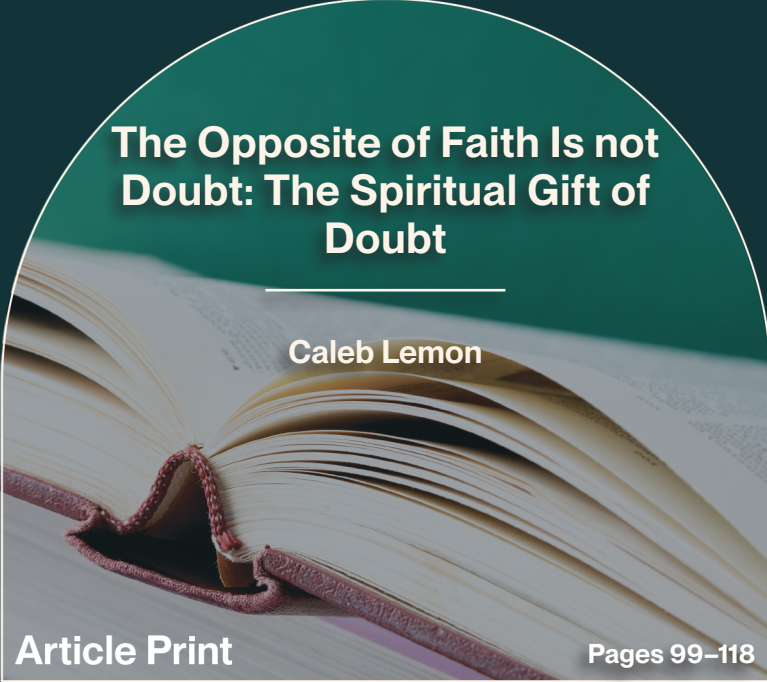


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**The Opposite of Faith Is not
Doubt: The Spiritual Gift of
Doubt**

Caleb Lemon

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The Opposite of Faith Is not Doubt: The Spiritual Gift of Doubt

Caleb Lemon

Abstract: *Doubt is not the opposite of faith but functions as a constructive spiritual gift that often facilitates faith development, protects against dogmatism, and reframes faith as relational fidelity rather than intellectual certainty. Drawing on scriptural theology and developmental perspectives on meaning-making, doubt commonly—though not universally—serves as a catalyst through which belief matures from inherited assumption to reflective commitment and ultimately toward greater openness, complexity, and compassion. Doubt also performs a vital epistemic role by preventing rigid certainty and fostering intellectual humility within religious life. By reconceptualizing faith as sustained trust and commitment in the presence of uncertainty, doubt distinguishes itself from nihilism. The true erosion of faith occurs not through questioning but through the loss of meaning itself. Ultimately, doubt, when properly understood, does not weaken discipleship but frequently deepens and refines it, enabling believers to engage faith with greater resilience, relational depth, and moral maturity.*

The Lord has prepared many gifts for his children, not only for the next life, but for this one as well. Regarding the gifts that his children receive that relate to faith, the Lord has said that “some [are given the gift of the] Holy Ghost to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he was crucified for the sins of the world.” Others are “given [the gift to] believe on their words, that they also might have eternal life if they continue faithful” (Doctrine and Covenants 46:13–14). An example of the first, the gift to know that Jesus Christ is the Son of the God, may be the stripling warriors who proclaimed to their mothers,

“we do not doubt” (Alma 56:48). An example of the second, the gift to believe on the words of others, may be Alma’s followers and Alma himself. God praised and blessed Alma “because of [his] exceeding faith in the words alone of [the] servant Abinadi” (Mosiah 26:15). Similarly, God’s praise and blessings extended to those who were baptized in the Waters of Mormon “because of their exceeding faith in the words alone which [Alma] hast spoken unto them” (Mosiah 26:15).

These examples, among many that could be cited, represent the separation of two distinct spiritual gifts that God has allocated for the benefit of those living in mortality. Is one of these two gifts superior to the other? Are those who are endowed with the gift to know better off or more spiritually prepared in the latter days than those with the gift to believe? Not necessarily. In fact, Jesus, foreseeing this potential confusion, suggested exactly the opposite to his newly commissioned disciples in America:

Blessed are ye if ye shall believe in me. . . . And, again, *more blessed* are they who shall believe in your words because that ye shall testify that ye have seen me, and that ye know that I am. Yea, *blessed* are they who shall believe in your words, and come down into the depths of humility and be baptized, for they shall be visited with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and shall receive a remission of their sins. (3 Nephi 12:1–2; see also John 20:29)

Some Latter-day Saints are given the gift of knowledge, but many others are given the gift of belief (often on the words of others). To know is not better than to believe and to believe is not better than to know. Both gifts are truly blessed. But without the certainty of knowing, it can be hard to believe. It can be difficult to believe the words of a prophet, the Book of Mormon, or the existence of a Father in Heaven. Doubt easily creeps in.

