

Enduring Joy

KEVIN J WORTHEN

During this past October general conference, two members of the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder D. Todd Christofferson and Elder Neil L. Andersen, shared the exact same quote from a talk given by President Russell M. Nelson in the October 2016 general conference,¹ when President Nelson was serving as president of the Quorum of the Twelve. Although it is always good to follow the counsel of prophets, seers, and revelators, I have learned to pay particular attention to those instances in which more than one of them focuses on the same topic—or, as in this case, the exact same words—at the same time. My desire to carefully reread President Nelson’s 2016 talk increased when I noted that Elder Dale G. Renlund also cited that same talk in his October 2019 general conference address.² Clearly these brethren had been reading President Nelson’s October 2016 talk. Clearly, I thought, I should do the same.

President Nelson opened his October 2016 talk by stating that he was going “to discuss a

principle that is key to our spiritual survival.”³ I thought, “No wonder Elders Christofferson, Andersen, and Renlund referenced the talk.” President Nelson then upped the ante by adding, “It is a principle that will only become more important as the tragedies and travesties around us increase.”⁴ Now he had my full attention: “a principle that is key to our spiritual survival” and one “that will only become more important as” our challenges increase. What was that principle?

President Nelson introduced the principle by reviewing the life of Lehi as recorded in the Book of Mormon. Lehi was persecuted, mocked, and even physically threatened because of his belief in God and his desire to keep God’s commandments. He left behind the comforts of home to go out into an unknown wilderness because of his commitment to God. He suffered hunger and other deprivations. Some of his sons rebelled against him. His was not an easy life. President Nelson summed up Lehi’s life in terms that may sound

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on January 7, 2020.

a bit like your life at times: “Clearly, Lehi knew opposition, anxiety, heartache, pain, disappointment, and sorrow.”⁵ President Nelson also noted that, in these trying circumstances, “Lehi taught a principle for spiritual survival”⁶ by declaring “boldly and without reservation a principle as revealed by the Lord: ‘Men are, that they might have joy.’”⁷

There it is. Joy is the key to our spiritual survival in the trying times in which we live, as well as in the trying times that lie ahead of us. When we experience “opposition, anxiety, heartache, pain, disappointment, and sorrow”—things all of us are likely to face in this coming year—how are we to survive? By tapping into the power of joy.

Experiencing “a Fulness of Joy”

I believe we often underestimate the importance of the concept of joy. Without much thought, we sometimes casually wish others a joyous holiday season or invite them to spread joy. But I am not sure we fully appreciate how central joy is to God’s plan for us. And it seems that our current leaders, from President Nelson on down, are now trying to draw our attention to it. In fact, according to a word search on the Gospel Library app, the word *joy* was used 149 times in this most recent general conference—more than double the sixty-five references in the April 2019 conference and nearly triple the fifty-four references in the October 2018 general conference. To use the current social-media parlance, joy was clearly trending in this last general conference.

And the trend goes beyond general conference. The December 2019 issue of the *Ensign* and *Liahona* magazines focused on the concept of joy. Elder Patrick Kearon, a General Authority Seventy, quoted President Nelson’s talk on joy in his remarks at the First Presidency Christmas devotional just four weeks ago,⁸ as did Sister Jean B. Bingham in her recent BYU devotional talk here at the Marriott Center.⁹ Add to that Elder David A. Bednar’s BYU devotional last December,¹⁰ which focused on joy, and it is clear that joy is one of the principles that current Church leaders want us to consider more deeply.

So my request for this coming year is that we focus more on joy; that we seek to understand it better; that we come to view it not just as a mental or emotional concept or feeling of comfort but as a principle of power—power to survive and thrive spiritually and otherwise; and that we come to experience what President Nelson has called “enduring joy.”¹¹

So we begin by asking, “What is joy?” That is not a simple question. It is a question that philosophers, psychologists, songwriters, theologians, and poets have explored and debated for millennia. Part of the difficulty is that language is a little imprecise and ultimately inadequate to capture the concept fully. For example, some distinguish happiness from joy, although in scriptures and prophetic teachings those terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

However, this much seems clear: joy is not merely a temporary emotion but rather a more permanent and constant condition. As stated in the Guide to the Scriptures, joy is “a condition of great happiness coming from righteous living.”¹² It is not some momentary sensation of rejoicing but a condition—a state of being.

