

# “The Joy of the Lord Is Your Strength” (Nehemiah 8:10)

TRUMAN G. MADSEN

**B**rothers and sisters, the chorale has given my message in music and President Bateman has given my message in prose. So let’s go back to class.

Ann and I are grateful to be in your midst in the Thanksgiving season. I have a cheerful message, and smiles will be permitted and even encouraged.

“I’m writing a book on joy,” said a rabbi to a colleague of mine in New York. That book found that one root of the word *joy* in the Old Testament is *chemdah*. When it is conjoined with the phrase “of the Lord,” it means three things. It means gladness; it means togetherness or being joined one with another; and it means something about the temple. Nehemiah was the rebuilder of the temple. The phrase “joy of the Lord” attends his invitation to the newly rebuilt temple.

Now our sacred texts place joy in the same mode, and our history writes it in flesh and blood.

Brigham Young, whose institution this is, said about the terrible persecutions and drivings of our people:

*You that have not passed through the trials, and persecutions . . . , but have only read of them . . . may think how awful they were to endure, and*

*wonder that the Saints survived them at all. The thought of it makes your hearts sink within you . . . , and you are ready to exclaim, “I could not have endured it.” I have been in the heat of it, and I never felt better in all my life; I never felt the peace and power of the Almighty more copiously poured upon me than in the keenest part of our trials. They appeared nothing to me. [JD 1:313]*

Brigham Young has a witness, Heber C. Kimball, who said:

*Often when I have been in the presence of brother Brigham, we would feel such a buoyant spirit that when we began to talk we could not express our feelings, and so, “Hallelujah,” says Brigham, “Glory to God,” says I. I feel it and say it. [JD 4:222]*

A second witness is Eliza R. Snow, who said, “None but saints can be happy under every circumstance” (in Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* [Salt Lake City: s.n., 1975], 146).

My great-grandfather Jedediah M. Grant once said that even when he was at the grave

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site of his baby girl buried on the plains, he felt near unto heaven. He said:

*It has given me much of trouble, and a great amount of perseverance, to be happy under all circumstances. I have learned not to fret myself. It has taken me a great while to arrive at this point. . . .*

*. . . I thank the Lord for the bitter as well as for the sweet. . . .*

*. . . I want the Saints to live in a way that they can feel happy all the time, and then we shall enjoy the Holy Spirit. [JD 3:11–12]*

We all know that the Spirit brings joy. The revelation to me is that joy brings the Spirit. When we are happy, the Spirit flows more freely—otherwise, it does not.

Looking back, our Church presidents and also their wives have said together in different ways that because of the gospel and the joy of the Lord, the sufferings of the wicked are far more than the sufferings of the righteous. And the Plains epic is their metaphor for our lives.

Remember, adventurers and fortune seekers left civilization, and left acting civilized, to race west to the mines—every man for himself. The Saints became a community on wheels. They were linked by a common cause. They went in the name of the Lord. The desperadoes and the explorers went with the obsession to be first and to strike it rich and to jump claims—even to gun down their opponents. The Mormon Battalion left the goldfields without gold to return to their wives and families and to create a new culture and a new civilization in the vision of Zion. The Saints sometimes died in each other's arms with a prayer. That cannot be said of some of those in the Donner party. The Saints had covenanted to pool their resources so that every person—able-bodied or not—could make this rite of passage. Their temple was burned behind them; their anticipated temple was 1,000 miles and 40 years away. But the beginning and end of their journey was Christ.

Now, what of today? Perhaps we can credit the computer for our increasing impatience. This generation is intent on what they want and how they want it and when. Don't wait for next week. Forget others. Forget nonsense about rules. Play the game your way. Cut corners. Make your own rules. We may be in the midst of the most impatient generation in history. But the truth is that all supernal joys take time and discipline and discipleship.

