

THE HOPE EFFECT

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I am truly humbled by the invitation to speak at this Utah Coalition Against Pornography conference. After all, who wants to be chosen as the replacement speaker for Elder Jeffrey R. Holland in his home town of St. George! Be kind to me!

Like you, pornography has impacted my circle of friends and family. I represent all in attendance today in thanking the organizers and sponsors of this community coalition who do so much to help those wrestling with this challenge in their lives.

The theme of today's conference is "The Hope Effect." I am not a professionally trained counselor in overcoming pornography, but in my role as a minister in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have found that hope for something better is essential for people of all ages who struggle with this malady.

THE NEED FOR HOPE

In Dante's fourteenth-century literary masterpiece *Inferno*, there is an inscription on the entrance gate of hell that ends with the phrase, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."¹ Dante understood that hell is full of people with no hope. I have found that people who struggle with pornography begin to lose hope, as do their spouses or loved ones, because the emotions that accompany addiction can sometimes feel like a personal hell from which there is little chance for escape.

Why might we lose hope? Maybe because pornography is so easily accessible. Pornography is no longer confined to softcore photos in magazines wrapped in black plastic and locked behind a store counter. Hardcore pornography videos in HD are available for free delivered immediately to a mobile phone. The results of this easy access are that the average age of first exposure is 11, that more than 70% of men aged 18-24 visit porn sites in a typical month, and that 1 in 3 porn viewers are women.² Pornography is not an exclusively male problem.

Why else might we lose hope? Perhaps because an increasing amount of published research about the harmful effects of pornography causes users and their spouses to think change is not possible. They read:³

- Pornography use affects the brain. Studies have found that even moderate porn use impacts cognitive function and correlates with depression, anxiety, stress, and social problems.
- Pornography use affects the heart—the center of human emotion. Men who use pornography report being less satisfied with their partners' physical appearance, sexual performance, and level of affection. Real intimacy declines and marital relationships break down.

- Pornography use affects society. Research shows that male pornography users have an increased negative attitude toward women, decreased empathy for victims of sexual violence, and an increase in behavioral aggression.

These findings signify the hyper-sexualization of our modern society. People are viewed as objects to be used rather than as humans with dignity. Such is the toxic environment in which our children are raised and our marriages struggle to survive. In such circumstances, Dante’s soul-draining statement seems almost prophetic: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

But it need not be so. Recall this bold proclamation by a woman quite acquainted with a seemingly hopeless set of life circumstances, Helen Keller. She wrote: “Nothing can be done without hope.”⁴ A corollary might be that anything can be done with hope, even overcoming the plague of pornography, whether as an individual or a society.

My message today is that there is every reason in the world to have hope for a better life. We must do our absolute best to keep hope alive in our hearts, minds, and souls.

H-O-P-E

The acronym H-O-P-E summarizes four ideas that I think anyone striving to overcome pornography use, or those who are impacted by others’ use of pornography, must believe in order to have hope:

- H: You must believe that **healing** is possible.
- O: You must believe that **openness** brings strength.
- P: You must believe that **patterns** can change.
- E: You must believe that **enjoyment** will come.

I will discuss these four elements of hope one by one, with the desire to provide hope to those who may be facing this problem—whether personally or as a spouse, child, sibling, friend, or religious leader. I want to assure you that there is light at the end of the tunnel for those who undertake the proper course.

During my presentation I will share with you a couple of new and not yet publicly released videos produced by my Church. These videos reflect the way hope will be integrated into the Church’s approach to helping people address pornography.

H: HEALING IS POSSIBLE

In order to have hope, the first thing you must believe is that healing is possible.

