

Divinely Appointed Responsibilities, Heavenly Blessings

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Brothers and sisters, first of all, Lesa and I would like to express how grateful we are to be gathered together with most of you virtually and with a few of you live on this beautiful wintry day.

Now, did you find yourself silently singing along with the Primary children as they proclaimed their membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in song? May I invite you to consider the simple words of the Primary song we just listened to?

*I belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of
Latter-day Saints.*

I know who I am.

I know God's plan.

I'll follow him in faith.

I believe in the Savior, Jesus Christ.

I'll honor his name.

I'll do what is right;

I'll follow his light.

His truth I will proclaim.¹

What does it mean to belong to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?

Many of us are familiar with an expression used by a company in numerous ad campaigns: "Membership has its privileges."² Well, we are not a secular organization; we are the restored Church of Jesus Christ. As such, if I were to articulate similar sentiments as a member of the Church, it might sound something like this: "Belonging brings blessings." And yet there is more, isn't there? Belonging brings responsibility as well.

I have been rather thoughtful about this. Today I would like to identify responsibilities associated with our Church membership. I will then discuss in greater length heavenly blessings given to us as members of the Church that enable us to accomplish those divinely appointed responsibilities.

The responsibilities I want to share with you are listed in the Church's *General Handbook*:

The work of salvation and exaltation focuses on four divinely appointed responsibilities. . . .

Gary E. Stevenson, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on March 2, 2021.

We come unto Christ and assist in God's work by:

- *Living the gospel of Jesus Christ.*
- *Caring for those in need.*
- *Inviting all to receive the gospel.*
- *Uniting families for eternity.*³

As we strive to fulfill these divinely appointed responsibilities as part of the Lord's work, the Church provides a multitude of resources. These are blessings that are pouring down upon us from heaven. They come in many different forms. Many are customized to our age, location, and circumstance. Some of these blessings result from covenants we make as Church members. Others bless the lives of all of God's children.

The Responsibility of Living the Gospel of Jesus Christ

First, I would now like to identify blessings available to accomplish the divinely appointed responsibility of living the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of these is our accessibility to education.

President Russell M. Nelson remarked:

*I encourage each person, regardless of age, to continue to learn. Pursue whatever path will be most valuable to you and your family. You will be blessed as you do this. You will grow academically, professionally, and spiritually as you seek to enhance your education.*⁴

The Church is a substantial provider of the education that prophets have consistently encouraged.

As seen by your school's history, which goes back to the BYU Academy founded in Provo in 1875 by Brigham Young, the link between education and living the gospel of Jesus Christ became clear early in this dispensation.

Today there are more than 30,000 students attending BYU. There are an additional 43,000 students who attend BYU–Idaho, BYU–Hawaii, and Ensign College. BYU–Pathway Worldwide provides certificates and degrees completely online to students from more than 150 countries around the world, many of whom otherwise might not have access to higher education. Its online enrollment is just over 50,000 students.

Spiritual education is also provided to students around the world. More than 700,000 students are enrolled in seminary and institute classes. In aggregate, more than 900,000 students are enrolled in some element of offering from the Church Educational System. What a blessing accessibility to education is in helping members of the Church live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, members of the Church are recipients of blessings that come through numerous other programs, curriculums, materials, and initiatives. Let's talk about just a few of these:

- Tens of thousands of young men and young women have attended For the Strength of Youth conferences in more than forty-six countries and in twenty languages.
- *Come, Follow Me* curriculum in digital and print blesses the lives of millions of members who by necessity, resulting from the pandemic, are conducting home-centered, Church-supported gospel learning.
- More than 190 million copies of the Book of Mormon have been printed and distributed in 112 languages.
- The newly introduced children and youth program for members ages eight to eighteen teaches how to follow the Savior in all areas of life: spiritual, social, physical, and intellectual.
- Face to Face events have been conducted for groups of all ages throughout the world. Lesa and I did a Face to Face broadcast in 2018 originating from the Philippines for all of the youth in the Asia Area, followed by an event in Japan that we were able to conduct in Japanese.

Also, consider how the blessing of more than 20,000 meetinghouses populating the world is assisting us in our responsibility to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. The meetinghouse gives a place to gather, to participate in ordinances, and to feel a sense of fellowship and belonging.

Dedicated meetinghouses come in a variety of shapes and sizes, adapted to numerous countries and cultures. For instance, consider the bright countenances of members in Vanuatu at

the dedication of a new meetinghouse in their village. In their simple, clean, dedicated space, members gather, worship, and conduct sacrament and other meetings. Similarly, a new meetinghouse was recently constructed and dedicated in Kiribati, providing space for members of this little branch on their own little island and blessing them in their efforts to live the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Responsibility of Uniting Families for Eternity

Second, I would like to focus on the divinely appointed responsibility of uniting families for eternity, which would be impossible without the blessing of temples dotting the earth. In the house of the Lord, ordinances that bind families take place.