We are taught that the opposite of humility is arrogance, and our prophet has recently alerted us against that. I suggest that the opposite of meekness is demandingness. "I demand mine." Some of us are apparently willing to do anything wrong in order to get our rights. But the teaching of Jesus turns that upside down. The meek will inherit the earth precisely because they understand the kind of caring that leads to sharing. And they demand, like the Christ, nothing. They pray as He prayed for deliverance and relief. But their blessings flow unto them without compulsory means because they submit to a higher and wiser will.

In the academy just now, one of the purr words is *postmodernism*. The superficialized thesis is that anything goes, that no one can say what is true or false or what is good or bad. But this stance is not really post- and it is not modern. It was old when Socrates was young. I submit that it is sometimes willful ignorance of human history—that a self-centered life is just as good as any other life. That is the attitude, I suggest, of sick souls. When it enters our presence, it becomes the 14th article of faith, which negates the other 13: "We believe in narcissism." Modern scripture has a definition of this. It is called "seeking to be a law unto yourself." For such there is a guaranteed result.

It was Dostoyevsky's character Ivan Karamazov who believed that if God is dead, then everything is allowed. Well, both the premise and the conclusion are misleading. Neither God nor law tell you what you must do. That is a fiction. They tell you what the

inevitable consequences will be of what you do do. So here is an absolute that is not obsolete. It is more reliable than the second law of thermodynamics. Put negatively, if you seek your own immediate gratification and ignore, neglect, or, worse, exploit others, you will not find joy. You will find a chimera. And if you persist, you will find misery. You cannot find joy that way any more than you can jump off your own shadow.

As a little boy I used to try to see the refrigerator door turn the light off. Did you ever try that? I hurt my nose badly. You can't see the light turn off because the door is closed before the light goes off. Let us put it positively, as Jesus did: "If you lose yourself for my sake and the gospel's, you will rejoice and be exceeding glad. You will experience the joy of the Lord."

For it is not chance but choice that is involved here. Each of us has some control over finding joy. To paraphrase Elder Marion D. Hanks: "No matter how we live, there will be pain in this world. But misery is optional." Think about it. Christ is against selfishness and sin—not because He is the giant spoilsport, but the other way around. He is against sin and selfishness because He is against despondency and melancholy and morbidity. He is against the shrinking of our capacity for fulfillment. On this He is the world's leading expert. He knows. As the book of Hebrews has it, "For the joy that was set before him [He] endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). Whose joy did He envision? Ours. He saw beyond our sins and stupidities and our clumsy mistakes. He knows what we have within us to become. And having paid the awful price in blood, He is entitled to alert us to reality.

This changes the kinds of questions we ask of life. Instead of "What's in it for me?" we ask, "What's in it for those I love or should love?" Instead of "Why am I having such a hard time?" we ask, "Am I growing through my hard times? Can I see any meaning or purpose for the good of the kingdom in my struggle?"

Instead of "How soon can I get what I want?" we ask, "Can I train my desires to be a better friend of Christ?" All these questions become prayers: "And however long it takes, dear Lord, stay with me."

For the Latter-day Saints the plight is better—or worse. We were not only born with the Light of Christ, but we have also been exposed to an environment of light. We have been exposed to the roots and the fruits of the tree of life. In our hearts we all know the difference between His way and all other ways. One result is expressed in Heber C. Kimball's ungrammatical sentence after the Saints had made covenants in the Nauvoo Temple. He said, "You can't sin so cheap no more" (1844 journal, LDS Church Historical Library, Salt Lake City).

Whatever diminishes our relish for spiritual things, whatever we cannot consistently invite the Spirit to attend, is not for us. Sin and selfishness are furtive, they are half-hearted, and they are self-dividing. But Christ's way is whole-hearted, and the wholeness becomes holiness. Sin cannot sing. The music of sin is a dirge. It is a wilderness crying in a voice. But Christ's way is song—a new song, a lifting song. Sin loves darkness and covers up. It is darkening. But Christ's way is light. And light cleaves to light. Sin and the defiant defense of sin is ugly. Christ's way is beautiful. And everlastingly so. There is no joy in iniquity and, contrary to the world, there is no joy in inequity. We are promised that one day, should we be faithful, we will be equal in heavenly things and even ultimately in earthly things.