King Benjamin described it this way:

*Consider on the **blessed and happy state** of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness.*¹³

President Dallin H. Oaks explained it this way:

Joy is the ultimate sensation of well-being. It comes from being complete and in harmony with our Creator and his eternal laws.

The opposite of joy is misery. Misery is more than unhappiness, sorrow, or suffering. Misery is the ultimate state of disharmony with God and his laws.

*Joy and misery are eternal emotions whose ultimate extent we are not likely to experience in mortality. In this life we have some mortal simulations, which we call happiness or pleasure and unhappiness or pain.*¹⁴

Notice three common elements in King Benjamin's and Elder Oaks's descriptions:

1. In its fulness, joy is a condition or state of being; it is a constant.
2. It comes from living in harmony with God's laws, from keeping His commandments.
3. We may not experience it fully in this life. Indeed, because of the limits of our mortal bodies and finite minds, we likely cannot even fully describe or understand this condition.

As President Nelson noted, God "offers an intensity, depth, and breadth of joy that defy human logic or mortal comprehension."¹⁵ In fact, the scriptures indicate that we can completely experience "a fulness of joy" only after resurrection, when our perfected bodies and spirits are "inseparably connected."¹⁶

Thus joy is in one sense a description of our ultimate destiny. Joy is at the center of God's plan for us. The book of Job recorded that when that plan was presented to us in the premortal existence, we "shouted for joy."¹⁷ Note that the scripture indicates we shouted *for* joy and not *with* joy. It may well be that we were not just generally rejoicing at the announcement of the plan but rather were celebrating the concept of joy itself, shouting *for* joy, overwhelmed at the beauty and depth of the concept of joy and our realization that we, too, might enter into that state of being that our Heavenly Parents enjoyed. As Joseph Smith put it, joy or "happiness is the object and design of our existence."¹⁸ Joy is the very purpose for which we, and everything else in the cosmos, were created. Thus it should be no surprise that it was the "good tidings of great joy"¹⁹ that the angel pronounced to the shepherds at Jesus's birth.

However, just because we may not completely experience a fulness of joy in this life, it does not mean that we are without joy in the world. Adam and Eve both recognized that their choices in the Garden of Eden made it possible that "in this life [we] shall have joy," even "the joy of our redemption."²⁰

Indeed, one of the purposes of this life is to develop our capacity for joy—and the extent

to which we do that will impact the degree to which we will experience joy both in this life and even more in the world to come. As Elder Jack H. Goaslind once observed, "Our joy in God's kingdom will be a natural extension of the happiness we cultivate in this life."²¹ Thus Moroni taught that our level of joy does not automatically change with death. When the Judgment comes, he wrote, "he that is happy shall be happy still; and he that is unhappy shall be unhappy still."²²

Thus, even though we may not experience a complete fulness of joy until the next life, it is very much in our interest to do what we can to experience all the joy we can in this life—both because it will make our current lives better and because it will better prepare us for our ultimate destiny to experience the fulness of joy that God wants to share with us.

So how do we do that? How can we cultivate more joy in our lives now and thereby increase our capacity to experience joy in the next life? Let me share six suggestions.

Cultivating More Joy in Our Lives

First, we need to recognize, and constantly remember, that our ability to have joy in this life—and in the eternities—is not dependent on external conditions. As President Nelson so eloquently put it:

The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

When the focus of our lives is on God's plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives.²³

This is the quote that Elders Christofferson and Andersen cited in their most recent general conference talks. This is the quote that Elder Kearon shared in the Christmas devotional and that Sister Bingham shared in her most recent BYU devotional. It is so contrary to what many in the world think—and that erroneous thinking diverts us from joy—that it bears repeating:

The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

When the focus of our lives is on God’s plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives.

