

## **The Precious Promise**

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I appreciate very much this opportunity to be with so many wonderful sisters who do so much in the spheres in which the Lord has placed you. I was particularly glad last night by means of TV to watch the new Relief Society presidency represent all nine members of the general presidencies of the auxiliaries. How well they did, and how blessed I am to understand more about these three sisters. That's true of each of us, and particularly you sisters: If we knew you more, we would love you even more.

My congratulations to Janet Scharman and her entire team for this conference and the way in which you focused on a precious promise that is your conference theme: "Remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; . . . whereon if men build they cannot fall" (Helaman 5:12). A more relevant promise is hard to imagine when so many mortals are falling and being dragged down. The Great Deliverer, Jesus Christ, can deliver on this precious promise as well as on all His other reassurances.

Regarding divine determination, sisters, "there is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it," and the scriptures so assure (Abraham 3:17). Imagine what it would be like if we worshiped a lesser god who, like us, had problems of his own!

Building on His firm foundation requires us, however, to emulate Christ's character. There is no joy nor is there any security in giving Him mere lip service. Emulating Him is the key, and our emerging character is the refined structure of our souls. After all the circumstantial scaffolding comes down, character is what is left.

Now, my beloved sisters, I have one reservation in speaking to you. You are already so conscientious, and my desire is to lift you up, not to weigh you down. Please remember, therefore, that as I speak, preceding any exhortation is my admiration for you! You are likely to be doing much better than you realize.

First some words, however, about the precious process of character building. The traits of character to be focused on are all interactive, and they hasten the development of each other. Paul notes one spiritual sequence when he says, "Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope," and hope brings more of the love of God (Romans 5:3-4). If you and I will meekly submit to "our light affliction," whatever it is, this

will lead later to a far greater “weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

So it is that while the “intelligence we attain unto in this life . . . will rise with us in the resurrection” (D&C 130:18), the gospel definition of intelligence isn’t one’s scholastic I.Q. Instead, intelligence signifies the totality of the soul and reflects “the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). If we are diligent, we can develop faith, patience, godliness, kindness, charity in greater abundance in our lives. These qualities, in turn, will make us fruitful “in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:8).

Note how we differ from the world. Added knowledge of spiritual things follows better behavior! When we lack this knowledge, however, Peter warns us, we will not be able to see “afar off” (2 Peter 1:9).

When we emerge from a fiery furnace or trial, we don’t run around to find another fiery furnace in order to stand in line to get an extra turn.<sup>1</sup> Sisters, we will be amply supplied with tests and tribulations. There’s no need to search for them! So, now, my saying a few things about character should be more in the nature of a caress of confirmation to you than an excess of exhortation.

Furthermore, when in the midst of these things, we should not be surprised if, at times, we are faithful but mute: “Be still and know that I am God” (D&C 101:16). That’s sometimes the best class participation, given Who is our Tutor.

The particular developmental challenge that we face may arise from the steady drumbeat of disappointment over a poor relationship in life or a dramatic intervening event may focus us. In a way, it doesn’t matter, if we understand and value the process with all of its stepping-stones.

You’ll recall that when we raise a blind on a window, only to be struck by a burst of bright sunlight, it makes us wince and squint and almost turn away. Sometimes doctrines are like that—they strike us with sudden illumination in ways for which we do not feel quite prepared. Such is Paul’s teaching that we “glory in tribulations” (Romans 5:3). Why would anybody glory in tribulation? We find, however, that as doctrine dilates our discipleship, we can handle the added incandescence and benefit therefrom.

The women disciples in my life, especially Colleen, are often further along the developmental path of some attributes. When I finally arrive at a developmental rendezvous, Colleen is already there! Because we are further along or further behind on the path of life in some respect or another from others, we need each other’s help in the journey. We realize, too, that the premortal world actually accounts for some of these striking, spiritual differences among us. Whether Jacob, Paul, or Peter—they all want us to see things more clearly. Such as the process I’m attempting to describe—seeing “things as they really are, and . . . as they will be” (Jacob 4:13) in order for us to enjoy a supernal advantage.

Furthermore, the development of Christlike character clearly qualifies as truly being “about [our] Father’s business” (Luke 2:49). The wonderful thing about this process, sisters, is that

amid the seeming mundaneness of daily life we can be about our Father's business, day by day, achieving imperishable things to be taken with us through the veil of death and to rise with us in the resurrection.

Jacob wrote of "looking beyond the mark" by failing to see Christ as the center of it all, and Jacob added ominously that people so blinded and diverted "must needs fall" because they are looking beyond the mark (Jacob 4:14). Ignoring the Savior includes failing to build Christlike character in order to be more rocklike ourselves.