Now let me name three dimensions of joy—all of which, I think, require the Spirit and revelatory awareness.

### 1. The Joys of Mission

These are what I call right-track feelings: the sense that no matter where we are or what we are doing, we are on the Lord's errand—that we are serving Him even in trifles. The conviction is that where you are is the best place for you to

be as long as you need to be there. This applies even to sickbeds and dentists' chairs. It even applies to prisons. Such a sermon was delivered in the state penitentiary. Afterward, a young man forgot himself and prayed, "Bless all those who aren't here this time that they may be here next time." That is going a little too far.

In the Church, our purr word is *active*, and it is of course crucial. But even if we are partially disabled—and we are, most of us, in various ways—even then, if the heart is continually filled with righteous desires, they themselves are transforming. The activity Christ most cares about is within us amidst the bustle. In short, wherever we are can be a pleasant place if Christ approves us there and attends us there.

It is said that a man in Jerusalem was given a job of going daily to a flat roof and looking toward the east to anticipate the Messiah. Asked about it, he said, "Well, the pay isn't much, but the work is steady." We all have that steady job. It was assigned us by the Master—assigned the Saints when they were driven out in midwinter in Missouri. The counsel was, "Seek the face of the Lord always, that in patience ye may possess your souls" (D&C 101:38). Again, at Winter Quarters, history repeated itself. The Lord said, "If thou art sorrowful, call on the Lord thy God with supplication, that your souls may be joyful" (D&C 136:29). When He said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33), His disciples had almost nothing to cheer about except their relationship with Him and the transcending anticipation of His return.

## 2. The Joys of the Senses

H. L. Mencken scored religious people as those who live in mortal dread "that someone, somewhere, may be happy" (in "Sententiae," *A Mencken Chrestomathy* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949], 624). It is a sharp indictment. It is also one of the superstitions of the irreligious, I suggest, that religious people cannot have fun.

We work at it in this church. Well, our religion is not Mencken's religion. It is the religion of the glad tidings of the Master. Notice His promised rewards for keeping the Sabbath. He only imposed one condition. He said we should keep the Sabbath "with a glad heart and a cheerful countenance" (D&C 59:15). And then He promised

*the good things of the earth, and it shall bring forth in its strength. . . .*

*. . . To please the eye and to gladden the heart;*

*. . . For food and for raiment, for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul.*  
[D&C 59:3, 18–19]

He calls this "the fulness of the earth" (D&C 59:16). He even defines fasting and prayer—fasting ordinarily conjoined with mourning—with rejoicing and prayer (vs. 14).

Further, the Master did not say we would only be happy when we transcend the earth. He said, instead, that this very earth transformed will become heaven. He said that even here we may begin to enjoy that which shall be in full hereafter. At this level, joy and pleasure are not opposed—they are combined.

When Jesus said through John in his epistle, "Love not the world," He meant, "Love not the wickedness of the world" (JST 1 John 2:15).

And when He said to keep "unspotted from the world" (D&C 59:9), it was actually to keep "unspotted from the vices of the world" (JST James 1:27).

He did not say the body is intrinsically evil. Yes, this body can be easily perverted and abused, but He taught that this body is a temple that is a house of light and glory. It can be a Stradivarius violin on which, if we permit Him, He can, as Master Musician, play. I was struck this morning again by a line reflecting Joseph Smith: "Man of himself is an instrument of music" (Joseph Young, "Vocal Music," *History of the Organization of the Seventies* [Salt Lake City: Joseph E. Massey Restoration

Publisher, 1970], 14). Through his modern prophet the Lord has promised that the Spirit will not only illumine our minds but heighten all our senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. What else is a glorious resurrection?

