

## *In the Strength of the Lord*

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In August of 2008, when our committee began planning this year's conference, we hoped to find a theme that provided encouragement to rely on the Lord in all things, in good times and in times of uncertainty and challenge. In August 2008 the Dow Jones Average was still above 11,000. Massive layoffs had not taken place across the United States. The U.S. housing crisis and subsequent foreclosures were just showing the tip of a terrible iceberg. The good Saints in California had not yet faced the venom of the campaign on Proposition 8 and its vicious aftermath. Those in Fargo, North Dakota, had yet to fight the rampaging Red River. We knew that a severe and perhaps prolonged recession, political barbs, and natural disasters were not the only challenges nor the only uncertainties that you and your families would be facing. We felt drawn to a theme that would be an anchor for anyone facing any challenge of mortality.

I do not plan to dwell on the breadth and depth of what can be just plain tough about mortality. I do want to point out why mortality is the way it is. The Lord taught Moses that "worlds without number have I created; and I also created them for mine own purpose. . . . [and] this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:33, 39). Fundamental to achieving an immortal life like God the Father and His Son have, with the family relationships they enjoy, and with the characteristics of Godliness they possess, was the principle of agency. To become like God, His children had to be free to choose. And in order to be able to choose, there had to be opposition. As Lehi explained, if we did not have opposition there could be no righteousness and there would have been no purpose for our creation (see 2 Nephi 2:11–12). God gave us commandments so that we could return to Him, develop His traits and His capacities, and become like Him. As we use our agency to obey those commandments we will stand "proven" to the Lord (see Abraham 3:25).

This magnificent plan was explained to us in the council in heaven, including the fact that we could all very well stumble, trip, fall, falter, crumble, faint, or fail during this mortal test. But we were assured by Him who cannot lie (see Titus 1:2) that we could be rescued from our spiritual clumsiness by a Holy Redeemer, filled with perfect charity, who would "go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; . . . [taking] upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, . . . and he will take upon him [his people's]

infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, . . . that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:11–12).

Someone with plenty of talent and plenty of intelligence, a supreme example of the natural man, someone dazzling and charming enough to be called a “son of the morning” (Isaiah 14:12) offered to fill the role of Redeemer for us. His plan had two major errors that demonstrated his disregard for eternal laws and his amazing arrogance. Lucifer would get us through the test of mortality, all right. All we had to do was give up our agency while Father gave up His glory (see Moses 4:1–2).

We are all here because we chose the Holy One of Israel. We saw through the smoke and mirrors of Satan’s devious and disobedient offer. We chose Christ. When He said, “Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever” (Moses 4:2), and “here am I, send me” (Abraham 3:27), we “shouted for joy” (Job 38:7).

Satan then began his continual war against Christ. Because we used our agency to choose God, His Son, and their plan, we are here, right now, having this mortal experience. Truth is, we have been opposing Satan for a long time. His goals are simple: Thwart the plan of God, make us as miserable as he is; bind us captive when we give our agency to him (see 2 Nephi 2:27); laugh at our distress when we are in his chains (see Moses 7:26); desert us if we choose to follow him (see Alma 30:60); and reign with blood and horror on the earth.

But Christ did come. He did complete the atonement. He did suffer for us. He did rise from the tomb and He did appear to Joseph Smith. President Eyring has taught that, “We have trials to face because our Heavenly Father loves us. His purpose is to help us qualify for the blessing of living with Him and His Son, Jesus Christ, forever in glory and in families. . . . The restored gospel not only teaches us why we must be tested, but it makes clear to us what the test is. . . . ‘And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them.’” (Abraham 3:25).<sup>1</sup> President Eyring also explained that we will need more than our own strength to keep the commandments—a strength that will come to us in any circumstance we face because of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. President Eyring said that “because the Atonement of Jesus Christ is real. . . . we can become stronger for the tests of life. We then go in the strength of the Lord . . . [and] He goes with us. And in time we become His tested and strengthened disciples.”<sup>2</sup> Mortality is a test with opposition, to see if we will choose the Lord. Satan is here to heckle, distract, shove, kick, and gouge us along the way. Mortality is like taking a very difficult final examination in the most important course of your degree program, with people yelling obscenities in one ear and whispering sweet nothings in the other, kicking your shins, poking their fingers in your eyes, turning the lights on and off, making the room either blazing hot or freezing cold, telling you that you’ll never succeed and should not even try, and playing your least favorite music loudly in the background. Mortality, with its normal losses, sorrows, sicknesses, disappointments, torments, weeds, mistakes, errors, sins, and other afflictions would be a reasonable test in and of itself. But throw in Satan and his minions and now we have a test of faith and obedience that will ensure the Lord knows what we are made of.