Of course, conversion to the gospel and the Church can happen all at once in a burst of recognition and through the testifying of the Holy Spirit; however, the subsequent mentoring in order to develop further, for instance, a quality like patience, takes time. Yes, patience does not come "right now"! Do not expect the world to understand or help in the precious process I'm attempting to describe.

Mercifully, the whisperings of the Spirit nudge us along the path in an almost private process. Through it all we will need to be strong enough for ourselves, but also, sisters, to be strong enough to help others, because there will be immigrants arriving from Babylon, there will even be some defectors from the "great and spacious building" (1 Nephi 8:26), and they need to encounter women like you.

A few examples of the character of Christ will illustrate what we are to emulate, even for the already conscientious. Because we view Christ as the Light of the World, it is by His light that we should see everything else. Disciples are the real realists, whatever irreligionists may say or think.

Unlike God and Jesus, who are omniscient, you and I are often perplexed. We can be unsettled by the unexpected or made uneasy by the unknown. We surely need all of this added perspective! Furthermore, whereas Jesus paid the full price in order to ransom us, you and I may still hesitate over paying the full costs of discipleship, including developing the key attributes of a disciple.

Likewise, though Christ successfully resisted all temptations, we still dally, and we may take some temptations under advisement. No wonder the eloquence of His example is so powerful, for the scriptures say He gave "no heed" to temptation (D&C 20:22).

We also tend to shrug off the persistent reminders of our sins of omission, as if our avoidance of the super sins of transgression and commission were enough. It is my opinion that in the realm of the sins of omission we can make more major, though quiet, progress than in any other place. That is particularly true of a conscientious people.

Like His Father, Jesus exemplifies love perfectly. He so loved the Father and us that He meekly and submissively let His will be completely swallowed up in the will of the Father in order to accomplish the Atonement, including blessing billions and billions of us with the unmerited, universal resurrection. What He did is staggering even to contemplate. No

wonder He can help us along. He knows the way.

So profound and comprehensive is Christ's love, that even during His infinite suffering, He still noticed and nurtured finite sufferers who endured so much less anguish than he had to bear. For instance, He noticed and restored an assailant's severed ear in the Garden of Gethsemane. On the cross, He directed John to take care of His mother, Mary. He comforted a thief on a nearby cross.

In contrast, when you and I let ourselves get stuck in the ooze of our own self-pity, we fail to notice the needs of others. Still, with a little more effort, we can become a little more noticing and a little more nurturing. Let us reflect on our circles of love. Are they increasing in size, or are they static? What is the quality of our caring for those within those circles? Do we avoid lazy stereotyping? It's so easy to deal with people as functions and stereotypes instead of as individuals. Are we lovingly patient with others who are also striving to develop? Or do we, judgmentally and impatiently, constantly pull up the daisies to see how their roots are doing?

President Brigham Young declared of love, so fundamental to everything else, "There is one virtue [or] attribute, . . . which, if cherished and practiced by the Saints, would prove salvation to thousands upon thousands. I allude," he continued, "to charity, or love, from which proceed forgiveness, long-suffering, kindness, and patience."<sup>2</sup> All other virtues are derivatives and reflections of love! Again, since you sisters have such an instinctive, even reflexive love, you are probably further along this trail than you now realize.

Jesus likewise exemplifies perfect patience and long-suffering. Think of the implications of the Lord's course, which, He tells us, "is one eternal round" (D&C 3:2). Routine and repetition may bother us, may bore us. But God and His Son, Jesus, are never bored with Their "one eternal round," whatever that phrase is meant to convey, because of Their perfect love. God is patient with us in process of time. He also helps by trying our patience and our faith (2 Thessalonians 1:4).

If left untried, those qualities, which are portable and eternal, would remain underdeveloped. There's something about the isometrics that are involved when we're putting off the natural man or the natural woman while striving to become the man or the woman of Christ. These isometrics are a blessing in disguise, though I grant you sometimes it's well disguised.

As striving disciples, therefore, are we willing to be so mentored? Tutoringly, the Lord has said, "Ye cannot bear all things now; . . . I will lead you along" (D&C 78:18). He knows our bearing capacities. Though we ourselves may feel pushed to the breaking point, yet, ere long, thanks to Him, these once-daunting challenges become receding milestones.

Even outstanding and courageous Jeremiah was once discouraged. Being mocked and persecuted, he briefly considered refraining from speaking out anymore. But then said God's word was "like a burning fire shut up in my bones . . . , and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9). Jeremiah reached a breaking point, but he did not break!

