

Choose to Believe
L. Whitney Clayton, *Ensign*, May 2015

Last January, seven-year-old Sailor Gutzler and her family were flying from Florida to Illinois in a private airplane. Sailor's father was at the controls. Just after nightfall, the aircraft developed mechanical problems and crashed in the pitch-dark hills of Kentucky, upside down in very rough terrain. Everyone but Sailor died in the accident. Her wrist was broken in the crash. She suffered cuts and scrapes and had lost her shoes. The temperature was 38 degrees Fahrenheit (or 3 degrees Celsius)—it was a cold, rainy Kentucky winter's night—and Sailor was wearing only shorts, a T-shirt, and one sock.

She cried out for her mother and father, but no one answered. Summoning every ounce of courage, she set off barefoot across the countryside in search of help, wading through creeks, crossing ditches, and braving blackberry briars. From the top of one small hill, Sailor spotted a light in the distance, about a mile away. Stumbling through the darkness and brush toward that light, she eventually arrived at the home of a kind man she had never met before who sprang to her care. Sailor was safe. She would soon be taken to a hospital and helped on her way to recovery.¹

Sailor survived because she saw a light in the distance and fought her way to it—notwithstanding the wild countryside, the depth of the tragedy she faced, and the injuries she had sustained. It is hard to imagine how Sailor managed to do what she did that night. But what we do know is that she recognized in the light of that distant house a chance for rescue. There was hope. She took courage in the fact that no matter how bad things were, her rescue would be found in that light.

Few of us will ever endure an experience as harrowing as Sailor's. But all of us will, at some time or another, have to traverse our own spiritual wilderness and undertake our own rugged emotional journeys. In those moments, however dark or seemingly hopeless they may be, if we search for it, there will always be a spiritual light that beckons to us, giving us the hope of rescue and relief. That light shines from the Savior of all mankind, who is the Light of the World.

Perceiving spiritual light is different from seeing physical light. Recognizing the Savior's spiritual light begins with our willingness to believe. God requires that initially we at least desire to believe. "If ye will awake and arouse your faculties ... and exercise a particle of faith," the prophet Alma

teaches, "yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of [the Savior's] words."²

Alma's call for us to desire to believe and to "give place" in our hearts for the Savior's words reminds us that belief and faith require our personal choice and action. We must "awake and arouse [our] faculties." We ask before it is given unto us; we seek before we find; we knock before it is opened unto us. We are then given this promise: "For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."³

No more impassioned plea for us to believe has come than from the Savior Himself, during His earthly ministry, when He appealed to His disbelieving listeners:

"If I do not the works of my Father, believe me not.

"But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works: that ye may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in him."⁴

Every day each of us faces a test. It is the test of our lifetimes: will we choose to believe in Him and allow the light of His gospel to grow within us, or will we refuse to believe and insist on traveling alone in the dark? The Savior provides His gospel as a light to guide those who choose to believe in and follow Him.

After the crash, Sailor had a choice. She could have chosen to stay by the airplane in the dark, alone and afraid. But there was a long night ahead, and it was just going to get colder. She chose another way. Sailor climbed up a hill, and there she saw a light on the horizon.

Gradually, as she made her way through the night toward the light, it grew brighter. Still, there must have been times when she could not see it. Perhaps it went out of view when she was in a ravine or behind trees or bushes, but she pressed on. Whenever she could see the light, Sailor had evidence that she was on the right path. She did not yet know precisely what that light was, but she kept walking toward it based on what she knew, trusting and hoping that she would see it again if she kept moving in the right direction. By so doing, she may have saved her life.

Our lives can be like that too. There may be times when we have been hurt, when we are tired, and when our lives seem dark and cold. There may be

times when we cannot see any light on the horizon, and we may feel like giving up. If we are willing to believe, if we desire to believe, if we choose to believe, then the Savior's teachings and example will show us the pathway forward.

Choose to Believe

Just as Sailor had to believe that she would find safety in that distant light, so we too must choose to open our hearts to the divine reality of the Savior—to His eternal light and His healing mercy. Prophets across the ages have encouraged us and even implored us to believe in Christ. Their exhortations reflect a fundamental fact: God does not force us to believe. Instead He invites us to believe by sending living prophets and apostles to teach us, by providing scriptures, and by beckoning to us through His Spirit. We are the ones who must choose to embrace those spiritual invitations, electing to see with inward eyes the spiritual light with which He calls us. The decision to believe is the most important choice we ever make. It shapes all our other decisions.

God does not compel us to believe any more than He compels us to keep any commandments, despite His perfect desire to bless us. Yet His call to us to believe in Him—to exercise that particle of faith and to give place for His words—remains in effect today. As the Savior said, "I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me."⁵

Belief and testimony and faith are not passive principles. They do not just happen to us. Belief is something we choose—we hope for it, we work for it, and we sacrifice for it. We will not accidentally come to believe in the Savior and His gospel any more than we will accidentally pray or pay tithing. We actively choose to believe, just like we choose to keep other commandments.

Put Belief into Action

Sailor could not know at first if what she was doing as she pushed her way through the underbrush would actually work. She was lost and injured; it was dark and cold. But she left the crash site and ventured out in hope of rescue, crawling and scraping her way forward until she saw a light in the distance. Once she had seen it, she did her best to move toward it, remembering what she had seen.

We likewise must give place for the hope that we will find spiritual light by embracing belief rather than choosing to doubt. Our actions are the evidence of our belief and become the substance of our faith. We are choosing to believe when we pray and when we read the scriptures. We are choosing to believe when we fast, when we keep the Sabbath day holy, and when we worship in the temple. We are choosing to believe when we are baptized and when we partake of the sacrament. We are choosing to believe when we repent and seek divine forgiveness and healing love.

Never Give Up

Sometimes progress in spiritual things can seem slow or intermittent. Sometimes we may feel that we have lost ground, that we have made mistakes, or that our best efforts to find the Savior are not working. If you feel this way, please do not give up—ever. Go right on believing in Him and in His gospel and His Church. Align your actions with that belief. In those moments when the light of your faith has dimmed, let your hope for the Savior's love and grace, found in His gospel and His Church, overcome your doubt. I promise that He stands ready to receive you. Over time you will come to see that you have made the best choice you could possibly have made. Your courageous decision to believe in Him will bless you immeasurably and forever.

The Blessings of Belief

I have felt the merciful love of the Savior in my life. I have searched for Him in my own moments of darkness, and He has reached out to me with His healing light. One of the great joys of my life has been traveling with my wife, Kathy, to meet with members of the Church in many corners of the globe. These wonderful encounters have taught me and taught us about God's love for His children. They have shown me the limitless potential for happiness that becomes the blessing of those who choose to follow the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. I have learned that believing in Him and in His redemptive power is the true path to "peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come."⁶

I testify that Jesus Christ is the source of light and hope for all of us. I pray that we may all choose to believe in Him. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.