

# *“They That Wait upon the Lord”: Metaphor and Meaning*

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Using the literary technique of repetition and completion, the prophet Isaiah wrote this magnificent promise: “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” (Isaiah 40:31). My text is guided today by this scriptural passage, drawing on personal and professional life experiences, other scriptural passages, and the words of the prophets.

Waiting upon the Lord: As a woman and a nurse researcher focusing on women’s health, when I first think of the word *waiting*, I think of women bearing children. Old Testament Hannah spoke of her experience when she said, “For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him” (1 Samuel 1:27). Hannah waited upon the Lord. Patricia T. Holland has suggested that “women appreciate that word *labor* in a way that no man ever can” (*Within Whispering Distance of Heaven: A Message for Mothers* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989], p. 11). I believe this is so. For nine months a woman carries a child both beneath and within her heart. Waiting long months and then laboring long hours, she then gives birth.

Over the past decade my research has focused on the meaning of childbirth. I have listened to the birth stories of women living in North and Central America, Scandinavia, and the Middle East. What wonderful experiences have been mine. I have learned through interviewing women that there is a connectedness that transcends the barriers of language and culture when sacred experiences such as childbirth are shared. The pictures of my own children and grandchildren became dog-eared and worn from being held in so many women’s hands as we shared our commonalities. I listened to “woman talk” sitting on worn, century-old wooden benches in maternal and child health clinics and on dirt floors in humble homes and in refugee camps. I sat among these women—women whose life circumstances are so different than my own—and listened. I see in my mind’s eye the Guatemalan women wearing brightly colored woven clothing, made by their own hands—creating beauty in stark contrast to the harshness and poverty of their life circumstances. I think of the Orthodox

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Jewish women, their hair covered in symbolism of their modesty before the Lord. Many of the Muslim women were robed and veiled, covered from head to toe in black as a symbol of their devotion to God. I think in contrast of Mormon women who have made temple covenants wearing the symbol of their devotion in sacred white clothing worn next to their skin.

In thousands of pages of transcribed narrative data, I found that women made sacred the experience of giving birth, supporting the thesis that there is deep meaning in women's ordinary and commonplace lives regardless of sociocultural context (see Sue Bender, *Everyday Sacred: A Woman's Journey Home* [New York: Harper-Collins, 1995]). The foundational well-springs of Christian, Islamic, and Judaic religious traditions give these women a pattern and language for creating meaning in their lives. Such intuitiveness demonstrates an openness to the transcendent dimensions of their life experiences. Women spoke of the integration of the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical dimensions of pregnancy and birth. This supports the most significant Islamic principle *tawhid*: meaning that life experiences prove the oneness of God. One Muslim woman expressed it this way:

*During childbirth the woman is in the hands of God. Every night during my pregnancy I read from the Holy Qur'an to the child. When I was in labor I was reading a special paragraph from the Holy Qur'an about protection. The nurses were crying when they heard what I was reading. I felt like a miracle might happen—that there was something holy around me, protecting me, something beyond the ordinary, a feeling, a spirit, about being part of God's creation of a child.*

There is special protection for women who assume the sacred task of bearing children, as expressed in an earlier verse in chapter 40 of Isaiah: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd

... , and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isaiah 40:11). An Orthodox Jewish woman said that every action in her life, including childbirth, is guided by *Hashem*, the Yiddish word for God. An Orthodox Jewish grandmother whose two daughters had recently given birth articulated her sense of the dimensions of becoming a mother in this way:

*Having a baby is not only a physical and biological experience. It is all that, but it's much more than that. It is a very high spiritual experience, because the whole purpose of the world is bringing down a child, bringing down a soul. If God gives you a soul, you become the caretaker of this soul. I mean, God gives this into your hands. You feel God's presence most tangibly when you have gone through [childbirth].*

Jewish women spoke reverently about childbirth. Frequently in Jewish literature, spiritual striving is compared to labor and childbirth. The pivotal life event of giving birth for many women represents this concept of waiting upon the Lord. Among indigenous women giving birth in rural Guatemalan highlands, newborns have a 10-fold higher risk of dying during the first year of life as compared with babies born in the United States, and mothers have a 12-fold higher risk of losing their lives in complications associated with childbirth (Lynn C. Callister and Rosemarie Vega, "Giving Birth: Guatemalan Women's Voices," *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, and Neonatal Nursing* 27, no. 3 [May/June 1998], pp. 289–95). The stark reality is that the child a woman carries may not live and that the childbearing woman is in increased risk of losing her own life. Within this sociocultural context where life is tenuous, women find strength in their spiritual lifestyle, relying on the Lord to ensure positive outcomes or to give them the courage to deal with negative ones. One Mayan woman said:

