

**“Strengthen One Another in the Lord”
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of the Quorum of the Twelve**

This address was given Friday, May 4, 2018 at the BYU Women’s Conference.
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Thank you, Susan sweetheart.

Just as I was preparing to come today, our dear President Russell M. Nelson said,
“Gerrit, please tell our sisters how much I love them.”

Dear sisters, my father and mother spent their professional careers teaching. My mother
taught kindergarten and first grade. My father taught university natural science.

When I come to a school or class, I sometimes imagine it is time for school, and a son is
telling his mother why he doesn’t want to go.

“Mom,” he says, “I don’t want to go to school today.”

“I know, Son.”

“Mom, my stomach hurts.”

“I know, Son.”

“Mom, there are two reasons I don’t want to go to school today. All the kids hate me,
and all the teachers hate me too.”

“I know, Son, but there are two reasons you need to go to school today: first, you’re 45
years old, and second, you are the principal of the school.”

In the school of mortal life, the Lord invites us to learn and grow in lifelong and eternal ways by loving Him first and by strengthening one another in His love.

Strengthening one another in the Lord and in His love is embodied in the first and second great commandments. As the First Presidency letter recently taught, “The Savior’s ministry exemplifies the two great commandments: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind’ and ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’”ⁱ The First Presidency letter continued, “In that spirit, Jesus also taught, ‘Ye are they whom I have chosen to minister unto this people.’”ⁱⁱ The song of our risen Savior’s redeeming love celebrates the harmony of covenants (that connect us to God and to each other) and the Atonement of Jesus Christ (that helps us put off the natural man and woman and yield to the sanctifying enticing of the Holy Spirit).ⁱⁱⁱ

That harmony is expressed in the plan of happiness, where we learn and grow by daily exercise of individual moral agency. Nor are we left to wander on our own, but are given a covenant path and the gift of the Holy Ghost. Alpha and Omega^{iv}, the Lord Jesus Christ, is with us from the beginning. And He is with us to the end, when “God shall wipe away all tears from [our] eyes,”^v except our tears of joy.

Our covenants connect us to God and to each other. Meant to be eternal, our covenants include God our Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Eternal covenants can bring the power of God’s love—to give hope and increase love; to lift and transform; to edify and sanctify; to redeem and exalt.

In the revelation of our true, divine selves through our covenants with God, we learn to recognize and love our brothers and sisters as He does. This deepening love and knowledge invites, empowers, and sanctifies us to know and, in our own way, to become more like Him.

The harmony of our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ is heard in the melodies and descants as drawing on our Savior’s Atonement helps us fulfill our covenants in a new and holier way. Together, our covenants and our Savior’s Atonement can shape what we desire, perceive, and experience in daily mortality and prepare us for the sociality of heaven.^{vi}

Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, we find faith, strength, and trust to come unto Christ, knowing perfection is in Him. Such offers an escape from the otherwise always-anxious treadmill of perfectionism. There may be some truth in the children’s song “Let It Go”^{vii}—if “let it go” means “let go” of self-imposed worldly expectations that can never satisfy and if it also means “hold on” to the God-given heavenly hopes and promises the Lord offers.

Have you noticed that each ordinance calls us by our name and connects us by our name to the name of Jesus Christ?

Ordinances are universal and particular (or individual) at the same time. Years ago, as the high councilor responsible for stake baptisms, I noticed stake baptisms were outwardly the same but spiritually distinct. The baptismal ordinance was outwardly the same for each person but individually distinct in that each person baptized was called, one by one, by their name, and their name was connected by covenant to the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amazing grace is as universal and unique as our Savior Himself. A Lamb without blemish, He set the pattern by being baptized to fulfill all righteousness.^{viii} The scriptures call it, and our missionaries teach it, as the doctrine of Christ.^{ix} The doctrine of Christ includes “to follow the example of Jesus Christ by being baptized by someone holding the priesthood authority of God.”^x We enter through the gate of repentance and baptism by water, “and then cometh a remission of [our] sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost.” The strait and narrow path—the covenant path—leads to eternal life.^{xi} It is part of how we are each strengthened in His love.

Our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ connect in other ways as well.

We belong to each other. By divine covenant, we belong to God and to each other. Covenant belonging is a miracle. It is not possessive. It “suffereth long, and is kind.”^{xii} It envieth not, vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.^{xiii} Covenant belonging gives roots and wings. It liberates through commitment. It enlarges through love.

