

# God's Covenant of Peace

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It is so wonderful to be with all of you. I know many of you, and I love *all* of you. Thank you for being my friends, women whom I love and admire with my whole heart. Thank you for your goodness and your graciousness in welcoming me into your hearts. I ask for and I appreciate your prayers in my behalf.

For nine years, I spoke pretty regularly in this cavernous arena—too regularly for my liking. You would think speaking would get easier, but it doesn't. I recently had my annual physical checkup and was engaging in a little small talk with my doctor. He said he thought it was wonderful that I got so many chances to speak publicly. I nearly strangled him with his stethoscope. When I got through with him, I think *he* scheduled a physical checkup. I told him that when I have to speak, my cells stop working. Not just my brain cells—*all* my cells. He laughed and said, "You sound like nearly every other woman who comes into my office. It's nice to know you are no different from everyone else."

I am deeply touched by but not worthy of that lovely introduction by my friend, President Mary Ellen Smoot. I am grateful for her kindness to me always, and certainly for her kindness to me today.

This is the voice of Helaman to his sons Nephi and Lehi: "Remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built" (Helaman 5:12).

That is the same message the psalmist gave in another time but for the same purpose—to calm our fears and soothe our hearts, to give us refuge from the storm. Speaking of those who are caught in the rising wind and the perilous waves of life, Psalm 107 reads: "They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is

melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven" (v. 26–30).

On some long days and during some even longer nights, you may have wondered why that comfort, that care, and that guidance is not a little more evident—or at least evident a little sooner. That reminds me of a thought expressed by Mother Teresa of Calcutta: "I was consoling a little girl who was sick and had much pain," said Teresa. "I told her, 'You should be happy that God sends you suffering, because your sufferings are a proof that God loves you much. Your sufferings are kisses from Jesus.' 'Then, Mother,' answered the little girl, 'please ask Jesus not to kiss me so much'" (Edward Le Joly, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta: A Biography* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985], 321).

We will all have the chance to face some of these storm-filled, tempestuous moments in life—moments when, for a time, we feel utterly alone and experience genuine despair. Nevertheless, whatever challenges we have faced and may be facing yet, I *know* that God is caring for you, guiding you, and bringing you to his "haven." I know that partly because I know you, but I know it best of all because I know him.

So, gathered on this beautiful campus in the last springtime of an outgoing millennium and looking ahead to the exciting dawn of another, I think this is a good time for us to spiritually inventory the many changes, choices, and challenges we face individually and collectively as each of our missions continues to unfold. This women's conference is a good time to ask ourselves if we are truly built upon the rock of our Redeemer, that sure foundation upon which, if we build, we cannot fall. This conference is a good time to ask whether we are living in such a way that God can bring us into his "desired haven."

The most obvious external symbol of such refuge, of such safety, is the holy temple. Are we true to the covenants we have made there? Is our faith in God and in his promises such that when we enter his holy house it truly can be a sanctuary from the storm? And when we cannot be in a temple, do we keep our covenants in that other holy place, our own home, the other great sanctuary God has given to the faithful? Because of covenants made and kept, we have the blessing of taking our sanctuaries with us, much like the children of Israel did who wound their way toward the promised land. And given the storms that can come up in the Sinais of our life, it is a wonderful thing that God goes with us.

I assume you won't think me too bold or off-base if I say that when the winds blow and the sea is storm tossed, we must not give in to self-pity. God is with us; Christ is our sure foundation; there is a safe haven ahead. We simply have to remember that in this mortal journey, *all* learning, all personal growth, all spiritual refinement carry with them the possibility of a little motion sickness. No one—not even the Saints, maybe especially not the Saints—are immune from such challenges. Remember the little girl and the kisses from Jesus. No one escapes God's refining hand. Our trials offer a training ground for godhood. Without some moments in darkness, would we ever cherish the light? Without confronting

some doubt, would we ever recognize and cling to faith?

I would dare say there is not a woman in this room who has not been directly affected by any number of things—disease or death, loneliness or discouragement, divorce, or family or financial challenges—any of a wide variety of disappointments or seemingly unyielding tribulations. Many of these challenges have come not from personal choice but from God's divine timetable, a timetable that for obvious reasons is usually *not* put into our hands for prior review and approval. The loss of a spouse, concern for a child, a major change in health or temporal circumstance—these can occur to any one of us at any time. So many things can unexpectedly play havoc with our hope and darken our view of the future.

