative geniuses: Galileo, Aristotle, Newton, Einstein, Pasteur, Confucius, Beethoven, Mozart, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and thousands more. Each played their part in showing us all a glimpse of what is humanly possible.



And each of these one hundred billion beings obtained a human body—which is a miracle in and of itself. Our bodies have eleven intricately coordinated life systems:

- nervous system (brain)
- musculoskeletal system (bones and muscles)
- endocrine system (glands)
- integumentary system (skin, nails)
- immune system (infection defense)
- cardiovascular system (heart)
- lymphatic system (white blood cells)
- respiratory system (lungs)
- urinary system (kidneys)
- reproductive system (sex organs)
- gastrointestinal system (stomach and intestines)⁸

8. Brouhard, Rod. “The 11 Body Organ Systems: Anatomy and Function,” *Verywell Health*, September 19, 2024. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/organ-system-1298691>

The human body—your body! Your heart beats one hundred thousand times a day.⁹ Your lungs breathe twenty thousand breaths a day.¹⁰ If you cut yourself, your body heals all by itself without a single conscious thought on your part.

So, google it: “How many cells are there in the human body?” According to *National Geographic*, there are thirty-seven trillion cells in a human body.¹¹ (Many of us have been trying to lose a few trillion cells recently. ☺) And *each* of these trillions of cells contains what scientists call the human genome—the DNA program consisting of 3.2 billion tiny chunks of information—your genetic code—the instructions for creating you—the only you in the universe.¹²



If you were to unravel and stretch out the DNA genome in just *one* of your trillions of tiny cells, it would extend out over six feet in length—from *just one* cell. Multiply that by your thirty-seven trillion cells, and the length of the DNA in your body would stretch out over ten billion miles. How far is that? It’s the distance from the earth to the sun and back over fifty times.¹³

9. “Amazing Heart Facts,” *Nova*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/heart/heartfacts.html>

10. Frysh, Paul and Poonam Sachdev. “All About Your Lungs,” *WebMD*, <https://www.webmd.com/lung/ss/slideshow-lung-facts-overview>

11. Zimmer, Carl. “How Many Cells Are In Your Body?” *National Geographic*, Oct 23, 2013, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/how-many-cells-are-in-your-body>

12. National Research Council Committee on Mapping and Sequencing the Human Genome, *Mapping and Sequencing the Human Genome* (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 1988) 2.

13. Ashworth, Hannah. “How Long Is Your DNA?” *BBC Science Focus*, <https://www.sciencefocus.com/the-human-body/how-long-is-your-dna>

Yes, *each* of your microscopically small cells is more powerful than the most powerful supercomputer on Earth. And who designed that code?

The Master Programmer.

Try to imagine it—if you can. From the infinitesimally small human cell to the infinitely vast universe.

Unimaginable.

Martin Luther wrote a song in the year 1429 based on Psalm 46:

*A mighty fortress is our God,
A tower of strength ne'er failing.
His might and pow'r are great.
He all things did create.
And he shall reign for evermore.*

Our Father in Heaven is so much more than a mighty fortress.

Let's turn to the book of Isaiah. Isaiah lived about six hundred years after Moses. Like Moses, Isaiah was a prophet who also saw God.¹⁴ This is what he says in Isaiah chapter 40 from the New Living Translation:

*Haven't you heard? Don't you understand?
Are you deaf to the words of God—
the words he gave before the world began?
Are you so ignorant?
God sits above the circle of the earth.
The people below seem like grasshoppers to him!
He spreads out the heavens like a curtain
and makes his tent from them.
He judges the great people of the world
and brings them all to nothing...*

*"To whom will you compare me?
Who is my equal?" asks the Holy One.*

*Look up into the heavens.
Who created all the stars?...*

*The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of all the earth. (Isa. 40:21–23, 25–26, 28 NLT)*

14. Isaiah 6:1

A million. A billion. A trillion. A septillion. A googol. An infinity. These numbers are mind-boggling to us. But to Him? They are nothing.

And what does He do with this infinite power? To Moses, He explained,

For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man. (Moses 1: 39)

Wow—all of this for us. Imagine that!

Innumerable. Unbelievable. Unfathomable. Inconceivable. Unimaginable.



Infinite is perhaps the best word to describe the greatest gift God gave us. President Russell M. Nelson said it this way:

*His Atonement is infinite—without an end. It was also infinite in that all humankind would be saved from never-ending death. It was infinite in terms of His immense suffering. It was infinite in time, putting an end to the preceding prototype of animal sacrifice. It was infinite in scope—it was to be done once and for all. And the mercy of the Atonement extends not only to an infinite number of people, but also to an infinite number of worlds created by Him. It was infinite beyond any human scale of measurement or mortal comprehension.*¹⁵

15. Nelson, Russell M. “The Atonement,” October 1996 General Conference.

As the psalmist says, “Be in awe and know that I am God” (46:10 NLT).

Awe-some.

This is the awesome God in whom we invest our faith. In the next chapter, let’s explore what could be the second letter of the FIRST acronym and why.

Chapter 4

I Have No Hands but Yours

We’ve now established that the first word of the FIRST acronym is *faith*. As President Russell M. Nelson has taught, “Everything good in life—every potential blessing of eternal significance—begins with faith.”¹

F aith How can I have **faith** to put God first and fast?

I
R
S
T

What word shall we use for the second letter in the acronym?

There are many important concepts starting with the letter *i*. Here are some possible candidates for our acronym: Ideal, Imagine, Immanuel, Immortal, Important, Improve, Inspire, Instrument.

That last word in the list—*instrument*—begs to be considered.

God directs, “Be an instrument in my hands.”

In the Bible, the word *instrument* is usually used in the traditional sense—instruments of war, musical instruments, instruments to be used in the temple, etc. In the Book of Mormon, the word *instrument* is used thirteen times in the metaphorical sense—where people become instruments in the hands of the

1. Nelson, Russell M. “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” April 2021 General Conference.

Lord. This is how Alma the younger said it: “I know that which the Lord hath commanded me, and I glory in it. I do not glory of myself, but I glory in that which the Lord hath commanded me; yea, and this is my glory, that *perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God* to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy” (Alma 29:9, emphasis added).

Yes, *instrument* would be a good word for the acronym.

F aith How can I have **faith** to put God first and fast?
I nstrument
R
S
T

Have you ever been an “instrument in the hands of God?” Have you ever had a thought pop into your head to call someone? Or had a hunch to visit somebody? Or “bumped into” a person who miraculously needed your advice or help at that very moment? Have you ever had a feeling that someone was in trouble and you’d better check on them? Have you ever felt impressed to contribute to a specific charity or to a philanthropic endeavor or to a church’s humanitarian program? Or to a family member? Or even to a homeless person on the street?

Or maybe you have been the recipient of such a “divine intervention?” One of my favorite quotes is from President Spencer W. Kimball: “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs.”

This quote comes from a December 1974 article in the *Ensign* called “Small Acts of Service.” In the article, President Kimball wrapped his quote with thoughts that illuminate what he was trying to say. Here is the more complete quote:

God does nothing by chance, but always by design as a loving father... Surely such a loving Father in heaven, who gave commandments to prevent human misery, will not forget the needs of each of his children.

William Law observed: “It is said that the very hairs of your head are all numbered; is it not to teach us that nothing, not the smallest things imaginable, happen to us by chance? But if the smallest things we can conceive of are

declared to be under the divine direction, need we, or can we, be more plainly taught that the greatest things of life, such as the manner of our coming into the world, our parents, the time, and other circumstances of our birth and condition, are all according to the eternal purposes, direction, and appointment of divine Providence?”

