

Thou Art an Elect Lady

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One Saturday shortly after my husband and I began our missionary service in West Africa, we drove our way over the deep, potholed roads to Ikot Ekong, one of the first bush districts organized after the revelation on the priesthood was announced in 1978.

As we entered the simple concrete building nestled in the jungle among tall palm trees, we saw a beautiful, ebony-skinned Nigerian Relief Society sister who had obviously trekked some distance in order to clean the building before our conference. Bringing her short-handled broom made from the spines of dried palm fronds, she worked hard, bending over to sweep the rust-colored sand from the chapel's chipped concrete floor. I greeted her, thanking her in my strange American English. I then asked her a question about the meeting to come.

I will never forget her response. She answered in halting English, as she referred to her husband, "I will ask my master."

My master!

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. As I stood speechless beside that magnificent sister, I was stunned by the realization of what those two words meant. And so was my husband. Later he said to me as we spoke of the experience, "Please teach these precious Nigerian sisters *who* they are."

Sisters, I rejoice to be a woman living when the gospel of Jesus Christ has been fully restored and we know who we are. When I ponder all we know, all we have, and all that awaits, my heart soars. We are, in fact, individually loved and valued by the Lord to such a degree that our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, has recently advised us, the women of Relief Society. He said: "Let us, each one, resolve within . . . herself that we will add to the luster of this magnificent work of the Almighty, that it may shine across the earth as a beacon of strength and goodness for all the world to look upon."

He added: "This is [the] season to be strong. It is a time to move forward without hesitation, knowing well the meaning, the breadth, . . . the importance of our missions [and responsibilities]."

That call to shine across the earth, that reminder to be resolute in our faith, fills me with joy. It reminds me that the truths of the gospel apply to my life and family and circumstances. It tells me that my personal efforts to prioritize my actions and thoughts and time matter to the Lord.

Today I want to discuss several revealed truths that give us as women of these latter days such a cause to "press forward with a . . . perfect brightness of hope" (2 Nephi 31:20).

First, we are daughters of God, given the agency to prioritize our time and actions.

Second, we can better the world as we serve individually and in complementary roles with our brethren.

Third, our covenants bind us to the Lord; temple ordinances link us eternally to our families, in which we have sacred roles.

First, we are daughters of God, given the agency to prioritize our time and actions.

The restored gospel of Jesus Christ shines a great light upon our identity as women. Literally, we are "daughters of our Heavenly Father, who loves us." Because this is true, each and every woman, regardless of her circumstances, can face her life with wonderful expectations of her own possibilities and purpose. My dear sisters in Nigeria were amazed and their eyes grew wide with disbelief as I taught them that they were beloved daughters of God, that He knew their names, their challenges, and the righteous desires of their hearts.

I cannot describe to you the joy I felt in being able to teach them the glorious doctrine that we are precious and of infinite worth to the Lord and that "he inviteth them all to come unto him and partake of his goodness; and he denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female; . . . and all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33). That doctrine warms my soul just as it did the sisters of Africa.

Understanding that the Lord invites each of us as a beloved daughter to come unto Him profoundly influences *how* we think and *what* we do. Perhaps our greatest challenge today is not to become distracted from our most important responsibilities by the busyness of our lives. For the most part, we have sufficient testimony and enough life experience to have little trouble deciding between good and evil. Our challenge comes in choosing between *good* things and *needful* things. A scripture speaks of "lay[ing] aside the [good] things of this world, and seek[ing] for the things of a better" (D&C 25:10).

Sisters, a glorious gift of the Restoration to women is the knowledge that each daughter of God can prayerfully ponder her priorities, can carefully measure her choices with an eternal yardstick. In a most personal, profound sense, we can seek for the things of a better world.

Second, we can better the world as we serve individually and in complementary roles with our brethren.

Identifying a key priority, our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, has made a clarion call to the Relief Society sisters of this day. He said: "We call upon the women of the Church to stand together for righteousness. They must begin in their own homes. They

can teach it in their classes. They can voice it in their communities." This inspired message reminds us that as we act upon Restoration truths, we can make the world a better place.

Let me share with you an example of a sister whose service blessed many in her land. Dr. Prisca is a Relief Society sister who heeds the prophet's call to stand for righteousness. She set a great example for her fellow countrymen by volunteering for three weeks to help vaccinate children during the Red Cross and Church-sponsored measles campaign in her island nation of Madagascar. When she attended a preliminary meeting for all the vaccinators, the other physicians focused on the payment they expected for their services. After listening to their discussion, she arose, less than five feet in height, and boldly declared that she was willing to work without any compensation. The moderator asked if she would sign a statement to that effect, which she did in the presence of over 100 people. Her example of standing strong and immovable in doing what she knew was right blessed not only children in families but also many orphans in her homeland. She personally went into the city to bring street children to the clinic for their measles vaccinations.

