

# *“My Life Is a Gift; My Life Has a Plan”*

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**B**rothers and sisters, I’m very humbled to be standing before you today. I want you to know I am very honored to be among you. I am especially honored to be among the amazing BYU students who continue to edify me daily in my life.

At a recent stake conference I attended, the visiting General Authority opened the evening session for questions, and a man in the congregation asked, “Could it be that I have the wrong patriarchal blessing?”

At first I was startled by his words. But as I pondered the implications of his heartfelt question, I realized that I also had times when I doubted whether or not portions of my patriarchal blessing would really be fulfilled. Can you identify? Are there times in your life’s journey when your faith wavers in respect to God’s plan for that journey?

In my experience, following God’s plan has been made easier by knowing my relationship to God, experiencing the divine nature of love and service, recognizing the examples of prophets, finding joy and guidance in the temple, learning from the experiences of others, and ultimately trusting the wisdom of God’s plan for me. During our time together this morning I would like to consider with you these milestones in the journey God has ordained for us. I invite the Spirit to be with us.

## **Knowing Our Relationship to God**

When my sister Natalie delivered her second child, I was blessed to visit her family in Wisconsin. One night, while preparing for bedtime, I was singing “I Am a Child of God”<sup>1</sup> with my then three-year-old niece, Amanda. She looked up at me from her bed and said, “Aunt Michelle, Heavenly Father made you and He made me.” Tears welled in my eyes as I considered the pure doctrine this toddler had expressed. At a very young age Amanda understood one of the most central truths of God’s plan: “All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”<sup>2</sup> This principle is so significant to Heavenly Father’s plan that He emphasizes it in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” the Young Women theme, and the Relief Society declaration,<sup>3</sup> as well as in Primary, where young children sing many songs that highlight this simple truth.

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Many modern-day prophets have also underscored the message of our divine nature. Recently our beloved President Thomas S. Monson declared:

*I never cease to be amazed by how the Lord can motivate and direct the length and breadth of His kingdom and yet have time to provide inspiration concerning one individual. . . . The fact that He can, that He does, is a testimony to me. . . .*  
*. . . The Lord is in all of our lives.*<sup>4</sup>

Brothers and sisters, for the past few years I have felt impressed to study the nature of God and His plan of salvation. In doing so, I have come to understand some beautiful truths. I bear witness that what Amanda taught me when she was three years old is true: Heavenly Father did make you and me. He made us for a divine purpose. I testify that He knows you by name and that He loves you. One of His greatest desires is “to guide [your] future as he has [your] past.”<sup>5</sup> I testify that the Lord is eager to be in your life by sharing His love and His plan for each of you. “Have confidence in the Lord.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Experiencing the Divine Nature of Love and Service**

Elder Quentin L. Cook commented:

*Understanding how [Heavenly Father] feels about us [and the potential that He recognizes in each of us] gives us the power to love Him more purely and fully. Personally feeling the reality, love, and power of that relationship is the source of the deepest and sweetest emotions and desires that can come to a man or woman in mortality. These deep emotions of love can motivate us.*<sup>7</sup>

We can show that love in so many simple ways. Recently my sister Natalie posted on Facebook that my sweet Amanda, now twelve years old, had shared her coat with her younger sister Maren on their way to school

because Maren had left her coat at home. Amanda’s understanding of the profound doctrine of love has motivated her in how she treats other people, particularly her own sister. Her example inspires me.

I’d like to believe that a portion of Amanda’s understanding of her divine nature is derived from her heritage. Her great-grandmother Beatrice Marchant was a woman of noble faith and continual service. Grandma Marchant wrote in one of her personal histories:

*The first and most important fact [for me to share with my posterity] is that I was born a “Child of God.” . . . I can appreciate and understand the world and the people around me if only I make an effort to do so. I even have the ability to help change the world for better or for worse. This has made my life an interesting experience.*<sup>8</sup>

Grandma Marchant was a remarkable woman. She raised fifteen children; cared for her invalid husband for ten years prior to his death while simultaneously providing for her many children; fed every person who walked through the doors of her home, despite her limited resources; worked as one of the first female legislators for the state of Utah; served as Relief Society president at age seventy; and, without fail, acknowledged every birthday and anniversary of each of her enormous posterity, including in-laws. I could go on and on about my grandma’s loving, giving heart.

