

Enduring and Trusting to the End

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I feel grateful for the unique opportunity to share some time with you today. I have prayed for divine guidance so I can share with you something that, hopefully, will inspire you during times of uncertainty to stay focused on what matters most: enduring to the end and trusting in the Lord's plan for each one of you.

The prophet Isaiah knew how crucial it is in our lives to trust in the Lord's plan for each one of us. He said:

*But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*¹

Certainly the Lord has given my family and me the strength to "run, and not be weary; . . . walk, and not faint." We have our share of adversity, but we have seen Isaiah's promise in everything that we have experienced. I know that if we are humble and wait upon the Lord, He walks with us

when things go well and sustains us when things seem too painful to endure, too difficult to accomplish, or too dark to go through. I have seen the Lord's hands guiding my family and me during all the stages of our lives. He was there during my experience with poverty as a child. He was there in our days wandering as refugees of war. He has been there when our losses were so deep, so painful, that it was difficult to see the light. But His light has been constant in our lives.

"Be Strong and of a Good Courage"

I grew up in some of the poorest areas in Guatemala. My house was an adobe home built in *colonia* La Florida. We lacked material comforts, but we were blessed with divine abundance in many ways. I was privileged to belong to a family with loving and caring parents and siblings. I had a happy childhood and did not know how poor we were until I entered high school and saw the world beyond La Florida, where I grew up.

Estela Marquez, an advisor at BYU Multicultural Student Services, delivered this devotional on September 22, 2020.

I am a first-generation college graduate. My parents were farmers and never had the opportunity to receive any formal education; however, I was blessed with a mother who had a tenacious desire for her children to be educated. I was also blessed with a kind father who, using the words of the Lord from the Old Testament, always encouraged me to “be strong and of a good courage.”²

My older brother was the first convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in my family. He was a good missionary, and even though he lived far away from us, year after year he kept sending missionaries to our door. We were Catholic, and my mom was not interested in listening to the missionaries. Finally my older sister decided to invite the missionaries inside, which led my mom, my sisters, and me to later be baptized into the Church. My dad joined us a few years later. Many miracles followed our conversion. The gospel brought us a new hope and the knowledge that God had a plan for each one of us. Our lives were filled with the joy of knowing our divine heritage and understanding the purpose of our existence here.

Before our conversion to the gospel, my parents moved to the city in search of better opportunities for us. In Guatemala, in those years, children did not have a guaranteed space in school. At the beginning of every school year, my mom would get up at around 3:00 a.m. to register us at the only elementary school in La Florida. From my mother’s example, I knew early in life that education was important, and I wanted to become a teacher someday. In the middle of our material limitations, I was able to finish high school with a vocational certificate to teach elementary school.

I wanted to get a college education, but I did not have the forty-five dollars needed in those days to register for college. My older sister was living in Illinois when I graduated from high school, and she sent me sixty dollars to buy my graduation ring. I used the money to pay for my college registration at La Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala in the College of Chemical Engineering. I had very little resources but many dreams I wanted to accomplish. Remembering the words my father had taught me to “be strong and of a good courage,” I walked for the first time onto

a university campus, scared and confused but full of hope.

In 1975 I met my husband, Israel, and soon fell in love with him. Israel and I married the following year. We planned to marry in the temple, but we did not have a temple in Guatemala, so we drove for four days to get sealed in the Mesa Arizona Temple. When we finally arrived, we were grateful to enter the house of the Lord for the first time. Our lives were filled with lots of joy. Making sacred covenants with the Lord gave us a new perspective about what He expected from us.

The 1970s were difficult times in Guatemala. We experienced the devastating earthquake of 1976 that destroyed many *pueblos* in the rural areas and in the poor sectors of the city. My adobe home was totally destroyed. In addition to the natural disasters, government oppression was prevalent everywhere. It was difficult to witness the social and political violence against the poor, students, workers, and other good people and to feel completely powerless to do anything about it. My husband, Israel, prayed and fasted about what to do. He was inspired to be involved in the movement to protect the rights of laborers, who were at that time earning \$0.52 per day, working under inhumane conditions.

In a country with a lot of political and social violence, my husband’s involvement had a high cost for our young family. We were living under an authoritarian government that interpreted any dissent from the social, economic, and political status quo as an open conspiracy against it. Soon anonymous threats against my husband’s life appeared everywhere. Twice government forces attempted to kidnap my husband. That was a time when people who disagreed with the government’s policies would be abducted in the dark and taken to unknown places, and then, days later, their bodies would appear with signs of torture. It was dangerous to voice your disagreements with the cruelties happening everywhere in Guatemala.

