

## “The Powerful Privilege of Women”

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In 1842 Joseph Smith, beloved and honored by the saints as the prophet of God, stood before the sisters of the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo and made this promise: “If you live up to your privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates.”<sup>1</sup>

These were women who had left homes—and even families—to join the Lord’s Church in preparation for His Second Coming. Some had suffered degradation, privations and unthinkable horrors for having chosen to follow Him. Strong in the gospel, they were sure of their faith and humble in their worship of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

But Joseph wanted them to recognize that the Lord had more in store for them. “If you live up to your privileges,” the prophet said, angels will come; you will be connected to the heavens; you will be divinely directed in what the Lord will have you do.

Such is our promise today.

Without question, we as daughters of God are entrusted with “privileges” that exceed any honor or opportunity the world pushes our way. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we have precious privileges on Earth that reach far beyond here and now, privileges that are attended by godly manifestations of His mighty power. The priesthood of God is not elusive, nor is it a commodity to be bartered for or bantered about. It is the Lord’s, and it is holy.

Today I want to focus on three things, all relating to the priesthood of God:

- First, the privilege to exercise faith in God the Father and in His Son Jesus Christ and in the Holy Ghost.
- Second, the privilege to understand, seek and feel the power of the priesthood in our lives.

- And third, the privilege to draw upon and act with authority given us by those holding priesthood keys.

Let's begin with faith, for it enables and underscores all blessings. By our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, buttressed by our willingness to follow His example and live, truly live, His commandments, we draw closer to living up to our privileges. We become, quite simply, faithful disciples of the Savior and are blessed for following Him.

By faith the woman with an issue of blood was healed as she reached out to touch the garment of the Lord. She believed in Him. She counted it a privilege to be in His presence, and she stretched out her hand, exercising faith in his power—priesthood power that permeated the very folds of his clothes. Such is the faith underpinning our privileges.

Are we the kind of women whom the Lord can count on to reach for righteousness, to live His ways, to be worthy of treasuring and bearing witness that He lives—the testimony of His divine power? Are we learning from the disciples of old who watched the Lord perform miracles and were healed as well, healed from the ways of the world? Do we accept the Lord's plan for our lives as did Mary when she said, "Be it unto me according to thy word?"<sup>2</sup> Do we heed His counsel to Emma Smith to "lay aside the things of this world, and seek for the things of a better"?"<sup>3</sup>

Consider the faith exemplified by a young girl in the biblical account of Naaman, a heroic warrior and a leper. Leading the Syrian army, he had brought captive out of Israel a little maid—we don't even know her name, but we know she was a believer in the power of God; she knew in whom she trusted to do God's bidding. "She said unto her mistress, 'Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! For he would recover him of his leprosy.'"

You know the story: Naaman comes with his horses and chariot to the door of Elisha, expecting some great reception, some fire from the sky as a demonstration of priesthood power. The prophet Elisha instead has his servant tell Naaman, "Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean."

Naaman was aghast. A servant, not the prophet, receiving him? Wash in a river? He was hoping for a big splash, not a dip in the common, muddy Jordan. Another of Naaman's servants boldly suggested to his master, "If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?"<sup>4</sup> Finally, Naaman goes down into the Jordan and is healed.

What has the Lord said? Your ways are not my ways.<sup>5</sup> Naaman was a man of the world with power to conquer armies, but Elisha was a man of God who had been given priesthood power that could cleanse the body and the soul. That power opens the gates of heaven. That demonstration of priesthood power began with the quiet testimony of a young woman whose faith was sure.

In 1846, Bathsheba Smith, young wife of Apostle George A. Smith and my great-great-great-grandmother, left Nauvoo with the early companies. This woman, born to mortal privilege on a plantation in Virginia, wrote of the experience:

We left a comfortable home, the accumulations of four years of labor and thrift and took away with us only a few much-needed articles such as clothing, bedding and provisions. We left everything else behind us for our enemies. My last act in that precious spot was to tidy the rooms, sweep up the floor and set the broom in its accustomed place behind the door. Then with emotions in my heart . . . I gently closed the door and faced an unknown future, faced a new life, a greater destiny as I well know, but I faced it with faith in God.<sup>6</sup>

Do we have that profound faith in God? Are we “steadfast and immovable,” pressing forward with “a perfect brightness of hope”?<sup>7</sup> Or are we standing by the side of the Jordan, asking for a bigger river, more clear water and a grandstand of onlookers who think power is theirs to demand?