You know this is true because you're out there taking mortality's exams. But there is another, even greater truth. And that is the message of this Women's Conference. During all this testing and trying in mortality, remember what we rejoiced about in the Council in Heaven. We have a perfect friend beside us to buoy us up; to steady our feet; to put starch in our feeble knees; to enlighten our minds; to lead us, guide us, and walk beside us; to bear our burdens and our griefs; to take our stripes when we have been in error; to "take our lickin'" for us when we have sinned; to face the bullies with us; to wipe our fevered brow in sickness; to mourn with us when we lose the people we love the most—and the things we probably shouldn't have loved so much; to steady us when the job is lost; to reassure us when our hearts are troubled or sore afraid or lonely; to ease our pain; to stand with us when we have been falsely accused; to carry us when we are tired and weary; and to comfort us through a betrayal of trust. We have a Savior and a Redeemer. When we rely on His strength we can ride out the storm, complete the test, fight the good fight, finish the course, and keep the faith (see 2 Timothy 4:7).

In Psalm 27:1 we read "the Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Paul testified, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

At a time when chaos and confusion encircle us, when disappointments and pressures mount, when even our strictest obedience doesn't seem to be rewarded in the ways we might have hoped, we can be assured that through the Atonement of Christ we can endure well all that we face, and come off more refined in Christ's image, more true in our discipleship, and more content in our hearts.

As I have examined stories in scripture and Church history that demonstrate how people have relied on the strength of the Lord in very challenging mortal moments I am impressed with common themes.

Those who rely on the strength of the Lord understand the purpose of life and its adversity. Because they understand what the test is all about, they don't get confused. They understand the difference between the normal tests of mortality which require faith, obedience, and endurance and the "wages of sin" which require faith, obedience, and repentance. They keep their eyes on eternity. They understand life isn't about getting as much as we can of power, or honors, or stuff. Instead, it is about becoming like Christ in integrity, humility, and charity. They recognize that adversity refines us as it turns our faces and hearts to the Lord. They know, as Elder Oaks said, that "adversities can be the means of obtaining blessings unobtainable without them."<sup>3</sup>

In 2008 I had the opportunity to travel with the BYU Folkdance Ensemble to eastern Europe. At a fireside in Bratislava, Slovakia, I met a white-haired woman who radiated pure joy. Sister Valeria Žišková was the last person baptized in what was then Czechoslovakia before the missionaries were pulled out of the country just before World War II. She had been quite ill but insisted on being baptized. The next day the missionaries left and were gone for decades. From her childhood to her very mature adulthood she was without the Church organization but she grasped tightly to its divine truths. Despite the terrors of the Nazi occupation and the brutal repression of the Communists, especially directed to those with ties to the West, she kept her

faith and raised her family with that faith. How she rejoiced when the Church returned. She knew the purpose of life, and she had relied on the strength of the Lord through many difficult circumstances.

People who go forth in the strength of the Lord know the character of God. They know that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and filled with charity. He knows the end from the beginning. His arm is stronger than any arm of flesh. They know He is the Mediator, the price-payer, and the “foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall” (Helaman 5:12). They know that he atoned for the sins of the world, and that through repentance and obedience we can be snatched from the Devil’s captivity and born of God (see Alma 36:17–23 and Mosiah 27:29). They are valiant in their testimony of Jesus Christ.

