

"Bright as the Sun, This Heavenly Ray Lights Ev'ry Land Today"

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You see how blessed I am? My dear sisters, it's a joy and honor to be with you in the closing session of this magnificent BYU Women's Conference. Congratulations to all of you who have participated and especially to those who have made this conference possible. Thank you, thank you, thank you again. The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles send their greetings; they love and honor you. You women are special in the eyes of the Lord. My wife and I love to be with the members of the Church all around the world. Tender feelings come back as we meet with you here at BYU.

Our daughter studied at BYU, and we attended her graduation here in the Marriott Center. Jeffrey R. Holland was then the president of BYU. We also have very special feelings toward Provo, because as our daughter was working on her master's degree, she also gave birth to twin boys. I always knew that the women of the Church were very efficient, but our daughter really showed us how to use one's time wisely and productively. And those two boys even came seven weeks early.

My wife and I love you wonderful women of the Church! You are such a power for good in the world. You are truly a light to the nations, to communities, to families, and to the Church.

In the scriptures, reference is made to women who have blessed individuals, people, and generations with their intellectual and spiritual gifts. Names like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, or Martha, Elisabeth, and Mary, the mother of our Savior, will always be honored and remembered. But the scriptures also mention women whose names are unknown to us but who bless our lives through their examples and teachings--like Jairus's 12-year-old daughter (see Mark 5:22-23, 35-43); the woman of Samaria whom Jesus met at the well of Sychar (see John 4); the ideal wife and mother mentioned in Proverbs 31; and, of course, Eve, the mother of all living.

Just think about it: After creating this beautiful world, God created Adam and, then, as His prime creation, He created woman--Eve! She was the sublime, the ultimate in all of His creations. She was the crowning creation.

Looking at the history of this earth and at the history of the restored Church of Jesus Christ, it becomes obvious that you sisters do hold a special place in our Father's plan for the eternal happiness and well-being of His children.

When I thumb through my own life's "who's who" in search of the most influential persons who had an impact for good at times of greatest need, I quickly realize that most of the defining moments in my personal development were positively shaped by faithful daughters of our Heavenly Father. First of all there is, of course, the great influence of my dear wife, Harriet, who is the sunshine of my life--always faithful and forthright and never hesitant to speak her mind. Once, during a press conference, she interrupted me and said, "Sometimes I am more like a thunderstorm than sunshine." I assure you, she is the sunshine in my life--a very lively sunshine--24 hours a day. This year we will celebrate our 43rd wedding anniversary. How grateful I am for her! How much I love her!

Our daughter, Antje, and our daughter-in-law, Carolyn, are also great examples for me. They both live in Europe and raise their families there. Carolyn served a mission in southern Utah, and Antje graduated summa cum laude from BYU. They both returned to their home countries and use those great experiences of mission and education to build strong families and bless the Church there. I think you can sense that I am just a little proud of them.

Looking back to these very special and shaping moments of getting rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, three very special women appear in my life's book of remembrance: my mother, my grandmother, and my mother-in-law.

Toward the end of World War II, my family was living in Czechoslovakia, where I was born. My father, a customs officer, was drafted into the army and sent to the western front of the war. As the war raged with more severity and the eastern front moved toward our town, my mother, alone with her four children and in an effort to protect them, made the decision to leave our home and all our earthly possessions behind and head west, toward the home of her parents in East Germany.

It was the winter of 1944--one of the coldest, harshest winters of World War II. My mother instructed us to take only warm clothes and food, but no other possessions. At this time, we were members of the Lutheran Church, not even aware that there was a restored Church of Jesus Christ. Considering this, it is interesting that she took most of our family records and family pictures on our flight to the west.

As a four-year-old boy, I was so sad as we left behind our nice home with all my toys and a large balcony. How I loved this balcony and the view it provided, even though I once got my head stuck between two of its pillars; my ears--my pretty big ears--kept me from getting back out again. Fortunately, there was my mother to help and a big crowd to watch.

We were on one of the last refugee trains heading westward, and the journey, which would usually take one or two days, took us almost two weeks. Traveling in a freezing train, stopping over in refugee camps, and heading out toward the west again--exhaustion, hunger, and fear were the continuous ingredients of this perilous flight.

