

Vaulting to Greater Heights: Replacing Fear with Lasting Peace

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Good morning, friends. It is truly miraculous that I am standing here today, eager to share my testimony of Jesus Christ and of His amazing gospel. Only eight years ago I was not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In fact, my life was a bit of a mess. I often felt that I was sinking. Before I understood the gospel plan,¹ something that often escaped my mouth was the phrase “I can’t handle this.” All I worried about were outcomes. I did not understand my purpose or the endgame. Then, at my lowest point, while going through a divorce, I remembered the Bible stories my mother had taught me, and in my despair I called to Jesus.

Today, seven years after having been baptized, hard things still happen in my life. But thanks to Jesus—my Savior—I feel confident in my ability to keep swimming, to keep trying, no matter how rough the water gets. The gospel lens directed my gaze toward eternity and helped me see my purpose. The way my life has transformed in just eight years feels so grand that it is almost

unbelievable, and it is entirely thanks to Jesus Christ. If we are willing, He can bring about great changes in us that strengthen our faith and refine our character, placing us on the path that leads to eternal life—the eternal win.

I am not claiming that I know or understand all things, but I know that my Heavenly Father loves me and sees the end from the beginning,² so I trust Him to guide my steps, and this brings me peace. Fellow faculty, students, and all those who are listening, understanding and working to achieve your eternal purpose—the eternal win—leads to peace in all circumstances, a powerful peace that displaces fear.

Lessons from My Family

To help you understand how I know this is true, I need to tell you more about my starting point—my wonderful family of origin. I admire each one of my family members. Although they do not share my testimony of the restored gospel, my siblings, mother, and some of my extended

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family do share a love for the Savior. My grandparents were “Okies”—a derogatory term used to describe poverty-stricken people from Oklahoma who moved west after the Great Depression in search of a better life. It was a term of disdain pinned on poor farm workers. Despite this history, my grandmother says she is proud to be an Okie. She is proud of where she is from. I am also proud of my roots, and I am proud of my grandparents; they helped me develop grit.

My grandparents’ starting point was one of meager economic means and limited social status. Yet only two generations later, I am a confident woman with a PhD who has the ear of hundreds of students every year—and even more today. My sister is a talented nurse who administers programs across the western United States. She is a devoted wife and mother who has raised two outstanding children. My brother is a battalion chief for the Fresno Fire Department. He is committed to his two daughters (who are full of light), his beautiful wife, and his community. How can this be? How can our family go from Okies to community elevators in such a short time? How can poverty be eradicated from a family in two generations? There are two principles that have helped us. In my family we learned to (1) work hard and (2) be accountable.

Let’s first consider hard work. In our family, hard work was not only valued but enjoyed. Every Saturday I was required to perform manual labor with a good attitude for hours. I learned to love the benefits of hard work, which prepared me to love progression—an integral part of the gospel plan. Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught that “work builds and refines character, creates beauty, and is the instrument of our service to one another and to God. A consecrated life is filled with work.”³ Difficult circumstances need not stop us from progressing. With a vision for a better future and a willingness to work hard despite overwhelming odds, we can change the course of our life and help others in our families and communities to do the same.⁴

The second principle my family instilled in me is accountability. My grandmother Betty did not see her life as the arbitrary outcome of unfair circumstances. She believed it was her responsibility

to do what she could to build the life she hoped to live. Her choices reflected this belief. To be clear, there is no principle that promises all our hard work and good choices will lead to the short-term outcomes we want; that is not the nature of our mortal probation. Rather, accountability is understanding that our actions change the distribution of possible short-term outcomes and that they can guarantee the long-term outcome.⁵

My family’s love of hard work and their commitment to accountability prepared me to progress. For example, without hard work and accountability, I never could have earned a PhD while being a mom, and I certainly never could have become a NCAA Division 1 national pole vault champion!

Finding Lasting Peace: My Story

As you can see, I was already living some gospel principles and being blessed as a result. However, hard work and accountability alone were not sufficient to bring peace when trouble and heartbreak arrived. When the outcomes I desired—and worked hard to achieve—did not occur, anguish and fear would creep in, robbing me of peace.

My mother raised us with traditional Christian values. I grew up believing in God and Jesus, and I loved the moments when I felt the Spirit. But for several reasons, religion did not resonate with me as a young adult. I decided that I was going to be a good person—the best that I could be—without any formal worship of God. I stopped reading the scriptures and praying regularly. Thus began my ten years of spiritual decline.⁶

During those ten years, I chose a challenging marital situation. We are both good individuals; we were not a good team. We were married for nine years and had two wonderful children before the marriage ended.