[Giving birth] *I felt closer to God. I thanked God for allowing me to have a baby. Well, I don't say she is mine but that he let me borrow her. While the baby was in my womb I realized how great God is. Only God watches over the children that are yet in the womb because only he could do that.*

Professor Cynthia L. Hallen, in an interesting treatise on Isaiah and 3 Nephi, defines the metaphorical scriptural language associated with childbirth and spiritual growth (see *The Lord's Covenant of Kindness: Isaiah 54 and 3 Nephi 22*, in Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, eds., *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* [Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998], pp. 313–49). The bittersweet paradox of this experience is described by the apostle John:

*A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world.* [John 16:21]

The acts of labor and childbirth have been compared to the struggle for spiritual birth, as suggested in this scriptural text: “Pangs have taken thee as a woman in travail” (Micah 4:9). And, again, in the New Testament, “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you” (Galatians 4:19). The spiritual rebirth of the earth is articulated in the language of childbirth: “The earth hath travailed and brought forth her strength” (D&C 84:101). Elder Bruce C. Hafen also noted significant spiritual parallels:

*Just as a mother's body may be permanently marked with the signs of pregnancy and childbirth, he [the Savior] said, “I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.” (1 Nephi 21:15–16.) For both a mother and the Savior, those marks memorialize a wrenching sacrifice—the sacrifice of begetting life—for her, physical birth; for him, spiritual rebirth.* [Bruce C.

Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, “‘Eve Heard All These Things and Was Glad’: Grace and Learning by Experience,” in Dawn Hall Anderson and Susette Fletcher Green, eds., *Women in the Covenant of Grace: Talks Selected from the 1993 Women's Conference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1994), p. 29]

*Wait* in Hebrew means to hope for, to anticipate. In a gospel context, waiting on the Lord connotes hopeful anticipation, submission to the Lord's will, and trusting in the Lord. Waiting denotes an active process, one of keeping our covenants. Fervent meekness is required as well as the realization of the need for reliance on the Lord. Waiting requires continual self-examination, constantly trying to become more worthy, an ever-deepening and progressive discipleship of a broken heart, a contrite spirit, a yielded will, and a consecration of self. The word *wait* denotes spiritual expectation. It is when one knows that the guidance of the Lord and the answers to our prayers are spiritual gifts that one cannot control or demand. It means that we must be content and peaceful about the spiritual nudgings we may receive, the gentle promptings, and be grateful for those occasional illuminating moments of brighter light and clearer understanding.

Why does the Lord require waiting? Why aren't blessings granted immediately? Why are we required to “see through [the] glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), not knowing the end from the beginning? The Lord has told us, “Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning [you]” (D&C 58:3). The Savior has said, “I hid my face from thee for a moment, but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee” (3 Nephi 22:8). The hymnist penned this plea: “Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see / The distant scene—one step enough for me” (“Lead, Kindly Light,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 97).

Waiting sometimes means living with uncertainty. We can look to the example of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, living with the uncertainty of a potentially life-threatening illness. He said:

*Uncertainty as to our longevity is one of life's basic realities for all of us. Hence, you and I should importune in faith for the blessings we deeply desire, but then "be content with the things which the Lord hath allotted unto [us]" (Alma 29:3). ["From Whom All Blessings Flow," Ensign, May 1997, p. 11; emphasis added]*

Elder Maxwell has suggested further that such waiting upon the Lord is "much more than polite deference. Rather, it is a deep yielding in which one's momentary uncertainty gives way to the certainty of [the] Father's rescuing love and mercy" ("Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ," *Ensign*, November 1997, p. 23).

Emma Smith was counseled, "Murmur not" (D&C 25:4). I believe the Lord was saying, to Emma and to us, "Be still and know that I am God" (D&C 101:16). We have been given the invitation "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). Is it possible for us to trust in the Lord that much, or do we rely too much on ourselves and our own finite abilities to reason and solve perplexing problems? Blessings come when we are willing to wait upon the Lord. We can obtain the blessing of the renewal of strength and the blessing of exhilarating upward growth. The blessing of strength to endure is promised in this scriptural passage. Many of the women whom I interviewed learned about their own capacities as they literally waited upon the Lord as they labored and gave birth. One woman reflected:

*The experience of childbirth helped me learn a lot about my capacity. . . . When I thought I was just too tired to push anymore I found another 15 minutes worth of energy. I learned I have a lot more*

*strength than I thought I did. Childbirth brought me more in tune with my[self] because I know what my capacities are: my mental, [emotional, and spiritual] capacities, my strength. I just know I could do a lot more than I thought I could.*

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31; emphasis added). The phrase "shall renew their strength" seems to imply receipt of the gift of the Holy Ghost as a Comforter, which enlightens our minds, fills our souls with joy, and literally renews our bodies (see D&C 11:13).