This is not a mere abstract concept. It is to be taken literally. President Nelson made this clear:

For example, it doesn’t seem possible to feel joy when your child suffers with an incurable illness or when you lose your job or when your spouse betrays you. Yet that is precisely the joy the Savior offers. His joy is constant.²⁴

This is what President Nelson invites us, as well as all the world, to experience—what he calls “enduring joy”—joy that can exist even when we fail a test, feel rejected, or face ridicule. It is a joy that does not need to wait until midterms, finals, or any other unpleasant task is over before we feel it. True joy, even the somewhat diluted but still overwhelming²⁵ brand we can experience in this life, transcends our circumstances. So don’t wait for your circumstances to change before experiencing an increase of joy. Draw on the power of joy in every situation.

Second, we should recognize and remember that enduring joy—constant joy—does not mean uninterrupted bliss and a life free of challenges. Suffering and adversity are part of the eternal plan, a part of the process by which we come to develop enduring joy. Joy helps us transcend temporary trials; it does not eliminate them from our lives. As Elder Lawrence E. Corbridge recently noted, “Suffering and joy are not incompatible but essential companions. You can suffer and never know joy, but *you can’t have joy without suffering.*”²⁶

Even God, who is the very essence of joy, experiences sorrow. As recorded in Moses 7, God weeps over the wrong choices of His children and over their resulting, unnecessary sufferings.²⁷ But, at the very same time, He comforts those who join in that sorrow by instructing them to “lift up your heart, and be glad,”²⁸ because those who embrace

His plan “shall come forth with songs of everlasting joy.”²⁹

So don’t let Satan fool you into thinking that you are failing in your quest for joy because you have tough days. All of us do. Satan wants us to be miserable like unto him,³⁰ and one way he strives to do that is by discouraging us into thinking that the challenges and difficulties we experience are the result of our own inadequacies and prove that we are not worthy of joy. But many of life’s events are beyond our control. We may struggle with mental health issues or be radically affected by the inadvertent, or even intentional, misdeeds of others, or maybe we just struggle because of the vicissitudes of life. If so, we should not blame ourselves or think ourselves beyond God’s reach. Instead we should recognize that with the Savior’s help, we can still experience joy—even in the midst of our afflictions. As President Nelson explained, because of Christ “we can feel joy even while having a bad day, a bad week, or even a bad year!”³¹ When you experience the inevitable challenges that lie ahead, believe in God and believe that He is concerned for you individually. He will weep with you, even as He bids you to “lift up your heart, and be glad.”

And when you are struggling, do not overlook the positive impact that you can have on others even while you are feeling inadequate. You are probably doing much better than you think, and others around are uplifted even when you are struggling inwardly. I often meet with distinguished visitors to campus. Many of them are struck by the joy they feel radiating from the students on campus. They labor to describe *what* they feel as they mingle with students, and they search for words to explain *why* they feel it. One such visitor asked me if we had “a happiness initiative” on campus. I responded that we did not, that it was just the natural disposition of our students. I am sure that not every student this visitor met was having the best day ever; some, I am sure, were struggling. Yet they still radiated joy that uplifted this visitor—and many others. I realized later that I had missed a wonderful missionary opportunity. When I was asked if we had a happiness initiative, I should have said, “Yes. It is called the plan of happiness. Would you like to learn more about it?”

Third, recognize and remember that true joy, enduring joy—the joy that many visitors to campus sense—ultimately comes only through keeping God’s commandments. Remember, King Benjamin indicated that joy describes “the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God.” Indeed, the commandments are the guidelines or the requirements for experiencing enduring joy.³² As Joseph Smith explained:

*Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God.*³³

It is only when we live in accordance with celestial law that we are able to experience celestial joy. As section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants makes clear, “For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.”³⁴

And one of those commandments is to love our neighbors³⁵ and to demonstrate that love through serving them, whether it be through formal ministering assignments or just through simple deeds of kindness for a roommate or a stranger. Focusing on the well-being of others increases our joy, regardless of our external circumstances. As Elder Goaslind once observed, “One key to maintaining your happiness in spite of adversity” is to follow Christ’s commandment to lose our lives for the sake of others.³⁶ It is concern for the well-being of others that gives God joy.³⁷ It is in following Him and His example that we will experience that same fulness.

President Nelson summed up the connection between joy and keeping the commandments with this very practical, but powerful, observation:

Every time we nurture our spouse and guide our children, every time we forgive someone or ask for forgiveness, we can feel joy.