Levels of Pornography Use

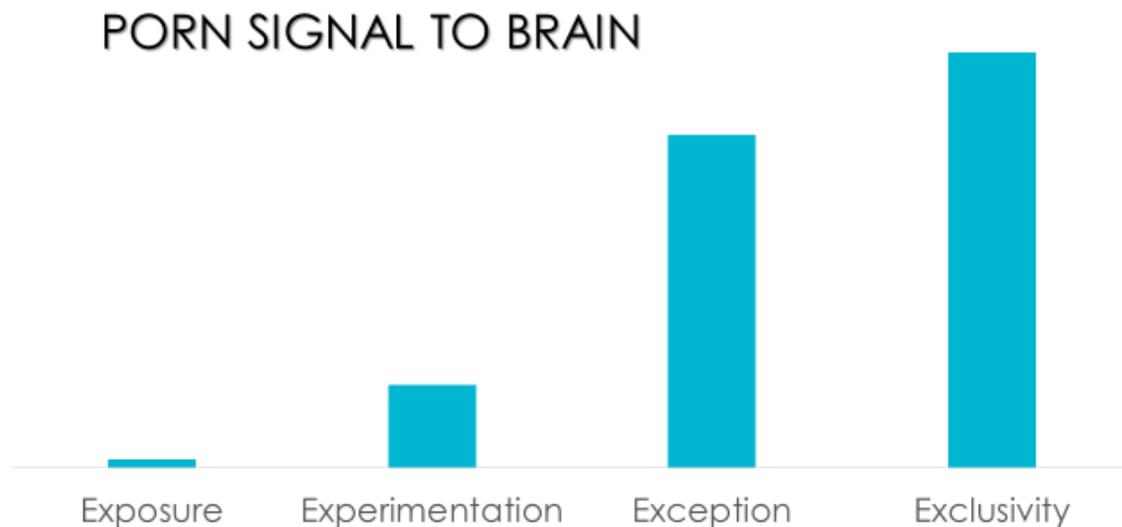
I am concerned that many teenagers and young adults with whom I have worked are too quick to label themselves as an addict. In religious communities, there is this sense of, “I’d rather be labeled as a heroin addict than a porn addict.”⁵ For young people, just thinking that they are addicts does some real damage—they retreat from their religious and social communities, and they don’t feel worthy of romantic love so they

stop dating.⁶ Because of this addict label, many youth and young adults lose hope in being healed.

On the other hand, I am concerned that many older people—particularly those in outwardly content marriages—are too slow to admit that they have a pornography addiction. In their minds, and often in the minds of their pastor or bishop, addiction is about frequency of use. Usage frequency may define addiction for substance abuse, but not for sexual behaviors.⁷

We would all agree that the person who compulsively watches pornography several times a day is clearly addicted. He or she obviously covers this behavior in secrecy. But the person who binge watches pornography for two nights, every three months, over decades, engages in the same type of secrecy. He or she may also have an addiction, even though it is engaged in less frequently.

Experience has taught me that every story is different, and it is difficult to know how severely a person is affected by pornography. Therapists use the following gauge to try to determine how to help someone. Think of these levels like signal strength on a mobile phone, with more bars representing a stronger porn signal to a user’s brain.



- **Exposure** occurs with children and adolescents, rarely with adults, when a person innocently stumbles upon pornographic material. Youth can even feel intense shame, as if they have done something very wrong by looking. Experiences like this are opportunities for parents to teach their children in their homes about the power and beauty of our God-given sexuality and the blessing of human intimacy, what to do if they are exposed to porn, and how to prevent behavior from becoming more serious.

- **Experimentation** occurs when a younger individual has repeatedly and intentionally accessed pornography. She knows that it is wrong, but she is confused by why something bad makes her body feel good. Parents and religious leaders can help such youth learn about proper human intimacy. Experimentation can last up to a month, but if it occurs longer than that, our young friend may be developing a dependency on pornography.
- **Exception** occurs when a person is caught using pornography. The user usually explains “this is an exception, it was my first time”; however, this is often a lie and an indication of an unwillingness to change. Parents and religious leaders are limited in what they can do to help individuals who take this defensive approach. Spouses are torn: on one hand they are devastated by betrayal; on the other hand they are sometimes told by their bishop, pastor, or religious leader that “this is not so bad because it could have been worse.”
- **Exclusivity** occurs when people protect their pornography use with secrets and deceit. They have entered into an exclusive relationship with an addiction to cope with life’s stress. It is not helpful to suggest that their problem is a “habit” and recommend a simple behavior change as the solution. Many individuals faithfully attempt to pray or read the scriptures more and still falter. The reality is that pornography use affects people physically, emotionally, spiritually, sexually, and relationally. They need tools to counter these aspects of their addiction, usually through therapy and support groups.