Divorce is brutal; it is heartbreaking for the entire family. It was the first time I felt I had failed at something that really mattered. I was so disappointed in myself and frustrated with the bad outcome. I cried every day when I woke up and every night when I went to bed. I experienced a very public panic attack. The divorce had real and lasting consequences, especially for my children, Elijah and Katherine, and my heart broke for them.

As I have already told you, it was during this sorrowful time that I remembered the stories my mother had taught me—stories about Jesus and His love. I called upon Him for help, and soon I began to feel the comfort I needed. That reformatory year allowed me to become intimately associated with our Savior, Jesus, because He carried me through it.

To heal after the divorce, I did what I knew. I prayed and I read my Bible—activities I had not done in more than ten years. I went to counseling. I tried to forgive and extend grace to others. After a few years, I had made good progress in developing my faith, but I sensed there was more.

James is my favorite book in the Bible. It begins with this promise: If we lack wisdom and ask God, then it shall be given to us.⁷

You can imagine my excitement when, just a year later, I learned that Joseph Smith had also loved the book of James and that its words had also inspired him. But that discovery was still a ways off at this point.

For a long time I read James daily—all five books. Those chapters taught me what pure religion is and how to recognize wisdom from above.⁸ My faith grew, but I felt there was more.

After I had been divorced for about two years, I prayed differently one evening.

I prayed for a *family* that would be a light to the world.

I prayed for a *marriage* centered on Jesus Christ.

I prayed that we, as a family, would truly live a Christ-consumed life.

I prayed for sanctification through the family unit.

What was different about this prayer was not the things for which I prayed. I prayed for those things often. The difference in this prayer was that I expressed my complete willingness to walk whatever path was required of me. I told Heavenly Father that if He showed me the path, I would “pre-commit” to taking it. I was prepared to make a covenant.

After I said these words, I was immediately filled with fear. What if it was hard? What if I had to give up something or change my life? What if people made fun of me? I pondered these consequences and then considered what my life was like with

only partial light, and I said to Heavenly Father, “I will do what is required. Show me the path.”

Immediately I felt the heavens open, and I experienced personal revelation in a completely new way. I received strong confirmation that additional light would come and that I would get married that year! (That seemed remarkable because I had not been on one date since the divorce.)

I suspect that Heavenly Father answered my prayer with the promise of additional light because I had been so humbled by my recent trials. Metaphorically speaking, I was waving my white flag, ready to yield my life to His will. The scriptures teach us that if we are humble, the Lord will lead us by the hand and answer our prayers.⁹

Right away I started looking for the additional light—and I started dating. By mid-year, when the promises had not yet arrived, I began wondering how they would be fulfilled. (And *when!* Time was running out.) Then I met Marc.

The first time I met Marc, I said, “I am not sure what you believe, but I believe in Jesus Christ and I am never going to compromise.” I said this on most of my first dates, and the response was usually awkward, or even negative. Yet I continued to declare my love for the Savior because I had already pre-committed to follow Him. Being a follower of Jesus Christ is a primary part of my identity, and it was the first characteristic I wanted to share.

Marc’s response was different than those I typically received: he smiled and calmly said that he also loved the Savior. His humble yet confident response intrigued me.

Our first official date lasted eighteen hours. I knew he was the answer to my prayer, but I could not reconcile the fact that he was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and I was not. This was not how I had expected the prayer to be answered.

Over the first few months of dating, I often wanted to discuss our religious differences, and Marc wisely said, “We will, but not yet.” He allowed me time to get to know him and see his character before discussing our different beliefs. I watched him carefully, observing his strong faith, his kindness, his work ethic, his commitment to doing good, and the power of his prayers.¹⁰

After a few months, Marc invited me to watch general conference with him. I said that I would but that I could not break the promise I had made to Heavenly Father. I was intrigued by the fruits I had seen in Marc (and others), and I was willing to consider the Church as the possible source of his goodness. But if I did not feel God in it, I could not pretend otherwise—no matter how much I liked Marc. I knew how to recognize my Father’s voice, and I would only go where He directed.

On that Sunday morning when I heard President Thomas S. Monson speak, I knew that his words were true, and this surprised me.¹¹ Who was this man whose words penetrated my soul? That night we began reading the Book of Mormon together with two rules. First, prior to reading we prayed for the Spirit to accompany us. Second, we committed to openly discuss all questions but without contention. We wanted God’s Spirit to teach, so we tried to create a space in which He could comfortably reside.