*Every day that you and I choose to live celestial laws, every day that we keep our covenants and help others to do the same, joy will be ours.*³⁸

Fourth, because we will not in our mortal state keep the commandments perfectly, repentance is a critical part of experiencing enduring joy. Many in the world, and too many in the Church, view repentance as an unpleasant, even dreaded process, confusing the consequences of failing to repent with repentance itself. However, as Elder Christofferson explained, just the opposite is true:

*When prophets come crying repentance, [some say] it “throws cold water on the party.” But in reality the prophetic call should be received with joy. . . . Repentance is a divine gift, and there should be a smile on our faces when we speak of it. . . . Rather than interrupting the celebration, the gift of repentance is the cause for true celebration.*³⁹

One stake president wisely observed that “if we really understood the doctrine of repentance, we would run to repent.”⁴⁰ Reflecting this same understanding, one of my Church colleagues confided in me that one of his goals was to be in the Repentance Hall of Fame.

This does not mean that repentance is easy or that it should be done casually. President Nelson has taught, “To repent from sin is not easy. But the prize is worth the price.”⁴¹

Repentance always stretches our souls, sometimes beyond what we think we can stand, as Alma the Younger discovered. But the joy Alma felt as a result was so great that, once he had experienced it, he “labored without ceasing, that [he] might bring [other] souls unto repentance; that [he] might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which [he] did taste.”⁴²

So if we want to experience joy, we need to repent—and to even repent joyfully. Because, as President Nelson observed, “when we choose to repent, we choose to . . . receive joy—the joy of redemption.”⁴³

Fifth, we need to recognize and remember that joy is a principle of power. Joy is not just a reward for a lifetime effort to follow God’s commandments and to repent when we fail. Joy can increase our ability to stay on the covenant path that leads to enduring joy, to do things we might

not otherwise be able to accomplish. As President Nelson explained, “Joy is powerful, and focusing on joy brings God’s power into our lives.”⁴⁴

As proof of this truth, President Nelson pointed to the example of the Savior, “‘who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross’ [Hebrews 12:2]. Think of that! In order for Him to endure the most excruciating experience ever endured on earth, our Savior focused on joy!”⁴⁵

Similarly, we can bring God’s power into our lives by focusing on joy. President Nelson asked:

If we focus on the joy that will come to us, or to those we love, what can we endure that presently seems overwhelming, painful, scary, unfair, or simply impossible? . . .

. . . What repenting will then be possible? What weakness will become a strength? What chastening will become a blessing? What disappointments, even tragedies, will turn to our good? And what challenging service to the Lord will we be able to give?⁴⁶

Sixth, and finally, all of this is possible only because of Jesus Christ. President Nelson summed it up: “How, then, can we claim . . . joy? We can start by ‘looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith’ ‘in every thought.’”⁴⁷

Let me repeat again, with a little different emphasis, the quote that so many Church leaders have recently shared:

The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

*When the focus of our lives is on God’s plan of salvation . . . and **Jesus Christ and His gospel**, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives. **Joy comes from and because of Him. He is the source of all joy. . . . For Latter-day Saints, Jesus Christ is joy!**⁴⁸*

Thus Christ is not only “the author and finisher of our faith” but is, in one sense, the author and finisher of our joy. We begin to have joy when we focus on Christ. We can then bring the power of Christ into our lives by focusing on joy.

I bear witness that He lives and that because He lives, we can, in the world to come, experience the fulness of joy that is part of our eternal destiny, if we so choose. And in this life we can, through joy, survive and flourish spiritually. May we more fully experience the power of joy in the coming year is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. In D. Todd Christofferson, “The Joy of the Saints,” *Ensign*, November 2019, and Neil L. Andersen, “Fruit,” *Ensign*, November 2019; quoting Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2016:

The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

When the focus of our lives is on God’s plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives. Joy comes from and because of Him. He is the source of all joy.

2. See Dale G. Renlund, “Unwavering Commitment to Jesus Christ,” *Ensign*, November 2019, endnote 16.

3. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival.”

4. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival.”

5. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival.”

6. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival.”

7. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival”; quoting 2 Nephi 2:25.

8. See Sydney Walker, “Bring the Savior into Focus This Christmas Season, Elder Kearon Says,” *Church News*, 8 December 2019, churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/bring-the-savior-into-focus-this-christmas-season-elder-kearon-says?lang=eng.

9. See Jean B. Bingham, “How to Be Happy Now—and Forever,” BYU devotional address, 10 December 2019.

10. See David A. Bednar, “That They Might Have Joy,” BYU devotional address, 4 December 2018.

11. Russell M. Nelson, “Let Us All Press On,” *Ensign*, May 2018:

Our message to the world is simple and sincere: we invite all of God's children on both sides of the veil to come unto their Savior, receive the blessings of the holy temple, have enduring joy, and qualify for eternal life.

12. Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "joy," churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs.
13. Mosiah 2:41; emphasis added.
14. Dallin H. Oaks, "Joy and Mercy," *Ensign*, November 1991.
15. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival."
16. D&C 93:33–34; also D&C 138:17. See also D&C 101:36: "In this world your joy is not full, but in me your joy is full."
17. Job 38:7.
18. Joseph Smith, "Happiness," HC 5:134. President Joseph F. Smith similarly taught:

*The object of our earthly existence is that we may have a fulness of joy, and that we may become the sons and daughters of God, in the fullest sense of the word, being heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus Christ [see Romans 8:14–17], to be kings and priests unto God, to inherit glory, dominion, exaltation, thrones and every power and attribute developed and possessed by our Heavenly Father. This is the object of our being on this earth. [GD, 439; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (1998), 100; emphasis added]*

19. Luke 2:10.
20. Moses 5:10, 11.
21. Jack H. Goaslind, "Happiness," *Ensign*, May 1986.
22. Mormon 9:14.
23. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival."
24. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival."
25. See Alma 27:17: "The joy of Ammon was so great even that he was full; yea, he was swallowed up in the joy of his God, even to the exhausting of his strength."
26. Lawrence E. Corbridge, "Survive or Thrive," Days of '47 Sunrise Service address, Salt Lake City, 24 July 2019, Sons of Utah Pioneers, sup1847.com/s/2019SunriseServiceTalk.pdf; emphasis in original. Quoted in Spencer Williams, "Elder Corbridge Shares Important Takeaways Latter-day Saints

Can Learn from the Early Pioneers," Leaders and Ministry, *Church News*, 24 July 2019, thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2019-07-24/elder-corbridge-shares-important-takeaways-latter-day-saints-can-learn-from-the-early-pioneers-90.

27. See Moses 7:28–29, 32–33, 37.
 28. Moses 7:44.
 29. Moses 7:53.
 30. See 2 Nephi 2:27.
 31. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival."
 32. See John 15:10–11:
- If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love. . . .*
These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

33. Joseph Smith, "Happiness," HC 5:134–35.
34. D&C 88:22.
35. See Mark 12:30–31.
36. Goaslind, "Happiness"; see Luke 9:24: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it."
37. As President Marion G. Romney once observed:

Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.

*Knowing that service is what gives our Father in Heaven fulfillment, and knowing that we want to be where He is and as He is, why must we be commanded to serve one another? Oh, for the glorious day when these things all come naturally because of the purity of our hearts. In that day there will be no need for a commandment because we will have experienced for ourselves that we are truly happy only when we are engaged in unselfish service. ["The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982]*

38. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival."
39. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Divine Gift of Repentance," *Ensign*, November 2011.
40. A quote by a stake president at a stake leadership meeting mentioned by Russell M. Nelson

and related by Mark Peteru, Area Leadership Message, “Repentance—Accessible and Available to All,” New Zealand Local Pages, Digital Only, *Ensign*, September 2019, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2019/09/nzl-eng-local-pages/local-news-001?lang=eng.

41. Russell M. Nelson, “Repentance and Conversion,” *Ensign*, May 2007.

42. Alma 36:24.

43. Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign*, May 2019.

44. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival.”

45. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival”; emphasis in original.

46. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival.”

47. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival”; quoting Hebrews 12:2 and D&C 6:36.

48. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival”; emphasis added.