In covenant belonging, we strengthen each other in His love, thereby coming more to love God and each other. This is in part because covenant belonging “seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.”^{xiv} Covenant belonging “rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.”^{xv} Covenant belonging is to come and see face to face, knowing even as we are known.^{xvi} Our covenant faithfulness is steadfast and immovable.^{xvii}

Covenant belonging is to hope all things, to endure many things, and hope to be able to endure all things.^{xviii} Covenant belonging is to keep the faith. It is not to give up on ourselves, on each other, or on God.

Covenant belonging is to delight with those who delight and to rejoice with those who have cause to rejoice and to stand as witnesses of God’s tender mercies and daily miracles at all times and in all things and in all places.^{xix}

To belong to God and to each other in covenant belonging is to smile in unexpected places as we see with eyes to see and hear with ears to hear. He changes us and our relationships to become more like Him and His.

As we strengthen each other in His love, we are active participants in Leo Tolstoy’s heroism of everyday living.

In one marriage relations class, a married student finally raised her hand and said to the teacher, "Pardon me, you keep saying marriage is hard. It is not marriage that is hard; life is hard, and marriage, with its ups and downs, can be a blessing where we get to face the joys and challenges of life together."

While eternal marriage is our ideal, infidelities, abuse of any kind, unsurmountable incompatibilities may necessitate immediate, protective action, also separation and possibly divorce. We know covenants are binding and eternal only by mutual consent of the parties affected and when confirmed by a merciful heaven's manifestation of the Holy Ghost, which the scriptures describe as the Holy Spirit of Promise. There is comfort, peace, and hope in the Lord's assurance that worthy individuals will receive all promised blessings.^{xx} It is part of His promise to strengthen each of us in His love, in His way, and in His time.^{xxi}

When I was a young bishop, an experience in our ward taught us about covenant belonging as manifested in the strengthening of one another in His love.

Our ward included many extraordinary families and individuals. Among them were the Hans and Fay Ritter family and the Larry and Tina O'Connor family. The Ritters and O'Connors, along with many others, were constantly ministering to others and were beloved by all.

One day our stake president gently asked if I would check on the Ritters. When I came to the Ritter home, they invited me in and we had a good visit. I noticed some sagging in the floor and a well-used kettle. Brother Ritter said, "Bishop, it's like this. Our water heater leaked, and warm water seeped through the floor. Termites came. That's why the floor sags a little. We had to shut off the water heater, and that's why we heat water in a kettle."

I asked Brother and Sister Ritter if I could discuss their situation with our ward council. They were initially reluctant, but finally agreed. Always other-oriented, on this occasion a gift they gave was allowing others to join in serving together. Our ward council was amazing—everyone knew someone who could help with floors, walls, carpets, appliances, paint. Many came and helped in countless generous ways. Among them was Larry O'Connor, a skilled builder who, with many generous others, was frequently at the Ritters' house.

Recently, Tina O'Connor, Larry's wife, recalled, "Larry and Jack Schwab and other quorum members would sometimes go to the Ritters on Friday and stay all night." Tina said, "One Saturday morning I took them breakfast and there was Larry coming out of a bathroom holding plumbing tools. He and Jack were happy to be working together, though they clearly looked like they had been at it all night."

Tina added, "It was from men like Hans Ritter and Larry Chandler that my husband learned to become a man—kind, thoughtful, tender. As my Larry served together with such good men, including in the nursery," Tina said, "he became an even more wonderful husband and father."

When the house was finished, we all rejoiced.

Hans and Fay Ritter have been gone for some time, but I spoke recently with two of their sons, Ben and Stephen, who live with their families in Utah and Virginia.

Ben and Stephen remember that the quiet service of others maintained the dignity of their father, who worked tirelessly, they said, "sometimes two and three shifts at work," to take care of their family. Ben and Stephen said, "There was a wonderful feeling. We were working and serving together in love."

Stephen and Hans were Susan's and my home teachers for a time. Stephen told me, "I have been telling my elders quorum I home taught someone called to the Quorum of the Twelve." He laughed, "When the phone rang and you said you were Brother Gong, I was sure you were one of my quorum members joking with me."

Not too long after the Ritters' home was completed, something unexpected happened. While at a ward activity, Larry and Tina O'Connor received emergency word their home was on fire. They rushed to their home immediately and everywhere saw broken windows (to vent smoke) and walls punctured by fire axes (to check for hidden flames). Tina said, "We were devastated."

But then the ward came. Larry and Tina remember, "Everyone helped. We were able to put things back together. The whole ward came together in love. We were there as a family."

And who were among the first to come and among the last to leave as the O'Connor home was being rebuilt? Yes, Brother Hans Ritter and his family. Ben and Stephen are modest but remember their family coming to help the O'Connors. "We were all there together," Ben and Stephen remember. "That's the way service works. We all take care of each other, sometimes by helping others and sometimes by allowing others to help us."