God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs. Therefore, it is vital that we serve each other in the kingdom. The people of the Church need each other’s strength, support, and leadership in a community of believers as an enclave of disciples. In the Doctrine and Covenants we read about how important it is to “succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees” (D&C 81:5). So often, our acts of service consist of simple encouragement or of giving mundane help with mundane tasks, but what glorious consequences can flow from mundane acts and from small but deliberate deeds!²

How true! Many scriptures in the Book of Mormon depict instances in which missionaries were instruments to bring people to a knowledge of the Lord.



And yet, as President Kimball taught, God does “mundane” miracles daily using us as His miracle makers. There are many temporal ways for us to be instruments in His hands. Just think of the “instruments” He has used to solve some of the world’s most serious problems.

2. Kimball, Spencer W. “Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, December 1974.

Here are two examples with well-known acronyms: AA and MADD. In 1935 two recovering alcoholics, Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, were inspired to start Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) with its revolutionary twelve-step program. Six of the twelve steps refer to the need for a spiritual solution using such words as, “a spiritual connection,” “a power greater than ourselves,” “a Higher Power,” “God,” “the Almighty,” and “prayer.”³ How many millions of lives have been saved as a result?

Candice Lightner started Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) in 1980 to protest the death of her daughter, Cari, because of a drunk driver. According to the website, the campaign has prevented the deaths of over 330,000 people—and counting.⁴



In many ways, visible and invisible, people are “called” to participate in “divine interventions.” Often, the “nudging” we receive is not revealed until after the intervention is obvious.

In the eternities, I think we’ll be able to watch the replays of how millions of His instruments (sometimes without their awareness) were working behind the scenes to do His work.

3. “The Twelve Steps,” Alcoholics Anonymous. <https://www.aa.org/the-twelve-steps>

4. “MADD History” Mothers Against Drunk Driving. <https://madd.org/our-history/>

In the Doctrine and Covenants it clearly states, “Verily I say, men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward” (D&C 58:27).

Isn’t that another reminder for every one of us to be instruments in His hands? How do you and I become better instruments? Elder Jeffrey R. Holland suggested, “Prayers are answered, in great measure, most of the time, I think, by God using other people. Well, I pray that He’ll use us. I pray that we’ll be the answer to people’s prayers.”⁵

Yes, being a better instrument often starts with prayer. Sometimes our prayers start out as petitions—“please help me, please bless us, I need this, we need that”—as if God were some Santa Claus in the sky. We are often so self-absorbed, so me-centric—living in the eye of life’s hurricane—that it takes faith to surrender our own needs and pray that he’ll use us to be the answer to someone else’s prayer.

But that’s exactly what our Exemplar did. His prayers were always, “not my will, but thine be done” (Luke 22:42). Even as a teenager, the young Jesus said: “How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49)

So, that’s the pattern—although it’s not easy: to put God’s business FIRST. When we kneel to pray, our minds are often flooded with the items on our to-do list. The first item on our to-do list should be to ask, “Father, what is on *your* to-do list for me today? How can I be an answer to someone’s prayer? How can I be an instrument in your hands?”

As President Thomas S. Monson taught, “We are the Lord’s hands here upon the earth, with the mandate to serve and to lift His children. He is dependent upon each of us.”⁶ An amazing visual example was shared by Sam Lucero

5. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Neonatal Care in South America,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Nov 10, 2011, video. <https://philanthropies.churchofjesuschrist.org/humanitarian-services/news-features/neonatal-care/>

6. Monson, Thomas S. “What Have I Done for Someone Today?” *Ensign*, Nov 2009, 86.

in a 2013 article in *The Compass*—the official newspaper for the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay Wisconsin. Lucero writes,

One of the most memorable and symbolic images I’ve seen of Jesus Christ was a statue outside “Christ the King Church” in San Diego. I captured an image of that statue while working at the Southern Cross diocesan newspaper in 1986. The nearly life-size, plaster statue is not unlike other ones found at any church or Catholic cemetery—except for one glaring omission.

Around 1980, vandals damaged the statue, cutting off both hands. Rather than repair the statue, Jesuit Fr. Robert Fambrini, pastor at the time, placed a sign at the base to reflect the mission of the people of God. “I have no hands but yours.” The sign was later replaced by a permanent plaque. Fr. Fambrini told me that he received offers to pay for the statue’s repair, but he turned them down.⁷



In the next chapter, let’s discuss how we can be better instruments.

7. Lucero, Sam. “Immigrants and Open Arms,” *The Compass News Online*, Oct, 30 2013, <https://www.thecompassnews.org/2013/10/immigrants-open-arms/>

Chapter 5

Spiritual Math: The Ultimate Leverage

Have you ever felt that you aren't good enough—that you don't measure up? That others are better than you? Have you ever worried about what other people think of you? Or assumed that your weaknesses are obvious to others? Do you fear that if they ever looked behind your façade, they probably wouldn't like what they might see?

If so, you're not alone. That's the bad news. But here's the good news: There can be strength in weakness.

In fact, weak people are exactly the type of people the Lord loves to choose to help Him in His work.

The Lord said it Himself: "Wherefore, I call upon the weak things of the world, those who are unlearned and despised, to thresh the nations by the power of my Spirit" (D&C 35:13).

Notice how the prophets throughout history felt when God chose them:

Abraham: *"Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord."* (Gen. 18:27 NKJV)

Jacob: *"O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac... I am not worthy of the least of all th(y) mercies."* (Gen. 32:9–10)

Gideon: *"But Lord," Gideon replied, "how can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family!"* (Judg. 6: 15 NLT)

Amos: *“But Amos replied, ‘I’m not a professional prophet, and I was never trained to be one. I’m just a shepherd, and I take care of sycamore-fig trees.’”* (Amos 7:14 NLT)

Isaiah: *“Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”* (Isa. 6:5)

Jeremiah: *“O Sovereign LORD... I can’t speak for you! I’m too young!”* (Jer. 1:6 NLT)

Nephi: *“O wretched man that I am! Yea, my heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.”* (2 Nephi 4:17)

Alma the Elder: *“I am unworthy to glory of myself.”* (Mosiah 23:10–11)

Ammon: *“Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my strength I am weak.”* (Alma 26:11–12)

John the Baptist: *“I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal.”* (John 1:7 NLT)

Paul: *“O wretched man that I am!”* (Rom. 7:24); *“I am less than the least of all saints.”* (Eph. 3:8); *“I am nothing at all.”* (2 Cor. 12:11 NLT)



You might have noticed a glaring omission in the previous list of prophets: Moses—one of the greatest of all the Hebrew prophets. At the age of forty, Moses killed an Egyptian who was beating one of his fellow Hebrews.

He abandoned his privileged Egyptian lifestyle and spent the next forty years as a fugitive tending sheep in the desert. At the age of eighty, when he met God at the burning bush, Moses felt so unqualified that he turned down his prophetic calling. In fact, he turned it down *eight times*.

God said to Moses, “Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt” (Exod. 3:10 NLT).