What a blessing to the world committed Relief Society sisters like Dr. Prisca are because they "arise and shine forth . . . [as] a standard for the nations" in which they live (D&C 115:5). They know who they are and what their responsibilities are, and they use their time, talents, and influence to better the world.

Significantly, as a result of truth revealed in the Restoration, we, as daughters of God, know our proper relationship with our brethren. Time after time as I taught the regal Relief Society sisters of West Africa that they are equal to their husbands in the sight of God, they would gaze at me in total amazement.

They could *not* believe that it was possible.

Thankfully, modern prophets have clarified our complementary roles as men and women. President Hinckley said of women: "They are our co-workers in building the kingdom of God. How great their role, how marvelous their contribution. How they add to the luster of life." Sisters, this doctrine that we serve as partners with our brethren, in complementary roles to theirs, places us in the position to do great good in the Church and truly to add luster to the world. We are not only positioned to do so, but we are blessed because we *can* do so.

Belle Spafford, a general Relief Society president for nearly 30 years, reminded President David O. McKay that ever since the Restoration, women have built the kingdom of God along with men. She used this explanation: "The women stood side by side with the brethren when they were in Kirtland, in Missouri and in Nauvoo, and they walked across the plains with the brethren." When I think of this joint labor, I recall that every step a man took, a woman walked. Every mountain a woman climbed, a man scaled too.

Of course, our work as "fellow laborers" is not always the same as we build the kingdom of God. The example of how men and women worked in complement to build the first Nauvoo temple makes the point. The men constructed the building; the women housed, clothed, and fed those temple workers. The brethren hewed the timbers; the sisters sewed the temple veil. And so it went. All were needed to complete the house of the Lord.

Joseph Smith, whom we honor so appropriately this year, explained that the Church was never perfectly organized until the women were organized. Now, throughout the world in more than 160 nations, we are organized---priesthood and Relief Society---according to the Lord's order, and we walk and work side by side to accomplish our important responsibilities.

Sometimes we hear of sisters who don't feel listened to or supported by priesthood leaders. Some Relief Society leaders disagree with decisions and directions of their priesthood brethren. Whatever the case, dear sisters, may I suggest that we take to heart President Hinckley's statement that we are "co-workers" with the brethren "in building the kingdom of God." Let us believe in the greatness of our roles and our ability to make marvelous contributions.

Then let us add luster to our callings, to our joint service with our brethren, to our work in the world. The Lord is depending upon us to do so. Let us never be dissuaded from living according to who we are and what we must do. Rather, let us stand strong as women of these latter days "who continue to take part in helping to 'bring forth and establish the cause of Zion.' "

Third, our covenants bind us to the Lord; temple ordinances link us eternally to our families, in which we have sacred roles.

The covenants we make in the temple bind us to the Lord. The saving ordinances we participate in link us to our families. The sisters who aided in the building and furnishing of the early Restoration temples knew this truth and understood the place of temples in the bringing forth of "the cause of Zion." As they officiated in temple ordinances and engaged in the saving work done in the house of the Lord, the sisters knew their service blessed both the living and their kindred dead.

Their temple covenants also gave them the peace and courage they needed to face their "perilous times." In her journal, Sarah Rich, a Nauvoo sister, penned these poignant feelings: "If it had not been for the faith and knowledge that was bestowed upon us in [the Nauvoo] temple by the influence and help of the spirit of the Lord, our journey would have been like one taking a leap in the dark, to start out on such a journey in the winter as it was, and in our state of poverty, it would seem like walking into the jaws of death." Driven brutally from their homes, forced across the frozen Mississippi, sent to an unknown destination, burying loved ones along the way, these sisters leaned heavily upon the spiritual bonds they felt with the Lord because of sacred ordinances performed and personal covenants made in the temple.

The performance of ordinances that link generation to generation brings spiritual stability and depth to family members on this side of the veil while offering our families on the other side the freeing blessings of the temple. As we do for our kindred dead what they cannot do for themselves, we draw our families together in a way that is meaningful across generations. It is, in fact, difficult to put into words the blessings of hearts turned to fathers and children.