The reality of mortality is that many doubt when something appears too good to be true, and that may be a good thing. Doubt often provides safety in environments that could be disadvantageous or even dangerous.¹ When people exercise too little doubt in their lives, they can be too trusting and naïve, thereby becoming vulnerable to manipulation. Doubt, in these ways, inherently serves them. Without it, how

1. Andrew Moon, “The Nature of Doubt and a New Puzzle about Belief, Doubt, and Confidence,” *Synthese* 195 (2018): 1827–48, doi.org/10.1007/s11229-016-1310-y.

would they keep themselves out of financial scams, grow real love, or protect themselves from others?

The gift of knowing and the gift of believing the words of others have been discussed above. There may be a third gift related to faith: the gift of doubt. This third gift will be discussed further below, but, if doubt is truly a gift of God, how is it received? Why, when confronted with doubt in religion, do so many followers withdraw, do nothing, or further bury their heads in their beliefs, often ostracizing others (and themselves) in the process? Latter-day Saints seem stuck choosing among celebrating doubts, discouraging them, or (and often the most chosen route) avoiding the topic altogether. To have doubts about aspects of religion is normal—even, arguably, desirable for many. After all, "one of the purposes of the Church is to nurture and cultivate the seed of faith—even in the sometimes-sandy soil of doubt and uncertainty."²

Missionaries of the Church routinely encourage investigators to doubt traditional Christian beliefs. Examples include the vagueness of the Trinity and that God's revealed word stopped at the book of Revelation (which, ironically, was not the last book added to the Bible). An invitation to keep the law of tithing is, in part, an invitation to doubt that God "will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Malachi 3:10). A request to attend Church opens the door to doubting their previous beliefs and prior biases. Missionary work would likely halt completely if missionaries stopped asking others to doubt.

The Prophet Joseph Smith doubted the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the Methodists for being "equally zealous... endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others" (Joseph Smith — History 1:9). Even in earnest prayer before the First Vision, Joseph admits his anxieties and his doubts about his attempting to pray vocally. God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, appeared in a pillar of light shortly after the beginning of that prayer, first resolving the doubts of his prayer, and second, resolving the doubts about those congregations, instructing Joseph to join none of them (Joseph Smith — History 1:19). One could infer that the religion he founded was partially built by doubting others.

Some members and converts, blessed with the gift to know, don't require a wrestle with doubt to gain a witness of the Restoration, the

2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," *Ensign*, November 2013, 21, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/come-join-with-us.

Book of Mormon, or Jesus Christ. But many, blessed with the gift to believe, may. When doubt is viewed as a spiritual gift (like knowledge or belief) it becomes apparent that the opposite of faith is not doubt. Rather, the opposite is *nihilism* — the total loss of ultimate purpose and meaning behind joy and suffering. The purpose of this paper is to help the Saints recognize that doubt is a spiritual gift. When understood as such, this gift (1) becomes a catalyst in faith development, (2) prevents dogmatic thinking, and (3) clarifies faith as being a relationship. Latter-day Saints who begin to understand this view of the gift of doubt recognize that it is not faith’s true opposite, and as such, realize that they have more faith than they had thought.

Doubt as a Common Catalyst in Faith Development

For those blessed with the gift to know, faith may come with unusual clarity and assurance. But for those given the gift to believe, faith often unfolds through tension, reflection, and, at times, doubt. If doubt is not the opposite of faith but is, instead, part of the lived experience of belief, how does faith mature across a lifetime? Developmental theologian James Fowler offered a useful framework for considering that question. His “Stages of Faith” model does not define faith as doctrinal agreement but as the way individuals construct and reconstruct meaning throughout life. In this sense, faith development includes moments of questioning and reinterpretation. Fowler’s framework, therefore, does not serve here as the focus of analysis but as a conceptual lens through which to examine how doubt may be a common, but not universal, catalyst in faith development. The model consists of six stages, summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Fowler’s “Stages of Faith” model.

Stage of Faith	Definition	Example
Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith	Faith shaped by imagination, emotion, and influential figures	Forming beliefs about God through stories and family practices
Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith	Religious narratives understood in concrete and literal terms	Viewing scripture as strictly factual and rule-based
Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith	Beliefs shaped by community norms and authority figures	Accepting beliefs primarily because trusted leaders teach them

Stage of Faith	Definition	Example
Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith	Personally examined and critically evaluated beliefs	Reassessing doctrine through reflection and personal conviction
Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith	Acceptance of complexity, paradox, and symbolic meaning	Holding deep commitment while appreciating other traditions
Stage 6: Universalizing Faith	Radical compassion and commitment to justice for all people	A life devoted to service and reconciliation

Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective Faith is shaped primarily by imagination, emotion, and the examples of significant adults. People begin to form early images of God and faith through stories, symbols, and personal experiences rather than through logical reasoning.