And if these burdens do not fall upon us directly, they can come to those we love. Such burdens are no less painful to us. In fact, as a doctor friend of mine once said, "It's like asking a mother not to breathe," when she is to be only a bystander near her children who are afflicted with one kind of trial or another, feeling there is so little one can do to help. Some of you have seen your own children or grandchildren make choices so inconsistent with your own that their lives as well as yours have been changed forever. At least that is how it seems in the heat and pain of the moment.

With all of this ebbing and flowing of emotion that the psalmist described, we can, as one writer put it, "go up to Heaven and down to Hell a dozen times a day" (May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude* [New York: Norton, 1973], 108). And some days, particularly difficult days, days when the adversary seems to have an absolutely crushing upper hand, it may appear that the spiral downward is more frequent than the reach upward.

Some of you may relate to the following passage contained in a letter from John Winthrop to his wife, Margaret. This letter was written in response to a situation in which their wildest and most irresponsible son married a young woman against his parents' wishes. John Winthrop, who discovered the news while on business in London, wrote to his wife back in New England, asking her to take in their son and his new wife until they could get the means to settle on their own. Then he gives her courage with these words:

"I know thou lookest for troubles here [meaning life here on earth] and when one affliction is over, to meet with another. But remember what our Savior tells us; Be of good comfort, I have overcome the world. See his goodness, he hath conquered our enemies before hand, and by Faith in him, we shall assuredly prevail over them all. Therefore my sweet wife, raise up thy heart, and be not dismayed at the crosses thou meetest with in family affairs, or otherwise, but still fly to him, who will take up thy burden for thee, go thou on cheerfully in obedience to his holy will, in the course he hath set thee, peace shall come, thou shalt rest as in thy bed and in the mean time he will not fail nor forsake thee" (*Winthrop Papers*, 6 vols. [Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1929], 2:84).

I don't pretend to have come with any prepackaged solutions to individual sorrows, but I have come to say that I love you and that I know some very basic things to be true. No matter how terrible the current challenge may seem, if, as Mr. Winthrop said, we can go on cheerfully in obedience to God's holy will, peace shall come, we shall "rest in our beds," and

God will not fail nor forsake us. God can mend our broken hearts. Indeed, I believe it is through the cracks of a broken heart that God sheds his purest and most illuminating light to the soul.

Consider these sensitively written lines:

#### THE WELL OF GRIEF

Those who will not slip beneath  
the still surface on the well of grief

turning downward through its black water  
to a place we cannot breathe

will never know the source from which we drink,  
the secret water, cold and clear,

nor find in the darkness glimmering  
the small round coins  
thrown by those who wished for something else.

(David Whyte, *Where Many Rivers Meet* [Langley, Wash.: Many Rivers Press, 1996], 35)

My entire message to you today is simply this: "Please trust lovingly in the goodness of God. He will honor the covenants you have made with him!" Glorious and glimmering promises await you if you will but trust in him. Illuminating secrets, clearly revealed, are awaiting you—the wonder of rewards found in "small round coins thrown by those who wished for something else." You are God's child. He loves you—and he will never stop loving you. You are still being formed and transformed at his tender hand. Though his molding requires we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, he has provided for you a pathway of peace. Even through the darkest of shadows, we can walk in comfort and consolation if we lovingly trust God. Remember your baptism. Remember the sacrament table. Remember the temple. Remember an entire theology built upon covenants. Well did de Chardin write, "Not everything is immediately good to those who seek God; but everything is capable of becoming good" (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* [New York: Harper & Row, 1960], 86). Things are *made* good through the power of covenants.

I don't know exactly how old I was, maybe fourteen or fifteen years of age, when I learned this truth. I only remember being old enough to think I had made too many mistakes in my life to be of any use to anybody. I was not a rebellious teenager (you couldn't get in too much trouble in Enterprise, Utah, population 350) but I was very curious and active and asked my parents a lot of questions. I suppose I just had all of the fears and frustrations of an average teenager. I especially remember thinking that maybe my life would be lived more with a whimper than a bang, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot (see "The Hollow Men," in *The Norton*

*Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Nina Baym et al., 3rd ed. [New York: W. W. Norton, 1989], 1843–46).

