

# *Strength and Safety Through Gathering*

STEPHEN W. OWEN

**B**rothers and sisters, you are an impressive sight. I commend you for taking the time from your busy schedules to participate in this devotional. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a strong tradition of gathering together to be uplifted and inspired. The semiannual general conference we enjoyed earlier this month is a good example.

For more than 130 years, the Church's general conferences were held in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, which seats about 6,000 people. In 1996, President Gordon B. Hinckley noted that the Tabernacle was getting too small to accommodate those who wanted to attend conference. That is when President Hinckley announced plans to build the 21,000-seat Conference Center.<sup>1</sup> Why go to all that trouble—especially with technology emerging that would allow general conference to reach more and more people in their homes? Well, it seems that gathering is important to the Lord. As President Hinckley later said:

*The building of this structure has been a bold undertaking. We worried about it. We prayed about it. We listened for the whisperings of the Spirit concerning it. And only when we felt the confirming voice of the Lord did we determine to go forward.*<sup>2</sup>

Now we can hardly imagine general conference without the Conference Center. Any of you who have attended general conference know that there is something powerful about being in the Conference Center with 21,000 other Latter-day Saints—just as there is something powerful about this gathering at today's devotional.

Clearly, both general conference and BYU devotionals are about more than just receiving a spiritual message. If that were their only purpose, the speakers could simply prepare their messages and have them published. But part of what makes general conference and BYU devotionals so meaningful is that they involve gathering—in the Conference Center, here in the Marriott Center, and in many locations worldwide.

I also find it interesting that the Church's revolutionary PathwayConnect program, which uses the internet to bring the blessings of education to people around the world, includes weekly gatherings at a local Church facility in addition to online coursework. These gatherings are considered a

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*Stephen W. Owen, Young Men general president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on October 23, 2018.*

vital part of PathwayConnect—and many students report that they are their favorite part.<sup>3</sup>

I believe something powerful happens anytime we gather as God’s covenant people anywhere in the world, no matter how many people the gathering may include. That power can be difficult to describe, but perhaps these words of the Savior explain it best: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

Our Father in Heaven wants to gather us because there is great strength and safety in gathering. He has said “that the gathering together upon the land of Zion, and upon her stakes, [is] for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm” (D&C 115:6). “[I will] gather you,” He has promised, “as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, if ye will repent and return unto me with full purpose of heart” (3 Nephi 10:6).

The adversary, on the other hand, seeks to isolate us and divide us, because just as gathering brings strength and safety, division brings weakness and danger.

President Russell M. Nelson recently put the topic of gathering on all of our minds when he spoke to the youth—and then again to the women—of the Church about the latter-day gathering of Israel. He called it “the most important thing taking place on earth today.” He said, “Nothing else compares in magnitude, nothing else compares in importance, nothing else compares in majesty.”<sup>4</sup>

In the spirit of President Nelson’s stirring words, today I would like to explore with you three ways in which the Lord gathers His people:

1. He gathers us in families.
2. He gathers us with fellow Saints.
3. He gathers us to Him and to His gospel.

### Gathered in Families

First, we gather in families. It is true that we all “work out [our] own salvation” before the Lord Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:12; Mormon 9:27). Most of the covenants we make are personal, between an individual and God. And yet, as President

Nelson explained, while “salvation is an individual matter; exaltation is a family matter.”<sup>5</sup> The highest covenant we make here on earth—the covenant of eternal marriage—is the only one that we cannot enter into alone. We must make and keep this covenant together with our spouse.

Our Father did not send us to earth alone, and He does not intend for us to try to make it back to Him alone. President Henry B. Eyring explained:

*[Heavenly Father] wants His children to come to earth, following the eternal pattern of families that exists in heaven. Families are the basic organizational unit of the eternal realms, and so He intends for them also to be the basic unit on earth. Though earthly families are far from perfect, they give God’s children the best chance to be welcomed to the world with the only love on earth that comes close to what we felt in heaven—parental love.*<sup>6</sup>

It is easy to see why the Lord’s Church is so committed to building and strengthening families—and why Satan would try to disintegrate them. If he can, the adversary will try to convince you not to get married and start a family.<sup>7</sup> If he can’t do that, he will try to convince you to put it off at least until after you have had a chance to enjoy independence for a while. Then, when you are married, he will try to stir up contention, pride, selfishness, and hurt feelings to prevent your family members from being truly united. At the same time, he will whisper his message that families are outmoded and unnecessary, that people are just fine—better, in fact—when they are single and independent. He does all this because he knows that the children of God are weaker and more vulnerable when they are isolated.

