

Chosen to Witness for His Name

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Our beloved prophet, Gordon B. Hinckley, recently said: "This is the greatest day—the greatest season—in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. How wonderful to be alive today. How wonderful to be a part of this great cause at this time in the history of the world and in the history of this church. . . . I simply say that things are getting better and better. And I feel profoundly grateful for that." [1](#)

I too am grateful—grateful to know that in our midst lives a man who is not only the president of the eleven million members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints but is a modern-day prophet, called of God, for the entire world. Our prophet has said that in spite of the obvious trials and challenges that confront each of us, we need to remember that things are getting better and better. The verse of scripture from which this year's BYU Women's Conference theme is drawn also begins with a message of optimism:

"Wherefore, be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you; and ye shall bear record of me, even Jesus Christ, that I am the Son of the living God, that I was, that I am, and that I am to come" (D&C 68:6).

I find it interesting that being of good cheer and not fearing are prerequisite to our being able to bear record of Him. To be of good cheer and not to fear is the very essence of Jesus Christ's message to the world. It is a message which fills our souls with hope and allows us to see beyond the drama of the moment, beyond the pain and disappointment which inevitably invade our lives. To be of good cheer is not simply putting on a happy face. Good cheer radiates. It is a friendly warmth that reaches out and lifts, illuminates, and encourages. It begins with our willingness to trust in His will and to be an emissary for His cause.

We can be of good cheer even when life's circumstances are less than we had hoped. It is during such times that we remember that Jesus is the Christ who atoned for our sins, our children's sins, and the sins of those who have hurt us. We must never forget that it was He—Jesus Christ—who laid down His life for His friends. Feelings of grief, sorrow, or disappointment do not nullify cheer. In fact, it may be during our most challenging times that the knowledge the Lord is with us and will stand by us provides us the cheerful strength, ability, and will to continue.

Feelings often come to us uninvited, and negative emotions can be immobilizing as they close our ears and our hearts to promptings of peace and comfort. But we can quickly remind ourselves that the Lord wants us to succeed and that He will keep His promise to stand by us, to sustain and

support us.

President Hinckley reiterated his message of good cheer and optimism on another occasion when he said that the "work [of the Church] is possessed of a vitality which has never been evidenced before to such a degree."² *Never before*. That's quite a statement, given what we know about the commitment and passion demonstrated by our forefathers.

One reason I believe the prophet and trust his perspective is that I see the vitality in the faithful women of the Church. We understand the absolute importance of the family and the critical role we play in raising up righteous children unto the Lord. We appreciate that each of us is a member of a family by divine design as a daughter, sister, cousin, aunt, wife, or mother, and these relationships extend to both sides of the veil. We value the contributions we can make to our ward and neighborhood families as well.

We take to heart the counsel of our presiding bishop when he says that "[this] is a season to reach out to touch the life of someone."³ The reach of that touch may be as near as the next room or as far as distant lands. It starts with our families and then extends to ever-widening circles. We truly understand the concept of charity, of pure love, and we strive to live our lives in accordance with the ways of the Lord, not the ways of the world. Twenty years ago President Spencer W. Kimball shared a glimpse into our day when he said:

"Much of the major growth that is coming to the Church in the last days . . . 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."⁴

Sisters, it is happening.

"Distinct and different." Hmmm. At first glance, women of the Church look very much like the other women of the world—until we take a closer look. I know of some women, roughly twenty thousand of us here in the Marriott Center and thousands more around the world, who have found baby-sitters, taken vacation time from work, prepared some extra meals for those staying at home, and arranged for travel—all so we can be unbelievably crowded together today and listen to other people talk. For those gathered on the BYU campus, our one evening away from home will be spent making hygiene kits, packing food, giving blood, stitching medical procedural dolls, and painting toys for people we will likely never meet. Over the years, most of us have willingly agreed to be a ward nursery leader, camp director, or Relief Society president, even though these callings predictably have come at the absolute busiest times of our lives. Our Sundays, which are holidays for much of the world, are devoted to Church meetings and spiritual endeavors. One-tenth of what we earn is regularly returned to the Lord.

And what about the children? How many hours, days, years of patience have been required to teach the importance of personal hygiene, adequate sleep, keeping living spaces clean, and of developing good study habits? We've tried to encourage our children to be kind to their siblings and to spend time eating, and studying, and praying together. And just when we get a glimpse that our efforts may have paid off, we voluntarily send these children, barely nineteen years old, at our own expense, to live for two years in areas distant and unfamiliar. We agree that our only contact during that time will be a somewhat regular exchange of letters and two phone calls per year. The pay is lousy, the work unending, and yet we do all of this with a smile on our faces and a prayer of thanks in our hearts to Heavenly Father for His many blessings to us.