To me, there can be a wondrous, virtuous, and harmonious circle as we strengthen each other in His love. The O'Connors help the Ritters, the Ritters help the O'Connors, and all the while a community of Latter-day Saints is being established. Each day, in myriad ways, we each need and can offer ministering love and support in small, simple, powerful, life-changing ways.

And thus we experience a double loaves and fishes miracle: first, a community of Saints can rally in magnificent selfless unity to address a dramatic need; and second, simultaneously, a fellowship of Saints can be knit together in love, through daily, loving ministering in many quiet circumstances (as in a family, a ward, a branch, or a community over many years), independent of any dramatic need.

All of this brings us back to where we began—the first and second great commandments and the invitation to be strengthened and to strengthen each other in the Lord’s love. President Russell M. Nelson powerfully invites, “Our message to the world is simple and sincere: We invite all of God’s children on both sides of the veil to come unto their Savior, receive the blessings of the holy temple, have enduring joy, and qualify for eternal life.”^{xxii} As we feast upon the words of Christ^{xxiii} and put God first,^{xxiv} the Lord strengthens and blesses every aspect of our lives. There is divine harmony and resonance in covenant belonging as we are strengthened in His love and as we strengthen each other in the Lord.

The words of the Apostle Paul echo the harmony of our covenants and the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...

“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

“Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is Christ Jesus our Lord.”^{xxv}

Such is also my solemn testimony. I testify of God our Eternal Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. They know us better and love us more than we know or love ourselves. This is why we can trust in the Lord with all our heart; and need not lean unto our own understanding.^{xxvi}

In 159 Houses of the Lord in 43 countries, we can be strengthened in the Lord through our covenants and the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

We are blessed by priesthood authority and continuing prophetic revelation from the Prophet Joseph Smith to our dear President Russell M. Nelson today. Events of recent days have made me even more certain of, and even more humbled by, the reality of restored doctrine, keys, ordinances, and covenants in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as the “Lord’s kingdom once again established on the earth, preparatory to the Second coming of the Messiah.”^{xxvii}

The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ and all the Holy scriptures are the word of God.

Dear Sisters, as you return to your places of abode, whether near or far, may you do so with a certainty the Lord loves you, each of you, uno por uno, one by one. He knows your goodness; your righteous hopes and desires; your immense talents and consecration; your concerns and joys.

Where there is illness or concern, in the office of my calling and in all humility, I bless you with peace and assurance, health and strength, the necessities of this life, according to the will of the Lord.

I bless you that the spiritual truths you have felt these past days will deepen your conversion and increase your faith and trust in our Heavenly Father and our Savior Jesus Christ and His Atonement.

May you know, by the power of the Holy Ghost, the truth of the continuing fruits and blessings of the restoration, including as evidenced in the Prophet Joseph Smith, in the Book of Mormon, and our dear President Russell M. Nelson.

That we may each come to know our Savior better and become even more like Him, as we are strengthened in the Lord, and as we strengthen each other in the Lord and His love, I humbly pray, in the sacred and holy name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 22:37, 39.

ⁱⁱ First Presidency letter, Apr. 2, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Mosiah 3:19.

^{iv} See Doctrine and Covenants 61:1.

^v Revelation 7:17.

^{vi} See Doctrine and Covenants 130:2.

^{vii} “Let It Go,” Frozen (2013).

^{viii} See 2 Nephi 31:6.

^{ix} See 2 Nephi 31:21; 3 Nephi 11:38–40.

^x Preach My Gospel (2004), 66.

^{xi} See 2 Nephi 31:17–18.

^{xii} 1 Corinthians 13:4.

^{xiii} 1 Corinthians 13:4; see also Moroni 7:45.

^{xiv} 1 Corinthians 13:5.

^{xv} 1 Corinthians 13:6.

^{xvi} See 1 Corinthians 13:12.

^{xvii} See Mosiah 5:15; Alma 1:25.

^{xviii} See Articles of Faith 1:13; see also 1 Corinthians 13:7; Moroni 7:45.

^{xix} See Mosiah 18:8–9.

^{xx} See Handbook 2: Administering the Church (2010), 1.3.3.

^{xxi} See Doctrine and Covenants 88:68.

^{xxii} Russell M. Nelson, “Let Us All Press On,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 118–19.

^{xxiii} See 2 Nephi 32:3.

^{xxiv} See Matthew 6:33.

^{xxv} Romans 8:35, 38–39.

^{xxvi} See Proverbs 3:5.

^{xxvii} Book of Mormon, Introduction.