Through His servants the Lord teaches eternal principles upon which successful families are built and maintained.<sup>8</sup> Through Elijah, He is turning “the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). Through Joseph Smith, the Lord has restored doctrines and ordinances and priesthood power so that “fam’lies can be together forever Through Heav’nly Father’s plan.”<sup>9</sup>

Now when we speak of eternal families, some of you may be painfully reminded that you come from a family situation that is less than ideal. I want to assure you that regardless of your background or your home circumstances, you have a home—a heavenly home. And you have a family—a heavenly family. I invite you to come often to the house of the Lord. This is where Heavenly Father gathers His family. This is where you will find the strength that comes from gathering in a way the world cannot duplicate.

The gathering, as President Nelson has taught us, takes place “on both sides of the veil.”<sup>10</sup> Nowhere is this more true than in the temple. Heavenly Father’s plan is to gather and unite not only a husband, wife, and children but multiple generations in the great family of God. This is why He invites us to search out our ancestors, learn about them, and receive sacred ordinances in their behalf in the temple. Temple and family history work provide what Joseph Smith called “a welding link . . . between the fathers and the children. . . . For we without them cannot be made perfect; neither can they without us be made perfect” (D&C 128:18). We need each other!

It has become popular in recent years to give names to the various generations. You have heard them—the greatest generation, the silent generation, the baby boomers, Generation X, the millennials, and so on. Usually these labels are used to highlight differences between one generation and another. Unfortunately, the result is that we focus on what divides us rather than on what unites us, and that causes what we sometimes call “generation gaps.”

God’s plan of happiness bridges all generation gaps. It doesn’t matter if you were born in medieval China or postwar Germany or twentieth-century Ghana. The plan of salvation is for everyone. It helps us feel a closeness and unity with all generations, for together we are all part of Heavenly Father’s great eternal family.<sup>11</sup>

I invite you to make it a high priority to build your family, to mend any divisions that have arisen in your family, and to turn your hearts to your family of previous generations. Receive the

blessings of safety and strength that come when we gather in families.

We live in a society that focuses on the “now.” The gospel invites us to make choices and develop habits that prepare us and our families for eternity. Remember, you are part of the great family of God. In the beginning, we all chose to follow His great plan of happiness. Our greatest desire was to return home together, as families. Let your daily decisions reflect that desire.

### Gathered with Fellow Saints

In addition to inviting us to gather in families, the Savior gathers us with fellow Saints. He has given us His Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Church affords us multiple opportunities to gather with other believers.

Many people, especially young people, question the need for a church, what they call “organized religion.” Often they consider themselves spiritual and even religious, but they prefer to exercise their faith privately and independently.<sup>12</sup>

Of course there is nothing wrong with worshipping God in private. But consider the great blessings that come from gathering frequently with other Saints. Moroni said of those who were baptized in his day:

*They were numbered among the people of the church of Christ; and their names were taken, that they might be remembered and nourished by the good word of God, to keep them in the right way, to keep them continually watchful unto prayer, relying alone upon the merits of Christ, who was the author and the finisher of their faith.*

*And the church did meet together oft, to fast and to pray, and to speak one with another concerning the welfare of their souls.*

*And they did meet together oft to partake of bread and wine, in remembrance of the Lord Jesus. [Moroni 6:4–6]*

You will notice that some of these blessings of gathering relate to our Sunday meetings: we gather to fast and pray together and to partake of the sacrament. But most of what Moroni described

is much broader than a weekly meeting or class. To “be remembered and nourished,” “to keep [each other] in the right way,” to look after “the welfare of [our] souls,” we need more than a hi and a handshake in the hallway from fellow Saints on Sunday.