Refusal 1: “*But Moses protested to God, ‘Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?’*” (Exod. 3:11 NLT)

Refusal 2: “*But Moses protested, ‘If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them?’*” (Exod. 3:13 NLT)

Refusal 3: “*But Moses protested again, ‘What if they won’t believe me or listen to me? What if they say, ‘The LORD never appeared to you?’*” (Exod. 4:1 NLT)

Refusal 4: “*But Moses pleaded with the LORD, ‘O Lord, I’m not very good with words. I never have been, and I’m not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled.’*” (Exod. 4:10 NLT)

Refusal 5: “*But Moses again pleaded, ‘Lord, please! Send anyone else.’*” (Exod. 4:13 NLT)

Refusal 6: “*Then Moses went back to the LORD and protested, ‘Why have you brought all this trouble on your own people, Lord? Why did you send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh as your spokesman, he has been even more brutal to your people. And you have done nothing to rescue them!’*” (Exod. 5:22–23 NLT)

Refusal 7: “*“But LORD!” Moses objected. ‘My own people won’t listen to me anymore. How can I expect Pharaoh to listen? I’m such a clumsy speaker!’*” (Exod. 6:12 NLT)

Refusal 8: “*But Moses argued with the Lord, saying, ‘I can’t do it! I’m such a clumsy speaker! Why should Pharaoh listen to me?’*” (Exod. 6:30 NLT)

Yes—Moses protested, objected, pleaded, and argued, but the Lord’s answer was clear: “Now go! *I will be with you* as you speak, and I will instruct you in what to say” (Exod. 4:12 NLT, emphasis added).

Through all of these refusals, the Lord knew a good candidate when He saw one. God knows spiritual math. He knew that when the weak Moses was multiplied by God Himself, the result would be historic.

What Is Spiritual Math?

To represent God, let's use a symbol that you've seen before: the infinity sign:

$$\infty$$

According to Oxford University Press, infinity stands for something that is "limitless or endless in space, extent, or size."¹ Infinity is impossible to measure or calculate. Nothing is bigger than infinity.

Infinity—that's a perfect description for God.

What number should we use to describe an ordinary human being? Let's use the simple number one.

$$1$$

Therefore, when you multiply the number one by infinity, the answer is infinity:

$$1 \times \infty = \infty$$

We know that Moses considered himself unworthy, less than a complete man, and a fraction of his real self. Let's say half a person:

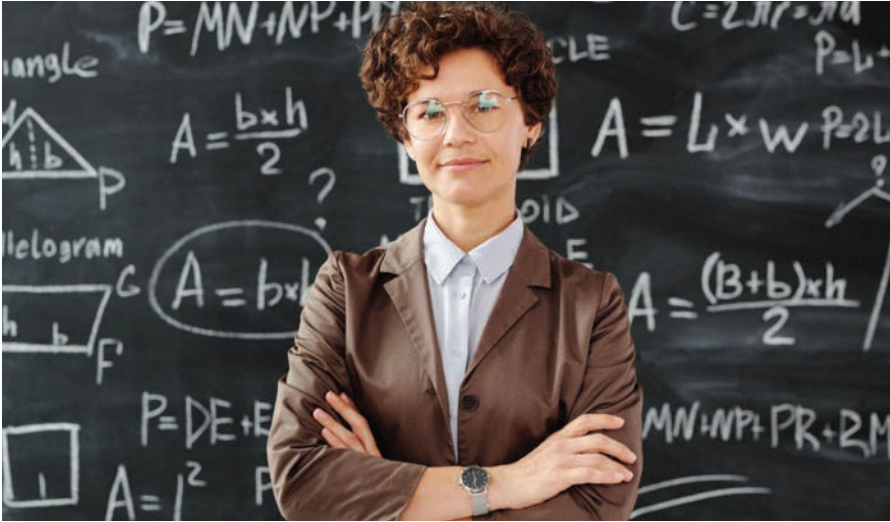
$$0.5$$

But when you multiply 0.5 by infinity—believe it or not—the answer is still infinity:

$$0.5 \times \infty = \infty$$

God was saying to Moses, "*Trust me.* Bring what little you've got, even if it's just a fraction. I'll bring the rest. Together, we can do this." And that's exactly what happened.

1. "Infinity" *The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English*, 8th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)



So, what does all this prophet talk have to do with you and me? We're not prophets. But spiritual math also applies to us. Even when we feel that we are weak and inadequate instruments, if God is with us, we have access to infinite power. When we multiply our paltry selves by infinity, the answer is always infinity.

$$.00000001 \times \infty = \infty$$

The “weak things of the world” are fully aware that they can't do it without God. That's why He chooses them.

In the Book of Mormon, Ammon declared, “Yea, I know that I am nothing: as to my strength I am weak; therefore I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God, for in his strength I can do all things” (Alma 26:12).

The Dark Side of Spiritual Math

But spiritual math has a dark side. As humans, when we start to achieve some measure of success, pride creeps in. We often begin to think that we're “bigger than our britches.” As Paul wrote, “For if a man thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (Gal. 6:3). He further reminded us,

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor. 1:26–29 NLT)

Have you ever known people who have worldly success and confidence but who don't put God first? Who feel they are too busy or too important to pay Him much attention? Who consider themselves rich and smart and powerful, but who don't acknowledge the Lord as the source of all their blessings?

The Lord told a parable about a fool whose barns were full but whose life was empty. He said, "So is he who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21 ESV). You likely already know the eventual end to that story—ultimately, those who think they are "something else" end up with nothing at all. Zero. Zilch.

\$ Billions × 0 = 0

That's why God doesn't often choose the richest, smartest, proudest people—because they think they don't need God.



I once heard a story about a preacher driving along a country road, passing field after field until he sees an unusually rich crop of billowing waves of ripe grain. He sees the farmer there, standing in his field, and approaches him. The preacher says, “That’s a fine crop that you and the Lord are growing there together.”

The crusty old farmer thinks on this a moment and says, “Well, you shoulda seen it when the Lord had it all by Himself.”

But the farmer was myopic. There is a bigger picture. Yes, he had worked hard—planted, weeded, fertilized, and harvested. But God had done the truly miraculous things. He had already created the seeds, the soil, the sun, and the seasons. God had done ninety-nine percent of the essential work. The farmer had only done one percent and assumed that he had done it all. Just wait till an early frost wipes out his crop—then we’ll see who’s really in charge.

As the Lord said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 NKJV).

I think that life is designed to drive us to our knees. We learn from our own experience that surrendering to His Way is always the best way. Through life, we learn to be more meek, more humble, more childlike. We bring to Him our broken hearts and contrite spirits. He can work with that.

Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit; and unto none else can the ends of the law be answered. (2 Nephi 2:7)

That’s what the atonement is about. We can’t earn our way into heaven. The price is too high. We offer up the best we can and “after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23)—even if our contribution is only 1/1,000,000th of what it takes to gain admission—Christ multiplies our tiny, minuscule attempt by the infinity of His atonement, and we enter in to become heirs of all that He has.

And as President Nelson said in October 2021 conference, “Nothing could be worth more than all our Father has!”²

2. Nelson, Russell M. “Pure Truth, Pure Doctrine, and Pure Revelation.” October 2021 General Conference.

I'll end our discussion about spiritual math by sharing Psalm 103 from the New Living Translation:

*The Lord is like a father to his children,
tender and compassionate to those who fear him.*

*For he knows how weak we are;
he remembers we are only dust.*

*Our days on earth are like grass;
like wildflowers, we bloom and die.*

*The wind blows, and we are gone—
as though we had never been here.*

*But the love of the Lord remains forever
with those who fear him.*

*His salvation extends to the children's children
of those who are faithful to his covenant,
of those who obey his commandments! (13–17)*

As instruments, we sometimes think of ourselves as incapable to help with the work. After all, we are nothing but dust.

But dust times infinity is more than enough!