Now the devil's game is to convince you that he is the king of enjoyment. He advertises shortcuts to ecstasy. "Buy into my game," he says, "and the rewards are all here in glittering neon." But, as usual, he lies. He lies big time. In wrath over his own permanent unembodiment, he either taunts us that the body is nothing—and we seek then a kind of negative spirituality—or he tells us the opposite. The body is everything. And you know where that leads. In abject misery of his own making, he seeks to make all men miserable like himself. He is a double-crosser. He keeps no promises. He not only doesn't deliver, he enslaves. He is the saddest of sadists in the universe.

The Savior, in contrast, will never, ever tamper with your freedom, except if you cooperate with Him to increase it. I count 75 times in the Doctrine and Covenants where He pleads with us to "ask, seek." But He will not force. He has everything to give that the devil claims to have, and He has never broken a promise yet.

### 3. The Joys of Contemplation and Anticipation

Jesus said in modern revelation, "If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge" (D&C 42:61). Is there joy in learning, however difficult? Yes. All learning can be fulfilling and helpful: skills, talents, problem solving, earning a living. But below that is an undergirding quest. Listen to what He most wants us to learn. The Lord finished His sentence with "that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things—that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal" (D&C 42:61). Peaceable things? That which bringeth joy? The context of this is the temple. Temples are where all levels of joy combine, where togetherness with Him and with others is

hallowed and sealed into families. The temple is a magnifying glass of such learning and of such lasting love. There you see your mission in life in the framework of eternity. There mind and spirit and senses are reawakened to the grandeur of the earth and of its joys. The temple is our most direct access to His mighty intelligence. And I trust the line that He is "more intelligent than they all" (Abraham 3:19). This is the glory of God. This is light and truth.

In the house of the Lord, it is as if we are in the Panama Canal. The Spirit comes up, as it were, under us and lifts us, and when we leave, we leave on a different ocean. But at the same time we are there, the vessel itself is healed and repaired and recommissioned and floats away prepared for the batterings and the confusions of daily life. The Prophet said, speaking of these heavenly, peace-giving truths:

*I can taste the principles of eternal life, and so can you. . . . You say honey is sweet, and so do I. I can also taste the spirit of eternal life. I know that it is good; and when I tell you of these things which were given me by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, you are bound to receive them as sweet, and rejoice more and more. [HC 6:312]*

In the original Joseph Smith said, "I rejoice more and more." Which did he mean? I, or you? He meant both, because in that process, we have been told, "both are edified and rejoice together" (D&C 50:22). The temple and those within it are a perpetual prayer for the fulness of the Holy Ghost. And that means ultimately the fulness of joy (see D&C 109:15, 79–80).

But is there such a thing as the fulness of joy? Well, there is a portrait of how these dimensions came together once in this world. Near a temple in a land called Bountiful, Jesus, who had been rejected and crucified and abandoned, now found Himself in the midst of a multitude of men, women, and children who had survived a three-hour earthquake. (By the



way, this is one of the most authentic notes in the Book of Mormon. It says “three hours.” But then there is another phrase: “and it was said by some that the time was greater” [3 Nephi 8:19]. I’ve been in a 20-second earthquake, and I was already in serious trouble.)

As we are told in 3 Nephi 17, the people of Bountiful not only listened but received Him for whom He is. He could not do many mighty works at home, but in His new home He healed the crippled and the wounded and perhaps those who had other kinds of afflictions. All of them fell to their knees and in prayer poured out gratitude. The Book of Mormon says the Spirit taught them what they should pray. They had been commanded, as we have, to pray to the Father in the name of Christ. But now they prayed to Him, calling Him their Lord and their God.

And the Lord said, almost apologetically, in His prayer, “Father, . . . they pray unto me because I am with them” (3 Nephi 19:22). In how many ways with them! He prayed that they would be one with Him, as He is with the Father. And now they were.