It was at that age—maybe fifteen—that I read for the first time in my life Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God." I was struck dumb for a minute. Speechless! I remember that moment as if it were locked in time. I was sitting on my white Martha Washington bedspread surrounded by sea-blue walls, my head resting on a red velvet pillow. With my hands gripping the scriptures, I remember sort of looking up and saying, "Heavenly Father, do you mean that everything that I have ever done, silly or not, good or bad, happy or sad, will come together for my good if I—just love you?" I was incredulous. I can't tell you the joy that filled my heart.

At fifteen I hadn't had too many such moments with what really was pure and beautiful revelation. The whole thing was wonderful. I already knew that I loved God; I just didn't know how deeply until that moment. And at that very moment, at that very instant, I knew that God loved me. I didn't know everything I needed to be forgiven of but I felt forgiven. I think there on that Martha Washington bedspread with the red pillow, I knew for the first time that I could and would truly be helped in my life, and if it was a whimper instead of a bang—well, that would be my fault and certainly not God's. If I could document the moments when I moved from a youthful view of God to a more mature one, to some beginning of what it meant to love him with a maturing heart and mind, one of those moments was that day with Romans 8:28.

That moment in my life convinced me I could rise above sorrows or disappointments or mistakes or despair. I felt that day that God was an artist. He would use the very stone of my plain, even pitiful, little life, and refashion it, producing something far more redeeming and substantial. I knew even in that short span of life in Enterprise, Utah, that I might have to endure sometimes painful sculpting, as with a hammer or chisel, if I were to become something precious from this stone. To use a softer image, I believe we need to be as malleable as clay and from time to time feel the loving touch of his hand, if we wish him to form more exquisite lines and tones. At that moment, I trusted God perfectly, as perhaps only a fifteen-year-old can trust him.

I know it is easier to have that kind of faith in your youth, long before you have suffered through some of life's later challenges, such as having no opportunity to marry, or losing a loved one, or facing a debilitating disease, or any of the desperations of the mind that can come. But I think it is sometimes too easy for us to dismiss the faith of youth. That is "a cop-out" on our part, as the kids would say. Surely these youthful experiences in forming a testimony, which we have all had, must be among those reasons that Christ said, "Except ye . . . become as little children" (Matthew 18:2). I ask us to be like a child, to love God and trust God and keep our eye single to his glory, especially in time of stress and difficulty. I do know that all things will work together for our good. I promise you that on good authority. I promise it on the authority of God's own word.

May I share with you another's witness of God's comfort for the natural and expected

turbulence of our lives?

"At times we may feel that we do not need God, but on the day when the storms of disappointment rage, the winds of disaster blow, and the tidal waves of grief beat against our lives, if we do not have a deep and patient faith our emotional lives will be ripped to shreds. There is so much frustration in the world because we have relied on gods rather than God. We have genuflected before the god of science only to find that it has given us the atomic bomb, producing fears and anxieties that science can never mitigate. We have worshiped the god of pleasure only to discover that thrills play out and sensations are short-lived. We have bowed before the god of money only to learn that there are such things as love and friendship that money cannot buy and that in a world of possible depressions, stock market crashes, and bad business investments, money is a rather uncertain deity. These transitory gods are not able to save us or bring happiness to the human heart.

"Only God is able. It is faith in him that we must rediscover. With this faith we can transform bleak and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of joy and bring new light into the dark caverns of pessimism. Is someone here moving toward the twilight of life and fearful of that which we call death? Why be afraid? God is able. Is someone here on the brink of despair because of the death of a loved one, the breaking of a marriage, or the waywardness of a child? Why despair? God is able to give you the power to endure that which cannot be changed. Is someone here anxious because of bad health? Why be anxious? Come what may, God is able" (Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love* [Cleveland, Ohio: Collins, 1963], 112)

Some of you may be asking, "How do we do this? How do we make the transition from being together here in a cozy conference cocoon, hearing powerful testimonies from the scriptures, only to go out into that world of woe that confronts us from time to time?" My answer is not new, and it has everything to do with covenants—the promise that if we will remember something as fundamental as our baptismal, sacramental, and temple covenants, we will carry an inner peace that God is with us. Knowing precisely the doubts and difficult moments all of us would face, the great Jehovah said to the children of Israel, "For I know the things that come into your mind, every one of them. . . . I will be to [you] as a little sanctuary. . . . I will put a new spirit within you" (Ezekiel 11: 5, 16, 19).

