

Pray Not for Light Burdens but for Strong Backs

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*Ardeth G. Kapp gave this Women's Conference address
at Brigham Young University on 29 April 2004.*

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I have prayed earnestly concerning the topic I have been asked to address—that we pray not for light burdens but for strong backs. I have come to understand that to honestly pray for a strong back is a very courageous thing to do. The spiritual exercise required is not an easy course, but the promised blessings make it worthy of our total commitment—whatever the cost.

I learned of the importance of a strong back when I was about ten years old.

In the summertime after we had put in a full day's work, my father would take me down to the Belly River near the edge of our small Canadian town, Glenwood, not far from the Alberta Temple in Cardston. There he taught me to swim. Not only to swim but also to eventually jump off the pier into the cold water and swim upstream against the current. It wasn't easy. It took a lot of courage and determination—yes, and a lot of encouragement from my dad. As I recall, the water was always cold and it seemed very swift to me. What made it possible was my father swimming along beside me. I can hear his voice in my mind even today: "You can make it. Keep going." By the end of the summer, my back was stronger from the consistent effort and constant encouragement. The water in the river had receded, and the swiftness of the current had subsided considerably—but only after I had learned the lesson. There must be opposition if we are to develop strength. The river had served the purpose my father had in mind.

Today we must be prepared to swim upstream against the current. We face tremendous opposition. President Hinckley recently spoke of the challenges we face:

In the Church we are working very hard to stem the tide of . . . evil. But it is an uphill battle, and we sometimes wonder whether we are making any headway. But we are succeeding in a substantial way. . . .

We must not give up. We must not become discouraged. [“Standing Strong and Immovable,” Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, 10 January 2004 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 20]

Sisters, we must be strong enough to take a stand, to defend our values, and courageous enough to speak up and speak out, to register our vote and stand firm for truth and righteousness under all circumstances. We are swimming upstream against a river of opposition. Our families need our constant encouragement, reassurance, love, and faith. We will never be given more than we can handle with the Lord’s help.

When we pray for a strong back, we learn that it is through our covenants with the Lord that we are strengthened far beyond our natural ability. The testimony of President George Q. Cannon explains this relationship:

When we went forth into the waters of baptism and covenanted with our Father in heaven to serve Him and keep His commandments, He bound Himself also by covenant to us that He would never desert us, never leave us to ourselves, never forget us, that in the midst of trials and hardships, when everything was arrayed against us, He would be near unto us and would sustain us. [*Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of President George Q. Cannon*, sel., arr., and ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (n.p.: Zion’s Bookstore, 1957), 1:170]

Honoring our covenants is the only way to swim against the escalating opposition of our day. When we are baptized and confirmed members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we are given the gift of the Holy Ghost. Each week we have the blessing and opportunity to strengthen our backs and fill our spiritual reservoir. We renew our covenants by partaking of the sacred emblems of the sacrament. We hear in our mind and heart the words of the covenant to “*always* remember him and keep his commandments” so we can “*always* have his Spirit to be with [us]” (D&C 20:77). This should be our most earnest desire. Nothing will prepare us to stand against the opposing forces like the blessing and power of the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The Holy Ghost is the messenger who provides personal revelation, communication, and connection with our Father in Heaven and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Suppose we were to make a pledge to do all within our power to keep the communication lines open. Suppose there were no compromise, no justification, and no excuse to tolerate any enticement of the world—in our entertainment or other activities—that would lessen the Spirit. Let us strive every day to avoid anything that could weaken our spirit and extinguish the light. Let us simply give it up, turn our backs, and walk away.

Elder David B. Haight helps us understand the strength that can be found in our temple covenants, not only for our backs but for every fiber of our soul. He says:

A temple is a place in which those whom [God] has chosen [that’s all of us] are endowed with power from on high—a power which enables us to use our gifts and capabilities with greater intelligence and increased effectiveness in order to bring to pass our Heavenly Father’s purposes in our own lives and the lives of those we love. . . .

Come to the temples worthily and regularly. . . . Freely partake of the promised personal revelation that may bless your life with power, knowledge, light, beauty, and truth from on high, which will guide you and your posterity to eternal life. [“Come to the House of the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 15–16]

A very significant chapter in the Book of Mormon tells of Father Lehi explaining to his son Jacob the need for opposition. “For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things. If not, . . . righteousness could not be brought to pass” (2 Nephi 2:11). The very purpose of this life is for us to be tried and tested in preparation to receive all the blessings the Lord has promised those who love Him and keep the commandments (see D&C 136:31).

