

Encircled in the Arms of His Love

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The responsibility of this hour has weighed heavily on my mind. As I have approached this assignment with many fervent prayers and anxious contemplation, a concern of my four-year-old niece, Sharon Kay, came to my mind. She had just been asked to give her first talk in Primary, a big responsibility for such a little girl. She ran to tell her mother and then added with excitement, "Mom, Mom, what shall I wear?" I've asked myself this same question. I found my answer, not in the designer dress shop at the local mall, but in another place much less crowded.

In the writing to the Ephesians, Paul identifies the fashion for you and me today: We must take upon us the whole armor of God that we may be able to stand in the evil day, having our loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and our feet shod with the gospel of peace, and above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith we shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked and speak boldly (see Ephesians 6:13–19). What we choose to wear in this regard is far more significant than what we might select from our clothes closets.

This is an historic time. I can almost hear the friends I've worked with over the years say, "She always says that," and yes, I do. But consider where we stand today. Looking back, just a short time ago, we commemorated and celebrated those faithful early Saints who gave so much that we might have the blessings we enjoy today, who gave us the foundation of the Church on which we now build. Looking ahead, there is a great work for us to do. The purpose of this conference is not to weigh us down but rather to lift us up; not to separate us by comparing, competing, or complaining—those things that weaken the spirit—but rather to unite us and strengthen our righteous influence beyond our natural ability. The intent of this conference is not to send us home perfected but to fill us with confidence that as we move forward step by step, just one day at a time, increasing our righteous influence wherever we are, we will do our part.

President Spencer W. Kimball spoke of our time with these prophetic words: "Much

of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days will come because many of the good women of the world (in whom there is often such an inner sense of spirituality) will be drawn to the Church in large numbers. This will happen to the degree that the women of the Church reflect righteousness and articulateness in their lives and to the degree that they are seen as distinct and different—in happy ways—from the women of the world" (*My Beloved Sisters* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979], 44). He further said, "To be a righteous woman during the winding-up scenes on this earth, before the second coming of our Savior, is an especially noble calling. The righteous woman's strength and influence today can be tenfold what it might be in more tranquil times" (*My Beloved Sisters*, 17).

Did not our very souls burn within with the call from a prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, in the last general Relief Society meeting? Hear again his words, "Rise up, O women of Zion, rise to the great challenge which faces you" (Gordon B. Hinckley, *Ensign*, November 1998, 99). On another occasion he called for "a little more effort, a little more self-discipline, a little more consecrated effort. . . . You can do better than you are now doing" ("The Quest for Excellence," Brigham Young University Devotional, Provo, Utah, 10 November 1998; available at http://advance.byu.edu/devo98-99/Hinckley_f98.html).

Should this in any way sound like a chastisement? No, I think not. Rather, it is a testimony of a prophet concerning our potential, our divine nature, our ability to make a difference at this historic time. Could it be he knows us and our circumstances better than we know ourselves?

We might hear in our minds the familiar words from another time and season, "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14). This is our time, my beloved sisters, our challenge and our opportunity, whoever we are, wherever we are. Our Father in Heaven knows us and is counting on each one of us to do her part. And we can. We are given strength and power through our covenants, which provide a special relationship with our Father in Heaven. Through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ and our obedience, we receive an enabling power to do things we could not otherwise do on our own (LDS Bible Dictionary, s.v. "grace").

For this hour, I stand before you, but in all other circumstances I am honored and humbled and committed to stand with you, side by side, my sisters in the gospel, together in our time and circumstance.

What lies behind us and what lies before us is not as important today as what lies within us. Our Father in Heaven is committed. He is with us all the way. He has set the pattern. It is a pattern that does not change. It is a pattern based on love and obedience, sacrifice and service. It is a pattern made possible through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and realized when we make and keep sacred covenants. We can expect opposition, but we can rise to the challenge. It is this pattern I wish to speak about today.

The Pattern of Love and Obedience

I have heard the story told of a mother who, wishing to encourage her son's progress

at the piano, bought tickets to a Paderewski performance. When the evening arrived, they found their seats near the front of the concert hall and eyed the majestic Steinway waiting on the stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk to, and the boy slipped away. At eight o'clock, the lights in the auditorium began to dim, the spotlights came on, and only then did they notice the boy up on the piano bench, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on the Steinway. His mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, the master appeared on the stage and quickly moved to the keyboard. He whispered to the boy, "Don't quit; keep playing." Leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in the bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side and improvised a delightful obligato. Together the old master and the young novice held the crowd mesmerized.