May I share with you, with permission, the story of one of my students. This young man experienced the tragic death of his father in an accident when he was six years old. He left his childhood home when the actions of an emotionally and physically abusive stepfather became overwhelming. He worked to earn money for his mission. He had been blessed with a burning testimony all of his life and literally counted the days until he could serve a mission. He was determined to use every moment of his time wisely as he served in Japan, putting in long hours of finding and teaching investigators. He gave his heart, mind, might, and strength to the work. Again and again he had investigators get one step away from baptism and then fall through. Every time someone would walk away from their testimony, this elder felt as though his heart would break.

One day he sat in a zone leader's conference. It had been a rough month. He hadn't heard anything from home for many months and had had no baptisms. He sat and listened as elders rose and spoke of the great blessings they were enjoying in the work. One elder testified of how much his family had been blessed by his missionary service. This elder heard the same things said over and over again. He began to weep and could not hold back the tears. He said at that moment he was comforted and renewed by the Holy Spirit.

*I knew that the Lord was pleased with my efforts. I felt his Spirit quite literally to the consuming of my flesh. About a month later, the mission president came to do interviews. He sat me down and asked me how I was doing. I told him about our investigators and their progress.*

*He stopped me and asked again how I was doing, so I told him how the missionary efforts were going. He stopped me again and asked me how I was doing. I couldn't answer. Sometimes the strain of life just becomes so heavy and filled with heart-break that if you stopped to rest you are afraid that you'll be crushed under the weight of it all. That is how I was beginning to feel. My mission president opened up his scriptures . . . and [read], putting my name in place of Nephi's, 'Blessed art thou, Elder Taylor, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unwearyingness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou . . . hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments. And now, because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever' (Helaman 10:4–5). The words spoke right out to me.*

*At that moment I felt justified before God. I knew of his acceptance of my offering.*

The experiences of this young missionary fulfill the scriptural injunction of the apostle Paul to not “be wearied and faint” in our minds (Hebrews 12:3) but to be “transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Romans 12:2). This elder waited upon the Lord.

By hoping for or anticipating Christ, our strength is renewed. The apostle Paul suggested that “though our outward man [or woman] perish, yet the inward man [or woman] is renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). That thought is powerfully simple with wonderful imagery. The blessing of renewal may come through the keeping of our covenants. May I share a tender example of renewing covenants while waiting upon the Lord in uncertain circumstances.

On a humanitarian service assignment through the Kennedy Center for International Studies, Carol and Sterling Ottesen are currently teaching English in Jinan, Shandong Province, in the People's Republic of China. Carol wrote of their first Sabbath day in China:

*The two of us sat in our living room side by side in two upholstered chairs with a small table between us on which we placed a cup of boiled water and a plate with a small piece of bread. We selected a song that we knew and that wouldn't be too sentimental: “Welcome, Welcome Sabbath Morning.” Nevertheless, we couldn't make it through without a lump in our throats, and the sound was nearly inaudible as we finished with “Now we rest from every care. / Welcome, welcome is thy dawning, Holy Sabbath, day of prayer.”*

*Sterling said a beautiful prayer and thanked the Lord that “Carol could come today,” which made us laugh and cry at the same time. He then blessed the sacrament and we partook. After that we began our scripture reading in the New Testament . . . then spoke a few words to each other in an assessment of our time here and a statement of our purposes. We both feel strongly about the rightness of this decision, and this gives us courage. [Carol Clark Ottesen, personal communication, August 31, 1997]*

In the culminating weeks of their yearlong stay in China, the Ottesens recently wrote:

*We feel so blessed to have this experience—to know there are children here that we can learn from and that we can draw our circle of love around. . . . We can only give in ways we know how, and sometimes that seems woefully inadequate. But we know that we have been watched over here and been made strong many times when we felt very weak. More than ever we can bear full witness of the sustaining presence of the Spirit when we sufficiently humble ourselves, given strength we didn't know we had. [Carol Clark Ottesen, personal communication, May 10, 1998]*

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles” (Isaiah 40:31). The next promised blessing is to “mount up” with wings as eagles. Have you ever seen the wings of eagles? The extension of those powerful wings is incredible. Jehovah reminded the children of Israel, “I [bore] you on eagles’ wings, and [bring] you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4). Speaking metaphorically, the apostle John wrote, “And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness” (Revelation 12:14). What are the wildernesses of our lives in which we struggle to mount up with wings as eagles?