One night the train stopped again at a train station, and, as usual, my mother stepped out in search of some food for us children. Often, kind people came to those stations and brought milk and bread and other food for the refugee children. But this time when my

mother returned with some precious food for us, the train was gone, with all of her four children in it.

During this time of the war, many family members were separated from each other, never to be united again. There she was, in a war zone, without her husband, alone on deserted railroad tracks, realizing that she had just lost all of her children! Later she shared with us how lonely and devastated she felt. The physical stress of the effort to flee to the west, and the emotional stress culminating in the apparent loss of all her children in a few minutes of time, was overwhelming to her. She started to pray--the only source of solace available to her at that desperate time. I know today that the Light of Christ moved her to pray with faith, as a good Lutheran, and then to get up and look around to see if she could find the train somewhere else at the station. After a short period of terror and despair, she got on her feet and moved from one track to another and eventually found our train on a parallel track quite a distance away, where it had been moved during her absence.

With the protection of God, and under the inspired leadership of our mother, we reached her hometown and were reunited with her parents in Zwickau, East Germany.

Those dangerous days, as we fled in front of an oncoming army, and the following months, as the war came to an end, were among the most troublesome of our lives. Some of my memories of these days are of darkness, of night, of coldness. But with the help of God, we were moved into a place where a light was shining forth for all who came out of that darkness and coldness and who were willing to accept the Savior's invitation: "come and see" (John 1:39).

It was in this town of Zwickau that my grandmother was invited by an elderly single woman--an elderly single woman--to attend church with her. The setting was still desperate--the war was just over; food was scarce, and so were all other goods, like coal to heat our homes or cook our meals; houses were destroyed; and a family was fortunate if they were all still alive and had a roof over their heads.

My grandmother accepted the invitation of this dear single sister to attend sacrament meeting with her. This act of kindness might appear small and not too hard to do, but it changed our lives forever. Looking back from today's circumstances of comfort, it is almost unbelievable what was happening then. We attended church in a cold, cramped, back room meeting place with electricity often failing, leaving us in the dark. But at the same time, this room was filled with the Spirit, and the divine light of the message of the restored gospel was in great abundance, and we were surrounded by the love, friendship, and helping hands of the dear members.

All of our family joined the Church. All were baptized except me, because I was only six at the time. Two years later I was baptized too, in a local indoor swimming pool by one of the Church leaders in our branch. Because of the circumstances during the postwar poverty, I had not learned to swim at this young age and was apprehensive to enter the water to be baptized. This was my first experience in a public indoor swimming pool. I will always remember the feeling of warmth, safety, and importance as I came out of the water after this sacred ordinance had been performed.

How grateful I am to these two women of the Church--my grandmother and my mother! They are true modern-day pioneers! They went before and ventured into new spiritual territory. They helped me to gain a testimony of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. They had faith, and they radiated love to a little boy, even in places and times of

darkness, despair, and coldness.

The light of the gospel, bright as the sun, lighted up their life in these challenging times. And then in return, the warmth of their light and example helped me to feel secure and well grounded in the principles of the gospel.

I share these very personal experiences with you today, hoping to impress upon you that wherever you live, whatever circumstances you live in, whatever your background or challenges might be, the gospel light has the power and purpose to bring blessings into your life and into the lives of those placed in your path. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored to bring blessings to our Heavenly Father's children. You are planted in your country, your community, your family to facilitate these blessings. I urge you to bloom where you are planted!

My dear sisters--grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and friends--please never underestimate the power of your influence for good, especially in the lives of our most precious children and youth!

President Heber J. Grant said, "Without the devotion and absolute testimony of the living God in the hearts of our mothers, this Church would die" (*Gospel Standards*, comp. G. Homer Durham [1941], 151). And the writer of Proverbs said, "Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

President Gordon B. Hinckley counseled the women of the Church in January of 2004: "It is so tremendously important that the women of the Church stand strong and immovable for that which is correct and proper under the plan of the Lord. We call upon the women of the Church to stand together for righteousness. They must begin in their own homes. They can teach it in their classes. They can voice it in their communities" (*Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, Jan. 2004, 20).