Having gone into the waters of baptism, or to sacrament meeting, or to the temple to make our covenants, we cannot (much as we would like to) always remain in those wonderfully safe settings. We know that. We have to shoulder our backpack and take up the journey again. But that wonderful promise from the Lord recorded in the book of Ezekiel is that if we cannot always *be in* God's sanctuary, we can always have God's sanctuary *be in us*. "I will be [your] sanctuary," he promises. "I will put a new spirit within you!" When difficult times come, when we realize things are not good the way they are, we trust in God who can provide a new spirit. That is the power of covenant making and covenant keeping.

So often we hear discussions about our covenants with God, and well we should. Those promises and convictions, this way of faithful living, as someone recently said, "is our ticket home." But sometimes those covenants seem almost too challenging for our

inadequate selves to accomplish.

What we too often fail to realize is that at the same time we covenant with God, *he is covenanting with us*—promising blessings, privileges, and pleasures our eyes have not yet seen and our ears have not yet heard. Though we may see *our* part in the matter of faithfulness going by fits and starts, by bumps and bursts here and there, *God's* part is sure and steady and supreme. We may stumble, but he never does. We may falter, but he never will. We may feel out of control, but he never is. The reason the keeping of covenants is so important to us is at least partly because it makes the contract so binding to God. Covenants forge a link between our telestial, mortal struggles and God's celestial, immortal powers.

We bring all we can to the agreement, even if that doesn't seem like much—our heart, our devotion, our integrity—we bring as much as we can, but he brings eternity to it—he brings himself, priesthood and principalities, power and majesty beyond our wildest imagination. Just listen to the sure language of God's covenantal promise to us in Third Nephi:

"For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee" (3 Nephi 22:10).

God is saying, in effect, "Think of the most unlikely things in the world, things like the mountains departing and the hills being removed—think of the most preposterous events you can imagine, but still even then 'my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed.'" He goes on and gives lovely promises of temporal blessings and then this promise from verse 13: "And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children." I simply cannot imagine a more powerful nor hopeful promise.

The danger, of course, is that in times of pain or sorrow, times when the obedience and the sacrifice seem too great (or at least too immediate), we hesitate, we pull back from this divine relationship. How often when we have been asked to give our hearts, or give something from our heart, or give that latter-day sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit—how often when there is a difficult time or a bruising of our soul, we shy away or openly retreat from a total and uncompromising trust in the one person who knows exactly how to accept our gift and return it tenfold. God knows how to receive a broken heart, bless it, and give it back healed and renewed. He knows how to weep with love over such an offered gift, immediately bless it, mend it, and return it.

With God, whatever has become broken can be fixed. God doesn't just pull out the tiny spikes that life's tribulations have driven into us. He doesn't simply pull out what one writer has called the nails of our own guilt, leaving us bleeding and scarred forever. No, when we can finally trust our lives, our hearts, our whole souls to the Great Physician, then he not only heals what *was* but goes one better and makes all things new. We must remember, as my doctor son-in-law, would say, "We are up against a surgeon here whose only determination is to heal us—and he knows *exactly* how to do that." He gives us a new

strength of soul, a new birth, a new heart—holier and happier, healthier than it ever was before.

I know that just saying all of this doesn't necessarily make it easy to do. We sing that sacrifice brings forth the blessings of heaven, but we know from experience that sacrifice is not a trivial thing, that it can bring sorrow with a very personal price tag attached. We can sometimes be terrified at what may be asked of us. It reminds me of Sister Marjorie Hinckley's response when someone asked her how she felt about being the wife of the newly ordained prophet. With all four feet, eight inches of height and with her big brown eyes opened wide, she said, "Oh, I just want my mama!"

I think Sister Hinckley and I would agree with Paul the apostle when he wrote, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). "What?" we say. "You mean that Paul, who seemed the very essence of courage and faith, talked about being fearful and about fear over falling into the hands of God at that?" Yes, that very same Paul. And those "afflictions," as he calls them, come "after ye were illuminated" (v. 32), after those moments of having received light, knowledge, power, and revelation. We make our covenant, we step forward with our offering, and then we stand absolutely speechless, even a little terrified, sometimes sobbing with consternation when that offering is accepted.