Next, let's consider what might be an excellent choice for the third letter in the FIRST acronym.

Chapter 6

The Second Most Important Word in the Dictionary

What about the third word in the FIRST acronym? There are so many important words that begin with the letter *r*, such as **R**edeemer, **R**ejoice, **R**epent, **R**estoration, and **R**esurrection. But Spencer W. Kimball once said that **Remember** *could be* the most important word in the dictionary. So, if a Prophet said it, perhaps it would be a good candidate for our third word.

F aith How can I have **faith** to put God first and fast?
I nstrument How can I be a better **instrument** in God's hands?
R emember
S
T

President Kimball explained,

Because all of you have made covenants—you know what to do and you know how to do it—our greatest need is to remember. That is why everyone goes to sacrament meeting every Sabbath day—to take the sacrament and listen to the priests pray that they “may always remember him and keep his commandments which he has given them”... “Remember” is the word. “Remember” is the program.¹

1. Nyman, Monte S. and Charles D. Tate Jr. *The Book of Mormon: Helaman 3 Through 3 Nephi 8* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992) 243.

In the third edition of the *Merriam-Webster International Unabridged Dictionary*, there are 476,000 entries. How could the word *remember* be the most important word? Aren't there more important words? *Oxygen? Food? Chocolate? Family? Jesus?*



Remember—it must be a very important word judging by how many times it's used in the scriptures—literally over five hundred times in the standard works:

Do not forget this! Keep it in mind!
Remember this, you guilty ones.
Remember the things I have done in the past.
For I alone am God!
I am God, and there is none like me.
Only I can tell you the future
before it even happens.
Everything I plan will come to pass,
for I do whatever I wish. (Isaiah 46:8–10 NLT)

Find the chapter in the scriptures with the highest concentration of the word *remember*. This occurs in chapter 5 of Helaman in the Book of Mormon.

Helaman had two sons, Nephi and Lehi. In the first fourteen verses of that chapter, he uses the word *remember* fifteen times in teaching his sons. Let's read a few verses:

*O **remember, remember**, my sons, the words which king Benjamin spake unto his people; yea, **remember** that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, who shall come; yea, **remember** that he cometh to redeem the world... And now, my sons, **remember, remember** [when a prophet uses two remembers back to back, that must be really important] that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. (5:9,12)*

Why do we constantly need to be reminded? Because, as one author wrote, “Our brains are forgetting machines. One moment we are totally clear on what we want, why we want it, and exactly how to get it, and the next moment we forget completely and slip back into our old unproductive routines and thought processes.”²

Our brains are like a sieve. The average adult forgets at least three things a day. According to scientific research, when we learn new information, we forget about fifty percent of it within twenty minutes. Within twenty-four hours, seventy percent of it is lost. And before the end of a month, only twenty percent is retained. Eighty percent just evaporates.³



2. Aaron Allen, Aaron and Robert G. Allen. *The Four Maps of Happy Successful People* (Better-Life Books, 2016).

3. Milkman, Katy. *How to Change: The Science of Getting from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* (London: Portfolio, 2021), 92.

Yes, we can learn how to put God first—we just keep forgetting it. Before we came to this planet, we observed this blue earthly jewel dangling in space, and we shouted for joy (Job 38:7). But when we arrived here, we forgot our time in Heaven. How can one forget something as magnificent as that? But we did.

A veil of forgetfulness dropped over our minds, and it is still inflicting us. We sometimes think of the “veil” in the past tense—as an event that took place upon our birth. But perhaps the veil of forgetfulness is part of the ongoing human condition. We’re human—therefore, we just keep forgetting. Our brains are forgetting machines. It’s not only because we’re aging. We humans are constantly forgetting (or being encouraged to forget) even the most important lessons delivered by the most important people.

The children of Israel observed the ten plagues in Egypt. They watched as the Lord led them out of slavery in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They experienced the parting of the Red Sea. They were miraculously fed with manna in the wilderness. They were eyewitnesses to the fiery presence of the Lord on the summit of Mount Sinai. They heard His voice. Yet, they were constantly forgetting.

The Book of Mormon is the saga of peoples who cycled through periods of remembering and forgetting—from righteousness to wickedness and back again. They were human. That’s just the human condition.



It's our ongoing veil of forgetfulness. But we can't just blame it on our forgetful minds. We also have an enemy whose sole purpose is to thwart God's plan—to cause us to forget that we're on the covenant path to immortality and eternal life. He's a world-class expert at it with lots of tricks up his sleeve.

Have you ever wondered about those *weak* Israelites or those *foolish* Lamanites or those *hardheaded* Jews at the time of Christ? All of them witnessed amazing signs and wonders and miracles. How could they forget?

And yet, these vicious cycles of forgetfulness happen to us even up to this very day. We often forget that Satan is the greatest deceiver in history. He is a master at making us forget that he even exists. He and his angels don't sleep. They've been doing this for thousands of years. And they use these same age-old tactics against you and me nonstop, twenty-four hours a day. He understands our porous minds and uses this human frailty against us.



As President Russell M. Nelson cautioned, “With frightening speed, a testimony that is not nourished daily ‘by the good word of God’ can crumble. Thus the antidote to Satan’s scheme is clear: we need daily experiences worshipping the Lord and studying His gospel. I plead with you to let God prevail in your life. Give Him a fair share of your time.”⁴

4. Nelson, Russell M. “The Power of Spiritual Momentum,” April 2022 General Conference.

Yes, daily nourishment with the good word of God is a powerful antidote. Just how powerful? Here is a wonderful reminder of the power of the scriptures from the apostle Peter:

*For we were not making up clever stories when we told you about the powerful coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw his majestic splendor with our own eyes when he received honor and glory from God the Father. The voice from the majestic glory of God said to him, “This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy.” We ourselves heard that voice from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain. Because of that experience, we have even greater confidence in the message proclaimed by the prophets. **You must pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a lamp shining in a dark place**—until the Day dawns, and Christ the Morning Star shines in your hearts. (2 Peter 4:16–19 NLT, emphasis added)*

Yes, studying the words of the prophets every day is like a lamp shining in a dark place. It’s almost impossible to fall away when you’re intently studying the Word of God *every single day*. There is a shield of protection that envelopes you, and the wily temptations and cunning snares and fiery darts literally *can’t* pierce it. Satan’s mighty whirlwinds and hail and mighty storms “shall have no power over you” (Helaman 5:12).

Based on the same scripture from Helaman, President Eyring named his October 2007 Conference Talk “Remember, Remember”:

*There is a simple cure for the terrible malady of forgetting God, His blessings, and His messages to us... The key to the **remembering** that brings and maintains testimony is receiving the Holy Ghost as a companion. It is the Holy Ghost who helps us see what God has done for us. It is the Holy Ghost who can help those we serve to see what God has done for them... It is the Holy Ghost who testifies that Jesus Christ is the Beloved Son of a Heavenly Father who loves us and wants us to have eternal life with Him in families... We come to see the hand of God more clearly, so clearly that in time we not only **remember** Him, but we come to love Him and, through the power of the Atonement, become more like Him.*

In addition, we are reminded to **remember** weekly when we go to church. It’s an exciting and mysterious and dangerous world we live in. So, we come out of the world to attend our meetings every week—to be reminded. We members go again to re-member. To re-fresh our membership. To re-up, re-commit, and re-promise.