It is an honor to have learned from a woman who recognized her divine nature in such a profound way that many around her, particularly her posterity, have felt her influence. Grandma Marchant was the epitome of these words taught by Moroni: “That which is of God inviteth and enticeth to do good continually; wherefore, every thing which inviteth and enticeth to do good, and to love God, and to serve him, is inspired of God.”<sup>9</sup>

I am grateful for the examples of my niece and my grandmother, who have followed

God's plan by doing good upon the earth. My desire is that I will also live my life loving and doing good continually so that "the Lord [will] guide [me] continually."<sup>10</sup>

### Recognizing the Examples of Prophets

I likewise find great strength from the examples of prophets, including the brother of Jared and Joseph Smith, who were eager to seek the Lord's guidance to fulfill His divine plan for them.<sup>11</sup> Both of these prophets were impelled by their great faith to turn to the Lord to receive guidance. The brother of Jared sought the Lord's direction for the welfare of his people, particularly their basic needs, such as language, land, and light. Joseph Smith sought wisdom concerning religious truth. Each secluded himself from other people in order to plead with the Lord—one upon a mountain, the other in a grove. Both acknowledged their weaknesses and expressed the desires of their hearts, including ways that their needs might be met. Both men experienced adversity. The brother of Jared and his people lacked light and ventilation in their sea-tight barges; Joseph was seized by a "thick darkness" that threatened him with "despair and . . . destruction."<sup>12</sup>

What transpired next for both of these chosen servants was miraculous and powerful. The Lord appeared to each of them, and light was a significant aspect of both of these divine visitations. The Lord touched the stones provided by the brother of Jared, making them instruments of light for the barges.<sup>13</sup> "A pillar of light . . . descended [and] rested upon" Joseph Smith,<sup>14</sup> and he was invited to voice his question about religious truth to God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, receiving a direct answer "that not only changed his life forever but also changed the history of the world."<sup>15</sup>

Despite the transcendent importance of these events, I find what occurred after them to be even more significant. Neither the brother of Jared nor the Prophet Joseph kept the light

revealed by the Lord secret; they shared it freely with all who would benefit from it. The Jaredite stones became the source of light so that "men, women, and children . . . might not cross the great waters in darkness [to] land upon the shore of the promised land."<sup>16</sup> Joseph first shared the light of wisdom and truth of the First Vision with his family, then with his close friends and associates, and, ultimately, with the world. Brothers and sisters, we wouldn't be sitting here today in the Marriott Center if Joseph Smith had not shared the light he received, nor would we know about the brother of Jared. The far-reaching effects of the light Joseph Smith received and shared are almost incalculable.

As recorded in the Pearl of Great Price, the Lord revealed to Abraham the doctrine of the eternal nature of spirits. He specifically taught Abraham that there "were organized before the world . . . many . . . noble and great ones."<sup>17</sup> From modern-day revelation we know that prophets like Abraham, the brother of Jared, and Joseph Smith were among those noble and great ones.<sup>18</sup> You too were among the noble and great ones.<sup>19</sup> I testify that your presence and purpose upon this earth are as important to God as the presence and purpose of any of the noble and great ones who have gone before. God is an attentive Father, and, in His eyes, all His children possess nobility and greatness. I value the way in which Elder Neal A. Maxwell captured this doctrine:

*The same God that placed that star in a precise orbit millennia before it appeared over Bethlehem in celebration of the birth of the Babe has given at least equal attention to placement of each of us in precise orbits so that we may, if we will, illuminate the landscape of our individual lives, so that our light may not only lead others but warm them as well.*<sup>20</sup>

The lesson I draw from Elder Maxwell's statement is to do like the brother of Jared and the Prophet Joseph did: have faith in the Lord's

divine plan for us—both past and future—with the intent to lead others to partake of His light. In doing so we are able to help others progress toward their divine potential.

### **Finding Joy and Guidance in the Temple**

I am grateful for the tender experiences of making covenants and serving within God’s holy temples. Participating in temple work has been a vital part of discovering my nobility and understanding the Lord’s plan for me. Prior to serving my full-time mission to Haiti, I was blessed to receive my endowment in the Salt Lake Temple. I count that experience as one of the most glorious of my life. The love I felt as I passed through the veil into the celestial room, greeted by family and friends, was unfathomable. I am the oldest of eight children, and my parents have been less active in the Church since I was twelve years of age. Trusted friends and relatives were gracious to offer love and support so that I was not alone as I prepared for and was blessed by this sacred ordinance. I recall feeling a strong desire to remain in the celestial room, encircled by these good individuals, so that I could continue to partake of the love that filled my soul.

I soon realized that the feelings I experienced during my first visit to the temple could be renewed. I’ve come to appreciate that regularly entering the Lord’s house allows me to partake of His love and gain a clearer perspective about my divine potential. It is often within these hallowed walls that I seek and receive the Lord’s guidance for my future. Sometimes my request is related to an everyday need: for example, “What is the best direction for this talk that I’ve been asked to give?” or “Who should serve alongside me in a calling I have just received?” Other times I have sought direction regarding decisions that are of more eternal consequence, such as “Is this college major the best choice for fulfilling my potential?” “Is this job opportunity the right match for me?” or “Should I continue to date this man?”