Jesus also exemplifies meekness and humility. Though ever supernal in His achievements, Christ always, always gave the glory to the Father whether in the first, second, or now in the third estate. He was and is Lord of the universe, who under the direction of the Father created “worlds without number” (Moses 1:33). Yet, He was willingly known as Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter’s son. The Lord of the Universe. He always knew who He was! He meekly partook of history’s most bitter cup without becoming bitter!

Can we, in turn, partake of our tiny, bitter cups without becoming bitter? What a wonderful way for us to witness, especially to those we love the most! Can we overcome our drives for status and preeminence or our mundane desires merely to be one up on other people?

In the ebb and flow of life, can we meekly respond as did the preparer of the Way, John the Baptist? Unselfishly, he said, “[Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

How about meekness in our marriages? Is the pronoun me yielding ever more often to the pronoun we? The vertical pronoun I is best used in such situations as “I love you,” “I care for you,” “I hear you.” Otherwise, sisters, I can be drenched in ego: “I demand,” “I want,” “I need.”

Seemingly small, positive adjustments can make large differences in process of time. In our families, in the Church, and in other relationships, will we stop letting yesterday hold tomorrow hostage? Will we reclassify others, knowing that forgetting is part of forgiving?

So we see that building character is the most difficult form of construction. It requires faith and patience, using divinely given blueprints. There are also the overruns resulting from overcharged emotions. It’s not easy to be meekly resilient after experiencing failures. It’s not easy to retrofit by repentance, especially when our pride suggests that we are doing pretty well.

Likewise, it is ever tempting to try to use cheap, mortal substitutes instead of building Christlike character. The substitutes—such as cleverness instead of goodness, and smoothness instead of substance—do not survive when the winds and the rains pound on crumbling foundations. Furthermore, when we follow shortcuts, there is that awful subsidence, or sinking. Hence we can fall! All serious discipleship, therefore, requires our serious remodeling.

Christ is characterized as the Rock for so many reasons. We will find no fissures in His foundation. He never disappoints us. He never falters. His love never fails. He never fails to bring to pass His purposes.

Sisters, you can follow Peter’s counsel: Cast all your cares upon Christ, for he careth for you (1 Peter 5:7). Don’t be reluctant to do that, sisters. You may need to do it again and again! Christ told His disciples to catch a particular fish with a particular coin in its mouth in order to pay taxes, or tribute. Upon finding the fish, the disciples so did! Such incredible awareness about a single fish and a single coin should console us regarding the Master’s full

awareness of the details in the lives of each of us.

So, “we talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ.” Why? So that those we love the most “may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins” (2 Nephi 25:26).

A word now about our own families. Some of us are older; some are in mid passage; others have yet to begin. Some of us are parents, and some, grandparents. Grandparents have empty nests. Such emptyings are part of the plan, of course. Yet, since our flocks have left their nests, we find ourselves remembering and savoring precious days now irrevocably past. We listen in vain but with eager ears for children’s voices we once thought too shrill, too constant—even irritating. Yet that cacophony of children, which we once called noise, was actually sweet sound, a sound we yearn to hear again if we but could.

For the rest of you now amid the cacophony, seize the defining moments. Make more Mary-like choices and show less Martha-like anxiety. What are calories anyway, compared to special conversations? Of course, meals need to be served and consumed, but the mentoring memories will not be taken from you.

Whether old or young, married or unmarried, and with full or empty nests, the love of atoning Jesus for us is simply inestimable! Mercifully, the Lord tells us, “my arm is lengthened out all the day long” (2 Nephi 28:32). He waits with open arms to receive us, and on a later day, says the prophet Mormon, we can be “clasped in the arms of Jesus” (Mormon 5:11).

Whatever the remaining distance between us and Him, it is ours to travel! The beckoning stepping-stones are there. You have come thus far by faith in Him, though you have “miles to go before [you] sleep,”<sup>3</sup> and your faith will take you even further.

Please ponder this eloquent pleading to the Father. It is by the same Jesus who volunteered in the premortal world by saying meekly and simply, “Here am I, send me” (Moses 4:1). Here are the pleading words: “Listen to him who is the advocate with the Father, who is pleading your cause before him—Saying: Father, behold the sufferings and death of him who did no sin, in whom thou wast well pleased; behold the blood of thy Son which was shed, the blood of him whom thou gavest that thyself might be glorified; wherefore, Father, spare these my brethren that believe on my name, that they may come unto me and have everlasting life” (D&C 45:3–5).

He is always thinking of us! I so testify as one of His apostles and do so in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Neal A. Maxwell, “From Whom All Blessings Flow,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 11–12.

**2** Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 7:133–34.

**3** Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," in *An Introduction to Poetry*, ed. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, 8th ed. (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994), 341.

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