In our lives, unpolished though they may be, the Master surrounds us. God is our Father. We are his children. He knows us. He knows our needs and invites us to come to him and be encircled in the arms of his love. He wants us to know him and experience his love. We have his word: "I will go before your face, I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up" (D&C 84:88).

We do not wait until the end of our performance or the end of life for someone to take up the slack when we find ourselves falling painfully short because of our weaknesses, our imperfections, and even our sins. The doctrine of grace and mercy through the Atonement is an ongoing, hourly, even moment-by-moment process.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie, speaking at the funeral of a friend of mine some years ago, helped me better understand this concept. He said: "We don't need to think everlastingly about God our Eternal Father as being an omnipotent, almighty, glorified person. . . . We might do better to think of God our Father as just that—as a father . . . as a personal being whose face we have seen and in whose household we have dwelt, whose voice we have heard, whose teachings we have learned before ever we were born into this life" (address as funeral of Florence Johnson; typescript in author's possession, 27).

Whatever your feelings at this time, whether joy, gratitude, excitement, optimism, and peace in your heart, or discouragement, depression, even despair, whether concern for a wayward child or a troubled relationship or a seemingly unanswered prayer, anxiety for the life of a loved one, sorrow for sin, feelings of unworthiness, or just feelings of inadequacy, whatever may be the burden on your shoulders at this time—hear in your heart and your mind these words from a loving Father in Heaven: "I have spoken unto thee because of thy desires; therefore treasure up these words in thy heart" (D&C 6:20). Being where we are at this time, on this campus, in attendance at this conference, surely suggests something of our desires. And what are these words given by revelation through the Prophet that he would have us treasure up in our hearts? These words, taken from Doctrine and Covenants 6, have become the focus and the theme for this year's Women's Conference: "Be faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God, and I will encircle thee in the arms of my love" (v. 20). Through obedience to God's commandments, given out of his love for us to

bring us peace and happiness, we can feel his warm embrace.

The Lord has set the terms for the rewards and the promised blessings of exaltation. Discipleship requires effort—not a particle more than we can handle, but not anything less. He wants us to become like him. We are a covenant people. President George Q. Cannon explained: "When we went forth into the waters of baptism and covenanted with our Father in heaven to serve Him and keep His commandments, He bound Himself also by covenant to us that He would never desert us, never leave us to ourselves, never forget us, that in the midst of trials and hardships, when everything was arrayed against us, He would be near unto us and would sustain us" (*Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of George Q. Cannon*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987], 1:134). He never stops loving us or desiring to help us and bless us. In the words of Isaiah, "For I the Lord God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee" (Isaiah 41:13).

Oh, if only we could possibly understand the breadth and depth, the length and reach of his arms of mercy and all the blessings within our reach when we respond to the gentle plea, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Is it any wonder that we should on occasion sense a quiet longing for home? But we will not return there until we have finished the work we came to do. Even the Savior received not of the fulness at first but received grace for grace (D&C 93:12–13). We must not become impatient or discouraged but rather listen with our hearts for the encouraging message, "Don't quit; keep playing."

Through the great plan of happiness, we can eradicate our fears, our uncertainty about whether we can make it, our doubts that we could possibly be included with those encircled in the arms of our Savior. Elder Bruce C. Hafen has written: "The person most in need of understanding the Savior's mercy is probably one who has worked himself to exhaustion in a sincere effort to repent, but who still believes his estrangement from God is permanent and hopeless. . . .

"I sense that an increasing number of deeply committed Church members are weighed down beyond the breaking point with discouragement about their personal lives. When we habitually understate the meaning of the Atonement, we take more serious risks than simply leaving one another without comforting reassurances—for some may simply drop out of the race, worn out and beaten down with the harsh and untrue belief that they are just not celestial material" (*The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life's Experiences* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989], 5–6).

