

# “Peace I Leave with You”

LESLEE THORNE-MURPHY

Good morning. I am humbled by the opportunity to speak with you today. I would like to give special thanks to the members of my family, to my colleagues, and to my students who are in attendance. It doesn't seem that long ago that I was a student here at BYU attending devotionals and forums. I am glad to be part of this tradition as a speaker now; this campus community is a precious one, especially as we have opportunities to come together and discuss matters of the gospel.

## **The Peace of Christ**

I would like to tell you about an experience I had as a student. I was learning French, and I realized that in order to progress in my studies I needed to immerse myself in the language. So I applied for an internship and went to work as a nanny for a wonderful French-speaking family in Belgium. For the first several weeks I traveled with the family in France. As I had hoped, my language skills were improving daily—being corrected by a two-year-old was highly motivating.

Eventually, when we arrived back at the family's home near Brussels, I had Sundays free, so I could attend church. My hosts were kind enough to help me determine which trains and trams I would take to get to the

nearest chapel, and the next Sunday I ventured into Brussels on my own. After taking the train into the heart of the city and making various connections, I began walking through the busy city streets. Brussels is a beautiful and vibrant city. I came to love it. On this first trip through the city, however, I began to feel overwhelmed, a bit lost, and very much alone. In fact, the stresses of the last several weeks started to weigh heavy—the difficulties of constantly communicating in another language, of fitting into another family's routines, and of adjusting to a new employer's expectations. Lost, alone, and overwhelmed, I said a silent prayer and walked on.

Finally I turned a corner and caught sight of a bright white row building with “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” in French posted on the front. It is hard to describe exactly what happened at that moment, but what I *can* say is that the sight of that sign brought peace to my soul. Yes, I was relieved to have found the church building, but it was something more than that. The oppressive weight I had been feeling was lifted. I felt

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like I could go on. I smiled the biggest smile I had had on my face for quite some time and marched right into that building to enjoy one of the most powerful testimony meetings I have ever experienced.

When I think back on this time, I am reminded of what has become my favorite scripture. In John 14:27 we read:

*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

Christ spoke these words to His apostles as He was preparing them for His death. He had taught them that a Comforter would come in His place so that they could continue to receive direction and solace. He had taught them about the Resurrection, about carrying on His work, and about how they could be unified with Him and the Father. Yet apparently He knew that in spite of all they had learned and all they had experienced with Him, the next segment of their lives was going to tax their faith and patience and confidence. He knew that one would betray Him, that another would deny Him, that many would feel shame, and that all of them would suffer and worry and not fully comprehend the monumental events that were occurring.

In the midst of what He knew would seem to be a world in turmoil, He offered them peace. His type of peace would not mean the absence of military action or civil unrest. Instead, Christ's peace resides in one's heart. It is a spiritual peace that quells fear and anxiety. In the midst of the adversity that He knew His apostles would face, He wanted to bless them with consolation, confidence, and a conviction that all would be right in the end.

I imagine that there is not one soul on this earth who has not experienced adversity, who has not felt alone and troubled and afraid. Christ's gift to His apostles is certainly as available to us as it was to them. I know that

His peace descended upon my heart in the middle of the busy streets of Brussels. "My peace I give unto you," He says to each of us.

So how do we find this peace in the midst of our busy lives—while studying for mid-terms, writing research papers, and negotiating social relationships? Especially, how do we find it during the times when life is at its hardest, when the fear and anxiety and anguish of human existence feels like it may well overcome us?

Christ taught that understanding His role in this world is key to feeling His peace. "Be of good cheer," He said. "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

One image that comes to mind when I think of understanding the Lord's role comes from Isaiah 64: "But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand" (verse 8). Like a potter shaping clay into a beautiful vase, the Lord created us in the beginning, and He will continue to shape us now. Indeed, a great deal of peace comes with understanding this. He knows, for example, how to help us deal with the consequences of sin in order to make us whole and perfect. He knows how to aid us in responding to such things as catastrophic illness, nonsensical violence, or perceived failure.

That said, *we* have a role to play in this process too. We are the living dust into which He breathed the breath of life, and He expects us to take part in our own shaping. To do this, we cultivate a sensitivity to the Lord's promptings. As the psalmist wrote, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). We need our hearts and our spirits to be in line with the Lord's will in order to truly feel His peace.

I wish this were an easy process. I wish it were simple to feel secure, confident, and calm when encountering the bumps in life that can throw us off track. At times I think I have managed to tap into Christ's peace and assurance

at these points; at other times I think I haven't done so well. Perhaps you have experienced this too. I do find that watching how others deal with these situations teaches me a lot, whether those examples are in the lives of those around me, in the scriptures, or in the other books I read.