We can expect trials and tribulation—they are an essential part of the great plan. Some we will experience because of our own mistakes—our sins—others merely as a part of living in mortality, and others because the Lord loves us and provides experiences that tend to our spiritual growth. “Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth” (Hebrews 12:6). It doesn’t seem so hard once we understand the purpose for the trials. There are times when we must trust in the Lord with all our hearts even when we don’t understand (see Proverbs 3:5).

As Elder Bruce Hafen teaches,

If you have problems in your life, don’t assume there is something wrong with you. Struggling with those problems is at the very core of life’s purpose. As we draw close to God, He will show us our weaknesses and through them make us wiser, stronger. [“The Atonement: All for All,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 97]

Some years ago, Sister Jana Taylor, one of our faithful sister missionaries who committed to be totally obedient and strive to have the Spirit with her always, had some very difficult, discouraging, and challenging times—not unlike a typical mission. If one is committed to really make a difference, it seems the adversary is right there to increase the swiftness of the current, to increase the opposition that would, if possible, carry us downstream away from our goal. The last day before Sister Taylor was to return home from her mission, she stood before her peers to testify. She had a glow about her, a confidence different than when she arrived. “I’m thankful,” she said, “for the challenges and the trials. I’m thankful for every single hard day.” She paused, then added, “And every day was hard. If it hadn’t been, I wouldn’t be who I am now. I am not the same person I was when I came out.” And because of those hard times she will never be the same person again. She had, as the scripture says, grown up in the Lord (see D&C 109:15). And her growth will continue.

The writings of Orson F. Whitney help us understand the need for adversity:

No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God. . . . And it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we came here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and

Mother in heaven. [Quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, *Tragedy or Destiny*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year (6 December 1955), 6]

While serving in the Alberta Temple the past 3 years, I witnessed many people with strong backs. Some were stooped with age and others who had traveled long distances to enter into the walls of the temple. I'm not talking about the physical distance of miles or kilometers, but about the inward desire, about their priorities and commitment.

One day a young woman, Annae Jensen, came to the temple to receive her endowment. I could feel the radiance of her spirit. This young woman was born without any arms—nothing beyond her shoulders. However, it was almost as though she had lost awareness of her physical limitation and had been spiritually compensated.

Just this past month, my husband and I received a call from Annae and Garath Jones telling us of their blessing and excitement. I asked her for permission to share part of their story. They are expecting their first baby in just a few months—the beginning of their posterity. Into my mind I saw this faithful young mother without arms and thought of her desire to cradle and love this special little spirit.

I asked Annae, knowing she would respond positively, “How have you learned to handle the hard things in life?”

In her usual happy, upbeat tone, she said, “I just say, ‘Heavenly Father, what am I supposed to learn from this?’ And if I don’t learn it, I’ve missed an opportunity.” While Annae is without arms, her back is strong. She has developed spirituality under what would appear to be adversity. There is no question—that baby will be enshrouded with its mother’s love.

We have many examples in the Book of Mormon that show us how the Lord intervenes when we turn to Him and how trials and tribulation turn to our good. When Alma and his people were being persecuted by Amulon—the leader of the priests of the wicked King Noah—they began to pray “mightily to God” (Mosiah 24:10). The voice of the Lord came to the people of Alma, just as it will come to us. The Lord said, “I know of the covenant which ye have made unto me; and I will covenant with my people and deliver them out of bondage” (Mosiah 24:13).

From this record we learn several very significant lessons. The steps toward the complete delivery from bondage did not happen all at once. Alma’s people were told that the Lord would first ease the burdens on their backs, even to the extent that they wouldn’t even be able to feel them. The Lord did not take them away completely. There was a reason. It would not have allowed for the growth that took place as they learned to trust in Him. The Lord explained this when He said, “This will I do that ye may stand as witnesses for me hereafter, and that ye may know of a surety that I, the Lord God, do visit my people in their afflictions” (Mosiah 24:14). Learning to carry the burden with ease allowed them to testify from personal experience that the Lord does watch over us in our adversities.

We can follow these steps as we apply the pattern in our own lives.

And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, the Lord did strengthen them that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord. [Mosiah 24:15]

And the lesson continues. Because of their great faith and patience through their trials, the Lord spoke to them again. He would not only ease their burdens, but as He had promised in the beginning, He would deliver them. “Be of good comfort,” He said, “for on the morrow I will deliver you out of bondage” (Mosiah 24:16).