When those feelings creep into our thoughts like termites that can erode the very foundation of our faith and hope and diminish our righteous influence, let us turn to the scriptures. I have often referred to my scriptures as my letters from home. If you could go out to the mailbox on a very dreary day, when the clouds of life hang heavy, and pick up a letter addressed personally to you, would it have greater meaning? Consider this letter from the Lord. Type it up with your name in the introduction if needed. But read it the way you would read a letter from someone who loves you very much: "Behold, ye are little children

and ye cannot bear all things now; ye must grow in grace and in the knowledge of truth. Fear not, little children, for you are mine, and I have overcome the world, and you are of them that my Father hath given me; And none of them that my Father hath given me shall be lost" (D&C 50:41–42).

Consider the similar message in a favorite sacred song by Harry Rowe Shelley:

The King of Love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine forever.

Perverse and foolish, oft I stray'd,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulder gently laid,
And home rejoicing brought me.
("The King of Love My Shepherd Is," New York: G. Schirmer, 1914)

On his shoulders, encircled in his arms, at his side, wherever we stand in relationship to him, he is our Savior, our Redeemer, and our Judge. President Joseph F. Smith gave us these comforting words: "God does not judge men as we do, nor look upon them in the same light that we do. He knows our imperfections—all the causes, the 'whys and wherefores' are made manifest unto Him. He judges us by our acts and the intents of our hearts. His judgments will be true, just and righteous; ours are obscured by the imperfections of man" (*Journal of Discourses*, 24:78).

Elder Richard G. Scott describes the attributes of God in these words: "God is not a jealous being who delights in persecuting those who misstep. He is an absolutely perfect, compassionate, understanding, patient, and forgiving Father. He is willing to entreat, counsel, strengthen, lift, and fortify" (*Ensign*, May 1995, 75). He marked the path and led the way and invites us to follow. This clearly marked path begins and ends with love. If we would follow, we would find along the way the markers that secure our safe travel through our ordinances and covenants.

The Pattern of Sacrifice

In the great Council in Heaven, our Father called for help to carry out the plan of salvation. The Savior, knowing what would be required, was willing to pay the price for our sins and our souls. He said in the council, "Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever" (Moses 4:2). He came to earth, the Son of God, to do the will of the Father and become our Savior. And he asks us to remember the covenant: "Behold the wounds which pierced my side, and also the prints of the nails in my hands and feet; be faithful, keep my commandments, and ye shall inherit the kingdom of heaven" (D&C 6:37).

Speaking of this great act of redemption, President Boyd K. Packer tells us: "Save for those few who defect to perdition . . . , there is no habit, no addiction, no rebellion, no

transgression, no offense exempt from the promise of complete forgiveness" (*Ensign*, November 1995, 19).

I think of his hands pierced and bleeding to pay the debt!
Such mercy, such love, and devotion can I forget?
No, no, I will praise and adore at the mercy seat,
Until at the glorified throne I kneel at his feet.
Oh, it is wonderful that he should care for me
Enough to die for me!
Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful to me! (*Hymns*, no. 193)

This plan of happiness calls for our obedience and our sacrifice.

The sacrifice we are to offer unto the Lord in righteousness is that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit (see D&C 59:8). It is all we really have to lay on the altar, a consecration of self, a willingness to submit all to the will of the Lord, to make our wants his wants, to sacrifice anything that could come between us and him, to keep our covenants even when it may not be convenient or popular or comfortable, when it may even seem impossible for some. Let us reach out to others, to minister to one another, to open our circle and our arms and be an extension of his arms. May we learn to love one another as he loves us.

In the words of Mother Teresa: "Do not search for Jesus in far off lands. . . . He is in you. Just keep the lamp burning and you will always see Him." And she also said: "Give Jesus, not only your hands to serve, but your heart to love. Pray with absolute trust in God's loving care for you. Let Him use you without consulting you. Let Jesus fill you with joy that you may preach without preaching" (*Love: A Fruit Always in Season, Daily Meditations from the words of Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, sel. and ed. Dorothy S. Hunt [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987], 67, 29).

How grateful I am for the preaching of my great-grandmother, Susan Kent Greene. When her family was driven from Nauvoo to Mt. Pisgah in the summer of 1846, her husband, Evan, pitched their tent and then returned to the main camp to help bring others who had no means of transportation. As soon as Evan had left her and their five young children, their eleven-month-old baby became ill. The child rapidly grew worse and soon died in its mother's arms. Susan had to prepare the little baby for its last rest herself. On February 3, 1875, she recorded in her journal: "I make this covenant to do the very best I can, asking God for wisdom to direct me in that I may walk with him in all righteousness and truth. I much desire to be pure in heart that I may see God. Help me Lord, to overcome all evil with good." Signed: Susan K. Greene (copy in possession of the author).