The desire to know what is real and what is not can initiate Stage 2, Mythic-Literal Faith. At this stage, sacred narratives are interpreted concretely and literally. While most individuals move beyond this stage in adolescence, many adults continue to engage faith primarily in literal terms. The belief of biblical inerrancy or infallibility can exemplify this stage.

The recognition of contradiction, comparison of beliefs, and ultimately, reflection in general, all open the way to Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional Faith. Faith becomes closely tied to belonging and social affirmation. As Fowler noted, transition out of this stage often begins when contradictions arise within trusted authority structures or when individuals experience major life transitions that prompt personal responsibility for belief.

As a result, Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective Faith, may emerge. Here, beliefs are critically examined and claimed as one's own rather than merely inherited from community or tradition. Authority shifts from external sources to the self, and questioning becomes a constructive aspect of faith rather than a threat to it. Individuals begin to evaluate doctrine, practice, and meaning through reflection and personal responsibility.

Reflection can launch a person to Stage 5, Conjunctive Faith. Individuals here come to appreciate paradox, ambiguity, and complexity within religious life. Rather than seeking rigid certainty, they recognize the depth and multi-layered nature of spiritual truth.

Rarely, some individuals embody Stage 6, Universalizing Faith,

which is characterized by radical compassion and moral commitment extending beyond religious, cultural, and social boundaries.

Although Fowler associated certain stages with typical developmental periods, he did not claim they are strictly age-bound. As noted above, adults may remain within, return to, or predominantly operate from earlier structures of faith, particularly in communities where belief is strongly reinforced through shared authority, tradition, and belonging.

Each stage has its proper time of ascendancy. For persons in a given stage at the right time *for their lives*, the task is the full realization and integration of the strengths and graces of that stage rather than rushing on to the next stage. Each stage has the potential for wholeness, grace and integrity and for strengths sufficient for either life's blows or blessings.³

It is important to note that Fowler, a Christian himself, believed that a Christian faith “leads out toward [a] Universalizing faith.”⁴ This is because “the further one moves beyond a Synthetic-Conventional structuring of faith, the more likely one is to exhibit increased commitment in faith.”⁵ All of which says the following:

Discipleship to Christ, if radically followed to full maturity, would bring persons to a way of spending and being spent in their lives that would express loyalty to the rule of God and in covenant relations with a commonwealth of being.⁶

Few will reach Stage 6 in this mortal life. However, many may reach Stage 5—a mature faith shaped by sustained reflection and lived complexity. Such faith recognizes both the power and the limitations of conceptual certainty. Terryl and Fiona Givens similarly observe that spiritually robust belief is often marked by openness to truth wherever it may be found and to humility before the vastness of divine reality.

There is solace and kinship to be found in a shared discipleship faithful Latter-day Saints feel with a larger community of those who choose to love and follow God. The injunction to

3. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1981), 274, archive.org/details/stagesoffaithpsy00fowl/page/274/mode/2up.

4. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 295.

5. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 300–1.

6. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 295.

seek wisdom "out of the best books," along with the Lord's reproof that "because that ye have a Bible [and other scripture] ye need not suppose that it contains all my words," encourage a receptivity to the larger world of beauty and goodness and inspiration that God has cultivated.⁷

This conjunctive posture allows individuals to remain deeply committed to their own religious traditions while recognizing wisdom and meaning in others. Experiences of doubt within this developmental trajectory do not dissolve faith but frequently deepen it, teaching that certainty is not a prerequisite for meaningful discipleship.

Importantly, the movement toward reflective or conjunctive faith does not require the abandonment of belief, nor does it demand universal crisis. Some individuals transition into deeper faith without dramatic episodes of doubt (Stage 4). Yet for many, particularly those given the gift to believe rather than to know, moments of tension, contradiction, or uncertainty become the very catalysts through which faith is internalized and owned. Doubt, in these cases, does not destroy faith; it refines it.

Just how does doubt accomplish this? It appears that doubt of one stage, when it occurs, may function as a common, though not universal, instrument in the movement to a higher stage and, therefore, to the maturation of faith. When understood within a developmental framework, doubt appears less as rebellion and more as reconfiguration. It can be a restructuring of meaning that allows belief to move from inherited assumption to conscious commitment. The words of President Russell M. Nelson summarize well this section of the paper:

If you have questions — and I hope you do — seek answers with the fervent desire to believe. . . . In time, the Lord will answer all our questions. In the meantime, immerse yourself in the rich reservoir of revelation we have at our fingertips. I promise that doing so will strengthen your testimony, even if some of your questions are not yet answered. Your sincere questions, asked in faith, will *always* lead to greater faith and more knowledge.⁸

7. Terryl Givens and Fiona Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt: Reflections on the Quest for Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 99–100.

8. Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity" *YA Weekly*, 15 May 2022, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson). Emphasis in original.

The Gift of Doubt Prevents Dogma

Doubt also performs a critical epistemic function by safeguarding belief from rigid certainty and intellectual closure. It is in this capacity that doubt operates not as the enemy of faith but as a protection against dogmatism. Dogmatism is “the expression of an opinion or belief as if it were a fact,” or “a viewpoint or system of ideas based on insufficiently examined premises.”⁹

Dogmatism is, as psychologist William James wrote, “the mere outward form of inalterable certainty [that] is so precious to some minds . . . even where the facts most patently pronounce its folly.”¹⁰ In this state, “dogmatic dominion” can occur, manifested by laying down the “law in the form of an absolutely closed-in theoretic system.”¹¹ In Latter-day Saint discourse, dogmatism can appear on topics like the exclusivity of truth to the Church, the discouragement of questioning doctrine, and an overfocus on the notion that doubt is to be overcome only with faith, prayer, and obedience. In Fowler’s *Conjunctive Faith*, believers develop the capacity to live with paradox, ambiguity, and multiple perspectives. The presence of doubt does not dissolve commitment but instead protects faith from rigid certainty. In this way, doubt serves as a safeguard against dogmatism.

Fowler’s model also helps to explain why religious dogmatism often arises. In the Synthetic–Conventional Faith stage, beliefs are closely tied to community belonging and authority structures. Because identity and faith are intertwined, questioning can feel threatening rather than constructive. Doubt, therefore, may be needed in some contexts for movement beyond this stage. By introducing tension into closed interpretive systems, doubt may allow faith to move toward the reflective and self-aware posture that is characteristic of later developmental stages.

Assuming one has complete intellectual knowledge of things hinders the acquisition of more truth. When doubt leads individuals to question what James calls “closed-in theoretic systems,” intellectual humility and continuous learning and revision can follow. Doubt can expose “misbegotten premises,” “naïve assumptions,” and “outright

9. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “dogmatism,” [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogmatism](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogmatism).

10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; repr., New York: Modern Library, 1936), 326, archive.org/details/bwb_Y0-AAE-188/page/326/mode/2up.

11. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 330–31.

false doctrines.”¹² Doubt can also lessen unquestioning acceptance and “careless assumptions,” like the belief that modern prophets and Church leaders are incapable of imperfection. Doubt encourages Church members not to treat “every utterance of any leader as inspired doctrine,”¹³ which Joseph Smith himself recognized and even lamented:

To one of his friends, [Joseph Smith] complained that “he did not enjoy the right vouchsafed to every American citizen — that of free speech.” Smith added that “when he ventured to give his private opinion on any subject of importance, his words were often garbled and their meaning twisted, and then given out as the word of the Lord because they came from him.”¹⁴

The gift of doubt keeps us from believing that “surely God could find more saintly vessels to carry out his work . . . Surely the leaders of the Church should be the most righteous and flawless of humans!”¹⁵

A popular joke has more than a hint of truth to it that Catholics espouse papal infallibility, but no Catholic believes in it. Joseph Smith espoused prophetic fallibility, but no Mormon believes in it. Smith lamented before he was even dead, with his features marbleized and his flaws airbrushed by his followers, the cumbersome myth of his infallibility and ready access to unfiltered truth.¹⁶

Doubt helps Latter-day Saints remember that God “called weak vessels so we wouldn’t place our faith in their strength or power, but in God’s.”¹⁷

Givens explains that, if belief is approached as a choice of agency, a true choice, there must also be “grounds for doubt.” Having a “propensity to doubt” grants the “capacity to freely believe.” If the evidence for God were overwhelming, to the point there were no grounds for doubt, the choice to believe would become as “meaningless as would

12. Terryl Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 4 (2013): 131, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/letter-to-a-doubter.

13. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” 134.

14. Terryl L. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel: The Foundations of Mormon Thought—Cosmos, God, Humanity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19.

15. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 65.

16. Givens, *Wrestling the Angel*, 19.

17. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 70.

a loaded gun pointed at our heads.”¹⁸ He and his wife add that the moral act to believe requires that doubt remains a powerful and present possibility, validating the choice.

The call to faith, in this light, is not some test of a coy god, waiting to see if we “get it right.” It is only the summons, issued under the only conditions, which can allow us to fully reveal who we are, what we most love, and what we most devoutly desire. Without constraint, without any form of mental compulsion, the act of belief becomes the freest possible projection of what resides in our hearts. . . . The greatest act of self-revelation occurs when we *choose* what we will believe, in that space of freedom that exists between knowing that a thing is, and knowing that a thing is not.¹⁹

The gift of doubt compels the intellectual systems, society’s way of organizing, interpreting, and explaining reality, to maintain openness to new facts. Doubt challenges intellectual closure or finality, for if thinkers try to possess “unchangeable truth” they risk losing subsequent truths.²⁰

Belief and doubt are fluid, not inflexible. According to the Givenses, both believers and doubters “are continually adjusting their paradigms to make better sense of the world as they experience it.”²¹ For them, the ongoing process of “disillusion and readjustment” protects both from settling into a dogmatic state. Dogma demands intellectual certainty. The highest moral value doesn’t come from intellectual knowledge but rather from operating in the “grey area between conviction and incredulity.” It is in the absence of absolute certainty that an individual’s choices become the “purest reflection of who we are and what we love.”