The Lord chastened Joseph Smith after the loss of 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript, with these words: “For, behold, you should not have feared man more than God. . . . you should have been faithful; and he would have extended his arm and supported you against all the fiery darts of the adversary; and he would have been with you in every time of trouble” (D&C 3:7–8). Because of Joseph’s sincere repentance, the Lord also extended to him what is, to me, the most charitable form of His strength. Following His chastisement of Joseph Smith, Christ offered this bright beam of hope, “But remember, God is merciful; therefore, repent of that which thou has done which is contrary to the commandments which I gave you, and thou art still chosen, and art again called to the work” (D&C 3:10). I love those words. I love what they represent. When I have fallen short because I, like Joseph, have mistakenly relied either on my own strength or the strength of others, I love the hope I find in them.

Zeniff and his people prevailed against the Lamanites because they “did go up in the strength of the Lord to battle. Now, the Lamanites knew nothing concerning the Lord, nor the strength of the Lord, therefore they depended upon their own strength. Yet they were a strong people, as to the strength of men” (Mosiah 10:10–11). We will face many circumstances where our challenges (by individuals or by circumstances) are compounded by the “strength of men.” That strength could seem overwhelming and sometimes very persuasive unless, like David with his small stones against the immensity of Goliath, we have drawn on the strength of the Lord (see 1 Samuel 17:32–51).

Going forward in the strength of the Lord requires us to trust Him, to trust His messengers, and to be willing to hear and follow counsel. Such trust and willingness to be counseled comes more naturally to those who are meek, humble, teachable, and obedient. Unfortunately we can, at times, steadily rely on the strength of the Lord until we are caught in a moment of pride or weakness. In the same moment we can too easily forget that the Lord’s strength sustained us before and imagine that we truly “did it all ourselves.” Sometimes we can think we have been following long enough and that now we can do it all on our own. I learned this important lesson in a decisive way.

In late 2005 I traveled to the Dominican Republic with a good friend to pick up her son from his mission. We wanted to meet the people he knew and loved. We rented a car in Santo Domingo, which I drove. The night before we were to leave the country I was struggling to map out the

way to the airport. I was inspired to hire a taxi to guide me to the airport, as I had absolutely no idea where the airport office of the car rental agency was.

At four A.M., I strategically placed the Spanish-speaking missionary and his mother in the guide taxi with instructions to drive slowly and not lose the “gringa” following behind. The plan was to drop off the missionary’s mother and our luggage at curbside. The taxi would lead me to the car rental return location, wait while I checked in the car, and then return the missionary and me to the airport.

Everything worked as planned. I followed the taxi driver with exactness. We arrived at the airport, unloaded the luggage and the missionary’s mother. I was happy and relieved. I followed the taxi out of the departure lanes and away from the airport and then, for some inexplicable reason, I was overcome with a fit of pride. I saw a sign saying “rental cars” with an arrow pointing off to the left. When the taxi driver ignored this sign and kept driving straight ahead, I thought at that moment something like, “Gee, I just saw a rental car sign at an airport where I have never been before in my life. I must surely know better than that native taxi driver who has been to this airport a million times.” I decided to follow my own counsel instead of the wisdom of the local expert, an expert I had hired because he knew the way. I still cannot explain why I had that prideful, conceited, dumb moment. But it happened. I just ignored the guide and went off on my own to the left.

What a mess. I hadn’t gone in the correct direction at all. I was completely in the dark, both figuratively and literally. I made it back to the road the taxi had taken, but I couldn’t find it anywhere. I passed rental returns for every company except the one I needed. I ended up back on the freeway headed to Santo Domingo. Large concrete barriers made it impossible for me to reverse direction. I imagined how lost I would be once I arrived back in the city.

I clearly knew how desolate it was to be left to my own weak wisdom and puny strength. I started praying a desperate prayer, begging the Lord for forgiveness for my pride and stupidity. I noticed a gas station that serviced both sides of the freeway. I drove in, held up the rental car agreement and asked the workers in broken Spanish, “ayuda mi por favor, ¿donde esta Nacional?” but they couldn’t help me. I ended up back at the airport and went back down the road the taxi had taken with the same result, turning around again at the gas station and paying toll charges both times. Naturally, the missionary and his mother were also very worried. I had the airline tickets so they couldn’t even try to check in.

I had now spent more than an hour driving around without success. The sun was starting to come up and it wasn’t long before the plane was scheduled to leave. I was an emotional wreck. I promised the Lord I would never be so dumb again if He would just help me out this time. The third time around the airport I felt impressed to try a road I hadn’t seen before. I ended up in a rental car return, but not the one I needed. Still, the good workers there took pity on me and were willing to go with me to the correct car rental agency. Then they took me to the airport. I had been saved from my own idiocy by their generosity and kindness, and God’s mercy.