President Hinckley also says that big gates move on small hinges (see "A Prophet's Counsel and Prayer for Youth," *Ensign*, Jan. 2001, 7). Your example in seemingly small things will make a big difference in the lives of our young people. The way you dress, the way you groom, the way you talk, the way you pray, the way you testify, the way you live every day will make the difference. This includes which TV shows you watch, which music you prefer, and how you use the Internet. If you love to go to the temple, these young people will also love to go. If you adapt your wardrobe to the temple garment and not the other way around, they will know what you consider important, and they will learn from you.

You are marvelous sisters and great examples. Our youth are blessed by you, and the Lord loves you for that.

A few years after my baptism, my family became refugees for a second time. The political regime in East Germany perceived my father as a dissident. His life was at risk, and we had to leave the country overnight, leaving behind everything we possessed. Again we had only the clothes we wore, some food for the trip, and family records, as well as family pictures. By the time I was 11, we had been refugees twice within only seven years. But this time we had already received the gospel of Jesus Christ. We had made covenants with the Lord through baptism, and we came to a branch in Frankfurt, West Germany, with other members who had the same principles and precious values.

Into this branch, just a few years later, came a young widow with her two daughters. The missionaries had found this beautiful family, as you have just heard from my wife, Harriet.

When I saw Harriet the first time, with her dark brown eyes, I thought, "These missionaries are really doing a great job!" Even as a teenager I liked Harriet quite a lot. My bold advances, however, showed only marginal success. I tried, for instance, to influence the seating at the sacrament table so I could pass the sacrament to her. This did not impress her very much. On my way to Church activities during the week, I usually rode my nice bicycle and often stopped at their home to ask if Harriet would want to have a ride to church on my bicycle. Harriet never accepted; she always declined. Sometimes, however, her mother was there and would say, "Harriet will walk, but I will gladly ride with you on your bike to church." This wasn't really what I was hoping for at the time, but I later realized it is an advantage to be on good terms with the mother of the girl of your dreams!

Sister Carmen Reich, my mother-in-law, was truly an elect lady. She embraced the gospel in a most difficult and dark time of her life, and she liberated herself from grief and sorrow. As a young woman and a widow, and the mother of two young girls, she emancipated herself from a world of old traditions into a world of great spirituality. She embraced the teachings of the gospel, with its intellectual and spiritual power, on a fast track. As you heard, when the missionaries gave her the Book of Mormon and invited her to read the marked verses, she read the whole book within a few days. She knew things beyond the understanding of her peers because she knew them by the Spirit of God. She was the humblest of the humble, the wisest of the wise, because she was willing and pure enough to believe when God had spoken. She was baptized November 7, 1954, and was asked by the missionary who baptized her to write her testimony down in December, only a few weeks after her baptism. The missionary wanted to use her testimony in his teachings to help others feel the true spirit of conversion. Fortunately, Elder Jenkins kept the handwritten original for more than 40 years and then returned it to her as a very special and loving gift. What a wonderful act of love. Carmen Reich, my dear mother-in-law, passed away in 2000 at age 83.

Let me read to you parts of her written testimony. Please keep in mind that you are listening to a sister who had heard about the gospel only a few weeks earlier. Before the missionaries came, she had never heard anything about the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, or Mormons in general. In 1954 there was no temple outside the United States, except in Canada. This is the English translation of her handwritten testimony:

"Special characteristics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints which are not present in other religious communities include, above all, modern *revelation* given through the *Prophet Joseph Smith*.

"The *Book of Mormon*, in its clear and pure language, is next, with all the instructions and promises for the Church of Jesus Christ; truly a *second witness*, together with the Bible, *that Jesus Christ lives*.

"Bound together by faith in *a personal God*, that is, God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Ghost, who facilitates prayer and also influences personally.

"Also, faith in the premortal life, the preexistence, the purpose of our earthly life, and our life after death is so valuable for us, and especially interesting and informative. It is

clearly laid out, and our lives receive new meaning and direction.

"The Church has given us the *Word of Wisdom* as a guide to keep body and spirit in the most perfect shape possible to realize our desire and goal. So we keep our bodies healthy and improve them. All this from the knowledge that we will take them up again after death in the same form.