The plea, “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief” (Mark 9:24) dramatically represents the coexistence, and tension, of faith (belief) and doubt (unbelief). It suggests that the presence of doubt does not necessarily negate belief. Rather, it exists alongside it. In fact, the process of becoming “converted” (which is a change in commitment) is the resolution of this internal divide. Prior to and during the struggle

18. Givens, “Letter to a Doubter,” 144.

19. Terry Givens and Fiona Givens, *The God who Weeps: How Mormonism Makes Sense of Life* (Provo: Ensign Peak, 2012), 5.

20. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

21. Givens and Givens, *The God who Weeps*, 8.

toward faith (conversion), elements of unbelief (doubt, self-despair, and a sense of sin) exist within the same consciousness as the ideal striving for truth.²²

Faith is often described as a state of assurance, characterized by peace and loss of worry. Having faith is generally intuitive and non-rational, which implies that the intellectual reasons for doubt (even evidence against belief) will persist.²³

Elder Uchtdorf's petition to "doubt your doubts before you doubt your faith" does not discourage the evaluation of doubts.²⁴ The continued coexistence of belief and uncertainty suggests that faith belongs not so much to the realm of proof, as to the realm of commitment. The question, then, is not how faith overcomes doubt but what kind of posture allows faith to persist in its presence.

Faith is Fidelity

The gift of doubt views faith as an alignment of one's heart and one's will. It is a "commitment [to] loyalty and truth."²⁵ In Hindu philosophy, the word *faith* carries a deeper meaning than just simple belief. Faith is expressed in the Sanskrit word, *śraddhā*, which is derived from *śrat* (meaning truth/heart) and *dhā* (meaning to place or hold). *Śraddhā*, literally means *to place one's heart in truth*.

To set one's heart on someone or something requires that one has "seen" or "sees the point of" that to which one is loyal. . . . One commits oneself to that which is . . . acknowledged, and lives loyally, with life and character being shaped by that commitment.²⁶

Faith really is acknowledgment of commitment. Often, believing carries "much the same range of meaning as that associated with 'to set the heart upon.'"²⁷

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to the Apostle Thomas, who had doubted the other disciples' account of a resurrected Savior, he instructed Thomas:

22. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

23. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

24. Uchtdorf, "Come Join with Us."

25. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 11.

26. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 11.

27. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 12.

Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not *faithless, but believing*... because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. (John 20:27, 29; emphasis added)

Thomas, who had seen Jesus in his glory, certainly met the requirements to know he lives. Jesus didn't counsel Thomas to "be not faithless, but *knowing*," rather, "be not faithless, but *believing*." Thomas then saw the "point of being loyal" to Jesus and committed himself to him. Thomas's declaration, "my Lord and my God[!]" (John 20:28) became a foundation for a stronger, deeper faith, which surely influenced his later missionary work. Doubt is not necessary for the development of strong faith; the apostle John apparently never experienced such doubt. Those who believe in Christ without seeing him are not lesser believers but participants in a different and equally blessed form of faith.

The Lectures on Faith does not define doubt as curiosity or questioning but rather as existential insecurity, the kind that erodes trust and commitment in a divine relationship.

Where doubt and uncertainty are there faith is not, nor can it be. For doubt and faith do not exist in the same person at the same time; so that persons whose minds are under doubts and fears cannot have unshaken confidence; and where unshaken confidence is not there faith is weak.²⁸

This latter position is not at odds with the statements quoted to this point since the quote defines faith here as "unshaken confidence." Unshaken confidence means covenantal loyalty, not intellectual certainty. Faith cannot coexist with a refusal to trust, an inability to commit. In Fowler's Conjunctive Faith stage, individuals accept ambiguity and complexity while remaining deeply committed to their religious tradition. Faith, therefore, becomes less about possessing certainty and more about sustained loyalty to what one has come to recognize as meaningful and true. This developmental step closely parallels the idea of faith as covenantal loyalty. Believers in these later stages no longer rely on rigid certainty but instead choose to remain faithful

28. N. B. Lundwall, comp., *A Compilation Containing the Lectures on Faith, as Delivered at the School of the Prophets at Kirtland, Ohio* (Salt Lake City: N. B. Lundwall, n.d.), 59–60, archive.org/details/compilationconta00lund/page/58/mode/2up.