### A Literary Lesson in Finding Peace

In my work as an English professor I have the pleasure of reading a lot of really good books. Many times my reading of these books goes beyond aesthetic appreciation or professional interest, and I find insights that truly enrich my understanding of life. Reading literary fiction can be a profoundly ethical exercise in learning to see the world from another's point of view. I had this experience several years ago when I first encountered the work of a Victorian author named Charlotte Yonge.

Charlotte Mary Yonge was born in 1823 in a village in the south of England. She was part of an upper-middle-class family and was the eldest of two children. Yonge's work was very popular during her day; indeed, in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, when Jo hides in her attic space to read, she is devouring Yonge's first best seller, titled *The Heir of Redclyffe*. In spite of her fame, Yonge lived out her life in the same village where she was born, teaching in the local Sunday School, nursing both her parents until their deaths, and honing her skills as an author.

It is interesting to note that while Yonge was living a seemingly staid life in a secure and well-established community, the early Latter-day Saints were bringing forth the Restoration as they moved from Ohio to Missouri to Illinois and eventually to Utah. Charlotte Yonge, however, was a figure in a religious revolution of a different sort. She and her family were part of a reform effort within the Anglican Church called the Oxford Movement. Yonge saw her published work as part of this movement; she considered herself "a sort of

instrument for popularising Church views," as she put it.<sup>1</sup>

Yonge thought deeply and seriously about religious matters. Though she rarely allowed overt questions of doctrine to intrude on her fiction, her novels engage with Christian principles in original and compelling ways. One of Yonge's favorite techniques was to write what she termed "family chronicles"—long novels about very large families. In her works, families are where Christian principles are learned and tested. When speaking of her novels, C. S. Lewis commented, "Yonge makes it abundantly clear that domesticity is no passport to heaven on earth but an arduous vocation—a sea full of hidden rocks and perilous ice shores only to be navigated by one who uses a celestial chart."<sup>2</sup> Lewis was right: family life in Yonge's novels is "an arduous vocation" that allows her characters to grow, stumble, move on, and then begin the process again.

One of her novels that best illustrates this process is titled *The Pillars of the House*.<sup>3</sup> It narrates the adventures of a family with *thirteen* children. Their father is a poor clergyman working as a curate to help oversee a parish in the Anglican Church. They are a complex and lively family whose members have their share of joy, laughter, and comfort in one another as well as their share of the conflicts, petty betrayals, and estrangements that any group of humans encounters when they interact on a daily basis. In other words, this family behaves as a typical family does.

That is, until their father contracts tuberculosis from a poor man he helped to nurse, suffers for years, and dies the day that his wife delivers her last two children—twins. Their mother passes away three years later, having never recovered from complications due to falling down the stairs while she was pregnant. The thirteen children are left to fend for themselves, and this is where the real plot of the novel begins.

Yonge’s novel narrates the children’s predicament and the means they take to survive. Underlying this narrative is a prolonged contemplation on what it means to live a peaceful life in the midst of nearly unimaginable adversity. One of the characters in the book whose life demonstrates this struggle most clearly is the eldest child of the family, a young man who takes it upon himself to oversee and support his siblings when he is only sixteen years old.

His name is Felix. Felix is not living the life his parents had envisioned for him. Both his father and his mother began life in relative ease. His father attended university and was groomed to take a position as a clergyman on the family estate. He married and had his first few children during this period. Soon enough, however, a legal complication meant that he lost any prospect of working on or inheriting the estate, and he had to take a low-paying job in a parish far away.

The ramifications of this scenario for Felix are great. He was to be the eldest son of a substantial clergyman, sure to have the chance for advanced education and a prosperous career. Instead, Felix chooses to leave his local school before he even has a chance to compete for a scholarship to university. He takes a job at the local newspaper office and stationery store, curtails his hopes of doing anything else, and focuses on doing what he can for his family.

One can easily imagine Felix becoming overwhelmed with his responsibilities, fearful about what the future might hold and embittered about his position in life. Indeed, he struggles with all of these reactions. And he is not the only one. Upon learning about Felix’s decision to leave school, his brother Edgar, a young teenager with great talent as an artist, grabs a half-burnt stick and takes out his indignation on the whitewashed wall of his bedroom by covering it with a charcoal sketch of the Greek hero Achilles as he shouted down the Trojan army. In this battle, Achilles’s

comrade, Patroclus, had just been killed, and Achilles was furious. Yonge described the scene in a storybook she wrote for children:

*The Trojans came thicker and more furiously on them, and were almost bursting in, when Achilles, hearing the noise, came out, and, standing on the rampart just as he was, all unarmed, gave a terrible thundering shout, at which the Trojans were filled with dismay, and fled back in confusion.*<sup>4</sup>

Edgar explains to his sister, “If I were but older—I know I could—I’d save Felix from this horrible thing! I feel to want to roar”<sup>5</sup> just like Achilles! Edgar’s impassioned and heartfelt despair and frustration at his own powerlessness is certainly understandable.