Picture streams of Christians flowing to chapels and churches worldwide—trying to be better and trying to remember. We flow out of the darkness of the world into concentrated pools of spiritual light. Imagined from a satellite high above the earth, these thousands of gathered groups shine like bright lights in the darkness of the world. And contributing to this spiritual light are the concentrations of angels hovering nearby.



Angels? Well, if we all have guardian angels then don't they come along with us to church? Our spiritual light and their spiritual light combine. It's a light you can actually feel.

Why go to church every week? Aren't there better things to do on a Sunday? Can't we connect with God in nature? On the beach? On a walk in a forest? Why go to a man-made building with uncomfortable pews? Is there any other way?

There is a story of a spiritual leader who visited a member of his flock who hadn't stepped foot in church for a while. The missing member said, "I believe I can be just as good a Christian outside the church as I can be inside it." The leader didn't answer with words. He simply went to the hearth where there was a burning fire and used a poker to pull a hot coal out of the center of the fire and drag it out to the edge of the hearth. They both watched in silence as the ember slowly went cold and black. And then, without saying a word,

the leader simply pushed the single coal back into the fire, where it quickly lit back up again. The man who had been absent from church now understood and nodded.

Nope. There is no better way. True Christians have been gathering around spiritual fires on the first day of the week since the resurrection of the Savior. It's just what Christians do.

Since we so easily forget, we need to be re-fired again and again—until we finally “get it.” Until we finally *can't* forget it.

Yes, President Kimball once remarked that the word *remember* could be the most important word in the dictionary. But I think he would agree that *remember* is really the second most important word in the dictionary. The most important word is the name of the most important person who has ever lived in the history of the entire universe. Yes, His name is the most important word in any dictionary.

Jesus!

Within twenty-four hours you'll probably forget reading this message. Within a few days, I'll probably forget having written it. But let's make sure we don't forget Him. “O remember, remember that these things are true; for the Lord God hath spoken it” (Mosiah 2:41).

This is my prayer for you and your family and for me and my family.

F aith	How can I have faith to put God first and fast?
I nstrument	How can I be a better instrument in God's hands?
R emember	How can I always remember Him?
S	
T	

Please read on so we can discuss the fourth letter in the FIRST acronym.

Chapter 7

Seeking to Be “Broken”

What about the fourth word? There are so many important words that begin with the letter *s*: Sabbath, Sacrament, Sacrifice, Saint, Savior, Spirit, Success, and Surrender.

What? Surrender?

To surrender seems to go against our very nature. To surrender in battle is to admit defeat—to be a loser. It is an admission of failure. Almost all the words in the thesaurus under the word *surrender* are negative: abandon, capitulate, cede, give in, hand over, quit, relinquish, renounce, submit, succumb, yield, fold, cave in, cry uncle, eat crow, eat humble pie, pack it in, put up a white flag, roll over, throw in the towel.¹

When you think of the word *surrender* the inspiring words of the great leader Sir Winston Churchill come to mind: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”²

To a positive person, it is anathema to think of giving up or throwing in the towel. Hmm—is there more to this word, *surrender*?

1. “Surrender: Synonyms and Antonyms” CWSL, <https://cws1.ca/surrender/>

2. Churchill, Winston. “Never Give In, Never, Never, Never.” National Churchill Museum. Oct 29, 1941. <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/never-give-in-never-never-never.html>

Surrender, when used in the worldly way, is a weak word. Surrender is forced upon us by a stronger foe. It's involuntary. We throw down our weapons and capitulate. We admit defeat. We lose face. We are shamed into submission. But when used in the spiritual sense, surrender is, paradoxically, a word of power. It is voluntary. We agree to give in. Let's look at the Churchill quote again.

Churchill's quote is memorable because he uses the word *never* eight times. We tend to remember his message to "never give in." But we tend to overlook that there is a time when surrender is not only a good idea but smart—even honorable: "Never give in except to convictions of honour and good sense."

In this case, the word *surrender* is a strong word, because it requires courage and strength to voluntarily give in—to submit—when honor and good sense are at stake.

So how do we apply this to our own lives?



We start off in life depending upon others for our every need. We're totally dependent. As we grow older, we want our independence—our way. We begin to experiment with our free will. With freedom often comes irresponsibility. We push the boundaries. We learn the consequences of having things our way. Chaos generally ensues. As Elton Trueblood says in his book *A Place to Stand*, "Just as all empty freedom inevitably turns into bondage, so the

acceptance of Christ's yoke sets men free. It does not eliminate burdens, but because the yoke fits, the burdens actually seem light."³

Then, we finally "get our act together." At least, most of us do. We learn to organize the chaos. We decide what to do. We learn what not to do. We realize that organization is a good thing. We put order to the chaos. It takes all our time and effort to discipline the mess so that things get done. We fall into patterns, routines, and rituals.

A "normal" day takes on a new meaning. We get up at a certain time. We have breakfast, lunch, and dinner on a consistent schedule. We start to gain some measure of normalcy—of responsibility. We become educated. We decide on a career. We find friends and form families. We bring money in the door. We pay our bills. We impose order on our personal universe. We finally figure out, "Oh, this is how life works. This is how I make sense of life. Life is good."

Sometimes it takes decades to finally achieve some measure of control over our lives. It just feels good to gain some stability in a topsy-turvy existence.

Phew. Finally!

During this phase of life, we learn the skills of control—and there are a *lot* of them.

- What do I want? → clarify, prioritize, envision
- When do I want it? → schedule
- Who can help me get it? → manage, delegate
- How much do I want? → calculate
- Where do I want it? → strategize
- Why do I want it? → consider intention, find a purpose
- How will I get it? → plan, organize, actualize

It takes *work* to pull all the pieces together and hold them in place long enough to generate a meaningful result—to get things done. Most of us are stuck in this control phase of life.

3. Trueblood, Elton. *A Place to Stand: A Practical Guide to Christianity in Changing Times* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014) 103.

And then, a disaster happens. Or a sudden storm. Or a hurricane. Or a pandemic. Or an accident. Or an illness. Or a failed relationship. Or an avalanche. A challenge arises to upset the apple cart—to stir things up. We set about re-organizing the chaos. We assemble teams and delegate tasks: “You clean up over there. I’ll sweep up over here.”

After this happens a time or two (or ten), we finally begin to realize that we’re not in control after all... We’ve never really been in total control. It was an illusion—like the farmer story I mentioned in chapter 5.

The farmer organizes the farm to grow a crop. It takes hard work to till, plant, fertilize, and harvest. The farmer assumes they are in control. Yet, *nothing* would have grown without the seed, the soil, the sun, and the seasons. We “control” maybe one percent of the process. God controls the other ninety-nine percent. He gives us the freedom—the illusion—to control our tiny share for a short period of time. But the longer we live, eventually we realize how little we know and how little is actually under our control.

The Paradox of Knowledge

Many scholars and authors throughout time have written about the paradox of knowledge, or the idea that the more we learn, the more we realize we don’t know.⁴ When we learn anything new, it is as if the newfound knowledge in our brain is the size of a pea. Everything we know about the subject fits into the size of pea. Everything we don’t know about this subject is outside the pea. The circumference of the pea comes in contact with everything we don’t know—which doesn’t seem like much. We are pea-brained.

We keep learning. We acquire new knowledge, read more books, do more research to fill up our brains with more knowledge until it becomes the size of a metaphorical lemon. Everything we know fits into the lemon. Everything we don’t know is outside the lemon. The circumference of the lemon comes in contact with even more things we don’t know.

4. This idea has often been attributed to Aristotle and Albert Einstein, but it has likely been around even longer, and the exact origins of this paradox are unclear.