Distinct and different from other women of the world? You'd better believe it!

Elder B. H. Roberts, in his account of Church history said, "Never was a greater mistake made than

when it has been supposed that the women of the church were weak, and ignorant, and spiritless." [5](#) Sisters, we have spirit, and we have the Spirit, a winning combination which makes us distinct and different in happy ways, which enables us to truly be of good cheer. I believe it is because not only do we value *who* we are as women of strength and courage but, as Truman Madsen has said, we understand *whose* we are. [6](#) We are daughters of God.

Today thousands of women across the world, by the blessing of modern technology, are gathered. Some are in physical proximity at the BYU Marriott Center, others are in homes or chapels, but we all join together in spirit. I believe that something powerful happens when righteous women—women who are distinct and different in happy ways—unite together, aligning our lives, our purposes, and our efforts. We strengthen each other as we are reminded that we are part of something grand, something divine, which is directed by the priesthood of God.

It is not by accident that we are where we are right now. The Lord is in charge, and He has chosen each one of us to come to earth during this winding-up season to do His work. Our efforts in the premortal existence prepared us for where we are now. We have been chosen not because we are better but because He would have us make our contribution to the world when there would be great need of our particular abilities. We each have a specific calling and have been uniquely positioned to participate in significant ways to the building of His kingdom.

While some of us have been called to serve formal missions, all have been called to witness for His name. Elder Holland reminded us during this past general conference, "Asking every member to be a missionary is not nearly as crucial as asking every member to be a member!" [7](#)

The Lord has confidence in us. He knows our capabilities and our desires, and He knows that with His help we can successfully do His bidding. We are living in the fulness of times—the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored. We have the organization, the priesthood authority, the ordinances, the scriptures, and modern-day revelation to guide us. We have the gift of the Holy Ghost to comfort us, prompt us, and help us to be more than we think we can be.

In July 1830, only a few months after the Church was organized, the Lord gave a revelation through Joseph Smith to his wife, possibly the only revelation in recorded scripture given to a woman. Although directed to Emma, the Lord ends the revelation saying, "This is my voice unto all" (D&C 25:16). In other words, He is really speaking to all women—to you and to me.

The Lord begins this revelation in verse 2 of Doctrine and Covenants 25 with the expression, "if thou art faithful." If asked, most of us would immediately have a sense of what being faithful means and what behaviors would manifest such an understanding. President Hinckley, speaking to the women of the Church in September 1984, shared some great insight when he said that in this particular verse the Lord was referring to our being "faithful to ourselves, to the very best that is within us. No woman can afford to demean herself, to belittle herself, to downgrade her abilities or her capacities. Let each be faithful to the great, divine attributes that are within her." [8](#)

How do we know what our divine attributes are and how we can best use them?

Not long ago I came across a passage in the Book of Mormon that added to my understanding of this concept of the divine within us. I love the Book of Mormon. It is comforting to me to know that the Lord has had direct care over this work and that the words contained within it are exactly *what* the Lord wants said exactly the *way* He wants it said.

Because I believe that, I have often pondered the significance of certain verses. The passage which caught my attention was 3 Nephi 10, in which the Lord uses an image of a hen gathering her chicks. For a long time this just seemed like very odd scripture. I didn't understand its power or its relevance to me. I assumed it was important because of the repetition of the image, but it didn't touch me in a

way I could fully understand. Beginning in verse 4 He says, "How oft have I gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings." In verse 5 He repeats again, "And again, how oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings." At the end of the same verse He says, "How oft would I have gathered you as a hen gathereth her chickens." In verse 6 He says it yet another time: "How oft will I gather you as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings."

Not being a farm girl, I could only imagine the scene of a hen gathering her chickens under her wings. I wondered what circumstances would cause a mother hen to gather her chicks and what would encourage lively chicks to be gathered. I wondered why the Lord would think it important enough to repeat this image four times in three verses.

Then a friend shared with me this story told by Phillip Allred in Meridian Magazine. A group of young college students were helping measure range damage after a wildfire raged across the prairie outside their university town. As they walked over the expanse of blackened earth, they noticed a cluster of small smoldering mounds. One of the volunteers was particularly interested in the unidentifiable heaps and asked one of the more experienced range managers what they were.

This veteran of many range fires replied that he had seen this phenomenon on a few occasions and suggested that the young man turn over one of the piles. He did. To his great surprise several sage grouse chicks ran out from under the upturned mound. He was fascinated. How incredible, he thought, that these little chicks had known to find and run underneath this mysterious shelter.