Irrespective of the question, the Lord ultimately provides an answer that leads me toward the destiny He has planned for me. In the temple I have become keenly aware that the Lord knows us by name as I hear the name of the person for whom I am performing ordinances repeated over and over. This has confirmed to me that He is aware of me, as He is of each of His children. The power of His words “I say unto you that mine eyes are upon you. I am in your midst”<sup>21</sup> has become more tangible. He has designed an individualized plan to help each person to progress so that each can return to live with Him.

This message is one that I am eager to share with others, especially my own family. I feel great joy watching my family members enter the Lord’s house and participate in ordinances that will lead them to know God’s plan. Many of my siblings provide opportunities for their teenagers to participate in temple work. It is evident that my nieces’ and nephews’ experiences in the temple have guided them to make righteous choices for their futures, particularly as they progress into their adult years. As they advance their education, serve missions, date people with high moral standards, and accept opportunities to build God’s kingdom, they show that they are committed to fulfilling their divinely appointed plan. I testify that worship and service in His holy house is key to seeking and receiving His direction—to being able to fulfill God’s plan and share His love with others.

### **Learning from the Experiences of Others**

I would like to share the experience of a young woman who is truly one of the noble and great ones. With time, this young woman chose to make changes in her life and to covenant with the Lord. She is a modern-day individual who allowed her faith in the Lord’s plan for her to influence others.

A few years ago a student who was enrolled in one of my classes (I will refer to her as

Anna) was essentially failing. When Anna attended class she portrayed a passion about becoming a teacher. One day I felt impressed to invite Anna to visit with me in my office. Through the course of our discussion I learned that her family background was complicated and challenging. Unfortunately, participating in school and living the gospel had not been high priorities for Anna's family and, therefore, had not become high priorities for Anna. In her formative years she had become disillusioned and profoundly disappointed by the inconsistency, addictions, and destructive behaviors she saw swirling around her.

Because of her turbulent family situation, Anna was taken into the home of relatives. Her aunt and uncle encouraged her to attend school and participate in extracurricular activities, particularly dance. Anna was wary about church but acknowledged that the young women in her ward unconditionally reached out to her despite her values and minimal church activity. Over time, participation in school and in dance, as well as the love of her relatives, helped Anna develop self-confidence. Ultimately, Anna's relatives encouraged her to apply to BYU. To their delight she was accepted.

Being accepted at BYU wasn't necessarily the golden ticket for Anna. Her family continued to be unstable, she avoided religious activity, old habits began to resurface, and old wounds refused to heal. At this time in her college experience Anna was enrolled in my class. I felt prompted that I needed to provide Anna another opportunity to demonstrate her commitment to becoming a teacher. Together we created a plan that would help her acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to pass my class and be on the road to becoming a professional educator. To my delight, Anna embraced the plan and passed my class. To my disappointment, I didn't hear from her once the semester ended.

More than two years later I was working in my office when a young woman appeared at my door—it was Anna. She radiated peace and joy. Something had changed since I had last seen her. When I probed, Anna told me that she had just returned from serving a full-time mission. I was overcome by the complete transformation I saw and felt in her.

Anna recently disclosed to me that during much of her youth and early young adult years she had felt trapped and angry. Many "things" influenced Anna's journey of change—friends, relatives, roommates, the testimonies of others, the Book of Mormon, the temple, and so forth. The turning point for Anna was when she realized a need to anchor herself in Christ. She began to feel the light and power of Christ's atoning love, especially when she read the Book of Mormon. Eventually she could not contain the light and love she felt, and she knew that she needed to share them, so she worked with her bishop to prepare to serve a mission. As a missionary Anna found that the more she served, the more she wanted to serve.

Anna's story doesn't end there. Last December I was jogging along Ninth East near the MTC entrance. As I crossed the street I was pleasantly surprised to see Anna approaching me. This young woman who had struggled with the Church during her youth and had nearly failed my class is now sharing her light and love with the missionaries as an MTC teacher. My heart was full.

When I asked Anna's permission to share her experiences, she readily agreed and quickly told me that the essence of her story is the transforming influence of the Lord's love and light in her life. While acknowledging that her journey has not been easy, she is quick to add, "The Lord has guided me. He has taken me by the hand and guided my life. Now I can be His instrument. All of the things I have are because of God's hand in my life."

### Trusting God's Plan for You

Anna's experience reminds me of these tender words:

*May today there be peace within. May you trust that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith in yourself and others. May you use the gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you. . . . Allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, and love.*<sup>22</sup>

I am honored to know Anna and others like her at BYU. Your commitment to rise above the temporal and partake of the divine is inspiring. Clearly you chose to seek your divine nature in your first estate, and, as a result, you were granted the privilege to live in this second estate.<sup>23</sup> So the question before you is, "How will you embrace your *second* estate?"