So, we study, learn, and add to our knowledge. The amount of our knowledge grows until it now fits into the size of an orange, then a grapefruit, then a melon. The more we know, the more the circumference of our knowledge encounters a larger number of things we had no idea even existed. That's why pea-brained teenagers act as if they know it all. Since they haven't experienced much, they don't yet know how limited their knowledge really is.

And that's the paradox. As our knowledge increases, so does the awareness of our ignorance. There is just too much to know. Like teenagers growing into adulthood, we finally realize that our Eternal Parents were not so dumb after all. We learn to surrender to the Being who knows it all—knows everything past, present, and future. Finally, it just makes “honour and good sense” to voluntarily surrender our will to His.

Surrender

It takes us a lifetime to learn, to gain, to acquire, to assemble, to organize, to grow our net worth, and to build our will. It takes courage to surrender our will to God's will. It takes everything we have to *give up* everything we have—to give up our way, our plans, our desires, our abilities, our wealth, our hobbies, our pet projects, our pride, our reputation, ourselves, our everything... until we realize that we wouldn't have anything to call “ours” if it hadn't been given to us by God

in the first place. Every breath we take is lent to us. Even our bodies, made from the dust of the earth, belong to Him who created us (Mosiah 2:21, 25).

We “live and move and do according to our own will,” until we run into obstacles that drive us to our knees. We become broken, contrite. We surrender. Now, He has something He can work with!

The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. (Psalms 34:18)

The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart. (Psalms 51:17 HBSC)

My hands have made both heaven and earth; they and everything in them are mine. I, the LORD, have spoken! “I will bless those who have humble and contrite hearts, who tremble at my word. (Isa. 66:2 NLT)

And ye shall offer for a sacrifice unto me a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost. (3 Nephi 9:20)



To be human is to be broken in the wrong way. We're prideful, egotistical, myopic, blind, forgetful, selfish. And yet, God loves us anyway. We're His pea-brained teenagers who eventually acknowledge our ignorance and brokenness and surrender to His Way. Apart from Him, we remain broken—unfixable, unhealable. He heals our human brokenness—he makes us whole in Him. He shows

us how to be broken in the right way. We voluntarily offer Him a broken heart and contrite spirit, and He shows us how to be an instrument He can use. He always uses the weak things of the world—His broken people—to do His will.

We don't surrender just because we're beaten. We surrender because it makes extraordinary "good sense" to do things His way. After all, He is Omni in every sense. He knows the best way for each of us, individually. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Your Father knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!" (Matt. 6:8 NLT).

As Elder Gerrit W. Gong has said, "Left on our own, we may not know our own good. When 'I choose me,' I am also choosing my own limitations, weaknesses, inadequacies... We become our truest, best selves only as we put off the natural man or woman and become a child before God."⁵

Ultimately, we learn that God's Way is the fastest, least expensive, least painful, most joyful way. The scriptures say that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. His Way is the better way. In the long run, there is no other Way.

Neal A. Maxwell explains, "Hence, in submitting knowingly and meekly to this plan, we cannot say to the Lord that we are willing to surrender but only on our terms. There are no conditions in unconditional surrender!"

Thus, we learn to lay everything on His altar, to meekly sacrifice our lives, if necessary. Why does it take so long for us to figure this out? If surrendering with a broken heart is the goal, we should be seeking it—seeking to be broken. King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon shows us, in brilliant clarity, how to do this:

*For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he **yields** to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, and **putteth off** the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and **becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit** to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth **submit** to his father.* (Mosiah 3:19, emphasis added)

C.S. Lewis expands on the idea of surrender in *Mere Christianity*:

*Christ says, "Give me **all**. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your*

5. Gong, Gerrit W. "All Things For Our Good," April 2024 General Conference.

*natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down... Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.*⁶

Finally, Henry B. Eyring sums it up in his April 2022 General Conference talk, “Steady In the Storms”:

[W]e must become as a child—a little child... I have come to know some of what King Benjamin meant when he said that we could become like a little child before God. I have learned from many experiences that the Holy Ghost speaks most often in a quiet voice, heard most easily when one's heart is meek and submissive, like that of a child. In fact, the prayer that works is... “I want only what You want. Just tell me what that is. I'll do it.”

Yes, surrender is a good word for our acronym.

F aith	How can I have faith to put God first and fast?
I nstrument	How can I be a better instrument in God's hands?
R emember	How can I always remember Him?
S urrender	How can I surrender my will to His?
T	

What is your suggestion for our final word that starts with *t*? See you in the next chapter.

6. Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collier Books, 1960) 167.

Chapter 8

Thank You, Thank You, Thank You!

What about the fifth and final word of our simple acronym? There are so many important words that begin with the letter *t*: **T**eam, **T**each, **T**emple, **T**hank you, **T**ime, **T**ithing, **T**rilogy, **T**ruth.

Well, the “cat is out of the bag”—if you read the title of this chapter, *The t* phrase that stands out is “Thank you!”

F aith	How can I have faith to put God first and fast?
I nstrument	How can I be a better instrument in God’s hands?
R emember	How can I always remember Him?
S urrender	How can I surrender my will to His?
T hank you	

The popular writer Anne Lamott wrote a book that shares some interesting and humorous insights about prayer called *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. As the flap copy explains, “It is these three prayers—asking for assistance, appreciating the good we witness, and feeling awe at the world—that get us through the day and show us the way forward.”¹

However, I wonder if the order of her three essential prayers should be re-shuffled. Instead of “help, thanks, wow”—perhaps it should be “thanks, wow, help.” Here’s why.

1. Lamott, Anne. *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).

Our best prayers start with “thanks.” Thankfulness. Gratitude. Appreciation. Praise. Thanksgiving. We celebrate Thanksgiving in America on one day of the year. Yet, Amulek in the Book of Mormon encourages us to live in thanksgiving daily: “Worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, in spirit and in truth; and that ye live in *thanksgiving daily*, for the many mercies and blessings which he doth bestow upon you” (Alma 34:38, emphasis added).

Thanksgiving is not just a day in November but a daily, even hourly, minute-by-minute habit pattern. We can be awakened to the gift of habitual thanksgiving.

From this attitude of gratitude, our prayers then flow naturally into “wow.” Our Heavenly Father is so awesome—so Omni—in every way. Imagine—we’re in direct, personal communication with the most powerful, most knowledgeable, most loving, most amazing force in the entire universe.

Nothing and no one even comes close!

Imagine all that power and knowledge and space and creativity and time and love focused on one objective—our ultimate eternal life.

But wait, there’s more: He is our Father. We possess His spiritual DNA.

How awesome is that?

Have you seen those high-resolution images transmitted from NASA’s James Webb space telescope? Amazing! When you hold this image in your mind as you pray—when you imagine the billions of galaxies out to the farthest stretches of the universe—when you’re bathed in the awesomeness of our Father’s universe—what more can you think but *Wow*?

Upon the deathbed of Apple founder Steve Jobs in 2011, as his life was flickering out, he saw something. His sister reported this in her eulogy of Steve: “Steve’s final words, hours earlier, were monosyllables, repeated three times. Before embarking, he’d looked at his sister Patty, then for a long time at his children, then at his life’s partner, Laurene, and then over their shoulders past them. Steve’s final words were: ‘OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW.’”²

2. Simpson, Mona. “A Sister’s Eulogy for Steve Jobs,” *The New York Times*, Oct 30, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/30/opinion/mona-simpsons-eulogy-for-steve-jobs.html>

Fortunately, we don't need to wait until our final breath. We can experience "OH WOW" every day. From the WOW of the universe to the WOW of a sunrise. From the WOW of a flower to the WOW of a single breath. When you pause to ponder, the WOWs are everywhere.