The young man asked what the mound was and how the chicks knew to take refuge there. To his amazement, he was told that the smoldering heap was the remains of their mother. When there is danger the mother hen instinctively calls out to her young ones and stretches out her wings for them to run under and find protection in her embrace. The young man was profoundly moved by this symbol of a mother's innate love and protection.⁹

I was moved as well by this image and reflected back many years to an experience of my own. When I was a young mother, our family moved to Germany for three years, and I felt the intense responsibility of holding my little ones close to me—of protecting and reinforcing—so they could face a world quite strange to them. None of us spoke a word of German, and we felt very alone in a little village where we were the only Americans and only Latter-day Saints.

I had never undertaken such an overwhelming adventure, and there were many lessons awaiting us. Our first visit to the local market must have been extremely entertaining for the residents as they saw me with my dictionary, trying to determine the contents of certain packages. I felt like a preschooler as I tried to figure out which bills and coins to use to pay for our goods. And then, as if dictionary struggles and lack of knowledge of the local currency were not enough, we had not brought baskets with us. Our village market had no bags. So, my three young children and I scurried home through the town, our arms full of loose food items, looking rather ridiculous, I suspect.

I put my children in the local elementary school with the hope that they would soon make some friends and learn the basics of the language. I remember those early days very clearly. I so much wanted this to be a good experience for my children, and yet I could tell they were suffering. In response to my cheerful "How was school today?" my ten-year-old son routinely answered: "How do you think it would be if you had no friends and couldn't understand anything anyone was saying to you?"

My seven-year-old daughter, who had been a happy, self-confident child in Utah, became fearful whenever I was out of sight. After many tears and much clinging, I finally learned that she worried if she had some problem, no one would be able to understand and help her.

We spent a lot of time during those early days talking, reading books together, playing games, and

going on outings—much more than we ever had before. My heart wasn't particularly brave, and tears were often very close to spilling, but we went on because it was the only thing to do. I gathered my chicks under my wings, not because I was especially noble or good but because I was their mother and I needed them as much they needed me. We summoned our strength, and then all ventured out to face the world again. My insecurities and genuine lack of German survival skills did not remove my responsibility to those children nor did it minimize the positive effect of the time we spent close together. Our time abroad evolved into one of our most treasured experiences, not because the way was easy, or because we navigated the course particularly well, but because we were together as a family.

Now my children are all grown, and our "nest" is usually empty. Gathering has become at times a little less spontaneous and more predictable. While extended family units are forming and beginning to play a prominent role, these earlier family connections are no less important or needed. Dinner on Sunday evenings at our home is when children and grandchildren gather. It has become a time for celebrating birthdays, purchases of new homes, announcing due dates of new little children, rehearsing talks for Primary, sharing talents, playing games. It is also a time for revealing disappointments, discussing fears, and talking about life. We've had to be creative in gathering those who live some distance from us and have come to rely on e-mail, phone calls, and small packages in the mail.

Gathering in righteousness and in support of those we love is apparently an ongoing process, and I believe it is particularly critical in this day and time. The world is not neutral. Neither can we be. Regardless of our age or stage of life, forces which challenge the family and threaten our agency are everywhere, beckoning us to dwell on the negative side of life. Television, advertisements, even expectations of neighbors and co-workers entice us to venture out and sample society's offerings, which lurk around every corner. The obvious challenges are easier to resist. Our family knows the difference between good and evil, legal and illegal, righteous and devious. It is the subtle messages which are most alluring and, thus, most distracting. They touch on how we dress, what we eat, how we spend our money. "Having Christlike love" and "caring about the one" are sometimes used as arguments to accept behaviors which counter God's eternal plan. It can become confusing to know when to reach out and when to avoid. I wish I had all the answers and could make it easier. What I know is the value of staying connected, being together, and listening to the promptings of the Spirit.

And so I reflect back on the question posed in 3 Nephi: How oft have I gathered my chickens under my wings?

I am struck that the verses do not say: How often have I gathered my chicks with confidence, having a clear plan, feeling happy and secure every single time. Nor does it say: Remember the one really great time I gathered you together? Being together often, sharing the family bonds, seems to be the key.