I find it very revealing that right on the heels of our prophet’s invitation to take our ministering to “a newer, holier” level,<sup>13</sup> the Lord has also reduced the time we spend in meetings and classes on Sunday. Clearly, gathering together with our fellow Saints is not just about being in the same room together. It is about building relationships and friendships, and that can and should happen in a thousand ways throughout the week, not just on Sunday.

I am not sure we are taking full advantage of the opportunities we have to strengthen—and receive strength from—our fellow Saints. Maybe we don’t think we need anyone’s help. Maybe we think they don’t need us. Or maybe we don’t fully realize the difference we could make in someone’s life.

When you and I were baptized, we entered “the fold of God.” We became “his people.” And that means we “are willing to bear one another’s burdens, . . . to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort” (Mosiah 18:8–9). In other words, when we joined this church, we pledged that we would no longer be concerned only about our own comfort and problems. We committed to uniting with a people who take care of each other.

I have always loved this poem—entitled “Your Friendship Means So Much to Me” by Jean Kyler McManus—that to me describes the kind of relationship the Lord wants among His people:

*Some friends are Summer friends  
Fragile as flowers  
They are delightful in life’s milder hours. . . .  
I love the Winter friends. . . .  
Sturdy as evergreen—wind-tossed  
They bow, but do not break  
Nor lose their luster in the snow and frost.<sup>14</sup>*

When I was called to serve as a mission president in Arcadia, California, we brought our youngest daughter, Jessica, with us. She turned thirteen two days after we arrived. We had left a strong community here in Provo, where Jessica had been surrounded by many good friends and extended family members, so we knew the transition would not be easy for her.

The first few weeks were the hardest. We arrived in the middle of summer, so while my wife and I were extremely busy in the mission, Jessica didn’t have much to do other than miss her friends back home. One day, only about three weeks into our mission, I pulled into the driveway of the mission home after a long, busy day, and I saw that someone had written with marker on the living room window: “I hate California. I miss Utah. I want to go home.”

I went inside to find Jessica sitting alone on the couch, watching TV, and crying. I took my daughter in my arms and said to her, “Jessica, no one in this world is as important to me right now as you are. Do you think we should go back to Utah?”

“No, Dad,” she replied. “You and Mom can stay. But I need to go home.”

Later that night, my wife and I counseled together and agreed that it was important that Jessica stay with us on our mission. But we thought it would be okay if she flew back to Utah for a weekend. So we sent her to stay with some family members there, with the plan that she would fly back to California on Monday morning.

That Sunday happened to be fast Sunday, and in the evening I received a phone call from Jessica. “Dad,” she said. “I’ve been fasting today, and I have received a revelation that I should not fly back to California tomorrow. I am supposed to stay here in Utah.”

“That’s interesting,” I replied. “I’ve been fasting too, and I have received a revelation that you need to get your tail on that plane!”

Well, she did get on the plane, and she did come back to California. Within a few weeks she was befriended by the young women in our ward and in seminary. She even made some friends who

accepted her invitation to learn about the gospel and be baptized.

Three years later our mission was coming to an end. As I drove into our driveway on the last day of our mission, I saw that Jessica had written with marker on the living room window: “I love California. I don’t want to move!” Jessica learned—and so did I—about the strength that is available when we gather with fellow Saints.

Looking back on this experience, I believe the Lord was preparing Jessica for other times in her life when she would need that strength.

One of those times came just a few years ago after the birth of Jessica’s first child, a precious daughter named Annie. Annie was born two months early, and she had a rare genetic disorder that caused her muscles to violently contract. This would happen sixty to seventy times a day, inhibiting her breathing, while her parents and doctors could only watch helplessly. After fighting through a short but difficult life of only four and a half months, Annie died.

Jessica later said, “My husband and I definitely couldn’t go through this hardship alone. . . . The relationships that we have with our family and friends have strengthened us through this trial.” You might say that Jessica had learned the importance of “winter friends.”

My dear brothers and sisters, when you go through dark days—and all of us do—you will need winter friends. Who will you rely on? Or better yet, who will rely on you? Who considers you a winter friend? Here at BYU you have a multitude of precious opportunities to gather with people who—though they may come from different backgrounds—share your values and standards. Please don’t neglect these opportunities. In addition to attending sacrament meeting and other Sunday classes, go to your ward activities. Attend family home evening groups. Take your ministering assignments seriously. Build strong relationships with your roommates. And reach out to people around you. This is where you will find lifelong winter friends. You won’t find them in online video games. You won’t find them in social media feeds. This kind of deep, lasting relationship happens only when we gather.