Have you ever felt like Edgar? Have you ever wanted to simply shout down the trials in your life—to put them to rest through your sheer might? I certainly have. Confronting our troubles is a good strategy, though trying to overcome them through our own might is bound to end in more frustration. Sure enough, anxiety and fear—the opposites of Christ’s peace—master Edgar time and again in the novel.<sup>6</sup>

Felix himself, though, chooses a different way of confronting his situation. Felix often makes difficult choices that align his will with what he understands of the Lord’s will for him. He certainly experiences as much emotional turmoil as Edgar, but he also manages to find some peace in the midst of adversity. Take, for example, one of the few recreations Felix allows himself after he assumes responsibility for providing for his family: he continues to sing in the church choir. The choir is an integral part of nearly every Anglican observance, so this is a drain on Felix’s very limited time. In spite of this, he never seems to consider letting this commitment go. Even after sorting through a particularly difficult domestic conflict during the Christmas holidays, Felix hurries to be on time to the holiday service. That night, Yonge explains, Felix found himself

“singing, as he had never sung before,—‘Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.’”<sup>7</sup>

What Felix seems to find in religious observance, particularly in musical observance, is a sense of reverence, a sense of a presence larger than himself that can put his own troubles into perspective. This is a conviction that Edgar lacks.

Paul Woodruff, a professor of humanities at the University of Texas at Austin, expressed the importance of reverence:

*Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all.*<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, Felix’s ability to feel awe anchors him. It allows him to accept his own and others’ human limitations, the limitations that Edgar so resents. It allows him to reconcile himself to the idea of a Maker who continues to shape and direct events and to trust that Maker after he has done all he can. Reverence brings Felix peace.

Reverence also gives Felix humility to persevere in the efforts that he knows are essential for the well-being of his family. And Felix is given some profound lessons in humility. A few of these lessons come from his brother Fulbert, who is by turns rowdy and sullen. Fulbert is young—just ten when his father dies—and Yonge deftly portrays the way that Fulbert translates his grief into marked resentment of his elder brother’s newfound authority. Fulbert knows exactly how to provoke Felix; it is as though all Felix’s patience and long-suffering evaporate when Fulbert spitefully wastes the precious food prepared for dinner, wreaks havoc in the town streets, or gambles.

What is Felix to do when his best efforts fail? Felix humbles himself. He restrains his anger, attempts to see the situation from Fulbert’s point of view, and does what he can to lead without imposing authority. In essence, he follows Christ’s admonition in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). He does his best to make peace with Fulbert. In doing so, he implements the counsel on leadership that the Lord gave to Joseph Smith—to lead “by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41). Eventually this has an effect.

Another brother, Theodore, has an entirely different set of needs. Theo, as his family calls him, is one of the twins born the day their father died. He is mentally disabled, unable to communicate beyond cheerful sounds when he is content and moans when he is not. Over the years a close and caring relationship develops between Theo and Felix. Theo is rarely more content than when he is in Felix’s company, so Felix keeps him close whenever possible. Felix even incorporates Theo into the church choir, not to sing the words but to vocalize the melody. On a daily basis Felix serves Theo, and their bond becomes stronger and stronger as time passes.

One way of understanding this bond is to see it in the context of Christ’s teachings about charity. As we learn in 1 Corinthians 13:4, “Charity suffereth long, and is kind,” and as Moroni wrote, “Charity is the pure love of Christ” (Moroni 7:47). The daily sacrifices that Felix makes for Theo forge this type of love.

As both Felix and Theo come to adulthood, this love is put to the test. One day several members of the family enjoy a picnic and a boat ride down a nearby river. They are laughing and singing, as well as enduring a little family squabbling, when another boat comes suddenly around a corner, colliding with them violently so that both boats capsize. Felix is

so attuned to caring for Theo that by reflex he dives to get hold of the full-grown Theo in the deep water and tows him to shore, using nothing short of superhuman strength to pull the two of them up the steep embankment and over the iron guardrail before he returns to help in the rescue of the others. Felix's sincere and selfless love for his brother trumps any concern for his own welfare, for in the midst of this rescue Felix sustains an injury that will eventually take his life.