To summarize, there is no question that clinicians can accurately diagnose addiction, but the rest of us should be careful about labels. A teen may mistakenly think she is an “addict” doomed forever, while a married man may incorrectly think that his occasional use is “not an addiction”—and neither the teen nor the man can summon the will to get the kind of help they need and do the hard work necessary to overcome pornography. But if they properly understand the problem, they can obtain hope, begin to believe that healing is possible, and gain the capacity to change.

Please, no matter the level of pornography exposure and use, never abandon hope that healing is possible!

Healing Is Common

You are wise to be in this conference today. The speakers are extremely qualified and will share their approaches and experiences with you on preventing and recovering from pornography use. They can tell you that healing is not only possible but also common.

The approach used by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in overcoming pornography, like that of other Christian denominations, draws on the power of Jesus Christ and His Atonement. Christ is not a distant and unfeeling judge. I have learned that He is near and full of compassion.

From the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus astonished the multitudes with His ability to heal almost any affliction. In His day, leprosy was a common plague, an illness with no hope for cure or healing. For that reason, I have always loved this interchange found in Mark chapter 1: ⁸

“And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean. And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed.”

Pornography is the leprosy and plague of our day—its effects are everywhere. Yet I believe Christ can heal now as He did then. The healing may not come immediately, but He will move with compassion in response to our hope and faith. He will give a user strength to continually pursue healing until he or she is once again free from the compulsion to view pornography. He will also give a spouse strength to find healing.

O: OPENNESS BRINGS STRENGTH

My second point in overcoming pornography use is that you must believe that openness brings strength. The first step to openness is having the courage to leave the dark.

Courage to Leave the Dark

Pornography use and habits thrive in the dark. “The dark” may mean getting up in the middle of the night when our spouse or parents are sleeping. “The dark” might be a hotel room when traveling for our employment. “The dark” might mean being in a closet at home, or a bathroom at work for those who have a more compulsive use. “The dark” includes being isolated and alone, even if linked electronically to a living person who is also alone and in the dark. “The dark” is any kind of deceit towards those we love most.

Exposure to light can significantly reduce if not stop pornography use. Let me draw an analogy from biology, comparing pornography to bacteria.

Hospitals use ultraviolet lights and lamps to kill bacteria, the single-celled microorganisms that cause diseases. Bacteria grow through rapid cell division. Shortwave ultraviolet light, found in sunbeams, deactivates the DNA in bacteria, stopping growth through cell division.⁹ Simply put, harmful bacteria die by exposure to light.

Like rapidly reproducing bacteria, pornography use tends to thrive in the dark. Similarly, exposure to the right kind of light can take out pornography’s chances for growth in a person’s life. Just as someone who is living in a dark home must open the curtains or the doors to let sunlight in, a user of pornography must be open to others about their use in order to draw on others’ strength and to increase their own.

Confession and Connection

A pornography user, to get real light and strength, must move out of the dark and into confession and connection. The confession might be to a spouse, a parent, a friend, or a minister. Such confession, when done with the intent of true healing, rather than sharing barely enough to placate their conscience, initiates real change. The user is no longer left to fight alone. Confession and connection brings strength and hope.

I feel to emphasize that the response to a pornography user's confession will be quite different for a parent or religious leader than for the spouse.

I begin with the parent or religious leader. I have met with many teenage boys who began their pornography use at age 11 or 12. Some boys' parents or bishop reacted in extreme disappointment or anger at the initial confession and caused them to feel deep shame. Later, those boys tended to lie and say the problem was solved when it really wasn't. In contrast, those boys whose parents or bishop had an "open door" and reacted in love were willing to remain honest over time, and more of them found healing.

Maybe the best thing parents and religious leaders can do upon hearing a confession is to lovingly say, "Thank you for opening up to me. We'll get through this! Please, tell me what been going on..." The worst thing a parent or leader can say is, "How could you do something so awful?" Let me again emphasize that it is critical for the initial response to be full of hope, love, and support: "God loves you, I love you, and I will do all I can to help you change."

I now address the much more difficult matter of confession to a spouse, typically by the husband (but by wives too). We cannot minimize the intense emotions that a wife experiences upon discovery that her husband uses pornography. My Church has taught: "When someone engages in any frequency of use or any level of involvement, his or her spouse will experience feelings of heartbreak, betrayal trauma, rejection, shame, and questioning of self-worth. Pornography use damages the connection, trust, and communication essential to a healthy relationship—making it vital for a spouse to seek hope and healing."¹⁰

(To any LDS bishops in attendance today, please listen to and respect the perspectives of the pornography user's wife, including disclosure of any emotional or sexual abuse that may have accompanied his addiction. She needs your love too.)