Berta, our first child, was born in 1978. She was a long-awaited blessing for us. She came to the world in times of oppression, fear, and violence. When Berta was only six weeks old, my husband experienced the first of two assassination attempts by the Guatemalan government, this one in front

of our home. Later in life, Berta eloquently wrote about the impact of war on children living under constant fear. She was one of those children. She wrote:

I feel bad for every child in the womb that subsequently experiences infancy . . . under the shadows of war, violence, greed, and imperialism. I know that every child who is living now under the reign of terror, war, abuse, and trauma is going to carry great heaviness with them their entire lives. . . . Warfare, PTSD, exile—all of these things cast such long shadows.

In the last assassination attempt, an innocent person died as government assassins tried to kill my husband. After this last attempt, we knew that it was impossible for us to continue living in Guatemala in those conditions. As the government attempted to stop the social restlessness of its people, several leaders of the movement disappeared, were incarcerated, or were killed. Many of our dear friends suffered this fate. Three bishops of the Church were killed during those terrible years. All of them had families and were followers of the Savior. Why did they not survive? Many times we wondered why we were spared from the unfortunate fate that had followed our good friends. What did the Lord want us to learn from those difficult experiences?

Having faith in God's plan for us was crucial as we tried to see what His will was for us. My husband, our daughter Berta, and I were forced to seek refuge at one of the foreign embassies in Guatemala. After a month of negotiations between the government and the embassy, we were allowed to leave the country under the embassy's diplomatic protection. This was the beginning of our lives as refugees in a strange land, far away from the support of our family and friends.

God's Divine Plan for You

Throughout all of our experiences, one thing has remained constant: our faith in Heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and our commitment to be His disciples and to remember the covenants we have made with Him. He had mercy with our imperfections and walked with us, especially when we felt we were losing our strength.

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf, in the September 2014 women's session of general conference, said:

*Walking in the path of discipleship does not need to be a bitter experience. . . . Discipleship lifts our spirits and lightens our hearts. It inspires us with faith, hope, and charity. It fills our spirits with light in times of darkness and serenity during times of sorrow.*³

The Lord lifted our spirits as we tried to live as His disciples in the middle of our circumstances. He filled our lives with hope and with precious moments of joy so that we could keep moving forward with faith. The blessings of the support from the community of the Church were constant in our lives. Wherever we went, we found good people who offered us their love, opened doors for us, and provided us with safe spaces.

In the devotional of December 10, 2019, Sister Jean B. Bingham, general Relief Society president, spoke to us about the importance of keeping a celestial perspective. She said:

*The viewpoint that makes all things clear is an eternal perspective: the perfect, all-encompassing perspective of our Heavenly Father. With His ability to see and know and understand all things past, present, and future in a higher and broader and deeper way than we possibly can, His perspective is complete.*⁴

Our time as refugees was a time in which it was more important than ever to keep an eternal perspective in our lives, but I am going to tell you that keeping a divine perspective in the middle of trials is not always easy. It was certainly not easy for us. For six years we wandered from Guatemala to Costa Rica and from Costa Rica to Mexico, trying to find a place where we could live in peace and raise our family. Having the gospel in our lives gave us direction, understanding, and comfort. The Lord's hand guided us as we tried to create a future for our family. When things became difficult, I would remember Isaiah's promise that the Lord would strengthen us so that we could keep walking and not faint.

The Lord strengthened us as we were trying to figure out where to settle. We already had family here, and it made sense that coming to the United

States would be a good option for us; however, we resisted the idea. We were trusting in *our* plans, not knowing that the Lord had a better plan for us. We stayed in Costa Rica for a few years but later decided to settle in Mexico City. But again, the Lord had other plans for us.

In 1985 a devastating earthquake destroyed a good part of Mexico City. Many people were trapped in the collapsed buildings, and thousands lost their lives. We were fortunate to come out of that tragedy with only material losses. Again the Lord had spared our lives. Many things changed after the earthquake, and it was not easy to continue living in Mexico City. By then we had four children under the age of eight. This prompted us to make the crucial decision to move to the United States. This was another opportunity to grow, and we ventured out again into the unknown.

We arrived in California, where we could be closer to our family. None of us spoke the language, knew the culture, or understood the environment, yet I believe the Lord, with His complete perspective, saw for us what we could not see at the time.

Through these experiences we learned that our success and our happiness depend on how we react to the adversity we experience in life and not on the adversity itself. Some of you may be experiencing challenges right now as you learn how to live with the realities of our new normal. You may be struggling with uncertainty, health problems, financial burdens, or personal or family difficulties. I want you to know that you are not alone in your journey. God has a plan for each one of you. He knows you and knows what you need. His arms are ready to encircle you and carry you during your difficult times.

In my years of working as an advisor for multicultural students, I have been privileged to learn the stories of students who are in the middle of incredible challenges but who keep their eternal perspective and stay firm in what they know about their divine heritage. I feel blessed for the opportunity to walk with these students, to be a little part of their journey, and to learn from their incredible resilience. Remember that God has a divine plan for each one of you.