I had an entire flight back to Utah to meditate on the lessons I learned from that experience. I thought about how foolish I was to have followed the taxi driver so carefully for so long and

then, suddenly believing I didn't need guidance anymore, go off on my own. I recognized that no matter what you think you know, you never want to put yourself in the position of thinking that on this one issue, or in this one situation, "I certainly know more than the Lord does and I certainly do not need to follow Him or to rely on His strength."

Those who go forth in the strength of the Lord understand that the winds of mortality will still blow against them. Yet because they understand the plan and have a testimony of the Savior, they rejoice even in the midst of their afflictions and press on in obedience. Rather than focus on the lone and dreary world, they express joy in the great plan of redemption. Mormon described the many trials of Alma and Amulek and then commented, "Yea, and [the Lord] also gave them strength, that they should suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ" (Alma 31:38).

In 1833, almost 1,200 Saints had built homes, planted farms, established a school, and were publishing a newspaper in Jackson County, Missouri.<sup>4</sup> W.W. Phelps was at work printing *The Book of Commandments*.

But the idyllic Zion so hoped for by the Saints lasted only a few brief months. The neighboring Missourians were incited to violence, and a campaign of abuse and falsehood began. On July 20, 1833, a council of Missourians voted to eject the Mormons, "peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must." They demanded that the Mormons leave the county, close the press, and halt any future emigration of Mormons to the area. Mobs numbering between 400 and 500 men came down on the Saints. They tore down the two-story building in which the printing press was housed and destroyed the press. The Phelps family lived in the same building. Sister Phelps and her sick baby were driven into the street amidst the broken furniture. Bishop Edward Partridge and another brother were tarred and feathered. Other brethren were scourged. The mob served notice to the Saints that every man, woman, and child would be whipped and scourged if they did not leave.

When the cold of November came that year, the Saints were forcibly removed from Jackson County. After the Mormons had surrendered their weapons as a token of good faith, the mob attacked, whipping the men, and driving the women and children from their homes at gunpoint, then setting fire to the houses. The banks of the Missouri River were lined with pitiful Mormon refugees, many without clothing, food, or any means of shelter from the winter storms. Some died from exposure, and the fleeing multitude left, in the frozen stubble of the fields, "a trail of blood from their lacerated feet."<sup>5</sup>

It was during this period, not in the early, more peaceful days in Missouri, that W. W. Phelps wrote the hymn "Now Let Us Rejoice." He didn't write this hymn when things were going well. This great and grand hymn of the Restoration was penned at a time of defeat at the hands of a mob, a time of frustration, homelessness, suffering, death, privation, cold, wet, and hunger. Those terrible afflictions produced a hymn of rejoicing that gave hope and strength to the Saints.

I confess that I haven't always appreciated this hymn—I thought the alto part was boring. But now I will never sing it without remembering W. W. Phelps and the other Saints who, while facing great hardships, still had cause to rejoice and bear testimony. Is it any wonder that this

hymn became a favorite of the Saints? It was sung in Kirtland at the temple dedication. It was sung in Far West, in Nauvoo at the first meeting of the Relief Society, in Winter Quarters, in Nebraska and Wyoming, in Utah, and in every Latter-day Saint settlement of the West. It is one of the first hymns translated into new languages. Now when we sing it, we know we join with generations of valiant Saints here and abroad who bear record that in the strength of the Lord, all things can be met with joy.

Those who rely on the strength of the Lord also understand the effort it takes to draw near to the Lord. They understand the power of making and keeping covenants with God. They know that sacrifice brings forth the blessings of heaven. They know that faith, testimony, and trust in God must be nurtured and nourished every day through service, study, and prayer. They know that obedience in small, seemingly inconsequential things can make the difference in large, very consequential things. They know that the fruit of the tree of life is sweet beyond comprehension and no filthy water, nor mist of darkness, nor scorn from those in the great and spacious building will keep them from it (see 1 Nephi 8).