I am quick to say honestly that I have experienced this pattern in my life, enough times that I am embarrassed to try to count them. The embarrassing part is that I can get lost in the self-preoccupation and self-pity that can come with a little fright and anxiety. I forget too easily what price you must pay for God's precious gift of faith. I forget how many times God will ask us to practice our virtues, embrace our fears, and reiterate our covenants until they are truly established, strengthened, and settled in our souls forever (1 Peter 5:10). What we all sadly forget in the heat of battle is that after these tests and tribulations, when God really is satisfied that we are "settled" firmly in the faith, then come the blessings that are too glorious for mere words. I stand as a witness that my most precious blessings, miracles, and the realization of God's covenantal promises have come after my fears have been aroused, my faith has been tried, and my heart truly broken in humility and supplication.

Paul, knowing these fears and frustrations, these fluctuating feelings, pleads with us to "cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:35–36). What then follows in this scriptural sequence is one of the greatest chapters on faith in all the Holy Bible. For the next forty verses of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, Paul describes the faith which preceded the sacrifices and afflictions of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samson, David, and Samuel—to name a few. He recounts there the examples of women who saw their dead raised to life again, accounts of the quenching of fire, escaping the edge of the sword, stopping the mouths of lions, and a host of weaknesses being made strong.

When I think of this kind of faith in the face of adversity and understandable fear, I think of a very current example. Shortly after Elder Neal A. Maxwell's leukemia was detected and he undertook his first chemotherapy treatments, my husband and I went to the



hospital to visit with him. He was so sick and fragile and frail. I'll never forget the sweet look on his face and the tear-filled eyes as he softly spoke and said, "I just hope that I do not shrink from this cup which has been given me."

That was more than two years, one book, dozens of regional conferences, and four general conferences ago. And he is still serving without shrinking—walking by faith, knowing that he still has leukemia, and never knowing for sure what the Lord may have in store for the next leg of the race. The treatments go on, the nausea returns, the hair comes and goes, but there is Neal Maxwell with his shoulder to the wheel. Elder and Sister Maxwell are perfect modern examples of faith overcoming fear, of hope tinged with sadness, of light shining in otherwise dark moments, of a couple who will never shrink nor shun the fight. To be around them is to feel an aura of serenity and calm. You know that Christ has pleasure in the strength of their covenants.

In these times, many people are starting to worry over the calamities of the last days. Fear is waxing strong, and the hearts of some men and women grow cold. To that I say as they do in Australia, "No worry, mate!" Curl up comfortably in your favorite easy chair, wrap yourself in the loving spirit of God, and read the italicized heading for this very chapter of Third Nephi we have been quoting: "In the last days, Zion and her stakes shall be established, and Israel shall be gathered in mercy and tenderness—They shall triumph" (chapter 22).

Let me close as I began—with the winds of adversity, shafts in the whirlwinds from the adversary himself.

Not long ago we experienced the worst windstorm Bountiful has seen in several decades. The wind on the freeway was gauged at 113 miles an hour. Coming out of our canyon, it seemed even more than that. Just as I was hearing news reports of semi trucks—twenty of them—being blown over on the roadside, I looked out my lovely back window down toward our creek, and I saw one of our large trees go down with a crash. Another smaller one followed almost immediately.

For a moment, I confess I was truly fearful. For an instant, I thought of Kosovo and Littleton, Colorado, of our own Family History Library, and even the great bug-a-boo of the year Y2K. The wind became even more furious, and it was very loud. I am a little embarrassed to say it, but I was scared.

It was very early in the morning as the worst of this was happening, and Jeff was just leaving for the office. I said to him, "Do you think this is the end? Is it all over—or about to be?" I whispered. My husband, who has deep faith and endless optimism, took me in his arms and said, "No, but wouldn't it be wonderful if it were? Wouldn't it be wonderful if Christ really did come and his children really were ready for him? Wouldn't it be terrific if evil was finally conquered, once and for all, and the Savior of the world came down in the midst of the New Jerusalem to wipe away *every* tear from *every* eye? Yes," my husband said, "in lots of ways I wish it were the end, but it's not. It is just a stiff windstorm in Bountiful. We have got more work to do." So, he kissed me and drove off to work, with

trees falling and rafters rattling.

Now, I was probably imagining it, but I thought I could hear him whistling a few bars of "Master, the Tempest Is Raging," especially that lovely closing refrain: "Peace, be still; peace, be still" (*Hymns* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985], no. 105).

"They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths; their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. *Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble*, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven" (Psalm 107:26–30; emphasis added).

This is God's covenant of peace to you. His kindness shall not depart from you, and terror shall not come near you. God's covenant of peace shall not be removed, for he has so declared.