The conversion process was not linear for me. I was so eager and excited to learn, but when I had significant questions or when I heard criticism levied against the restored gospel, I felt intense fear. Still I pressed on, and, little by little, as we read and I prayed, I began to feel peace. I met with the missionaries, and they taught me things that I felt I had known before but had forgotten. I asked clarifying questions. I asked tough questions. As I studied with a teachable heart—and a willingness to do the work God required of me—my questions were answered. One day the evidence was overwhelming. I knew I was on the verge of something amazing.¹² I knew my Heavenly Father was showing me the path—the path I had already pre-committed to follow.

When I was baptized on January 25, 2014, promising to take upon myself the name of Jesus Christ, I was filled with power. The clarity and energy that came from my covenants astonished me. I could see the path clearly for the first time, and I was energized to take it. I could discern the next step and understand more fully what my family needed. I had access to heaven, and this power filled my heart with love. Elder Christofferson taught that “the source [of such power] is God. Our access to that power is through our covenants

with Him.”¹³ I can testify that these words are true; there is power in covenants.

Marc and I were married two months later, and we were sealed in the Salt Lake City Temple about a year after that. If God had called me to remain single and raise my children in the gospel without help from a husband, I know He would have provided me with the necessary power and faith, and I would have walked that path too. Yet I am so grateful for my marriage because it helps me to become more Christlike. I need help learning to live the gospel, and it has been fun to learn with Marc. When things get hard (and they always do), we remind each other to look up. That is what we all need—a friend to point our gaze toward eternity.

Becoming Christlike

Today I have shared part of my story, not because it is particularly interesting but because some of the challenges I have faced are common to mortality and many of you can relate. Through these experiences and through prayer, scripture study, and the Spirit, I have learned of my purpose on earth—which is your purpose as well.

The purpose of this life is to choose to become Christlike—to move our character closer to His. At the end of the Book of Mormon, Moroni pled with us to be filled with the love of Christ so that we can “become the [children] of God; [so] that when [Jesus] shall appear we shall be like him, . . . purified even as he is pure.”¹⁴

This process of becoming Christlike cannot happen in an instant; this miraculous work of transformation takes time and practice. There are some lessons we can learn only through experience. Our dear prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, just reminded us in April that “the gospel of Jesus Christ *is* . . . an invitation to keep changing, growing, and becoming more pure. It is a gospel of hope, of healing, and of progress.”¹⁵ So it is not a problem if you are not yet thoroughly Christlike. The problem only comes when you stop trying.

The experiences that refine us and move our character closer to the Savior’s are unique to each of us, but there are a few common components of Christlike change that are within our control.

First, to become Christlike we must desire to have the Spirit of God in our hearts *and* be willing to act as directed by the Spirit. Our Heavenly Father respects our agency.¹⁶ If we want Him on our team, we need to humbly request His Spirit with a heart ready to act when He provides direction. As we look at the Savior's life, we see this principle in His example. The book of Matthew tells how Jesus "fell on his face," praying, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, we must be willing to do the hard work we are called to do. I only received direction from heaven after I was willing—and I mean truly willing—to do whatever was required to have the Spirit of God reside in my heart.

Second, we must practice living gospel principles, including hard work and accountability—two principles that I have discussed—and many others, such as forgiveness, repentance, and the ability to receive personal revelation. I often hear people complain about certain gospel principles and commandments as if they are without purpose and merely a spiteful way to ruin our fun. In a 2015 general conference address, Elder Rafael E. Pino said, "Our Heavenly Father first taught Adam and Eve the plan of redemption, and then He gave them commandments,"¹⁸ because understanding the plan of salvation helps us to see the purpose—the why—of the commandments. The commandments keep us on track for the eternal win.

I have a strong testimony that the commandments are gifts from a loving Father who knows the many roads that lead to destruction. If you have a hard time keeping the commandments, pray to know of God's love for you as an individual and to understand His character. When you understand these two things, your view of the commandments will change, and so will your desire to keep them. I see the commandments like a big hug from our heavenly parents—that is, the commandments feel like love to me.

Third, we need access to godly power to see our grand potential and to fully engage in the great work of becoming divine, becoming Christlike. Mortality is designed to include disappointment and heartache—what God calls learning opportunities. To navigate these challenges successfully,

we need access to power greater than our own, and that access comes through covenants. Elder Gerrit W. Gong lovingly reminded us in April that "sacred ordinances offer covenant belonging and 'the power of godliness' to sanctify inner intent and outward action."¹⁹ Covenants direct our gaze toward eternity and help us see the reformatory purpose of our mortal experience. As I use my covenants to access the power of God, I can discern the right path and I feel empowered to walk it. If I am on the path directed by my Father in Heaven, I know where it leads: a Christlike and eternal life.