Esther understood this principle when she determined to go into the King in hopes of saving her people, but only after she had asked her fellow believers to fast for her (see Esther 4:16).

The woman who pressed through the crowd to touch the clothing of Jesus and was healed when His virtue and strength passed to her because of her faith and her effort believed this principle (see Mark 5:25–34).

Emma Smith knew this principle when she hid the manuscript of the Joseph Smith translation of the Bible in special pockets in her petticoat and then bravely walked through winter wind and icy snow from Far West to Quincy, with a babe in her arms and small children clinging to her skirts.

Sister Lucille Sargent, a Latter-day Saint living in what was then called Peking, China in the 1970s acted on this principle. At that time, there were no other Latter-day Saints living in Peking. She was not married. She sent her tithing envelope regularly to Church headquarters. She had been in the Foreign Service for more than twenty years, living in remote areas, most of the time alone.

When President Faust, who was over the International Mission then, and his wife Ruby met Sister Sargent, Sister Faust asked how she managed to maintain her spiritual strength when she was all alone. Sister Sargent replied, “I always pray aloud, and on Sunday I would sing some hymns and pray aloud and read the scriptures.” She said that when she was considering her assignments, she would tell her supervisors, “I can take these difficult posts. I have special help.”<sup>6</sup>

Sister Sargent had learned, like Paul, that “all things work together for good to them that love God,” and that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him [meaning Jesus Christ] that loved us” (Romans 8:28, 37).

I have always loved the compelling story of the people of Ammon. When they were converted, they relied completely on the strength of the Lord. Their conversion infuriated their wicked

Lamanite brethren, who slaughtered them in their meekness because the people of Ammon had made a covenant to never again take up their weapons of war.

When so many of their people were brutally destroyed at the hands of the Lamanites, they did not bitterly turn on Ammon, accusing and berating him for teaching them the gospel and making them vulnerable. They didn't demand to know why their obedience wasn't being rewarded with protection. No, instead they asked Ammon to inquire of the Lord what they should do. Ammon was told to lead the people to Zarahemla. Remember, the Nephites in Zarahemla had suffered much at the hands of the Lamanites, so the people of Ammon were justifiably apprehensive about going there. Yet, relying on the strength of the Lord, they took their families out into the wilderness toward the land of Zarahemla. Ammon himself must have been anxious about how the Anti-Nephi-Lehis would be received in Zarahemla because he went ahead to sound out the Nephites. Not only did the good Saints in Zarahemla welcome the repentant, converted Lamanites, but they gave them their own lands and offered them protection. The Anti-Nephi-Lehis relied on the strength of the Lord to go to Zarahemla. The faithful Nephites relied on the strength of the Lord in meeting their former enemies with open arms and forgiving generous hearts (see Alma 27).

500 B.C. was the season for relying on the strength of the Lord for Esther and her people. The season for relying on the strength of the Lord for the Anti-Nephi-Lehis and the people of Zarahemla was 80 B.C. The season of strength for W. W. Phelps and the other Saints in Jackson County was A.D. 1833. Sister Sargent's season of strength was the 1960s and 70s. And our season for strength is right now, today and tomorrow, and the next day.

Let us do all that we can do to increase our faith in and reliance on our Savior so that we can say, like Alma, "give us strength according to our faith" (Alma 14:26). And on the days when we feel our faith is lagging, let us be like the father with the child possessed by a spirit, who when Jesus said to him, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. . . . cried out and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:23–24). Let us make the Lord our hope and our strength (see Joel 3:16). Let us follow Him with exactness. Let us draw near to Him (see D&C 88:63). Let us put our trust and our love in the true and living God because His strengthening grace is, and always has been, and always will be, sufficient in every season of our need (see Moroni 10:32).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Henry B. Eyring, "In the Strength of the Lord," *Liahona*, May 2004, 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Dallin H. Oaks, "Adversity" *Ensign*, July 1998, 7.

<sup>4</sup> George D. Pyper, *Stories of the Latter-day Saint Hymns*, 3rd edition, (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1948), 188.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1979), 132–139.

<sup>6</sup> James E. Faust, "Married or Single: Look Beyond Yourself," *Ensign*, March 1980, 35.

<sup>7</sup> See Bible Dictionary, s.v. "Grace," 697.