within the very conditions of uncertainty that doubt introduces. Indeed, “the Book of Mormon repeatedly shows faithful people who struggle, plead, and question while still choosing to trust God.”²⁹ Givens and Givens put it well when they teach:

Even among His modern disciples, there would be — and must be — room for those who live in doubt . . . [and] still live its essence. Many in the Church and world are doing just that. Just as some have entertained “angels unawares,” so might we well be exercising faith unbeknown. Faith is lived, not thought.³⁰

As C. S. Lewis articulately explained many years ago, some followers of Christ have found themselves in situations where they “thought [they] trusted the rope [of faith] until it mattered to [them] whether it would bear [them].”³¹ Certainly, the Book of Mormon teaches that faith is a deliberate choice, to act “as if” something could occur or is true, without perfect knowledge, that is, not merely believing intellectually, waiting passively, or feeling spiritually certain.

When King Lamoni, after offering his repentant prayer, fell “unto the earth, as if he were dead” (Alma 18:42), modern readers know he was not actually gone but only in a death-like state, but the queen does not know that. To everyone present at that time, he appeared completely dead, especially to the queen, his wife. She believed “as if [the king] were dead.” The queen did not see any evidence that her husband was alive. She did not have proof, nor did she receive a spiritual manifestation or have doctrinal certainty. All she had was Ammon’s word. By choosing not to bury her husband, the queen was not trusting an idea. She was trusting a person, Ammon, and through him, Ammon’s God — our God. This was relational trust.

In a similar manner and for some of the same reasons, faith is not simply thinking. It is also not a magical power, an intense cognitive focus, an absence of doubt, or an emotional connection with deity. . . . But it seems that once she has settled on her faithful and active commitment to non-burial, her thoughts and doubts will not matter. . . . The queen must believe enough to act, but forcing herself to pray harder or

29. Paul Bishop, “A Testimony Can Bend Yet Still Stand,” *Meridian Magazine*, 3 February 2026, latterdaysaintmag.com/a-testimony-can-bend-yet-still-stand/.

30. Givens and Givens, *The Crucible of Doubt*, 143.

31. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 18.

believe stronger will not make what is real somehow more real. Whether she sings hymns all night, recites scripture, or sits beside her husband simply holding his hand, it will not make Lamoni more—or less—alive. . . . As long as she remains committed to her chosen course of action, Lamoni will rise when he rises. The queen's thoughts do not alter that reality—at least they do not until those thoughts become powerful enough to convince her to change how she is behaving.³²

If faith were purely logical, the queen could demand evidence. If faith were purely emotional, then the queen could wait for a feeling. If faith were purely rational calculations, the queen could weigh the probabilities of this outcome. The gift of doubt, however, compelled the queen to choose this relationship with Ammon over any other form of control. Said differently, she accepted the uncertainty of this situation because she trusted the source. In effect, she asked, “do I trust the one who is speaking?” rather than, “Is this true?”

Faith, like an intimate relationship, can be risky. “To trust in a man, or a cause, or a God, is to risk disappointment. To act in faith is to risk failure, betrayal, even humiliation.”³³ What would have happened if King Lamoni had never risen? If Ammon were wrong about the king's death, the queen would have had a delayed burial, she would have had to relive grief, and she might have lost her credibility in her kingdom. Furthermore, she might have been manipulated, her husband's body might have suffered dishonor, and her authority might have collapsed. This constituted a massive amount of trust (and risk) to put in Ammon.

Faith exposes us to potential betrayal, humiliation, and renewed loss. When faith is described in this way, it can be easy to see why there may be too much emphasis in Latter-day Saint dialogue on receiving or promising blessings for acts of faith. We may have grown up “expect[ing] the gospel to make us happy”³⁴ instead of recognizing the vulnerability we must yield to the Lord.

Corrie Ten Boom, Holocaust survivor and rescuer, endured daily starvation, brutality, diseases, and constant fear while imprisoned at the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp during WW II. Yet, she thanked

32. Kylie Turley, “Practical Faith for the Real World: Reading *As If*, Believing *As If*,” *BYU Studies* 64, no. 2 (2025): 15, byustudies.byu.edu/article/practical-faith-for-the-real-world-reading-as-if-believing-as-if.

33. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 139.

34. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 115.