We know about our Savior, but it is often in our adversities that we truly find Him and know Him and love Him. In our times of trial, if we turn to Him, the Spirit bears witness that our Savior not only can, but will, ease our burdens. I can testify from my own experience in life, that some of our heaviest burdens, disappointments, and heartaches can in time be replaced with “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding” (Phillipians 4:7) while “we wait upon the Lord” (Isaiah 40:31).

In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, we read,

We can say: “I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17.)

There have been and will be times in each of our lives when such faith must be the bottom line: We don’t know what is happening to us or around us, but we know that God loves us, and knowing that, for the moment, is enough. [Not My Will, But Thine (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 119]

Sisters, we have a work to do. Our trials and tests are an important part of our preparation. The Lord is counting on us.

Now let us consider the possibility of burdens on our backs of our own making. Some would think that by filling up their daily planners with activities, events, and lists of good things to do, it defines them as being successful. But the burden slowly gets heavier and heavier, and without noticing it, they are in danger of being hunched over with osteoporosis. “Oh my aching back” or “My back is breaking” might be the shout for relief at such times.

President Kimball’s statement about life invites some thoughtful contemplation. He says, “Since immortality and eternal life constitute the sole purpose of life, all other interests and activities are but incidental thereto” (*The Miracle of Forgiveness* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969], 2). Now does that suggest there should be no time for fun, sports, scrapbooking—yes, shopping—and fancy parties? Of course not! We need to make time to do other worthwhile things, as long as they do not distract from what matters most, the very purpose of life.

Deciding what we really want is a very significant and powerful tool. It gives us a sense of being in control of our life, rather than being controlled. You see, the feeling of being controlled, or being out of control, is contrary to our divine nature. We cannot feel the Spirit or the peace and joy of each day when we are burdened beyond our ability to handle it all. I believe that if it

were possible, the adversary would keep us busily engaged in a multitude of good things in an effort to distract us from the few vital things that make all the difference.

Now this task of cutting back on some of our activities is really the hard part. It may seem as painful as cutting off an arm or a leg. It requires determination. Pruning is hard. It can come only after pondering and praying to know what we're willing to cut out to provide more time for what we really desire. I love Michael McLean's song "Hold On, the Light Will Come." As we look at our busy lives, we might sing, "Let go of some things so the light can come."

In the Book of Mormon, the writings of Zenos teach us the need for pruning, cutting back, and thinning the branches. The Lord of the vineyard looks at his dying trees and says to the dedicated servant what we might say when we have concerns for the welfare of our family: "What could I have done more in my vineyard? Have I slackened my hand, that I have not nourished it? Nay, I have nourished it, and I have digged about it" (Jacob 5:47). We might echo his lamentation, saying, "I've worked all day long, even into the night. What else might I have done?" (see Jacob 5:47, 49). Sound familiar? It sounds like complete dedication doesn't it? The servant then explains the problem. It wasn't a lack of dedication or hard work. The branches of the tree—like our overcrowded lives—had "overcome the roots," or grown faster than the roots, "taking strength unto themselves" and leaving the roots undernourished (Jacob 5:48). We are not left to wonder what nourishes our own roots. It is time spent together. It is in following the words of the prophet—including the guidance given in "The Family: A Proclamation to the World."

The first responsibility to ease the burden on our backs rests with us. We must take time to *ponder*, to *pray*, and to *prune*. Perhaps it would be a good idea to ponder the question Nephi was asked when he was swept away by the Spirit in chapter 11 of 1 Nephi. We learn that Nephi must have spent some time thinking and pondering when the Spirit said to him, "What desirest thou?" Nephi was prepared with an answer. If we were asked in answer to our prayers, "What desirest thou?" would we be ready with an answer? Do we know what it is we really want? Not only what we want, but more importantly, what we want to have happen and why?

I can hear one of my darling nieces say something like, "What I most desire is to make it through the whole day without being impatient or raising my voice. Or just to catch my breath for a few moments before the troops come home. Or just to feel loved, appreciated, and in control." Certainly those desires are reasonable and real, but when time is provided to get an eternal perspective and see beyond the urgencies of the day, our perspective changes. We are willing, even anxious, to do some pruning, some cutting back if that would provide more time for the things we most desire.