"Totally new to me, of course, is *temple work* with its many sacred ordinances, having *families together forever*. All this was given through revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith." Marvelous.

There couldn't be two more different women than my mother and my mother-in-law. They looked different, they were different, but they both had the same strong faith that blessed them with the gifts of the Spirit. And they blessed not only my life but the lives of generations to come.

The lives of these women are a powerful witness of the fact that the gifts of the Spirit do not belong to men alone. Spiritual gifts, promises, and blessings of the Lord are given to those who qualify, without regard to gender (see D&C 46:9-25). In the Church of Jesus Christ, woman is not an adjunct to but an equal partner with man (see John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, comp. G. Homer Durham, 3 vols. in 1 [1960], 305).

The beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ create a wonderful and unique feminine identity that encourages women to develop their abilities as true and literal daughters of God. Therefore, the Church's female membership has always played, and will always play, a central role in ensuring the success of Mormonism as a religion and as a society.

Through the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary organizations, women obtain an ecclesiastical identity in the Church. The women of the Church are an important part in helping to "bring forth and establish the cause of Zion" (D&C 6:6). They care for the poor and the sick; serve proselyting, welfare, and humanitarian missions; and teach children and youth, realizing their contributions to the temporal and spiritual welfare of the Saints.

In accordance with the family-centered doctrine of the Church, a woman's role varies with her circumstances and the choices that she makes within the context of the restored gospel. She may fill many roles simultaneously, which will encourage her to acquire an education and training that will qualify her for two vocations--that of homemaking and that of earning a living outside the home, if and when the occasion requires.

We are living in a great season for all women in the Church. You are an essential part of our Heavenly Father's plan for eternal happiness; you are endowed with a divine birthright. You women are the real builders of nations wherever you live, because strong homes of love and peace will bring security to any nation.

President David O. McKay said the principal reason the Church was organized was "to make life sweet today, to give contentment to the heart today, to bring salvation today. . . . Some of us look forward to a time in the future--salvation and exaltation in the world to come--but today is part of eternity" (*Pathways to Happiness*, comp. Llewelyn R. McKay [1947], 291-92).

What you sisters do today will determine how the restored gospel principles can

influence the nations of the world tomorrow. It will determine how these heavenly rays of the gospel will light every land in the future.

By living up to this mission, in whatever life circumstance you find yourself--as a wife and mother, as a single mother, as a divorced woman, as a widowed or a single woman--the Lord our God has responsibilities and blessings in store for each of you individually, far beyond your imagination.

May I invite you to rise to the great potential within you. But don't reach beyond your capacity. Don't set goals beyond your capacity to achieve. Don't feel guilty or dwell on thoughts of failure. Don't compare yourself with others. Do the best you can, and the Lord will provide the rest. Have faith and confidence in Him, our Savior, and you will see miracles happen in your life and the lives of your loved ones. The virtue of your own personal life will be a light to those who sit in darkness, and it will be because you are a living witness of the fulness of the restored gospel. Wherever you have been planted on this beautiful but often troubled earth of ours, you can be the one to "succor the weak, lift up the hands which hang down, and strengthen the feeble knees" (D&C 81:5).

My dear sisters, as you leave this wonderful Women's Conference, returning to your daily life with all its blessings and challenges, let me assure you that the Lord loves you. He knows you. He listens to your prayers, and He answers those prayers, wherever on this world you may be. He wants you to succeed in this life and in eternity.

In the early days of the Restoration, the Lord spoke to Emma Smith through the Prophet Joseph Smith, giving her instructions and blessings. The Lord declared that this revelation was "my voice unto all." Remember that these same promised blessings apply to you. He said:

- "If thou art faithful . . . Thou needest not fear."
- "A crown of righteousness thou shalt receive."
- "Where I am you [can] come." (See D&C 25.)

Later the Prophet Joseph Smith added: "If you live up to your privilege, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates" (RS Minutebook, 28 April 1842, LDS Church Archives).

Of this, my dear sisters, and of this truth I testify and leave you my love and my blessing as an Apostle of our Savior, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.