Even though a wife may desire to be absolutely Christlike and respond to her husband's confession with love and not judgment, it is certainly normal for that not to be the immediate reaction. She has been lied to for years. Her heart has been pierced.¹¹ The relationship she has relied upon and trusted in has seemingly been instantaneously destroyed. But with time, and perhaps professional assistance, she will be able express gratitude for her husband's courage to be open and heal his life and their marriage.

Let's watch this video from pornography users—and their spouses—who learned that they could not overcome a pornography habit on their own. [*VIDEO: Fix this on my own (3:49)*] There is indeed hope on the other side of confession.

But as nice as these stories are, remember that confession for most people will not be a one-time process: old habits die hard, and slips and reoccurrences will likely happen. Still, experts find that the more complete, accurate, and vulnerable the first disclosure is, the greater the likelihood of the relationship enduring. Full disclosure avoids later, more painful revelations. It can be very helpful to seek the help of a qualified counselor in preparing for and making effective disclosure.

Compassion

Pornography users must be compassionate to themselves. Continually shaming yourself and beating yourself up is simply not helpful. Without self-compassion you will not foster the belief that behavioral change and healing can occur, and you will fear being open with others.

To spouses or parents of those struggling with pornography use, you too can continue to strive to be compassionate and empathetic as those you love make difficult changes in their lives. However, I recognize that compassion in a betrayed marriage can feel impossible, especially when relapses happen and trust is shattered over and over. And, at some point, if there is little remorse and the addicted spouse's behavior does not change, and there is a "prolonged and apparently irredeemable [pattern] which is destructive [to your] dignity as a human being",¹² then divorce may need be the outcome. But, before that painful point of no return, may I say, God smiles upon and loves you for every single act of compassion, whether you stay married or not.

I know that as pornography use is brought out of the dark and into the light through confession and compassion, such openness will bring strength to both the users and their loved ones.

P: PATTERNS CAN CHANGE

The third element of hope that someone must believe to overcome pornography is that patterns can change. Many of today's breakout sessions will be led by experienced counselors who can address pattern change with practical approaches and tools.

I would like step back and introduce an overarching behavioral model that my Church's upcoming website will call "The Cycle of Shame." We have found that one of the most significant barriers to changing pornography use patterns is shame.

The noted professor and popular speaker Dr. Brené Brown has written and spoken extensively on the culture of shame. She wrote: "Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change,"¹³ and "shame erodes our courage and fuels disengagement."¹⁴

The Shame Cycle

Let's explore the shame cycle describing the experience of a typical pornography user, whom I will call John, and his wife, whom I will call Jane.



Ideals and perfection: Interestingly, John's shame cycle begins in a good place as he strives for ideals and perfection. Deep down, John wants to be great. And as a Christian, he hopes to fulfill Jesus's invitation to somehow "be ye therefore perfect."¹⁵

Mortal weakness: But John is human, and we all have weaknesses that cause us to fall short of our ideals. When John initially falls short of his ideal behavior and uses pornography, he feels guilt—a feeling of responsibility or remorse for offending moral law. John's conscience makes it clear that what he did was wrong, or what a religious person would call sin. In my experience, when someone feels guilty for something they have done, a natural response is to change the behavior; hope remains even amid feelings of guilt.

Shame and unworthiness: In contrast, John, like many who fall short of their ideals, goes beyond guilt to shame—a feeling of disgrace, dishonor, or public contempt. Shame convinces John that he is bad and unworthy of anyone's love or acceptance, and it diminishes his feelings of self-worth. Shame causes a pornography user like John to experience feelings of despair and hopelessness.

(Unfortunately, when Jane discovered John's pornography use, she too had feelings of shame—"I must lack the beauty and sexual drive John needs"—which were not true. John's porn use was absolutely not Jane's fault. As long as John was committed

to pornography, no woman could ever be beautiful enough or sexy enough. When an individual is seeking sex stemming from addictive intentions, his appetite can never be satisfied. John’s habit resulted from his choices.)