There are a variety of ways of gathering and diverse roles we play, depending on the situation. Sometimes we nurture, and sometimes we seek nurturing. There is something both comforting and fortifying in gathering with others who are important to us. I believe that is one of the reasons each of us has chosen to come together for this conference, as sisters in the gospel, under the protective wings of the priesthood. Gathering implies more than just sitting next to someone in the same room. It means smiling, reaching out, belonging, sharing a part of ourselves, and inviting a reciprocal response. It means trusting in and sustaining those who have stewardship for us. We are reminded of how many women in the world are just as we are, who love the Lord, who understand His love for us, and who want to do His will. We are inspired as we realize once again that we are part of something grand and glorious, that the Lord has a plan for His children, and that we have been privileged to be participants in the fulfilling of His work. For this brief time together, we feel protected from the raging fires of the world as we become reinforced to go back to lives we love and the divine

roles the Lord has chosen to assign to us, and which we, in turn, have chosen to accept.

Sisters, I consider it an honor to be a member of such an esteemed women's group which was organized under the direction of the holy priesthood. I want to reiterate that I believe you are faithful women of God, with boundless talents and gifts. You are strong, devoted, nurturing, and capable of stepping up to the tasks at hand. I believe that the Lord himself has commissioned each of us to help prepare the earth for the return of our Savior. Given all that, there is an important point to remember. He has chosen us not only because *He* needs us to do His work but because *we* need to do His work. Our experiences on earth fulfill His purposes as we benefit from them and progress in ways of eternal consequence.

Let me refer again to the Book of Mormon. In 2 Nephi 32, Nephi teaches us a very important lesson. In verse 9 he tells us to "pray unto the Father in the name of Christ, that he will consecrate thy performance unto thee, *that thy performance may be for the welfare of thy soul*" (emphasis added). As we bear record of Christ in how we think, in what we do, in the words we choose to profess—in our very beings—we become perfected and progress on the journey to exaltation, our own exaltation. As Elder Dallin Oaks has said, "the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to *become* something," [10](#) the kind of daughters our Heavenly Father has chosen us to be. The Lord loves us, and that love is manifested in every opportunity and every challenge which comes to us.

I am confident that as you participate in this conference, you will feel the Spirit of the Lord, which has blessed those who have sought His help as they have planned their part for these two days. For some, that will be enough, and you will return to your homes uplifted, with a heart that is full. For others, there will be a plan to take your renewed enthusiasm and share it with your friends and family. May I suggest that, in addition, you consider the following? As you participate and hear something which seems particularly relevant to you personally, think of one or two practical applications that will strengthen you to strengthen those you love. Then arrange with a friend to check with you in a few weeks, a month, two months for a progress report. It is by small but consistent steps, taken with those most important to us, that we travel the path which will take us back to our Heavenly Father's presence.

BYU Women's Conference for 2001 has officially begun. The members of the conference committee want you to know that we believe the theme and direction for this conference have been inspired. Over a period of several weeks we thought, talked, and prayed together that we might be guided in our preparations.

During one meeting last fall, each of us had a personal confirmation that the verse of scripture contained in Doctrine and Covenants 68:6, used as an overlay for all the activities of the conference, would be pleasing to the Lord. We have proceeded to this day with those words as a beacon and a commitment in our hearts to be true to its message. The Lord's promise, "I am with you, and will stand by you," is the surest protection from the firestorms of life. He stretches out His arms to us with the unequalled power of the Atonement, which can purify our souls. "As a hen gathereth her chicks," He has said, "I go to prepare a place for you . . . ; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3).

This is truly a time to be of good cheer as we acknowledge that we are blessed with everything we need to be happy and successful. The leaders of the Church are aware of us here today and support us in our every good effort. As we align our lives with the Lord's purposes, we can feel reassured of His love for us and can know for a surety in our hearts that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God, that He was, that He is, and that He will come again. This is my witness to you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1 Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Lord Is at the Helm," *Brigham Young University Speeches, 1993-94* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1994), 110-11.

2 Gordon B. Hinckley, "This Great Millennial Year," *Ensign*, November 2000, 67.

3 H. David Burton, "A Season of Opportunity," *Ensign*, November 1998, 9.

4 Spencer W. Kimball, "The Role of Righteous Women," *Ensign*, November 1979, 103-4.

5 B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 5:253.

6 See, for example, *Five Classics by Truman G. Madsen* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 147.

7 Jeffrey R. Holland, "Witnesses unto Me," *Ensign*, May 2001, 14-15.

8 Gordon B. Hinckley, "If Thou Art Faithful," *Ensign*, November 1984, 90.

9 Phillip A. Allred, "Whosoever Will Come, Him Will I Receive," *Meridian Magazine* [online] www.meridianmagazine.com; copy in possession of the author.

10 Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge To Become," *Ensign*, November 2000, 32; italics in original.