Elder M. Russell Ballard said, from this very podium, “When all is said and done, each of us has the privilege of choosing whether or not we will believe that God is our Father, that Jesus is the Christ, and that They have a plan designed to help us return home to Them. This, of course, requires faith, which is why faith is the first principle of the gospel. Our testimonies and our peace of mind and our well-being begin with the willingness to believe that our Father in Heaven does indeed know best.”<sup>8</sup> What our Father knows, sisters, is that grassy plains, treacherous caverns and Rocky Mountains are ahead on our journey home—all the way home. Like Bathsheba Smith, the key is to face them with “faith in God.”

Our second privilege as women is to seek greater understanding of the priesthood and its profound blessing in our lives. This is one of the “ifs” Joseph Smith was talking about. “If” points us to look for the hand of God around us, feel His strength and His peace, and rely on His promises. And in so doing, “angels can not be restrained from being [our] associates.”

I was raised in a single-parent home with a mother of incredible faith and charity. Not until I was married did I experience the blessing of a righteous priesthood holder in my home. But my mother understood the gospel; she was a woman of great faith and reverence for God’s almighty power. Elder Ballard has said, “The power of a converted woman’s voice is immeasurable, and the Church needs your voices now more than ever.”<sup>9</sup> Where do you voice your conviction? Do you speak with the tongue of angels, bearing witness of Jesus Christ in your homes and to your family, friends and associates? Do we live up to that privilege?

I will always remember when my Uncle Jon baptized me just days before he left on his mission to the Central States. He and I share an eternal connection that reaches back to the Salt Lake Tabernacle when he pronounced, “Having been commissioned of Jesus

Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.”<sup>10</sup> It was my privilege to be his first baptism.

Elder Neil L. Andersen has taught, “All of the ordinances invite us to increase our faith in Jesus Christ and to make and keep covenants with God. As we keep these sacred covenants, we receive priesthood power and blessings.”<sup>11</sup>

With each priesthood ordinance we receive, we are drawn closer into the family circle of our Father in Heaven. And we are changed, both by the love of God and by our love for Him.

Every one of us has moments in our lives where we must choose to be believers in the power of God or be skeptics, turning our hearts away. If you wrestle with feelings of being overlooked or lonely, humbly reconsider the love of God in your life. President Thomas S. Monson, our living prophet, has reminded us:

“Your Heavenly Father loves you—each of you. That love never changes. It is not influenced by your appearance, by your possessions, or by the amount of money you have in your bank account. It is not changed by your talents and abilities. It is simply there. It is there for you when you are sad or happy, discouraged or hopeful. God’s love is there for you whether or not you feel you deserve love. It is simply always there.”<sup>12</sup>

Priesthood ordinances are an expression of God’s love, for they bring us back into His presence. “The Lord will give grace and glory: no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.”<sup>13</sup> Are we worthy of those promised blessings? Worthy by living the commandments? Worthy by prayerful use of our agency? Worthy by receiving and living up to our covenants?

It isn’t always easy to walk uprightly.

I always worried in my pregnancy with twins that they would be born with all their fingers and toes. I never imagined that one would die. Christian Horne Swinton lived only 22 hours. I remember standing at his graveside, his tiny little casket being readied to lower into the hard winter ground. It was a wrenching moment that to this day, 38 years later, is still fresh in my heart and mind and soul.

At the same time Cameron, the younger of the two by just minutes, fought valiantly for his life in Newborn Intensive Care—all three-plus pounds of him. His journey there with tubes and monitors and daily frightening experiences lasted for weeks that turned to months. But Cameron lived. He and Christian both received priesthood blessings at birth. The Lord chose to let Cameron stay, and he is a daily reminder of the power and love of the Lord.

I remember slipping into the back of my ward sacrament meeting after the twins were born and Christian was gone. The opening song was “Come, Come Ye Saints,” and the

congregation was singing “And should we die before our journey’s through, Happy day! All is well!”<sup>14</sup> Happy day—not yet, and in some ways not ever. But “all is well” was true.

“All is well” is an eternal perspective that draws upon the power of the priesthood. Christian was born under the covenant, sealed to us—forever. I now had a son who was all the way home with our Father in Heaven. For me and my husband Jeffrey, everything changed. I came to treasure the sealing power on Earth, the blessings and covenants in the temple, because my family now straddled the veil.