In an international nursing course, students have the opportunity to spend a semester in Amman, Jordan, providing health care in a variety of acute-care and community-based health settings, including a Palestinian refugee camp, where more than 200,000 people live in abject poverty. Student experiences have been facilitated by able Brigham Young University faculty, including Dean Sandra Rogers, Dr. Rosanne Schwartz, Dr. James Toronto, and Professor Myrna Warnick. Students and faculty are pioneers, charting their course with faith and courage. They learn to literally wait upon the Lord for guidance and direction. Permission was gained to participate in evening prayers at the university mosque and to be instructed by the director of that mosque. He was amazed at the respectful and thoughtful questions posed by the Mormon students about the Islamic faith.

In this immersion experience, BYU students live side by side in on-campus housing with Arab students. These facilities lack many of the conveniences we take for granted here: hot water is sporadic, there are frequent power outages, and the bathroom facilities are challenging. I joined the nursing students for their evening devotional and was deeply touched. A hymn of faith, a heartfelt thought, a favorite scripture, and a humble prayer characterize

these gatherings. The dormitory at the University of Jordan grew hushed as the sweet voices of these young students were raised in song and the Spirit filled a small student bedroom. One Arab Christian student asked permission to join our BYU students each night, audiotaping the devotionals so she could listen to them after the students from Brigham Young University left Amman. The light of the gospel of Jesus Christ was reflected in the faces and lives of our BYU students.

Two years after the initial experience in the 1995 fall semester, I returned to Jordan and listened to health-care personnel and university and government officials speak with fondness and respect about these little “Mormon nurses” who made such a difference with their brightness and enthusiastic approach to caring. Dean Sandra Rogers has said, “When the history of the Church in the Middle East is written, the footprints of the students and faculty in the College of Nursing will be indelibly stamped on those pages” (Sandra Rogers, BYU College of Nursing convocation, December 21, 1995). I believe this will be so. These students have waited upon the Lord and mount up with wings as eagles, making a difference in the lives of our Muslim brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

“But they that wait upon the Lord shall . . . run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). “Run,” and not be weary; “walk,” and not faint: I believe we are seeing this scriptural blessing come to pass as we witness the remarkable ministry of President Hinckley, now in his 89th year, who has traveled hundreds of thousands of miles throughout the world since becoming the prophet.

King Benjamin wisely counseled, “It is not requisite that a man should run faster than he has strength” (Mosiah 4:27). The Prophet Joseph Smith received this counsel from the Lord: “Do not run faster or labor more than you have strength . . . ; but be diligent unto the

end” (D&C 10:4). Think of this promise of endurance in terms of a marathon, which requires consistent and long-term efforts: running with a burst of speed, but then consistently slowing to a walk and completing the race. Could this imply, in the words of Mormon, that as followers of Christ we walk peaceably rather than with an anxious and hectic haste? (See Moroni 7:3–4.)

We have been promised that as we “run with patience the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1), “in the strength of the Lord” we can do all things (Alma 20:4). We can run and not be weary, and walk and not faint as we wait upon the Lord to gain a fuller understanding of our life challenges. I testify that this is so. I bear solemn witness that continuing opportunities to wait upon the Lord have blessed my own life. I am sensitive to making reference to my own life experiences, but I’ll use the excuse of Henry David Thoreau, who said, “I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well” (*Walden* [1854], I, Economy).

As a young child my life was secure and happy in a home centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The pain of the death of my mother when I was seven years old was cushioned by the love of my family. I graduated from Brigham Young University, married in the temple, supported my husband through graduate studies, held Church callings, and had five beautiful children. I was blessed with a wonderful and secure life. I had multiple opportunities to serve.

Then came the test of the depths of my faith. Twelve years ago I found myself a single mother. I felt shock that anything could so disrupt our family, disbelief that divorce could happen to the “perfect family,” fear of the future, and anger. I held my sobbing children in my arms at night, trying to comfort their broken hearts. One of my little daughters carefully hid in her room a white envelope filled with tiny pieces of a photograph of her mother

and father, shredded by the hands of a heart-broken child.