### Gathered to Christ

We have talked about how the Lord gathers us as families and as fellow Saints, but perhaps our most important gathering is to the Savior Himself and to His gospel. People can gather and unite around all kinds of worldly causes or purposes. But as Elder Quentin L. Cook recently told us, “The unity *we* seek is to be unified with the Savior and His teachings.”<sup>15</sup>

In inviting the youth of the Church to help gather Israel, President Nelson taught us what it means to gather. He said:

*When we speak of the **gathering**, we are simply saying this fundamental truth: every one of our Heavenly Father’s children, on both sides of the veil, deserves to hear the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. . . .*

*Anytime you do **anything** that helps **anyone**—on either side of the veil—take a step toward making covenants with God and receiving their essential baptismal and temple ordinances, you are helping to gather Israel. It is as simple as that.*<sup>16</sup>

In other words, we gather to Christ and His gospel through sacred covenants and ordinances. This is the way, and it is the only way. “All men must come unto him, . . . and they must come according to the words which shall be established by the mouth of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:40–41).

The world would have us believe that we can choose our own plan. “Be yourself” and “Do your own thing” are messages we often hear. The Book of Mormon, on the other hand, counsels us to “feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do” (2 Nephi 32:3).

With President Nelson, I testify “that the heavens are open and that God speaks to His children.”<sup>17</sup> He knows the next step that you need to take to come out of the world and be gathered to Christ, and He will help you. In fact, if you look back on your life with an eye of faith, I believe you will recognize many instances when the Lord has reached out to gather you into the safety of His gospel and His love “as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings”



(3 Nephi 10:6). He will continue to do so if you are willing to be gathered.

I remember one such experience from my life. It happened when I was a young boy, and I believe it was a gift from my loving Father in Heaven to me to help me throughout my youth. To this day I can remember vivid details of the experience. I even remember the color of the shirt I was wearing and what I had eaten for breakfast that morning. I believe I was seven years old at the time.

It was a summer morning, and I was with my parents and my two little brothers and sister in a pasture at our ranch, trying to round up our horses. It was a large pasture, so we were spread out. I remember watching my dad and my little brothers as I walked in the pasture. The sky was blue, the sun was bright, the grass was green and lush, and there was a little breeze in the air. As I stood there, I looked up to the sky and the mountains and had an overwhelming feeling that Heavenly Father had created all of this and that He loved me. At that age, I had not read the Book of Mormon; my understanding of the gospel was limited. And yet I felt something very real, and it went deep into my heart. It was a warm, gentle feeling, and I captured it and have remembered it to this day.

As I grew and learned more about the gospel, faced temptation, and even made some poor choices along the way, I thought back on how I had felt as a young boy in that pasture, and I knew that Heavenly Father is real. That experience and other faith-building moments throughout my youth—such as praying, reading and studying the scriptures, bearing my testimony, serving others, attending church, and repenting—have truly helped me come unto Christ. I bear testimony that our Heavenly Father knows us and is aware of each of us, our needs, and our concerns, and He wants to bless us.

Think about the spiritual experiences you have had. When have you sought to “draw near unto [the Lord]” and felt Him “draw near unto you” (D&C 88:63)? Where were you? What were you doing? How have those experiences changed your life?

When Alma fled King Noah’s court and began privately preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, “many did believe his words” (Mosiah 18:3). But the world around them was hostile toward their faith, so they gathered in a place of safety known as the Waters of Mormon. There they heard the word of the Lord from Alma, made covenants to serve God and become His people, and bore witness of their commitment by being baptized. They “were filled with the grace of God” (Mosiah 18:16) and “their hearts [were] knit together in unity and in love one towards another” (Mosiah 18:21). This place was beautiful to them, because there they “came to the knowledge of their Redeemer” (Mosiah 18:30; see also verses 1–30).

My dear friends, each of you likely has a place in your memory that is like the Waters of Mormon to you—a place that is beautiful to you because there you came to the knowledge of your Redeemer. For me, some of those places have included the green mountain pasture from my childhood and a friendly, welcoming ward in Arcadia, California.