I have been impressed with the moving account of Emma Smith's most earnest desires at a very challenging time in her life. We read of when her husband decided to return to Carthage:

Emma asked [him] to give her a blessing. The Prophet told her to write the best blessing she could desire. He promised her that upon his return, he would sign it for her. [In Relief Society Courses of Study, 1985 (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1984), 199]

That tells us something about the confidence the Prophet had in the desires of Emma's heart. He never returned from Carthage. But we have a record of her desires at that fateful time in her life. She wrote nine things she most desired. The first sentence used the words "I . . . crave," and the following nine "I desire." I would like to share with you her first and last statements:

First of all that I would crave as the richest of heaven's blessings would be wisdom from my Heavenly Father bestowed daily, so that whatever I might do or say, I could not look back at the close of the day with regret, nor neglect the performance of any act that would bring a blessing.

She completed her list of ten with this statement: "Finally, I desire that whatever may be my lot through life I may be enabled to acknowledge the hand of God in all things" (in *Relief Society Courses of Study 1985, 199*). Under the most severe testing during that crucial time in the history of the Church, Emma Smith's desires tells us something of the strength of her back.

There are courageous women among us today and those who will follow after us when we do our part. In the poetic words of a Mormon pioneer, Vilate C. Raile, we see this legacy of faith passed from one generation to the next.

They cut desire into short lengths

And fed it to the hungry fire of courage,

Long after—when the flames died—

Molten gold gleamed in the ashes.

They gathered it into bruised palms

And handed it to their children

And their children's children.

[Cited in Asahel D. Woodruff, *Parent and Youth* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1971), 124]

Sisters, we are on the Lord's errand. We can have His Spirit to be with us always, with angels round about us to bear us up. Today I pay tribute to my great-grandmother Susan Kent Greene and her unwavering testimony.

In 1835 Susan married Evan M. Greene and soon after went to Kirtland to live. They were among the first of the Mormon fugitives at Mount Pisgah, Iowa, in the early spring of 1846. We read,

As soon as Evan pitched the tent he left his wife and their little ones while he went with his team and wagon to aid in bringing forward some of the saints who were without means of their own. Unfortunately for Susan she had no near neighbors. Almost as soon as her husband had gone the

eleven-month old baby became ill. The baby rapidly grew worse, and after a few days died in its mother's arms. This occurred on a dark and stormy night accompanied by loud thunderbolts and vivid lightening flashes. All she could do was to pray that the Lord would not forsake her, but would send someone to help her, which prayer was answered. A young man came to the door and spoke words of pity and comfort. In the morning he made a coffin and dug a grave for the baby and buried it. Susan had to prepare the little body for its last rest, herself. [Lula Greene Richards, "Life Sketch of Susan Kent Greene," typescript, in author's possession]

This was only the beginning of the tests that were to follow.

Evan and Susan arrived in Utah, having endured much, she wrote the following on the first page of her journal dated February 3, 1875:

I make this covenant to do the very best I can, asking God for wisdom to direct me in that I may walk with Him in all righteousness and truth. I much desire to be pure in heart that I may see God. Help me, Lord, to overcome all evil with good. Signed: Susan K. Green.

This covenant with the writings on this page is written with my blood and I have not broken my covenant and trust shall not. Signed: Susan K. Greene. [Quoted in Ardeth Greene Kapp, "I Shall Know They Are True": Susan Kent Greene," in *Heroines of the Restoration*, ed. Barbara B. Smith and Blythe Darlyn Thatcher (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 87–88]

I look forward to one day meeting my great-grandmother and pray that I can tell her that I have followed her path and kept the faith and all of the covenants.

With an understanding of the purpose of life, of our promised blessings as women of the covenant, and of the need for opposition, let us be grateful that God allows us to struggle, to cry, and to feel pain. Else how could we comfort others in their tribulation? (See 2 Corinthians 1:6.)

Let us be grateful to know about hurt and healing. Else how could we know the Healer, the Great Physician, who invites us to come unto Him and be healed? (See D&C 42:48.)

Let us be grateful to know about fear and faith. Else how would we recognize the light of faith after the dark night of fear? (See D&C 6:36.)

Let us be grateful to know about discouragement and encouragement. Else how could we reach out and take another's hand in empathy, understanding, and love? (See John 13:34.)

Let us be grateful to know about offenses and forgiveness. Else how could we ever begin to appreciate the Atonement? (See Alma 7:11.)

Let us be grateful for His infinite love and hear in our minds and hearts His words of comfort: "What I say unto one I say unto all, be of good cheer, little children; for I am in your midst, and I have not forsaken you" (D&C 61:36).

I testify that in those difficult times, when our crosses seem unbearable, He who carried the cross for all of us—our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—will sustain us, be with us, and will be the strength in our backs when we turn to Him in earnest and fervent, sincere and humble prayer.