Escaping pain: Negative feelings from the despair of shame will create hurt, so we naturally want to escape them. Many, like John, turn to pornography use as an escape from emotional pain. By repeatedly using pornography to escape through the powerful reward of sexual gratification, John forms habits that are difficult to break. Sometimes, John tries to escape pain by trying to stop his pornography habit on his own and resolving to be perfect from now on. This is often called “white knuckling it.”

Despite John’s determination to be perfect, however, he once again encounters his mortal weakness and again falls into the same behavior. Again, he feels guilt and then shame. Around and around it goes, causing John to strengthen his habit; feel more distant from his best self, Jane, other people, and God; thus deepening his feelings of shame and despair.

The Hope Cycle

The best way to stop the shame cycle is to interrupt it, and then replace it with the hope cycle.



Identity and guilt: John began to interrupt feelings of shame by remembering his identity as a person of worth. John was taught in his Church that we are each a beloved son or daughter of Heavenly Parents with a divine destiny. Abraham Lincoln said it this

way: “It is difficult to make a man miserable while he feels worthy of himself and claims kindred to the great God who made him.”¹⁶ A person who understands his or her identity can begin to change from feelings of shame (“I am bad. I am a mistake.”) to feelings of guilt (“I did something bad. I made a mistake, and I can change.”)

Experiencing connection: With this hope, John obtains the courage to tell his painful story to people he trusts—specifically, Jane, his parents, and his religious leader. The pornography user begins to break free when he or she admits to trusted souls, “My life is out of control. This challenge is bigger than me. I need help.” John begins to connect with real people, the essence of human experience, rather than digital fantasies. Real human connection requires deep humility and absolute honesty. As John alleviates his emotional pain through experiencing real connection with Jane and others, he is better able to stop escaping pain through the immediate reward of pornography use.

Triggers and plans: Like most pornography users, John fell into set patterns or habits that caused him to fall short of his ideal behavior. To interrupt the cycle, John was asked to identify his triggers. For him it was work stress, lack of sleep, and times of boredom. John then developed ways to avoid recurring traps. His plans included taking a walk when tempting thoughts came, not taking his mobile phone into the bathroom, and retiring to bed every night at the same time as Jane.

Higher power: Even with a plan to avoid and address behavioral triggers, John still needed to interrupt experiencing his natural weakness. Most addiction recovery programs—whether alcohol, drugs, or pornography—have at their core a means for drawing on a higher power. Like other Christians, John chose to interrupt the shame cycle by shifting from needing to be flawless to turning to Jesus Christ when he made mistakes. Drawing on that divine source of power gave John (and Jane) the strength and hope to overcome.

Once again, in my ministering experience of helping men and women change patterns, I have learned that guilt is helpful, shame is not. I cannot emphasize this enough. So I will say it again. Guilt can be helpful. Shame is not helpful.

Guilt can be good if it leads us to change patterns of behavior. Shame triggers pain, and the quick, easy escape from pain leads us back into the destructive patterns of pornography use. We need to strive for homes and places of worship that are shame-free zones. Jesus Christ never shamed anyone, any time, any place, ever. Shame is the device the devil uses to keep addicts as addicts.

E: ENJOYMENT WILL COME

The fourth thing you must believe in order to have hope is that enjoyment in your life will come—eventually, with persistence.

A Biblical prophet wrote: “Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy: when I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me.”¹⁷ Micah knew God’s help is needed to be persistent when falling and rising, and in moving from darkness to light.

Persistence is a theme in one of our family’s favorite movies, *Galaxy Quest*. Commander Peter Quincy Taggart is an intergalactic ship’s captain whose signature line when facing overwhelming odds is “Never give up, never surrender.”¹⁸ Those struggling with pornography can take heart from his words, as can their spouse, parents, or loved ones. Never give up hope that you can change and overcome.

Persistence in overcoming the effects of pornography will lead to joy. One of the tenets of my faith comes from the Book of Mormon, where the prophet Lehi didn’t say, “Men are that they might have pleasure.” He wrote, “Men are that they might have joy.”¹⁹

Joy is a completely different emotion than pleasure. Pleasure is made up of short-term feelings of satisfaction, whereas joy is an enduring emotion. Joy is part of the human experience when we truly connect with our fellow man.