In Moses chapter 1, we read how God took Moses on a personal tour of the universe: "I will show thee the workmanship of my hands" (1:4). Upon seeing the "Big Picture," the scripture reports that Moses "greatly marveled and wondered" (1:8).



Yes, Moses was *wowed*. And then he had an aha moment: "Now... I know that man is nothing" (1:10). From this place of awesomeness and nothingness, it's only a short distance to an even deeper sense of gratitude.

As with any prayer, it takes time to quiet the yammering mind and get into a prayerful place. Your mind races with your own projects, your own to-do list. Our thinking is often too "heady." It takes several minutes until one can quiet this rushing river of ideas and settle into reflection. It can often take five to ten minutes. Eventually, a change in your thinking happens. For me, the best way I can

describe it is that it sweeps over me like a *whoosh*. Then, your mind clears and expands. Your thinking goes “hearty.” You don’t just think, *Thank you*, but you feel it. You take deep breaths of it. Your heart flushes with warmth. You realize that you are present with Omnipresence. You are connected. This doesn’t happen with every prayer. Sometimes our thoughts don’t seem to go past the ceiling. Often we wonder, *Have I offended the Spirit somehow?* But when we persist, the flooding feeling of gratitude often comes—thanksgiving—thank-you-ness—oh wow-ness. Thank you, Father.

“Thank you, Jesus. Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow!”

Then, “thanks” and “wow” naturally evolve into “help.”

The meaning of the word *help* in Anne Lamott’s book is, “Please help me,” or, “Please help us.” And there certainly is a place for that. But when you are flooded with gratitude, you often feel less like supplicating and more like reciprocating. God is such a giver. He has already given us so much—even His own Son! Then how can we emulate that pattern? How can we give back? We naturally want to help—to repay Him in some way. How can we be of service in God’s grand design?

Now, it would seem that with all His resources, God certainly doesn’t need any help from “little ol’ us.” We’re just weak instruments. Our blades are dull. We’re out of tune. Father is aware of that. He understands spiritual math. What He really wants is our hearts.

That’s the sacrifice he’s looking for. “I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6 NLT).

So, with that attitude, we offer to help. We pray, “How can we help you to bring to pass ‘the immortality and eternal life of man’? I want to be on the team. Maybe I’ll just be a bench warmer. If I can’t be in the big game, let me play on the practice squad. Just let me help. Let me be an instrument.”

“Let me focus *first* on *your* business. And then, if you don’t mind, a little help with *my* business would be appreciated. Help me put some bread on my table. But not unless that’s what you want. First, you—then, me.”

King Benjamin reminds us, “And now, if God, who has created you, on whom you are dependent for your lives and for all that ye have and are, doth

grant unto you whatsoever ye ask that is right, in faith, believing that ye shall receive, O then, how ye ought to impart of the substance that ye have one to another” (Mosiah 4:21).



Yes, that’s one way we can help—we can impart of our substance. And what is our substance? Substance consists of our time, our love, our advice, our attention, our smile, our knowledge, our connections, our assistance, our prayers, our sustenance, and—yes—our material support. These are just a few of the ways we can wield our instruments.

That’s why the fifth word in the acronym can mean more than just “thanks.” Thanksgiving is more than an attitude. It is an action verb. We ask, “How can I thank you with more than just words and thoughts?”

The first action is simply to be *more aware* of our blessings, past, present, and future. We can look back and notice the unmistakable pattern of God’s hand in the details of our lives. We can look around us today and wonder, *What mini miracle is God fashioning out of the mundaneness of today?*

In a 1982 talk entitled “Gratitude and Thanksgiving,” Marion G. Romney said, “An ungrateful man is like a hog under a tree eating acorns, but never looking up to see where they come from.”³

3. Romney, Marion G. “Gratitude and Thanksgiving,” October 1982 General Conference.

We can look up more often and thank God for the “acorns” falling out of our sky: “Thank you, Father, for all these visible blessings and for the invisible blessings that are outside of my awareness.”

Perhaps we could start a gratitude journal like Oprah, who writes in a journal every night as part of her daily ritual: “Before bed, it’s my gratitude journal. I have volumes and volumes of journals I’ve filled over the years, listing whatever it is in that particular day that brought me pleasure or some sense of delight or happiness. It’s enhanced and lifted my life in a way I can’t even describe.”⁴



Perhaps we can practice gratitude in advance. As Mark Romero says, “Faith is being grateful for something before it shows up.” To exercise this kind of faith, we might say, “Thank you, Father, for the future blessings that I know are coming my way.”

In quoting Isaiah, Paul wrote, “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor 2:9).

FIRST. Yes, this one word—FIRST—reminds us to never put any other gods before Him.

4. Winfrey, Oprah. “Living Her Truth,” *Delta Sky Magazine*, March 2018.

F aith	How can I have faith to put God first and fast?
I nstrument	How can I be a better instrument in God's hands?
R emember	How can I always remember Him?
S urrender	How can I surrender my will to His?
T hank you	How can I show my thanks by giving more daily?

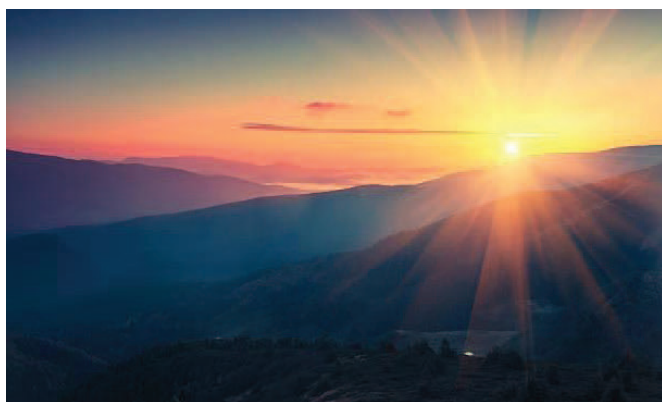
This is the complete acronym that can help us put Him first. But how can we live the FIRST life daily?

Chapter 9

Living a FIRST Life

An ordinary, average seventy-five-year life consists of about twenty-five thousand days. Yet, in the grand scheme of things, all these days can be boiled down into one single day—the day of this life:

*For behold, this life is the time for men to prepare to meet God; yea, behold the **day of this life** is the day for men to perform their labors... therefore, I beseech of you that ye do not procrastinate the day of your repentance until the end; for after **this day of life**, which is given us to prepare for eternity, behold, if we do not **improve our time while in this life**, then cometh the night of darkness wherein there can be no labor performed. (Alma 34:32, emphasis added)*



Even God operates on this daily pattern: “All is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men” (Alma 40:8).

The sun rises on an ordinary day. The sun sets at the end of that day. Just another day in the thousands of ordinary days. If all of life can be condensed into a single day, then wouldn't it be wise to design an ideal day and try to replicate that good day as many times as possible to "improve our time while in this life?"

If so, what would an ideal day look like? According to our acronym, it would be a day of **Faithing**, **Instrumenting**, **Remembering**, **Surrendering**, and **Thanksgiving**.

A FIRST day is one in which our every resource—our time, our talents, and the treasures with which the Lord has blessed us—are focused on helping God create a better world—including our individual worlds. As William Law stated, "If you have not chosen the kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead."