How thankful I am for her testimony, a witness "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in the fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Oh, that we could know the multitude of sermons among the sisters in this very

gathering, inspiring sermons of sacrifice and love that will be passed on from one generation to the next.

As an example, let me share with you a letter I received from one of our dear sisters, truly a disciple of the Lord. This came following an account I had given of a family in the Philippines who had been saving every penny they could for two long years, anxiously looking forward to the time they would have enough money for a one-way trip to the Manila Temple to be sealed as an eternal family forever. On the back of the envelope it reads: "Dear postal worker, I know this address is not complete, but *please* do all you can to deliver this. Thank you." Her letter reads in part, ". . . I know there are many in similar circumstances and I would help all if I were able. I've been struggling lately with what seems to me like a great burden of financial difficulties and my usual ability to count my blessings hasn't been seeing me through, making it more difficult to bounce back emotionally from each blow. But then I looked around and found blessings everywhere, some half hidden." She continues, "My children are sealed to me, though their father has removed himself from the eternal family through free agency. So with gratitude for all I have I give what I can spare to that family. Maybe in their country five dollars will go further than it does here. Please try to get it to them. If not, to someone else in need" (letter in possession of the author). What price would you put on the value of her offering to someone she doesn't even know?

The Pattern of Sacred Covenants

We are blessed with a cleansing of our thoughts through our covenants. President Ezra Taft Benson explained, "When we take the sacrament we commit to 'always remember him.' And thinking Christlike thoughts helps us shape Christlike lives" (*New Era*, April 1994, 4).

It is the sacrament that helps us weekly to remember the Savior's atonement and our sacred covenants, the highest of which are available only in the temple. In many parts of the world, in many languages, I have heard young women repeating with great feeling their baptismal commitment to "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things and in all places," followed by the last part of the Young Women theme, which states, "We will be prepared to make and keep sacred covenants, receive the ordinances of the temple, and enjoy the blessings of exaltation." It is in the temple that we receive a review of the entire plan of salvation. We learn something of our pre-earth life and the purpose of our temporary separation from our Father and his Son Jesus Christ. In the temple, we may find peace concerning matters for which our mind has no answers. From the blessings of the temple, we learn that we may be healed spiritually as well as physically.

There are times when we feel unworthy, perhaps even uncomfortable, about carrying his holy name. We have a keener sense of our imperfections, of those moments when the flesh is weak and our spirits suffer disappointment for our errors and our sins. At such times, we might feel a sense of withdrawal, a pulling away, a feeling of needing to set aside, for a time at least, that divine relationship with the Savior until we are more worthy. But at those very moments, even in our unworthiness, the offer is again given to us to accept the great

gift of the Atonement even before we change.

When we feel a need to pull away, let us reach out to him. Instead of feeling the need to resist, let us submit to his will with a broken heart and a contrite spirit. With his help we can make a profound difference. We can participate in the fulfillment of prophecy. We can pull down the blessings of heaven through obedience to law. The Lord has said, "On my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:18).

Is it any wonder that the adversary would try every conceivable means to contaminate and if possible control our thought processes, polluting the conduit through which the Spirit flows into our minds and hearts? It is wonderful, but not surprising, that after the admonition to "be faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God," he tells us how this is to be in these few simple and compelling words, "Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not" (D&C 6:20, 36). Doubt and fear are enemies that can enslave us in prison walls of our own making. Thoughts don't have to be sinful, only distracting enough to weaken the communication so we don't hear the whisperings of the Spirit. Looking unto him in every thought will eradicate thoughts that fuel the fires of jealousy, envy, pride, and related diseases that distract and destroy.

King Benjamin in his last address warned of these dangers: "And finally, I cannot tell you all the things whereby ye may commit sin; for there are divers ways and means, even so many that I cannot number them. But this much I can tell you, that if you do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, . . . ye must perish" (Mosiah 4:29–30).