Our dear prophet, President Nelson, leads and encourages our divinely appointed responsibility to unite our families for eternity. Besides encouraging temple worthiness and attendance, President Nelson is also announcing and overseeing the building of temples at a prolific pace. This truly exemplifies the principle that belonging brings blessings.

Consider the following invitation and promise:

My dear brothers and sisters, the assaults of the adversary are increasing exponentially, in intensity and in variety. Our need to be in the temple on a regular basis has never been greater. I plead with you to take a prayerful look at how you spend your time. Invest time in your future and in that of your family. If you have reasonable access to a temple, I urge you to find a way to make an appointment regularly with the Lord—to be in His holy house—then keep that appointment with exactness and joy. I promise you that the Lord will bring the miracles He knows you need as you make sacrifices to serve and worship in His temples.⁵

Let me outline a dramatic demonstration of the blessing of temple proximity: When President Nelson was born in 1924, there were only six operating temples in the Church worldwide. Sixty years later, in April 1984, when he became an apostle, there were twenty-six operating temples. With President Gordon B. Hinckley's inspired vision to build more temples, by the year 2000

there were 100 operating temples. There are now 168 operating temples in the world.

When the thirty-five new temples currently under construction and the twenty-eight announced temples are completed, the total number of operating temples worldwide will reach 231, and then it is estimated that 81 percent of the members of the Church will be within three hours' traveling distance to a temple.

To further demonstrate the blessings we are enjoying as members, let's go on a journey, beginning in 1979. President David W. Eka and his wife, Ekaete, were called as president and matron to the Aba Nigeria Temple in 2019. They have a beautiful family.

President Eka joined the Church in 1979 in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Following the baptism of Sister Eka, two years after his baptism, they looked forward to the day when they could be endowed and sealed in the temple. This took place in the faraway London England Temple—an eleven-hour international flight from their home, with little chance of returning there to attend again. The dedication of the Johannesburg South Africa Temple by President Hinckley in 1985 was a great blessing, as it created the first discrete temple district on the African continent. However, from Port Harcourt—driving nearly 4,000 miles one way through eight countries and taking more than one week to get to Johannesburg—it was an almost impossible journey for them.

Over the next twenty years, President and Sister Eka were able to attend the Johannesburg South Africa Temple only twice. You can imagine the joy they felt when the first temple in West Africa was dedicated in 2004! President and Sister Eka were now in the Accra Ghana Temple district. They felt like this temple was almost next door, yet it was still a two-day drive of eighteen hours one way—just over 650 miles away from their home.

Twenty months later, the Aba Nigeria Temple was dedicated. The Eka family felt this temple was so close that it was nearly in their own backyard! President Eka was set apart by President Hinckley as a sealer on the day the temple was dedicated in 2005. With a temple so close—just under a two-hour drive away—President and Sister Eka have attended there twice a week since its dedication,

except for the three years they presided over the Nigeria Lagos Mission. From their mission office in Lagos, the drive to the Aba Nigeria Temple was just over ten hours. When the Lagos Nigeria Temple announced by President Nelson in October 2018 is completed, a miracle will take place once again, this time for all the members in Lagos as it did for President and Sister Eka.

The Responsibility of Inviting All to Receive the Gospel

Third, let us now consider the divinely appointed responsibility of inviting all to receive the gospel—or missionary work, and heavenly blessings to accomplish that work.

Samuel Smith was called in June 1830 as the first missionary to serve in this dispensation. Hundreds of thousands of missionaries have served since that time.

In August 1852, my fourth-great-grandfather, William Holmes Walker, who was married with children at the time, was informed that a mission call for him had been announced in a special Church conference with instructions to depart as soon as possible to Cape Town, South Africa. He and his companions, Jesse C. Haven and Leonard I. Smith, would be the first missionaries to serve in Africa. He served almost five years on that mission.

Elder Walker left his family, traveling for three months by horse and wagon to New York City and then sailing for eighteen days to England. Preparations in England to go to Africa took two months. Boarding a boat in Liverpool, he sailed another sixty-six days for Cape Coast, Africa. From the time he departed Salt Lake to the time he arrived in Africa was 216 days! Today that seven-month journey takes about twenty-five hours by plane. Aren't we grateful for the example of the early missionaries of this dispensation and for their considerable sacrifice for the work?