Time

As soon as your eyes open at the beginning of the day, your time clock starts to tick. It's Ritual Time. It's a time to exercise at least three areas of your individual life: your spirit, your mind, and your body.

Exercise Your Spirit

When it comes to your time, try to be a FIRST giver. Give the first of your day to Him. "Thou shalt have no other Gods *before* me" (Exodus 20:3, emphasis added). Spend time to be with God. Enter his Presence in awe. Seek proximity to the Creator of the Universe.

You may have heard this quote from Jim Rohn before: "You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with." Wouldn't it be wise to include God in that short list? It will improve your average. ☺ Take time for God's words first—study and ponder the scriptures. Once your heart is thusly softened, pray and try to be open to impressions. Then, you have the rest of the day to give to yourself, your family, and the world.

Exercise Your Mind

Your brain was designed to predict the future. So, plan out your future. What do you want in five years, ten years, or one hundred years from now? What does God want you to want? Are you in alignment? Planning is the way to stretch your mind into the future and to reverse engineer the tasks that will lead you to that vision.

As Eisenhower said, “Plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.”¹ Planning is how you exercise your mind—by clarifying and prioritizing and envisioning and anticipating and organizing and scheduling and preparing to start doing. Do this FIRST, and you’ll go a long way in improving your time.

Exercise Your Body

Is there a person on the planet who does not recognize the importance of regular physical exercise? Add to this the importance of proper nutrition and sleep. If your body is a temple, take care of it FIRST. ’Nuff said.



When one exercises, there is a sense of resilience that builds inside us to prepare us to meet the challenges of the coming day.

1. Nixon, Richard. *Six Crises* (Ishi Press, 1962).

As Stephen Covey taught, success can be organized into seven daily Habits. Some of these habits are focused on achieving a “daily private victory.” Then, when we are prepared, we step out into the world to achieve our “daily public victories.”

In an online blog, Covey shared his personal daily regimen:

I make an effort every morning to win what I call the “private victory.” I work out on a stationary bike while I am studying the scriptures for at least thirty minutes. Then I swim in a home pool vigorously for fifteen minutes, then I do yoga in a shallow part of the pool for fifteen minutes. Then I go into my library and pray with a listening spirit, listening primarily to my conscience while I visualize the rest of my entire day, including important professional activities and key relationships with my loved ones, working associates, and clients. I see myself living by correct principles and accomplishing worthy purposes. One of my favorite quotes is, “The greatest battles of life are fought out every day in the silent chambers of one’s own soul.” (David O. McKay) Much of this listening and visualizing work is very challenging, so I win the private victory when I have made my mind up and commit to live by correct principles and to serve worthy purposes... I believe that the habit of constant reading of good books and scholarly periodicals and magazines in many disciplines is vital to give a larger perspective and to constantly sense the interdependent nature of life. I probably average two hours per day reading.²

Talent

After the daily private victory comes the daily public victory, where we exercise our talents. Talent is a gift from God. How we share our talent is our gift back to Him. Just like a symphony, there are different instruments. What instrument were you destined to play in the symphony of life?

Playing your instrument is one way to fulfill your purpose. People often ask themselves, “What is my purpose in life?” Have you read any of those life-after-life books? There have been plenty of books on near-death experiences since Raymond Moody’s jaw-dropper *Life After Life* in 1975. Those who’ve died and visited the next world often come back with profound lessons they learned during their brief visit to the spirit world. They say life is all

2. Babauta, Leo. “Exclusive Interview: Stephen Covey on His Morning Routine, Blogs, Technology, GTD and ‘The Secret’” *Zen Habits*. <https://zenhabits.net/exclusive-interview-stephen-covey-on-his-morning-routine-blogs-technology-gtd-and-the-secret/>

about love and growth. The unspoken questions on the other side are, “Did you learn how to love? Did you learn to grow? Did you learn to improve your time while alive?” That’s the primary purpose of life: to love and to grow. If we’re not doing that, we haven’t learned enough yet.



Part of fulfilling that purpose is learning how to love the world using your unique gifts—to love people using your time, your talents and the treasures that you’ve been given. There are needs to be fulfilled, people to feed, love to be shared, money to be made, and problems to be solved. Each of us determines which need we are most perfectly attuned to fulfill.

If you’re living “on purpose” you are excited to exercise your talents FIRST because that is where you shine the best.

If you’re good with numbers, you might become an accountant or bookkeeper. If you’re good at listening, you might become a counselor. If you’re good with money, you could become an investor and/or financial advisor. Some of us teach. Some of us cook, play, lead, or any other number of vital roles in life. What do you do with the gifts God has given you?

God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen. (1 Peter 4:10–11 NLT)



Learn to love the world using your unique way of loving. If you sing, love people with songs. If you write, love people with words. If you speak, move people with messages. If you design, delight people with creations. If you're an entrepreneur, love your customers with solutions to their problems. Love what you do. Then, do it with love. And keep getting better at it. Improve. Expand. Grow. Keep loving and keep learning until the lights go out.

Treasures

When you share your gifts, sometimes people will pay you for your talents. I recommend that you contribute the first dollars you receive back to the world. Just like giving your first hour to the Lord, give your first dollar to His children. This is called FIRST giving.

Most of us are last givers. After we have bought all the toys we want—all the cars and houses and clothes and watches and jewelry and travel—if there is any money left over, we'd tithe from that.

I'm going to encourage you to be a FIRST giver. Don't spend a dime on yourself until you've given away the first ten percent (or more) of your income. Find someone who needs it more than you do. Find a church, a cause, a

charity, a philanthropy, an organization, or an individual. Be their champion. Give your love, your support, your advice, and your financial help. Be a FIRST giver. And notice how it makes you feel.



You may have seen the “big rocks” object lesson at some point in your life. It goes like this: if you fill your time (or your jar) with smaller priorities (pebbles and sand) first, you won’t have room for your biggest priorities (rocks). But if you put the rocks in your jar first, the pebbles and sand will fill in the spaces around your rocks. If you don’t put the big rocks in the jar first, you can’t get them in. Similarly, if you don’t give first, there isn’t enough left for you to give. But when you give first, you’ll usually be amazed to find that there’s plenty left to go around. So, cross it off your list. Get it done FIRST.³

There isn’t space enough in this book to cover all the lessons that can be learned from living a FIRST life. Try this experiment. Become a FIRST giver. Give the FIRST of your time. Give the FIRST of your talents. Give the FIRST of your treasures. It’s enlightening to give the “firstfruits of your crops and the firstlings of your flocks” (Neh. 10:35–36). Just do it. And notice what happens.

I hope these thoughts have been useful to you. Pick out the gold nuggets, if any, and chuck the rest.

3. Covey, Stephen R. *First Things First*. (New York: Free Press, 1996)

One Final Thought

If all our days can be summarized into a single day, then all of our breaths can be reduced to a single breath. As life begins, we take our first breath. As our life concludes, we take our final breath. Every day, we breathe in and we breathe out twenty-two thousand times per day. In an average year, that's about eight million breaths. In an average seventy-five-year lifespan, that's about six hundred million breaths.

We inspire, and then we expire.

One day, our life on this planet will end with a final breath. It is my hope for your family and mine, that on that day—as we breathe our final breath—we'll say, like Steve Jobs, “Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.”

And when we meet our Savior, we'll be able to say, “Lord, every day including this, my last day—I put thee FIRST.”

I hope you enjoyed reading this book. If you'd like to connect, please email me at connect@robertallen.com. I'd love to hear from you!