We are instructed, "Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God" (D&C 121:45). President David O. McKay said, "No principle of life was more constantly emphasized by the Great Teacher than the necessity of right thinking" (*Gospel Ideals* [Salt Lake City: The Improvement Era, 1973], 38). The attempt of the destroyer to fill our minds with negative, unrighteous thoughts is no small attack but a major confrontation. It has been said, "Man is made or unmade by himself; in the armory of thought, he forges the weapons by which he destroys himself" (quoted by Joseph B. Wirthlin, *Finding Peace in Our Lives* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995], 211). Knowing what we do, would we ever admit into our homes movies, TV programs, videos, music, advertising, or tantalizing entertainment of any kind that would, if possible, hold us and our families captive by polluting our minds?

I recall a lesson I heard as a child in which my Primary teacher emphasized with considerable effort the danger of letting bad words get into our minds. That was long before TV, Internet, R-rated movies, and the like. I left that class sobered. The two worst words I knew, which would barely be considered slang today, grabbed my attention and played across my young mind. I recall sitting in my desk at school the next day burdened. The harder I tried not to think of those two words, the more constant they seemed to be. They refused to let go of my attention. The following week, as I recall, one of the memory gems

we used to repeat in Sunday School each week came to my mind as a rescue to my thoughts:

Purify our hearts, our Savior,
Let us go not far astray,
That we might be counted worthy
Of thy spirit, day by day.

When our hearts are right, our thoughts are right. And God knows our thoughts and the intent of our hearts (see D&C 6:16). After that day, for years, when an unwanted thought would grab my attention, I would repeat the words of that old memory gem.

You will have your own memory gem, and it may change from time to time. For me at this time, I repeat over and over again, "Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not."

Being mortal as we are, we have embarked on a journey through a life where many different things happen to us, and each moment we have a choice concerning our response. We can nurture negative thoughts and feelings, playing them repeatedly on the screen of our minds like old-time movies, reliving the experiences over and over again with the same emotions, nursing our self-pity and misfortune. Or we can change our thoughts. We must not trifle with thoughts that at first appear trivial and in the end become tragic. Negative and distracting thoughts, however just they may seem, are too heavy a load to carry. Some may try to escape responsibility by saying, "I can't help how I feel; it is just the way I am." In case we are ever tempted by that kind of thinking, let us consider the words of President George Q. Cannon: "It is true that some have greater power of resistance than others, but everyone has the power to close his heart against doubt, against darkness, against unbelief, against depression, against anger, against hatred, against jealousy, against malice, against envy.

"God has given this power unto all of us, and we can gain still greater power by calling upon Him for that which we lack. If it were not so, how could we be condemned for giving way to wrong influences? . . . God has given us power to resist these things, that our hearts may be kept free from them and also from doubt; and when Satan comes and assails us, it is our privilege to say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan, for I have no lot nor portion in you, and you have no part in me'" (*Gospel Truths: Discourses and Writings of George Q. Cannon*, sel. and ed. by Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987], 1:16–17.).

I have a book on my shelf at home given me by a friend with a fun sense of humor. She wrote a note in the front suggesting that I might find the content useful. The title of the book is *How to Make Yourself Miserable*. There is a chapter on the power of negative thinking and another one on how to change your worries into anxieties. It gives instruction for optimum brooding conditions. There is information on how to make yourself miserable about the future (what if) and another chapter on how to make yourself miserable about the past (if only). I confess, I've tried it all, and I don't recommend it. None of it!

Overcoming Opposition

Could there ever be a time in our lives when we are striving to keep the commandments, to be obedient, yes, even to sacrifice in our small way, yet we cannot feel his arms of love and mercy? Could it ever be that he would reach out but we wouldn't let him in? He says to each of us every day of our lives, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me" (Revelation 3:20). Do we ever refuse to open the door, maybe because we are too busy or too tired, or because we don't hear the knock, or because we even question on occasion that he is there?

In my own life, I remember a very difficult time when I, not realizing it, refused to let him in. It was Mother's Day. At the close of the Sunday School meeting, a young woman participating in the traditional tribute to mothers tried to force a little potted geranium, not yet in bloom, into my clenched-tight fist. The clenched fist was only symbolic of my heart and my mind, uptight with a myriad of unanswered questions. Why? Why?