The power of the priesthood of God did not take away the pain or the loss that still surface, even today, usually when I least expect it. But the Lord’s promise that we will be together for eternity was and is a privilege that prompts me, my husband and our four sons every day to live true to the ordinances we have received and the covenants we have made.

That expression of love is our privilege as daughters of our Father in Heaven. When we visit the temple and come out into the world, we are renewed with the strength and power born of sacred covenants. Do we realize what has just happened in our lives, the manifestation of priesthood power? And not just for us but also for one waiting, who knows how long, for those profound blessings in those lives! When we raise a hand to sustain and support the prophet of God who holds all the priesthood keys for the work of the kingdom of God on earth, right now, we are exercising great power. We are bearing witness that Jesus Christ lives, this is His Church, and we have a significant place in moving it forward. When hands are placed on our heads to call down the power of heaven we feel “angels round about”<sup>15</sup> to lift us, bring comfort and sometimes, even heal. When we accept a calling and are set apart by the power of the priesthood, we go forward with authority.

And that is the third message.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught recently at general conference, “Priesthood ordinances and priesthood authority pertain to women as well as men. . . . While the sisters have not been given the Priesthood, it has not been conferred upon them, that does not mean that the Lord has not given unto them authority . . . to do some great and wonderful things, sacred unto the Lord, and binding just as thoroughly as are the blessings that are given by the men who hold the Priesthood.”<sup>16</sup> Elder Oaks was quoting in part from a message delivered more than 45 years ago by President Joseph Fielding Smith, who also said, “Authority and Priesthood are two different things. A person may have authority given to him, or a sister to her, to do certain things in the Church that are binding and absolutely necessary for our salvation, such as the work that our sisters do in the House of the Lord. They have authority given unto them to do some great and wonderful things, sacred unto the Lord, and binding just as thoroughly as are the blessings that are given by the men who hold the Priesthood.”<sup>17</sup>

I sustain prophets, seers and revelators—President Monson, Elder Oaks, Elder Ballard, Elder Anderson and President Smith—whose words give us added insight to the power of the priesthood in our lives. They have explained not only what is the practice of the Church, but also what is the doctrine of the Lord. As a woman sealed in the temple in the

new and everlasting covenant, I know I share in priesthood power with my husband that is best understood by grasping the significance of that blessed, holy ordinance. My responsibility here and now is to continue to live up to that precious privilege.

Sisters, we have been given authority under the direction of priesthood leaders, and with it comes a sacred trust. So what does that mean for us? Are we taking seriously what the Lord has asked us to do in our own little patch in the vineyard? Are we casual about being called, set apart, and serving? Or are we like Naaman, wanting a bigger playing field? Do the words, “Not my will, but thine, be done”<sup>18</sup> clearly define our service?

The Lord bore our burdens in the Garden of Gethsemane with drops of blood oozing from Him, the very lifeblood of mortality. He asks us to find strength beyond our own, to lift and encourage and bear witness of His saving power. Shall we not count it an honor to be in His service?

Every time we partake of the sacrament we are exercising privilege as members of His Church. We say “amen,” promising to “always remember Him” and live worthy of His Spirit. The sacrament is holy and filled with power. I think of the time I was sitting in sacrament meeting, preparing to receive the sacrament, and my heart was heavy. I was so distressed by something really difficult that had happened in the life of someone I dearly loved. I couldn’t imagine how I was going to handle it and not be contentious, as the scriptures so clearly counsel, and not be just plain mad. As the priest said those sacred words of the sacrament prayer, I heard the Lord say to me, “You have to forgive. You have to show love—my love.”

That was not easy to do, but drawing upon the power of the Atonement, I did forgive. And it became a sweet experience.

Those words, to “always remember Him,” hold such meaning for each one of us. Yes, we remember that 2,000 years ago a wicked mob belittled Him, scourged Him, beat Him and hung Him on a cross. But why did this Son of God who raised the dead and healed the blind allow it to happen? Because he counted it a privilege to serve God. And he concluded his ministry with those stirring words, “It is finished.”<sup>19</sup>

He sacrificed his life for every one of ours—our sins, our disappointments, yes, even our very bad days. He loves us so much that He is willing to pick up our burdens so that we will not harden our hearts and turn away.