God for the fleas in the barracks. Why would she do that? It was because the fleas kept the guards away, allowing for forbidden study of a smuggled Bible. She later even forgave a former Nazi guard after the war, despite emotional resistance. Corrie acted in trust when emotion and evidence offered no reason to do so. Likewise, we must often act in trust in similar experience:

From our youth we are taught that God answers prayers, that all blessings can be anticipated as a direct and predictable result of a corresponding commandment, that obedience brings happiness. The empathy shown by Brigham Young is striking: "To profess to be a Saint, and not enjoy the spirit of it, tries every fiber of the heart, and is one of the most painful experiences that man can suffer." He realized that then, as now, thousands of Saints were paying the high price of discipleship and asking, "Where is the joy?"³⁵

Finding the joy in being faithful may be disappointing sometimes because "moments of doubt often arrive during circumstances that seem unfair or overwhelming. Illness, financial strain, loneliness, or unanswered prayers can make God seem distant."³⁶ When blessings don't seem to come, prayers do not seem to have been answered, and life is not going the way one imagined it would. To place one's heart in truth and commitment can be challenging, but it is supposed to be hard. "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26) because faith takes work. Belief is something one lives, not something one proves. As Givens expresses it, "As our experiences in marriages, families, and friendship teach us, it takes relationships to provide the friction that wears down our rough edges and sanctifies us."³⁷

Faith is not merely intellectuality, but vulnerability. Faith then, is fidelity. It is trust that is sustained over time. This type of relational faith, gained in part through the gift of doubt, is as Ammon labels it, "*exceeding faith*" (Alma 19:10).

Faith's True Opposite

The opposite of faith is not doubt. Fowler believed that if doubt may commonly accompany the developmental movement toward reflective and conjunctive faith, it cannot reasonably be described as faith's

35. Givens and Givens, *Crucible of Doubt*, 115.

36. Bishop, "A Testimony Can Bend Yet Still Stand."

37. Givens, "Letter to a Doubter," 138.

opposite. Rather than destroying belief, questioning can frequently participate in its maturation.

Instead, “the opposite of faith is *nihilism*.” *Nihilism* can be defined as an “inability to [imagine] any transcendent environment and despair about the possibility of even negative meaning.”³⁸ The philosophy of nihilism argues that life has no value or significance. It “does not contend that there is nothing, but it states that everything is meaningless.”³⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre believed that there is no God-given purpose, no built-in moral structure, and no cosmic story that gives life meaning. In other words, humans create their own meaning; they self-author their existence. Albert Camus went further, believing that “life is absurd” and that “we are condemned to absurdity by the human condition.”⁴⁰ In his writings, he claims that all mankind seeks meaning, but that the universe remains silent. Despite suffering, death, and randomness, they must rebel by living fully and acting courageously, even in a meaningless universe. While existentialism resists total hopelessness, it, nevertheless, begins with the assumption that meaning itself is absent or only humanly constructed.

In significant and critical contrast, doubt is not a loss of faith. The true opposite of faith is the loss of meaning, which leads to a collapse of faith altogether. The *Lectures on Faith* addresses this directly:

Where faith is weak the persons will not be able to contend against all the opposition, tribulations, and afflictions which they will have to encounter in order to be heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ Jesus; *and they will grow weary in their minds*, and the adversary will have power over them and destroy them.⁴¹

Growing weary in mind combined with a feeling of loss of power (which, alarmingly, means giving power to the adversary) reflects a loss of hope, endurance, and meaning. This is *nihilism*. As Kylie Turley puts it, “Ironically, it is disbelief or lack of faith that has the power to change reality in predictable and yet devastating ways.”⁴² It is not doubt that

38. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 31.

39. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (1946; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 152.

40. Jack Maden, “Albert Camus on Rebelling Against Life’s Absurdity,” *Philosophy Break*, September 2024, philosophybreak.com/articles/absurdity-with-camus/.

41. Lundwall, *Lectures on Faith*, 60, emphasis added.

42. Turley, “Practical Faith,” 16.

changes reality in devastating ways; it is disbelief — nihilism in disguise. Disbelief is more than merely to be not convinced. It is the withholding of trust, the refusal to commit, and the over-protection from risk. Whereas doubt is uncertainty, questioning, or wrestling, disbelief is a settled rejection or refusal to trust. Disbelief becomes significant, not when one questions something, but when one lives as though it cannot be true.

King Lamoni's wife, the queen, faced two decisions after her husband's death-like state began. The first was to conclude that the king was dead and to bury him because everyone was pressuring for burial. The second was to conclude that the king was alive and that burying him would kill him, pushing back on what society thought to be correct. Burial here was the safest option. It followed the customs, ended the uncertainty, and looked decisive. Even if the king were alive, burial would make him dead. Burying guarantees death. The gift of doubt prevents this. Nihilism feels safe, but it is locked only towards tragedy.

Burying (nihilism) resolves uncertainty by choosing the bleakest interpretation. Instead of "maybe there is life," it chooses "it's over, it's dead." Burying eliminates vulnerability. Faith says, "I might be wrong, but I will risk hope." Nihilism says, "I refuse to risk hope." Burying creates what it assumes. If the queen had buried King Lamoni, she would have guaranteed his death. Similarly, if people assume meaning is not real, then they stop acting "as if" it is. When they stop acting as if meaning is real, their lives begin to feel meaningless.