Something about the innocence of this young girl's face softened my heart enough to at least make me open my hand and accept the gift. I took the little plant home. In time, the rays of the early morning sun released the buds, which gradually came into bloom and opened up into bright pink blossoms. From this little plant that I wanted to refuse came a message: "If you will just open your hand and your heart, the Son, the Son of God, will come to you." I bear testimony that if instead of wrapping our empty and aching arms around ourselves we will open our arms, he will encircle us in his arms, his arms of mercy, his arms of love and understanding, and we will be able to open our arms to others. If through doubt and fear we clench our fists, he can't get through.

Looking back on that experience, I can more fully appreciate that some of my most fervent prayers have been answered with a peace of mind only after I have returned again and again, yes, even for years, and in the process have become acquainted with the voice of the Lord in my mind and in my heart. In my meager attempt at poetry I recently penned these few lines while sitting on a log by the creek in our neighborhood:

There is a place I walk not far from home,
Off the highway where I can be alone.
A quiet place, in solitude.
An invitation for a sacred mood.
The rocks and water make a perfect setting,
The symbols of His life resist the forgetting.
A place for sorting, for sifting, for clearing the vision,
And knowing for my weaknesses, He's made restitution.
In my meditation, a form of prayer,
I think and ponder and feel Him near.
When a cleansing is needed and surely it is,
I remember His love and know I am His.
I've been bought with a price that only He can redeem.

My Savior He is, I carry His name.
In this quiet place like a Heavenly shrine,
I hear in my heart, Daughter, you're mine.

Is there anyone who has not had occasion to cry out at some time and plead with a burning desire to reach and stretch far enough to connect with God? He tells us, "Draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you" (D&C 88:63). After extended periods of fasting and prayer, have we not asked, "But Father, what more can I do?"

One day in our progress, we learn to hang on and we learn to let go. We learn to differentiate between the things we must hold to tenaciously and those we must let go of if our faith is to grow. This is a mighty step in our spiritual development.

We no longer need to have things our way, not now, not ever. We don't need all the answers, and we don't need additional promises. We have come to trust in the words of the Psalmist, "Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee" (Psalm 55:22).

You recall the account of Mary Magdalene burdened with grief as she stooped to look into the empty tomb. Her whole heart consumed by the anxiety of the moment, she did not recognize the person standing next to her. In the quiet of that garden setting, in the springtime of the year and the freshness of a new day, the Savior spoke her name, "Mary." One word turned her grief to joy. She recognized the tone of his voice. She recognized him. To each of us he says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10; D&C 101:16). When we allow ourselves to be swallowed up in doubts and fears instead of faith and hope, we might fit the description given by C. S. Lewis, "The time when there is nothing at all in your soul except a cry for help may be just the time when God can't give it: you are like the drowning man who can't be helped because he clutches and grabs. Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear" (*A Grief Observed* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1961], 63–64).

A father told me of the anguish he and his wife felt for a wayward son. It consumed their total attention, of course; not for a moment was that child out of their thoughts. They kept repeating over and over the statement, "No success compensates for failure in the home." They were weighed down, burdened by the seeming evidence of failure.

They did not remember the comforting words of Elder Marvin J. Ashton, "We only start to fail when we give up on a son, daughter, mother, or father [or self]" (*Ensign*, June 1971, 32). We must never give up, but we must try to let up. We need to let up on our feelings of anguish and doubt, to trust in the Lord with all our hearts to do what we cannot do for ourselves. Then, with our hearts full of faith, not fear, our arms will be open wide and our hearts will be filled with love, a power that can penetrate the prodigal.

We Can Rise to the Challenge

Sisters, as we rise to the great challenges that face us, may our afflictions, our adversities, our trials and tests cause us to reach out, reach up, reach far enough to touch the

hem of his garment. I don't know what the circumstances are when you reach and may not touch. I do know that many times I reach and seem not to make the connection, but I have also come to realize that he is there, always there, although sometimes I must walk by faith. Never let those times of not connecting weaken your testimony of those occasions when you have felt and recognized the Spirit. The Lord said to Oliver Cowdery, and to us, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, if you desire a further witness, cast your mind upon the night that you cried unto me in your heart, that you might know concerning the truth of these things. Did I not speak peace to your mind concerning the matter? What greater witness can you have than from God?" (D&C 6:22–23).