Living by Faith

God already had a plan for my family and me when we finally decided to immigrate here. We had overcome many things in our lives, so adjusting to our new life was no bigger than surviving a war in Guatemala or a couple of tragic earthquakes, but the transition was still challenging. We did not know that it would take us many years to adjust our immigration status here in the United States, which came with some big limitations in our ability to grow here. I had some college education, but it did not matter because I did not speak the language and my immigration status was in limbo. With the support of my dear husband, I went back to school to learn English. Learning the language was crucial but very challenging for me. Up to this day I continue learning the language, and, as you can tell, I never lost my accent.

As my English skills improved, my job opportunities also improved. I was able to get a part-time job as a teacher's assistant in a local school district in California. It did not provide very much in terms of income, but it motivated me to be on track in improving my education. Once I felt comfortable with my English skills, I dared to take a few other college classes. My daughter Berta and I went to Mt. San Jacinto Community College and took a philosophy class together. While I struggled for weeks with an assignment, Berta, who had a gift with words and loved to write, would do hers the night before. Both of us would get an A, and I felt that was unfair! No doubt Berta was smarter than I was.

It was not easy to work part-time, take care of my family, and go to school, but I dared to dream, and I am here today to tell you that with God on your side, nothing is impossible. It is possible to reach your goals if you work hard, keep the right perspective, and use your challenges as opportunities to grow and develop. Find out what the Lord's plan is for you and then dare to walk by faith, knowing that He is leading the way for you.

As I said before, living by faith is not an easy thing. In the early 1990s our family did not escape the impact of the recession. We experienced serious financial troubles and ended up losing our home. To better support our family, I had to leave

my part-time job and take on a full-time job. By then I was done with my associate's degree, which most people can finish in two years. Due to family responsibilities, it took me almost four years to complete it, but when I needed a full-time job, it was a blessing to have that degree. I secured a job with the Department of Public Social Services in Riverside County, California. That was a big step for me in many ways. I knew then that if I wanted to grow in that department, I needed more education.

I made the decision to go back to school. By this time I had seven children, a home to care for, and a full-time job. I went to a three-year program offered to working adults by La Sierra University. I worked nine hours daily, and after work I went directly to school two to three times a week. Was that difficult? Yes, it was very difficult. By the time I got home, I was exhausted, but I still had a family to nurture and homework to do. I could not have done this without the incredible support of my dear husband, who has always been by my side along this journey. I tell him that my degrees are his degrees.

In 2004 I graduated with honors from La Sierra University with my bachelor's degree in social work. Once I finished my bachelor's degree, I was promoted to a better position within my same department. By then three of my daughters were attending BYU.

Now, let me go back to my humble beginnings in Guatemala. When I was fifteen, I dreamed of attending BYU. A good American missionary encouraged me to write a letter to BYU and express my desire to attend in the future, so I did. I got a letter back from BYU. The letter was nicely written in Spanish, but it asked me to write my next letter in English. My English skills then were very limited, so I never thought again about BYU. Thirty years later, my daughters were attending the university of my dreams. At least now my daughters were achieving their dreams, and somehow I was also achieving mine through them.

Those were good years in California. My heart was full of gratitude for the many blessings we were receiving. Life was good! I had a great job, we lived in a nice neighborhood, and my husband's business was doing well. What else could

I have asked for? With the encouragement of my children and my husband, I applied to the master's program at Cal State University and BYU. The truth is that I did not believe BYU would be interested in me. I only applied to BYU to appease my daughters, who were nagging my husband and me to move to Utah. Did they say Utah? No way! It was too cold and too far for us, but I was humbled when I received the acceptance letter from BYU.

This was another big change in our lives. Coming to BYU meant leaving everything we were already familiar with in California. You can guess the rest of the story. We moved to Utah, and my dream as a teenager finally came true, but that was not the end. It was the beginning of new opportunities and blessings. My first job right after graduate school was working for the Provo School District as a school social worker. There I was blessed to serve many families whose children were struggling in one way or another. I understood their challenges well. In my childhood I had been in a similar family.

Those years of being a school social worker contain some of my more memorable, personal, and professional experiences. I believe that the Lord works in mysterious ways, and if we are willing to submit our will to His, He will let us climb up the mountain "with wings as eagles." My work with the Provo School District prepared me to work with multicultural and first-generation college students here at BYU. I have been blessed to work with very bright students who bring to BYU unique perspectives and experiences. I feel privileged and grateful to be there for them, to listen to their stories, and to guide them so they can achieve their own dreams. Nothing brings me more satisfaction than seeing them not just surviving but thriving at BYU.

As my memory goes back to the adobe house of my childhood, I see my journey as a journey of hope. This life is full of challenges, but there is one thing I know: the Lord allowed me to have those experiences for a reason, and now it is my honor and responsibility to share them with you, the young dreamers of today. It is possible to make your journey a journey of hope and a journey of success.