The deliberate choice to act *as if* allows what is hoped for to become — or to remain — real. It explains why more faith will not make more things happen more quickly, why a fleeting thought of doubt has little impact on faith, and why, contrary to what many assume, disbelief — not faith — can be a self-fulfilling prophecy with a predictable outcome.⁴³

Faith does not guarantee resurrection. But nihilism guarantees no resurrection.

King Lamoni's wife makes the faithful choice not to bury him. But if she had lacked faith in Ammon's words, if she had buried her husband, then how could she ever know with certainty that King Lamoni was dead when he was buried? The

43. Turley, "Practical Faith," 8.

king may have been alive or dead, but [nihilism] hides what is real. The queen's story demonstrates that a lack of faith distorts and hides what is true, even as it changes and ruins what could have been real. It takes fear of the unknown and exchanges it for predictability and tragedy.⁴⁴

The choice of burial (nihilism) is not evil. It is understandable, culturally supported, socially responsible, and emotionally protective. Nihilism can feel intellectually rigorous, emotionally self-protective, and, ultimately, realistic, but nihilism can only protect people from being wrong. Ironically, it also prevents them from being transformed.

Faith fills the need to make sense of the world, it provides meaning. Faith, in a way, is like a movie:

It consists of thousands upon thousands of individual pictures, and each of them makes sense and carries a meaning, yet the meaning of the whole film cannot be seen before its last sequence is shown. We cannot understand the whole film without having first understood each of its components, each of the individual pictures.⁴⁵

By choosing to reembrace faith with depth and nuance, recognizing that faith is like a movie, something that cannot be fully understood without viewing each scene in the present, doubt becomes a spiritual gift.

Corrie Ten Boom observed that Holocaust prisoners who lost hope deteriorated quickly, while those who clung to meaning (be it love, service, prayer, or scripture study) endured far longer. Faith sustained survival.

Similarly, Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, profoundly believed that human beings can survive almost any suffering if they can find meaning in it. If people lose their sense of meaning, they psychologically collapse, even if their physical needs are met. His firsthand experience with prison inmates in concentration camps taught him that those who believed that nothing mattered anymore, those who believed there was no future, and those who believed there was no purpose to survive were the most likely to lose the will to live and to fall into despair. "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed."⁴⁶ He further believed that happiness is

44. Turley, "Practical Faith," 16.

45. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 143–44.

46. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 74.

not the goal of life, nor is pleasure or power. It is *meaning*, which can exist even in suffering. Meaning is always present, but, significantly, it must be discovered, not invented. Life is constantly asking something of us, and we respond through love, work, and courage in suffering. Meaning opens life, while nihilism closes it.

When we love, work, and face suffering with courage and fidelity, we find faith. Love draws the heart toward vulnerability and compassion. Work anchors belief through purposeful action. Courageous endurance transforms suffering into a beautiful site of growth. For Latter-day Saints and other Christians, these realities are lived through ministering to others, working through service in the community and our wards, and facing suffering courageously by continually showing up. Uncertainty and questions still arise, but found faith doesn't disappear.

Summary and Conclusions

Doubt can be a spiritual gift, a gift that is blessed, because the opposite of faith isn't doubt. It is the loss of meaning. Uncertainty and difficult questions will not vanish, in fact they often persist, but faith, rooted in meaning and relationship, does not dissolve in their presence. S. Michael Wilcox put it well:

I was blessed with a believing heart. It's a good thing, because I also have a questioning mind. Sometimes the believing heart and the questioning mind have some interesting conversations with each other. So occasionally, my mind has to tell my heart, We need to look at this with reason. And sometimes my heart has to say to my mind, You have to trust me. I have wrestled with just about every issue in the Church. I have learned to live with imperfect scriptures, imperfect people, imperfect prophets, imperfect me, and imperfect organizations. . . So we hold on.⁴⁷

The ultimate realization for Latter-day Saints who are questioning their testimonies is that they may have much more faith than they prematurely thought.

Ecclesiastes 3 reminds the faithful that "to every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven . . . a time to weep . . .

47. S. Michael Wilcox in *Finding Jesus Christ in the Old Testament: Inspiring SoundBites from the podcast "Follow Him,"* comp. Annabelle Sorensen (n.p.: IngramSpark, 2023), 83, followhim.co/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Follow-Him_OldTestament.pdf.

a time to mourn . . . a time to laugh . . . a time to embrace” (Ecclesiastes 3:1–5). There will be times and seasons marked by notably more faith and times and seasons marked by notably more doubt in everyone’s lifespan. Regardless, God promises that all these times and seasons can be *beautiful* for the individual because God makes “everything *beautiful* in his time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).



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Caleb Lemon was born in Provo, Utah, earned a B.S. in Psychology from Brigham Young University–Idaho, and is an incoming PhD student in Developmental Psychology at Brigham Young University. He served a mission in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and likes to ski and to run.

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