Several months later, having realized that his wound will never fully heal, Felix looks back on this experience and on the responsibilities he had undertaken nearly two decades earlier. He remarks to a family friend who has been a true mentor through the years, "I have had my full share of happiness. A most happy, peaceful family."<sup>9</sup> Looking at what Felix has endured, peace and happiness do not seem to be the hallmarks of his life. Yet for Felix, charity, patience, peacemaking, humility, and reverence have all combined to shape him into a person who is capable of enduring adversity while retaining the peace that Christ offers to us all. The Lord is indeed the potter for a person like Felix. Felix exemplifies the words attributed to Thomas à Kempis, a fifteenth-century theologian: "There is no other way to life and to real inner peace except the way of the Cross and daily self-denial."<sup>10</sup>

### **Happiness Through the Atonement**

In her depiction of Felix, Yonge sets a pattern for us to follow. In fact, she incorporates aspects of this idea into Felix's very name. I imagine Harry Potter fans in this audience already know the common meaning of the name Felix.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we know that Charlotte Yonge herself was aware of the name's meaning and associations.<sup>12</sup> *Felix* means "happy" in Latin, and the name is associated with good fortune.

Yet this hardly seems appropriate for the character Felix in the novel. He is anything but

fortunate. Did Yonge mean Felix's name to be ironic? I think not. I think Yonge meant us to reconsider our definitions of happiness and good fortune.

Felix's last name starts us thinking in this manner. The family name comes from the motto on its crest, "Under Wode, Under Rode." According to their father, this phrase incorporates Old English terms for tree or wood (*wudu* and *wuda*) and cross (*ród* or *rood*).<sup>13</sup> "Under Wode" has given the family its name: Underwood. Their name acknowledges that they labor under the burdens of this earthly existence, but it also acknowledges that Christ's Atonement lightens their load. The cross that is on their family crest is called a cross potent, or crutch cross. Each of its four T-shaped arms resembles a crutch. The idea is that the cross, or the Atonement, becomes a symbolic crutch, an aid to weary pilgrims completing their earthly journey. Before he dies, their father comments on the family crest:

*"Under wood, under rood," he repeated. "It was once but sing-song to me. Now what a sermon! The load is the Cross. Bear thy cross, and thy cross will bear thee. . . . Rod and Rood, Cross and Crutch—all the same etymologically and veritably."*<sup>14</sup>

I believe that Yonge wants us all to see ourselves as Felix Underwood—happy souls who are fortunate to lean upon the Lord as we make our way through this life. As we imaginatively step into Felix's life, we learn that cultivating virtues such as reverence, patience, humility, and charity allows us to lean upon the Lord. These attributes help us to pattern our lives upon that of our Redeemer and prepare us to access the peace that He promised to His disciples.

This peace rarely comes as a great and emphatic epiphany. Instead, peace suffuses our lives when we make the daily effort to invite it. When we pause, say a prayer, and invite the Lord in, He will send His peace. I know

this. I know that even imperfect efforts to be charitable, humble, and long-suffering invite the Lord into our lives.

Christ's peace does not eliminate adversity; it does give us the courage and the confidence to carry on. It is as the Lord promised His disciples, and as He promises us all:

*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. [John 14:27]*

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Barbara Dennis, *Charlotte Yonge (1823–1901), Novelist of the Oxford Movement: A Literature of Victorian Culture and Society* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 125.

2. C. S. Lewis, "The Sermon and the Lunch," in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 284.

3. See Charlotte M. Yonge, *The Pillars of the House; or, Under Wode, Under Rode*, 2 vols., (London: Macmillan and Company, 1901).

4. Charlotte M. Yonge, *Aunt Charlotte's Stories of Greek History for the Little Ones* (London: Marcus Ward and Company, 1876), 78.

5. Yonge, *Pillars*, 1:42.

6. See, for example, Yonge, *Pillars*, 1:62, 79.

7. Yonge, *Pillars*, 1:119.

8. Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

9. Yonge, *Pillars*, 2:455.

10. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Robert Jeffery (London and New York: Penguin, 2013), 74.

11. See J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2005), 187.

12. See Charlotte M. Yonge, *History of Christian Names*, vol. 1 (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1863), 346.

13. See *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, ed. Joseph Bosworth and Thomas Northcote Toller, s.v. "wudu" and "ród," [bosworthtoller.com/036709](http://bosworthtoller.com/036709) and [bosworthtoller.com/057374](http://bosworthtoller.com/057374). I am indebted to my colleagues Miranda Wilcox and Zina Peterson for referring me to this source and for advice on how to interpret the Old English phrase.

14. Yonge, *Pillars*, 1:35.