The examples of my niece Amanda, my Grandma Marchant, modern and ancient prophets, and BYU students like Anna have inspired me to embrace my second estate with hope.

A few years ago a friend gave me a framed quote from an alternate translation of Jeremiah 29:11, which reads, "For I know the plans I have for you. . . . They are plans for good . . . to give you a future and a hope."<sup>24</sup> I have positioned this framed quote in my bedroom so that I see it every morning and night as a reminder that "the promises of the Lord, if perhaps not always swift, are always certain."<sup>25</sup>

As one who has yet to experience the blessings of marriage, I have shared with you today truths I have wrestled to understand and accept. My tears have wet my pillow many a night over the timing of marriage. I do not know the reason why Heavenly Father's plan for me is a bit different than His plan for my sisters, various friends, and even many of my BYU students and former Young Women. But this I do know: I am a child of God, just as each of you is a noble child of God. He loves us, and

He has sent each of us here for an individual and distinct purpose. I am learning that "[His] words are sure and shall not fail, . . . but all things must come to pass in their time."<sup>26</sup>

I rejoice in His plan for me. I know that His promises are sure for each child of God in this room and beyond, even when you cannot fully see or understand His complete design for you individually. Because I have fervently supplicated the Lord and experienced His tender mercies, I can now bear witness that the Lord will reveal His plan to you if you "cheerfully do all things that lie in [your] power; and then . . . stand still."<sup>27</sup>

So rather than question the promises in my patriarchal blessing, I have chosen to show faith, believing the truth found in a Primary song: "My life is a gift; my life has a plan."<sup>28</sup> I promise that your patriarchal blessing is for you to keep! What I have learned in my life's journey is that the Lord will not tell me the end from the beginning, but He is eager "to guide [my] future as he has [my] past."<sup>29</sup>

We read these powerful words in the Bible Dictionary: "Faith . . . must be cultured. . . . The effects of true faith . . . include . . . an actual knowledge that the course of life one is pursuing is acceptable to the Lord."<sup>30</sup> I bear witness that the Lord knows you by name, just as He knows the brother of Jared and the Prophet Joseph. He is so eager to share His infinite love with you. He wants you to feel His love so that you will embrace your life's plan and cherish the gift that it is. Moreover, He wants you to share His love and light with others. Will you accept the invitation to be still, to come to know Him, and to trust His plan for you so that you can in turn share His light and love with others?

I testify that "He is the light, the life, and the hope of the world."<sup>31</sup> I know this to be true because I have felt His light and love, which have guided me to know His plan for me. It is the greatest desire of my heart to go forth and share His light, His life, and His hope

with all who are within my circle of influence. In His sacred name, even Jesus Christ, the Resurrected Lord, amen.

#### Notes

1. *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301; *Songbook*, 2–3.
2. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 102.
3. See “The Family,” 102; *Young Women Personal Progress: Standing as a Witness of God* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2009), 3; and the Relief Society declaration, in Mary Ellen Smoot, “Rejoice, Daughters of Zion,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 92.
4. Thomas S. Monson, “Consider the Blessings,” *Ensign*, November 2012, 89.
5. “Be Still, My Soul,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 124.
6. 2 Thessalonians 3:4.
7. Quentin L. Cook, “The Doctrine of the Father,” *Ensign*, February 2012, 34.
8. Beatrice A. Peterson Marchant, *My Heritage*, personal history and letter to her grandchildren, 8 June 1980, 1.
9. Moroni 7:13.
10. Isaiah 58:11.
11. See Ether 1–3 and 6; JS–H 1.
12. JS–H 1:15–16.
13. See Ether 3:4, 6.
14. JS–H 1:16–17.
15. Cecil O. Samuelson Jr., “Stand by My Servant Joseph,” *Ensign*, February 2013, 34.
16. Ether 6:3, 12.
17. Abraham 3:22.
18. See Bruce R. McConkie, “Joseph Smith: A Revealer of Christ,” BYU devotional address, 3 September 1978.
19. See “Carry On,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 255.
20. Neal A. Maxwell, *That My Family Should Partake* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 86.
21. D&C 38:7.
22. Author unknown, but this prayer is often attributed to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux or Saint Teresa of Avila.
23. See Abraham 3:26.
24. The New Living Translation (NLT) of the Bible (1996).
25. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Continue in Patience,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 58.
26. D&C 64:31–32.
27. D&C 123:17.
28. “I Will Follow God’s Plan,” *Songbook*, 164.
29. “Be Still, My Soul.”
30. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “faith,” 670.
31. The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles,” 1 January 2000.