I encourage you to seek Waters-of-Mormon experiences here at BYU. Like the people of Alma, come out of the world, gather with fellow believers, and seek to know your Redeemer better. Come unto Him and renew your commitment to serve Him and be part of His people.

I bear testimony that when we gather together as disciples of Jesus Christ, we not only join the great cause of gathering Israel but also strengthen one another in our journey toward eternal life in the presence of our Heavenly Father. May we all accept His invitation to “assemble yourselves and come; draw near together” (Isaiah 45:20) that we may receive His promised blessings of peace, strength, and “refuge from the storm” (D&C 115:6). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “This Glorious Easter Morn,” *Ensign*, May 1996.
2. Gordon B. Hinckley, “To All the World in Testimony,” *Ensign*, May 2000.

3. See “PathwayConnect: Weekly Gatherings,” BYU–Pathway Worldwide, [byupathway.lds.org/pathwayconnect/structure#gatherings](http://byupathway.lds.org/pathwayconnect/structure#gatherings).

4. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” worldwide youth devotional, 3 June 2018, [hopeofisrael.lds.org](http://hopeofisrael.lds.org).

5. Russell M. Nelson, “Salvation and Exaltation,” *Ensign*, May 2008.

6. Henry B. Eyring, “Gathering the Family of God,” *Ensign*, May 2017.

In addition, Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf taught:

*Marriages and families are meant to be eternal. Families are not just meant to make things run more smoothly here on earth and to be cast off when we get to heaven. Rather, they are the order of heaven. They are an echo of a celestial pattern and an emulation of God’s eternal family. [“In Praise of Those Who Save,” *Ensign*, May 2016; emphasis in original]*

7. The most recent U.S. census reveals that “the U.S. marriage rate is at an all-time low—only 51% of adults were married in 2011.” In addition, “the median age at first marriage [is] at a record high—about 29 for men and about 27 for women” (D’Vera Cohn, “Love and Marriage,” *Social and Demographic Trends*, Pew Research Center, 13 February 2013, [pewsocialtrends.org/2013/02/13/love-and-marriage](http://pewsocialtrends.org/2013/02/13/love-and-marriage)).

8. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).

9. “Families Can Be Together Forever,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 300.

10. Nelson, “Hope of Israel.”

11. Elder Merrill J. Bateman, former president of BYU, put it this way:

*We are Israel! We are inheritors of the Lord’s promises to our ancient forefathers. One of the most powerful and distinguishing doctrines of the restored gospel is the notion that the Bible is about us, that we are part of*

*the biblical narrative. Although the rest of Christianity applies Bible teachings to their lives, it is our belief that the Bible was written by our ancestors, who saw our day and left messages for us. [“Gathered in the Tops of the Mountains,” BYU devotional address, 7 September 1999]*

12. See “Why Americans Go (and Don’t Go) to Religious Services,” *Religion and Public Life: Polling and Analysis*, Pew Research Center, 1 August 2018, [pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services](http://pewforum.org/2018/08/01/why-americans-go-to-religious-services). As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we agree that faith should find expression in our personal lives outside of church. In the Book of Mormon, Alma and Amulek encountered a people who had been cast out of their synagogues and who worried that they now had no place to worship God. “Do ye suppose,” Alma asked them, “that ye cannot worship God save it be in your synagogues only? And moreover, I would ask, do ye suppose that ye must not worship God only once in a week?” (Alma 32:10–11).

Amulek added, “Ye should . . . worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in” (Alma 34:37–38). However, we also find great value in gathering regularly with other believers to strengthen and draw strength from one another.

13. See Russell M. Nelson, “Ministering,” *Ensign*, May 2018.

14. Jean Kyler McManus, “Your Friendship Means So Much to Me,” in *A Garden of Friendly Thoughts*, Treasury of Thoughts, sel. Carolyn Herrmann (Cleveland, Ohio: American Greetings Corporation, 1978).

15. Quentin L. Cook, “Prepare to Meet God,” *Ensign*, May 2018; emphasis added.

16. Nelson, “Hope of Israel”; emphasis in original.

17. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018.