Let’s watch a video of pornography users and spouses who share that you really can be happy again. [*VIDEO: Will I be happy again? (1:53)*]

I promise that as pornography leaves your life or the life of your loved one, the joy that comes from feeling real emotion will grow. The joy that comes from experiencing real relationships can return again in a new and better form.

THE HOPE EFFECT

Let me restate the theme of today’s conference: the hope effect. A journey out of the harmful effects of pornography must begin with, continue with, and end in hope. Everyone who is trying to overcome pornography must believe, along with their spouse or loved ones, that:

- H**ealing is possible.
- O**penness brings strength.
- P**atterns can change.
- E**njoyment will come.

Many in attendance at this conference today may feel like refugees, which the dictionary defines as “a person who flees for refuge or safety, as in time of upheaval.” At a recent symposium about political refugees, my colleague Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said the following: “People can live without a lot of things. They can live sometimes without much food. They can live sometimes without much hygiene and nutrition. But they can’t live without hope. They need to know that it’s going to get better.”²⁰

I think his words apply not only to political refugees but also to pornography refugees. You must have hope. You must know that it’s going to get better.

As an ordained minister of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I would like to close with a verse from the Book of Mormon that offers hope to those who may feel like they are now in or have previously been in Dante's inferno. A father who struggled with a difficult path wrote near the end of his life: "The Lord hath redeemed my soul from hell; I have beheld his glory, and I am encircled about eternally in the arms of his love."²¹

My friends, I assure you that pornography use does not have to lead to your destruction, or to those who love you. You can come out of darkness and be illuminated by light.

At the center of that light is the Lord Jesus Christ. He encircles all, one by one, in the arms of His loving embrace—including the pornography user, his or her spouse, parents, and friends. He carries our burdens so they may feel light, and at times He will carry us when we think we can walk no further. No wonder the Bible calls Jesus "the hope of Israel."²²

Your journey out of Dante's inferno and the harmful effects of pornography must begin with, continue with, and end in hope. Never abandon hope. Never give up, never surrender. You must have hope. You must know that it's going to get better. I promise that it will. Thank you, and God bless you in your efforts.

Endnotes

- ¹ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, canto III, line 9.
- ² See dailyinfographic.com/the-stats-on-pornography-infographic.
- ³ Rather than go through all the research, I have opted to show the effects as summarized on the “Fight the New Drug” website at <http://fightthenewdrug.org/get-the-facts/>.
- ⁴ <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/h/helenkelle164579.html>.
- ⁵ <http://kuer.org/post/religious-communities-stigma-pornography-brings-consequences-its-own>.
- ⁶ Nathan D. Leonhardt, Brian J. Willoughby, and Bonnie Young-Petersen, “Damaged Goods: Perception of Pornography Addiction as a Mediator Between Religiosity and Relationship Anxiety Surrounding Pornography Use,” *The Journal of Sex Research*, published online March 13, 2017. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28287845>.
- ⁷ See ASAM Public Policy Statement: Definition of Addiction, approved April 19, 2011 (<https://www.asam.org/resources/definition-of-addiction>).
- ⁸ *Holy Bible*, Mark 1:40–42.
- ⁹ <https://uvhero.com/how-uv-light-kills-bacteria/>.
- ¹⁰ “Heartbreak and Hope: When a Spouse Uses Pornography,” *Ensign*, Feb. 2017, 38.
- ¹¹ See *Book of Mormon*, Jacob 2:35.
- ¹² James E. Faust, “Father, Come Home,” *Ensign*, May 1993, 36.
- ¹³ Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame*.
- ¹⁴ John-Paul Flintoff, “Brené Brown: ‘People Are Sick of Being Afraid All the Time,’” *The Guardian*, July 27, 2013.
- ¹⁵ *Holy Bible*, Matthew 5:48.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/25777-it-is-difficult-to-make-a-man-miserable-while-he>.
- ¹⁷ *Holy Bible*, Micah 7:8.
- ¹⁸ See *Galaxy Quest*, scene 2 (<http://www.scifiscripts.com/scripts/GalaxyQuest.txt>).
- ¹⁹ *Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 2:25.
- ²⁰ <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/faith-rebounding-refugee-status-elder-holland-windsor>.
- ²¹ *Book of Mormon*, 2 Nephi 1:15.
- ²² See *Holy Bible*, Jeremiah 14:8; 17:13.