My father, Evan Stevenson, was called to serve in California and Arizona in 1947. Death Valley in California was one of his areas. Within days of his arrival to his mission, his mission president announced that, from that time forward, all missionaries would proselyte without purse or scrip. This meant that they moved out of their apartments and sent virtually everything

home. They could spend no money. They were instructed to receive meals and lodging from the people they were teaching. At the end of two or three days, they were to find new investigators or contacts both to teach and from whom they might receive meals and lodging. Can you even imagine this? Again, we express our gratitude for the faith and consecration of missionaries who preceded us.

I received my call and assignment to serve in the Fukuoka Japan Mission. [A photo was shown of Elder Stevenson, with his father and brother, opening his mission call letter. Another photo was also shown of Elder Stevenson boarding a train in his last area on the day that he completed his mission.]

It seems that each generation of missionaries is blessed to be able to stand on the shoulders of those who preceded them. Prior to the pandemic, just about one year ago, there were approximately 68,000 missionaries serving at the time. Missionaries were out among the people, engaging in traditional proselyting activities. Many had completed their MTC experience right here in Provo. Others may have been in one of nine other active MTCs, such as the one in the Philippines.

One year later, in spite of the worldwide pandemic, the work moves forward. Missionaries diligently follow local COVID guidelines in the areas in which they serve. In some instances they teach outside, socially distanced. In other locations in which greater restrictions are in place, missionary teaching originates from missionary apartments and is done virtually.

For several months now, newly called missionaries have completed their MTC training in an online virtual framework from their homes. The diligence of missionaries, with the support of their families and members combined with Church resources, blesses us to fulfill the divinely appointed responsibility of inviting all to receive the gospel. Belonging truly brings blessings.

The Responsibility of Caring for Those in Need

Finally, we have the divinely appointed responsibility as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of caring for those in need. Remarkable blessings in the form of resources are available to us, enabling the care for those in need.

Church support includes critical immunization campaigns around the world, including an important role in helping get COVID-19 vaccinations to those who might otherwise go without. The Church has provided significant support to displaced populations of refugees from the Middle East, including Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and sub-Saharan Africa. This aid has ranged from basic relief and shelter supplies for emerging crises to educational support for the more prolonged situations.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Church humanitarian efforts in 2020 have been by far the most extensive in our history, comprising hundreds of projects spanning 151 countries and including

- more than 28 million items of personal protective equipment;
- more than 1.3 million medical items, such as ventilators and thermometers;
- 2.1 million hygiene kits; and
- food items for an estimated 4 million beneficiaries, both domestic and abroad.

And finally, the worldwide impact of the pandemic unfortunately did not spare us from other natural disasters. In addition to COVID-19, Church funds and volunteers were drawn upon to respond to an undiminished number of natural disasters. In many of these instances, it was once again our members who were the heroes, donning their yellow vests—now accompanied frequently by masks—and braving the conditions of the pandemic to continue to provide the selfless post-disaster relief efforts that they have come to be known for. [A video was shown with clips of members of the Church helping those affected by hurricanes.]

In summary, as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have been given four divinely appointed responsibilities:

- Living the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Uniting families for eternity.
- Inviting all to receive the gospel.
- Caring for those in need.

I would like to invite each of you to consider your role in accomplishing these divinely

appointed responsibilities. How do you anxiously engage in this work? As you do so, I promise you will be humbled and overcome with joy in recognizing and enjoying heaven-sent blessings—blessings from heaven—for you to accomplish each of those elements of this work.

I would like to bear my witness of these principles of which we have spoken today, of the great blessings that come from belonging, and of the great responsibilities attendant to those blessings that we receive. I would like to bear witness to you, brothers and sisters, that the heavens are open, that God the Father and Jesus Christ in this dispensation opened them once again as They appeared to Joseph Smith—just exactly the way that Joseph said They did. I bear testimony of God the Father, of Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Ghost. I bear testimony of the divine doctrine of the Father, which is that He wants all of His children to return to His presence. I bear testimony of the divine doctrine of the Son that enables us to glorify the Father and His doctrine by returning to Him through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. And I bear my witness to you today of living prophets and of the sacred and divine role of Jesus Christ as our Savior and Redeemer. I offer that testimony and witness to you in His holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “The Church of Jesus Christ,” *Songbook*, 77.
2. American Express advertising campaign; quoted in Bill Abrams, “Sticking It to the Establishment: Social Turnabout in Credit Card Advertising,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 49, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 270, 275.
3. “The Work of Salvation and Exaltation,” *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, July 2020 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2020), 1.2 (p. 2), churchofjesuschrist.org.
4. Russell M. Nelson, “Inauguration of Clark G. Gilbert,” BYU–Pathway Worldwide Inauguration, 16 November 2017, byupathway.org/speech/inauguration-of-clark-g-gilbert.
5. Russell M. Nelson, “Becoming Exemplary Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, November 2018.