After years of gathering old photos and searching for vital family records, the MacArthur family was blessed to have the opportunity to do temple work for family members whose names they bear. During the drive from their home in another city to the Portland Oregon Temple, Sister MacArthur said, "[All of us in the family] reviewed the names of the

ancestors whose temple work we would soon perform. We shared what we knew about each person and made sure we understood all the family relationships. Each of us decided upon one individual for whom we could do all the necessary ordinances that day. Our younger son temporarily became family patriarch by serving as proxy for his third great-grandfather Hugh MacArthur, who had been born more than 200 years earlier. Serving as a proxy for a chosen ancestor helped us each see the ordinances of the temple through new eyes, and the significance of the promises and covenants took on new meaning." She said, "I will always recall the beautiful memory of my family in the sealing room and that comforting, joyful feeling in my heart. It was a time for *sealing* and *celebrating* seven generations of our eternal family!"

Generation to generation, women's roles in the family---wife, mother, grandmother, niece, sister, aunt---are sacred and binding. When we are together, we women often talk about our roles in families, don't we? Maybe we discuss family so readily because we know that *all* we do in our homes, with our spouses, for our children, and in behalf of our extended family members matters deeply in both temporal and spiritual realms. What a gift that restored knowledge is to women! What a difference this knowledge can make in how we think and plan for the family.

Recently, I was in Guadalajara. Let me tell you about this amazing mother I met. In the midst of her demanding responsibilities as a mission president's wife in Mexico, Sister Anderson found an inspired way to prepare her own boys to be missionaries. Desiring that her 8-, 12-, and 14-year-old sons become more proficient in the Spanish language, she arranged for a tutor to come to the mission home regularly. She asked the tutor, a serious-minded, demanding, but loving teacher, to use the Spanish Book of Mormon as the tool by which the boys could develop their language fluency. Sister Anderson also asked the tutor to develop questions to ask her sons about the things they had read.

Through the months, the tutor listened to each boy read in Spanish from the Book of Mormon and then asked questions. Her heart was softened, and her testimony blossomed. She later shared that she saw light around the boys' heads each time they read from the Book of Mormon. The Spirit touched her, and she joined the Church. I met her as a new convert of just one day while I was on a training assignment in Mexico.

I like the response of an aunt who helped her recently returned missionary nephew as he struggled through a piercing personal tragedy. His mother---her sister---died unexpectedly only a few months after the missionary's return home. In his sorrow he lost some of the light of faith that had burned so brightly in his heart. His aunt, anxious for his welfare, gave him a photo of himself that she had taken on the day he returned from his mission. She urged him to remember *why* he had looked so radiant and happy and *what* he had taught on his mission about faith and hope.

Through subsequent months she encouraged and counseled with him. Often she reminded him that she longed to see that excited, hopeful expression again because it would mean that he was healing and living so that the Spirit of the Lord could rekindle brightness in his heart and countenance once more. The photograph, a very specific visual reminder, and his aunt's steady, prayerful, optimistic participation in his life served as a beacon to this young man, lifting and directing him.

I have often thought about Emma Smith as a remarkable wife to her prophet husband. Joseph Smith described his "tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed wife" as "undaunted, firm---and

unwavering, unchangeable, affectionate." Emma's mother-in-law, Lucy Mack Smith, wrote of her: "I have never seen a woman in my life, who would endure every species of fatigue and hardship, from month to month, and from year to year, with that unflinching courage, zeal and patience. . . . She has breasted the storms of persecution, and buffeted the rage of men and devils, which would have borne down almost any other woman."

What strikes me about these tributes is that Emma, in so many ways an *ordinary* woman like you and me, did the *extraordinary* in the most trying of circumstances. In my experience, women bent on being Christlike and sincerely working for the betterment of their families are invariably extraordinary.

In an even broader sense, President Hinckley captures this idea. He said: "We are ordinary people who are engaged in an extraordinary undertaking. Those who have gone before have accomplished wonders. It is our opportunity and our challenge to continue in this great undertaking, the future of which we can scarcely imagine."

Sisters, I began my remarks today by sharing a story of African sisters new to the gospel who marveled at its revealed truths. I "stand all amazed" as well when I consider all we are, all we know, and all that awaits. These restored truths brightly beckon and bless us.

Like Mary, the first to see the Savior after His Resurrection, we look to Him and proclaim with joy and gratitude as she did, "Master" (John 20:16). What a gift it is to know that Jesus Christ knows and loves us personally, atoned for our individual sins, overcame the world, restored the gospel in this dispensation, and stands eternally as our Savior and Redeemer, our Lord and Master.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.