It is sobering to remember the Lord’s words, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in Heaven.”<sup>20</sup>

So there I was in that sacrament meeting, on the precipice of hardening my heart with anger and resentment. As a young man said the sacrament prayer, probably with a crooked tie, I heard in my mind the words, “that which the Spirit testifies unto you . . . that ye should do in all holiness of heart, walking uprightly before me.”<sup>21</sup>

Humility, honor, duty, service, charity—these are the workings of authority within us. We raise our hands to sustain the prophet, the Twelve Apostles, the general officers of the Church, including our sisters who lead Primary, Young Women and Relief Society. They have committed to serve us; we count it a privilege to receive that service. We sit in councils, men and women called of God to further his work, and we seek ways to bless the lives of those in our care. What a privilege for us to join together in service to God! We attend the temple, serve in the temple and feel the priesthood blessings promised us in the Lord’s house. We pray for one another that the Lord might intervene with blessings and comfort. All of these we do within our spheres of authority, privilege and assignment.

I have circled and underlined and written in the margins around the response of the Nephites to Jesus Christ when He prayed for them:

“The eye hath never seen, neither hath the ear heard, before, so great and marvelous things as we saw and heard Jesus speak unto the Father; . . . no one can conceive of the joy which filled our souls . . . .”<sup>22</sup>

Not all was well with them. Cities had sunk into the ground and pillars had fallen, and those who had mocked—even dear ones, I imagine—were swallowed up. This was not a time of general calm. But it was heavenly in its manifestations, and they were “good enough” to receive such privileges.

The question is, are we?

I know that my Redeemer lives. I know that He has placed in my path and yours privileges far beyond our own capacities that remind us who we are and why we are here. I have felt angels round about (as have you), the angels Joseph Smith promised could “not be restrained from being [our] associates.” We are in good company. We stand with the Lord; we feel His Spirit. We are blessed by His power, infinite and immeasurable.

It all comes down to having faith in Jesus Christ and trusting in His ways; seeking the blessings of the priesthood in our daily lives; and exercising with courage and commitment the authority given to us to serve by those with priesthood keys. Said President Smith, “It is within the privilege of sisters of this Church to receive exaltation in the kingdom of God and receive authority and power as queens and priestesses, and I am sure if they have that power they have some power to rule and reign. Else why would they be priestesses?”<sup>23</sup>

When we hope for more in this life, may it be as the song says, “More holiness give me, more strivings within.” May we plead for more of the things that the Lord loves—more patience, gratitude, meekness, purity, strength and wisdom to fulfill the work given each one of us that we might be “More fit for the kingdom,” and in the end, “More blessed and holy, more Savior like thee.”<sup>24</sup>

And then we will feel it a privilege as did Nephi when he said, “Rejoice, O my heart, and cry unto the Lord, and say: O Lord, I will praise thee forever; yea, my soul will rejoice in thee, my God, and the rock of salvation.”<sup>25</sup>

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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<sup>1</sup> History of the Church 4:604–5; from a discourse given by Joseph Smith on April 28, 1842 in Nauvoo, IL; reported by Eliza R. Snow.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>3</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 25:10

<sup>4</sup> 2 Kings 5:1–13

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 55:8

<sup>6</sup> Bathsheba Smith, *Autobiography*, ed. Alice Merrill Horne, typescript, 14–15, in author’s possession.

<sup>7</sup> Mosiah 5:15; 2 Nephi 31:20; see also D&C 49:23

<sup>8</sup> “Let Us Think Straight,” M. Russell Ballard, BYU Campus Education Week Devotional, August 20, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Ballard, “Let Us Think Straight”

<sup>10</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 20:73

<sup>11</sup> Neil L. Andersen, “Power in the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas S. Monson, “We Never Walk Alone,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 84:11

<sup>14</sup> *Hymns*, no. 30

<sup>15</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 84:88

<sup>16</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, “The Keys and Authority of the Priesthood,” *Ensign*, May 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, “Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1959.

<sup>18</sup> Luke 22:42

<sup>19</sup> John 19:30

<sup>20</sup> 3 Nephi 14:21

<sup>21</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 46:7

<sup>22</sup> 3 Nephi 17:16, 17

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, “Relief Society—An Aid to the Priesthood,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Jan. 1959.

<sup>24</sup> “More Holiness Give Me,” *Hymns*, no. 131

<sup>25</sup> 2 Nephi 4:30