Ask the Lord what His plan for you is, and as you are willing to submit your will to His, be humble and have the faith to let His hand guide yours. You have the divine potential to accomplish anything for which you are willing to work hard. Our success and our happiness do not depend on the circumstances that we face but on how we face those circumstances. As you work to do well in your classes during this historic semester, remember that you came to BYU with a purpose.

I love the words of President Kevin J. Worthen, who said in a 2016 devotional:

*You are not here by accident. God has a work to perform through you. Make Him the center of your efforts. Do what He would want you to do. Let His light shine more brightly through you as a result of your experiences at BYU. If you do, miracles will happen in your life and you will see the majesty of the Lord work in the lives of others.*⁵

I pray and hope that you internalize President Worthen's words. You are here because the Lord has a plan for you. Elder Ronald A. Rasband said in the October 2017 general conference that "the Lord is in the small details of our lives."⁶ I strongly believe this. The Lord is certainly in the small details of your lives. I know this by experience. My family and I did not leave Guatemala by accident. There was a purpose for us. I am very grateful for the many miracles we witnessed as we let the Lord's hand guide us to this place.

Receiving God's Strength

Sometimes it feels like the difficulties we experience in life pile up on us one after another. It comforts me to know that God is merciful and does not let us have more than what we can bear. In 2015 I felt overwhelmed when I was diagnosed with a brain aneurysm almost at the same time that one of my children was diagnosed with a debilitating chronic illness. During those times, when I was ready to ask the Lord for a little break, He showed me His perfect love by giving me the strength to move forward with faith. The aneurysm was surgically fixed, and I like to joke that I was given a new brain. God is good!

The pruning of our faith did not stop there. When our daughter Berta was born, we were grateful to finally have a baby after two unsuccessful pregnancies. Soon we realized that Heavenly Father had sent to us a very special spirit. As the oldest in the family, she was the peacemaker and the ringleader. Berta was a master at coming up with the silliest family jokes, and she loved to imitate my accent, which brought us a lot of fun. She loved writing and creating art, but above all she had a compassionate heart. Berta was always looking for opportunities to serve and nurture those who are often disenfranchised, forgotten, and overlooked.

Berta's wit and command for words were never lacking. She often used this gift during her untiring advocacy work for the Latter-day Saint LGBTQ+ community. Berta loved and sought to follow the Savior by being a humble servant to those who needed love and care. She once told me that every time she served others, she felt she was breaking bread with the Savior. Berta especially advocated for homeless LGBTQ+ youths, who frequently fall victim to predators. She worked to find them a safe place to live and access to health resources. With all the love and compassion she had in her heart, Berta battled with generalized anxiety and major depressive disorders. In June 2018, Berta died by suicide.

The days following Berta's death were some of the most difficult days in my life. I felt "like a broken vessel."⁷ Sometimes it was difficult to breathe or see the light, but the Savior's light was there, comforting us and sustaining us as He has sustained us in the past. Many angels in the bodies of family members, dear friends, and the LGBTQ+ community came to minister to us, even people I had never met before. As difficult as the passing of Berta was for our family, knowing that she inspired and touched many lives has been a healing experience for us.

I found comfort in the counsel given by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve in the 2013 October general conference:

Though we may feel we are "like a broken vessel," as the Psalmist says, we must remember, that vessel is

*in the hands of the divine potter. Broken minds can be healed just the way broken bones and broken hearts are healed. While God is at work making those repairs, the rest of us can help by being merciful, nonjudgmental, and kind.*⁸

If any of you today are feeling lonely, fearful, or hopeless, I invite you to seek help and never take a catastrophic solution for a temporal challenge. God loves you, and you have a place here. Please choose to live, seek help, and remember how much you are loved by our perfect Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Savior experienced in Gethsemane everything that all of us have or will experience in our lives. He knows each of us personally, and He understands our sorrows.

This is the promise we have received in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee. . . .

*For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee.*⁹

I pray that we may keep our commitment to strengthen our faith in our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son. I pray that we trust in His divine plan for us. God has a complete and eternal perspective. This certainty keeps me going with hope. Please take the Lord's divine hand and let Him guide you. In the sacred name of our Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Isaiah 40:31.
2. Joshua 1:6, 9, 18.
3. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Living the Gospel Joyful," *Ensign*, November 2014.
4. Jean B. Bingham, "How to Be Happy Now—and Forever," BYU devotional address, 10 December 2019.
5. Kevin J. Worthen, "The Light of the Y," BYU devotional address, 6 September 2016.
6. Ronald A. Rasband, "By Divine Design," *Ensign*, November 2017.
7. Psalm 31:12.
8. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Like a Broken Vessel," *Ensign*, November 2013; quoting Psalm 31:12.
9. Isaiah 41:10, 13.