Does the story end there? Not yet. He had called for their little children. Textbooks say that children have some innate fears, among them the fear of falling, the fear of loud noises, the identification with the terror and screams of others. Don’t you think little children after a three-hour earthquake would be clinging to their parents, bewildered, and shyly recoiling from strangers?

But He was no stranger. All of the children were brought forward and were completely comfortable in His presence. He then said, “Blessed are ye because of your faith. And now behold, my joy is full” (3 Nephi 17:20). This is the only place in scripture that I know of where He spoke of His own fulness of joy. When He had said these words, He wept. And with exquisite tenderness He scooped the little children up one by one and blessed them as the parents and grown-up children beheld.

Shortly after a sacramental feast, Christ turned from His own prayers to see them all—men, women, and children—kneeling, whitened and lightened and transformed. In the record we are told that what they saw and felt defied words. But they tried. They said, “No one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls at the time we heard him pray for us unto the Father” (3 Nephi 17:17). He bade them arise, but they did not because they were overcome. The power of that experience lasted in the memories of their children and their children’s children for 200 years.

The resurrected Jesus Christ was the fulfillment in their presence of His own prophecy to us. “Spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy” (D&C 93:33). The joy of the Lord became their strength, as it can become ours.

My Quaker great-grandmother was named Rachel. Joseph Smith taught her. She had to reverse her notions from the past that there was little or no room for singing or dancing or playfulness or humor or for turning fasting into feasting. But on the theme of cultivating the inner light, she found in the fulness of the gospel confirmation of her earlier faith. Widowed nine days after the birth of her only son, she toiled her way through nagging poverty. She forced the bishop to take her tithing when there were six pans on the floor catching the leaks from the roof. And, brothers and sisters, in this day of growth in the Church, just count Chile and the Philippines only and you have a million Latter-day Saints who are living pretty much with a tin roof and a dirt floor and the 23rd Psalm on the wall.

Rachel served for 35 years as a Relief Society president. Even while hurting, she helped those who hurt more. During those years she was completely deaf and therefore more sensitive to the Light or its absence in those around her. She could not believe the promise made her by a patriarch that as Rachel of old she would have a worthy posterity. She had only one son. Her

own portraits and the fading photographs are a study of clear eyes and serenity—she had the face of a saint. Last night we attended the 100th family reunion of her posterity. There are 700, and they are all of them in the world and of the world of Jesus Christ.

Brothers and sisters, this Light of the Spirit cannot be faked. All of the theater lights and stages and camera trickery and Photoshop manipulation may convince the unaware that artificial light has the same effect. It does not. Artificial light ends with the flipping of a switch. It is merely a backhanded tribute to Light. Christ is the Life and the Light—the Light that lightens hearts through thick and thin.

So I sum this up with two quotations again from Brother Brigham:

*There is not a man or woman on this earth, whose peace is made with God, and who are associated with holy beings, and seeking after holy principles, but their countenances are lit up with a lamp of divine cheerfulness.* [Sermon by Brigham Young, 1 October 1854, Historians Office Report of Speeches, LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City]

And again, elsewhere:

*I say, if you want to enjoy exquisitely, become a Latter-day Saint, and then live the doctrine of Jesus Christ. The man or woman who will do this will enjoy and endure most; and if they will be humble and faithful they will enjoy the glory and the excellency of the power of God, and be prepared to live with Gods and with angels.* [JD 18:247]

We are approaching the season to be jolly. But it can be more—it can be the season to be joyful. Let us come and adore Him. Let us sing the “songs of everlasting joy” (D&C 109:39, 133:33).

My testimony is this: I have been around a while, and I have read and spent at least half of my life looking at alternative religions and outlooks. And I suppose also I am a bit of an expert on the alternative death styles that are out there. One of the strongest arguments ever imposed upon me against this religion is that it is too good to be true. My testimony to you is, it is good and true and beautiful. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.