I must tell you about my dear Aunt Alice and a night when peace came to her mind. Oh, I wish you might have known this woman with her indomitable spirit. At age ninety-three, she attended a stake dance, and danced, of course. After retiring for the night, she awakened. Her leg swollen, her heart pounding, she was afraid she was going to die. She told me that she couldn't be found dead in bed looking as she did, so she got up, made her bed, changed into her newest nightgown, put on fresh makeup, combed her hair, and went out to die on the living-room couch, looking nice. She said she was quite surprised to awaken in the morning still alive. She has since passed on, but let me take you behind the scenes in the life of this remarkable woman, that we might learn from her journey.

Not long before her passing, she was asked to speak in stake conference on the subject, "To learn the capacity to love as our Savior loved." She sent me her beautiful handwritten copy of the address and gave me permission to share it. She begins: "Our Savior's love is beyond comprehension. When I became a wife I thought that to be the most perfect love that ever could be." In time she tells of her husband being called on a foreign mission. After he had been in the mission field about a month, their first baby was born. She says, "He became the center of my love and existence for two long years. When my husband returned, our lives were filled with love and thanksgiving for this adorable child. When he was five years old he was accidentally killed. It seemed all the light went out of the world for us. As I walked the streets at night unable to sleep, hoping to see that dear little face in a cloud somewhere, I came to love my Heavenly Father more as I pondered His words, "Take time to be still and know that I am God."

She goes on to tell of another son, Mark, who grew to young manhood and went on a mission. Shortly before his release from his mission, she received a call from his mission president telling her that Mark was critically ill. He had cancer of the lung. "It seemed unbelievable," she said. "We had great faith that he would be healed through fasting and prayer, but it wasn't to be."

She mentions that their life was anything but what a Latter-day Saint family should be at that time. She doesn't say more about this, but I will add that her husband had failed to keep his covenants, and the consequence resulted in tragic addicting habits. Concerning that time, she writes, "As I put my dear baby down for the night and the two older children had gone to bed, I dropped on my knees by the couch, poured out my heart to Heavenly Father as I had never done before. I thought my heart would break with the sorrow that possessed me. I said, 'Father, if things can't change, if I only knew that my prayer was heard, then with

the love I have for these dear children, we will survive.' While I bowed there in humble prayer, a warm feeling enveloped me, that sweet peace that passeth all understanding, and although I didn't see anyone I knew, there was a holy presence there."

She continues, "I most likely will never walk where Jesus walked in this life, but I knew I had walked and felt His presence there. I had never knelt in the Garden of Gethsemane where all alone He prayed, but I knew I had knelt and prayed and I wasn't alone. Some divine presence was there. I was able to pick my heavy burden up and with Him by my side I climbed the hill of Calvary where on the cross He died for my sins and yours. My heavy burden was gone and I lived, I lived as I had never experienced life before.

"The sweet peace filled my soul and as the love for my Savior grew I recalled the words in John 17:3, 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent.'"

Sisters, this is our time and our season as we approach the year 2000 and a new millennium. Let us go forth from this conference with the faith, the vision, and the decision to follow the pattern the Savior has given us. It ensures blessings not only for ourselves and our families but for all of God's children everywhere. Let us each feel deeply the power and strength and influence for good of our individual and united resolves. With renewed confidence and commitment to the covenants we have made, we shall become, in every way, women of God. Let us respond to the call of our prophet to rise up as women of Zion.

Let us rise to the great challenge that faces us, using the words of Paul for our pledge: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35, 37–39).

As we share this brief conference time together, in small gatherings or larger, let us feel the powerful bond of sisterhood and the righteous influence that emanates from this gathering through love, obedience, sacrifice, and service. As we go forth from this conference, let us carry in our hearts the tender words from the song *In Mercy's Arms*, which Sister Gladys Knight will sing for us.

The mighty fortress walls I have built
Around my foolish heart.
How they crumble and they fall
As I surrender all to Mercy's Arms.
Sweet the surrender, sweet the embrace.
Sweet the forgiveness to one forever
Undeserving of His grace.
Safely encircled, rested and warmed
Sweet is the taste of love that

Awaits in Mercy's Arms.

Of these eternal truths I bear my testimony, knowing that what lies behind us and what lies before us is not as important today as what lies within us.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.