After 23 years of marriage and five children, after 14 months of litigation and thousands of dollars in legal fees, I found myself in a Kansas courtroom going through what was abhorrent to me. I was alone in that courtroom. I thought of another who was alone: he who said, “I have . . . trodden the wine-press alone” (D&C 76:107). There are some things that must be done alone.

I was determined that although the adversary had destroyed a marriage, he would not destroy our family. On the wall of our home hung an inscription of the stirring commitment of Old Testament Joshua: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15). I drew my children close in an intimate circle of love. We read scriptures on my big bed, my children like a litter of puppies sprawled across and around each other and me in a casual, happy atmosphere. Our family was strengthened by pillows of faith that cushioned and softened the blows of life with flexibility and resiliency. (See Lynn Clark Scott, “A Time to Heal,” *Ensign*, April 1989, pp. 56–63.)

President Howard W. Hunter said:

*A line from Cervantes’ great classic, Don Quixote, . . . has given me comfort over the years. In that masterpiece, we find the short but very important reminder that where one door closes, another opens. Doors close regularly in our lives, and some of those closings cause genuine pain and heartache. But I do believe that where one such door closes, another opens (and perhaps more than one), with hope and blessings in other areas of our lives that we might not have discovered otherwise. [“The Opening and Closing of Doors,” *Ensign*, November 1987, pp. 54–59; emphasis in original]*

Ten years ago, unsolicited and across many miles, came the invitation to join the faculty in the College of Nursing at Brigham Young University. My first response was no. It would

not be possible for me to uproot my children from their childhood home when they had already experienced so much pain. It would not be possible for me to complete my graduate studies, take my comprehensive examinations, pack a household, sell a home, move a family halfway across the country—a single woman with five children—all to be accomplished in a few short weeks.

In turmoil and doubt I went to the temple, seeking the Lord’s guidance, and there came to me the gentle whispering: “Go.” And with that counsel came these reassuring words: “For I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way” (1 Nephi 3:7).

The way was prepared, my graduate studies completed, the house sold, the offer accepted, and the move negotiated. Then came the day when Dean June Leifson unlocked the door to my small corner office in the Kimball Tower. As the door closed behind me and I was alone, I looked out the window to a magnificent view of the Provo Temple: the house of the Lord with the mountains beyond. I fell to my knees with tears of gratitude streaming down my face for the many blessings of a loving Heavenly Father to one of the least of his daughters.

Nearly nine years ago I knelt again with tears in my eyes—this time kneeling across the altar of the Provo Temple with a man who loves the Lord. It is only when we have known the bitter that we may prize the sweet (see 2 Nephi 2:15, Moses 5:11). The philosopher Kahlil Gibran observed, “The cavity created by the suffering through which we go becomes a receptacle for compensating blessings.” I am grateful for the multitude of compensating blessings that have come as I waited upon the Lord. We were sealed in the house of the Lord, bringing together a blended family of 11 children. It seems significant that our first two grandsons were born only hours apart—and we planted two tiny spruce trees in celebration of those births. These two grandsons were

baptized this month and are happily preparing to serve missions in only 11 short years! Missions and marriages and more grandchildren have come and keep coming. Our cup runneth over! We are rich in posterity. We anticipate two temple marriages of our last two children in the coming months and will be celebrating the births of three more grandchildren in the coming weeks. There are continuing challenges and opportunities for growth, including the death of a precious daughter, Lucianne, last July—but how blessed our family is.

The Lord described my own experience when he said, “Mine angels [shall be] round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88). Perhaps at times we mount up with wings as eagles because others are lifting us up. I have felt the strengthening influence of my parents succoring me on both sides of the veil. My children and grandchildren may never fully know the strength they continue to offer me and how they bless my life. Recently, when a medical emergency occurred in our home at three a.m., our two youngest sons were immediately at our bedside to support us. James and Jonathan were virtual angels standing at the foot of our bed, their white temple garments in stark contrast to the darkness of the night. I am so grateful for my wonderful husband. We continue to have enriching, bonding experiences as we grapple with challenges of many kinds and grow in our love for each other.

“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” (Isaiah 40:31). These affirming words continue in the following chapter in Isaiah:

*Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. . . .*



*For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee. [Isaiah 41:10, 13]*

His promises are sure. Of this I bear witness in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Other Reading**

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