How do you feel right now? How have you felt this week, this month, this year? I suspect that some of you lack peace. Your minds are filled with anxiety and fear. You want to be righteous and to choose wisely, but you are not sure how to do so. I have been there and have emerged on the other side with a joy-filled faith, which is why I can say with confidence that you can have peace, even if the love of your life no longer loves you. You can have peace, even if you diligently study and sacrifice and still do not earn the grade you need to get into the program you desire. Even if you feel unseen, undervalued, and misunderstood, even if you get divorced or you become sick or you are worried about the well-being of somebody you love, you can have peace.²⁰ If you understand the purpose of this life and rely on the Savior, Jesus Christ, to help you achieve the eternal win, you can confidently move forward with guidance from heaven, having joy and peace in *all* circumstances, even when your mortal experiences are far from what you had hoped.

I know that my Heavenly Father loves me and each of you. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to bridge the gap between our shortfalls and the perfection He requires. Through my covenants, I am endowed with power that helps me get up, repent, and optimistically face the future each time I fall short. Remember, "the gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of repentance"²¹—a gospel of change. As I remember my purpose and focus on the path that leads to the great outcome of eternal life, fear dissipates. No short-term setback can keep me from the eternal win, which only requires that I keep exercising faith in Jesus Christ, keep trying, and keep repenting. I can do that, and so can you.

I love the Book of Mormon because it testifies that God loves all people. I admire Joseph Smith. His mortal probation was hard, and Heavenly Father required the ultimate sacrifice from him. Joseph knew which direction to face; he placed his faith in eternity rather than in mortality. I hope I can do that. I hope you can too. I love President Nelson. His words are true and are filled with light and love. I know this because I have learned to receive personal revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit. President Nelson knows the way, and I am following his counsel.

I know that the family unit is meant to be eternal and that the term *family* is broad and encompassing. I love my husband, Marc, and my children, Katherine and Elijah. They are three of the best people I know—truly outstanding human beings. I also love Sammy, my children’s half-brother; their stepmom, Sara; and their dad, Michael. I love our family. I hope they know that I believe in Jesus Christ and His gospel. My greatest desire is that they will do all that is necessary to know and love the Savior. I have the same desire for the entire human family—that we all know and love the Savior, Jesus Christ.

My friends, we will make mistakes, but through those experiences and the gift of repentance, we can learn and become something divine. I pray that we keep our gaze elevated so that we can see our trials through the lens of their purpose, so that we can become more Christlike and gain the eternal win. As we do so, our hearts will be filled with peace rather than fear. In the mighty name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See “Gospel,” Church of Jesus Christ Gospel Topics page, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/gospel?lang=eng.

2. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “See the End from the Beginning,” *Ensign*, May 2006.

3. D. Todd Christofferson, “Reflections on a Consecrated Life,” *Ensign*, November 2010.

4. See, for example, Stanley G. Ellis, “Do We Trust Him? Hard Is Good,” *Ensign*, November 2017.

5. See, for example, Galatians 6:7; Revelation 22:12; D. Todd Christofferson, “Free Forever, to Act for Themselves,” *Ensign*, November 2014; and Randall K. Bennett, “Choose Eternal Life,” *Ensign*, November 2011.

6. President Russell M. Nelson has taught that “the cafeteria approach” of not keeping all of the commandments, as I had done by refraining from praying or reading the scriptures, “will lead to misery” (“Face the Future with Faith,” *Ensign*, May 2011).

7. See James 1:5.

8. See, for example, James 1:27; 2:5, 8–9, 17–18; 3:13–18; 4:7, 10, 11, 17; 5:16.

9. See D&C 112:10.

10. By his fruits, I knew that Marc knew the Savior, Jesus (see Matthew 7:16–20).

11. See Moroni 7:15–16.

12. See Moroni 10:3–5.

13. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Power of Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 2009.

14. Moroni 7:48.

15. Russell M. Nelson, “Welcome Message,” *Liahona*, May 2021; emphasis in original.

16. D&C 104:17.

17. Matthew 26:39.

18. Rafael E. Pino, “The Eternal Perspective of the Gospel,” *Ensign*, May 2015.

19. Gerrit W. Gong, “Room in the Inn,” *Liahona*, May 2021; quoting D&C 84:20.

20. See John 14:27; 16:33.

21. Nelson, “Welcome Message”; emphasis in original.