

Famous Last Words

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As I have prayed about my talk, one impression has come again and again—Latter-day Saint women are no ordinary group of women! The Lord delights in us. He loves us. He is counting on us, for our most crucial work lies ahead.

Hence the theme for my address: Famous Last Words. Obviously there's nothing famous about my words, and I hope these aren't my last words. But as we stand on the brink of an era foretold by prophets from the beginning of time, there are some famous words we ought to review.

Among them are those of Joseph who was sold into Egypt but who was reunited with his conniving brothers when famine forced them to Egypt for grain. As Joseph dispatched his brothers back to Canaan to retrieve their father, his last words to them were: "See that ye fall not out by the way" (Genesis 45:24). That advice is reminiscent of the famous last words of the apostle Paul, written at the end of his life: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord . . . shall give me at that day" (2 Timothy 4:7–8). Paul's declaration makes me think of the hymn "Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel," which we sang frequently in our little Kansas branch because Grandma chose the songs and she loved the last verse:

Then work and watch and fight and pray
With all your might and zeal.
Push ev'ry worthy work along;
Put your shoulder to the wheel.
(*Hymns* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985], no. 252)

All of these last words illuminate our goal and our challenge: to keep from falling out by the way on our mortal sojourn. To wage a good fight against the enemy of righteousness, to finish the custom-made course prepared for each of us, and to nourish our faith in Jesus Christ—all of which we will do only if we work and watch and fight and pray.

Now, this process in which we are engaged is glorious but difficult. There are many reasons for that, one of which I learned as a 5'10" tomboy who lived and breathed sports and played whatever was in season. We had a great eighth-grade fast-pitch softball team, and as the pitcher and captain I was determined to lead our team in the championship. Everyone turned out for the deciding game, including my family.

The game was tight from the opening pitch, but as we went into the final inning we were ahead 2–1. Unfortunately, that's when things began to unravel. First, I walked the leadoff batter. Then the next hitter popped a fly ball to the shortstop, who dropped it. There were now runners on first and second. The third batter grounded to the third baseman, who let the ball get past her. The bases were loaded. The next batter hit a line drive right at the first baseman, who ducked. Two runners scored, and my vision of trophies began to vanish. Then the next hitter whacked the ball deep, and as the left fielder chased it into the corner, all of the runners scored.

You might wonder why I can still remember these details. The entire episode is engraved in my memory, because at that point something happened that I still can't explain. From the mound, I began shouting at my teammates—and they weren't the come-on-you-can-do-it kinds of words you would hope to hear from a team captain. This was a tongue-lashing in which I chewed out the entire infield. This scene went on for perhaps a minute when suddenly I realized that I was not alone on the mound. There stood Mother, who had apparently seen enough. Taking me by the arm, she escorted me off the field and motioned me into a nearby school bus.

Action on the field stopped. The umpire and coaches looked back and forth at each other and then at the school bus, where inside, and with her index finger waving in a steady beat, Mother stated what became her most famous words to me during childhood: "*You* are out of control. You have forgotten *who* you are, *where* you are, and what is really important. And if you would *ever* like to play ball again, I suggest you correct this mistake right now." I walked off the bus, apologized to everyone, and returned to the mound. We lost the game.

Mother was right. I was out of control. I had forgotten who I was and what standard of behavior was expected of me, where I was and what was appropriate on a ball diamond, and what was important—which was not only to play well but to behave well.

It seems to be easy here in mortality to do what I did—to lose sight of who we are and what we're here for and as a result to become distracted from what is really important. If we don't have a clear sense of our identity and purpose, we are much more vulnerable to Lucifer.

He of course knows that and attempts to blur our vision. He challenged even the Savior: "If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down," Lucifer taunted. To which the Savior responded, "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God," leaving no question about who He was (Matthew 4:6–7). When the adversary tried to entice the Savior to worship him, promising kingdoms he couldn't deliver, Christ made short work of him: "Get thee hence, Satan" (Matthew 4:8–10). There was no clever repartee or negotiation. The Lord simply rejected

and banished His tempter, at which point the devil was forced to leave, because the power of Jesus Christ is *always* stronger than the power of Satan. The Savior was clear about who He was, which allowed Him to neutralize and defeat the adversary.

Satan tries some variation of this approach on each of us. He lies. He shades and obscures truth. He makes evil look good and good look unenlightened and unsophisticated. He will try anything to obscure the truth about who we are, where we are, and what's really important. In President Harold B. Lee's last general conference, he stated that without an understanding of who we are, we lack "a solid foundation upon which to build our lives" (Conference Report, October 1973, 5).

Is it any wonder, then, that the enemy of all truth and righteousness would launch an all-out attack on Latter-day Saint women? He understands what President Joseph F. Smith articulated: "There are people fond of saying that women are the weaker vessels. I don't believe it. Physically, they may be; but spiritually, morally, religiously and in faith, what man can match a woman who is really convinced?" (As quoted in John A. Widtsoe, *Priesthood and Church Government* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1939], 86).

From the adversary's point of view, we are dangerous. Righteous women dedicated to the Lord and united in the cause of goodness threaten his work. Of course he would target and attempt to deceive us, women who have a clear understanding of who we are. As I said at the outset, we are not ordinary women.

We know that we are beloved spirit daughters of heavenly parents. We are women who seek to hear the voice of the Lord. We are women devoted to our families; women whose covenants and influence span generations; women who are not easily deceived; women of integrity, charity, and purity.

We are women who understand that to qualify for eternal life, we must deal with a full range of difficulty and disappointment here. We are free to choose how we live, where we spend our temporal, emotional, and spiritual resources, and to what and whom we devote ourselves. We are free "to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator . . . or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:27).

I have a friend who is a gifted teacher. During a hospital stay he learned that his nurse was taking the discussions, and one evening they talked at length about the plan of salvation. She summed up their conversation by saying, "Satan sure doesn't end up with much, does he?" No, Satan won't end up with much, and neither will those who are duped into following him. Hence our challenge to walk the straight and narrow path until the end of our probation (2 Nephi 9:27).

Our ability to successfully negotiate this spiritual minefield called mortality improves dramatically if we are clear about who we are and what is important. And what is important is eternal life. Said President Spencer W. Kimball, "Since immortality and eternal life are the sole purpose of life, all other interests and activities are but incidental

thereto"(*The Miracle of Forgiveness* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969], 2).

Does that mean there should be no ball games or barbecues or ballets? Of course not. But it does mean that we must be riveted on our goal. Anything that takes us closer to exaltation is worth our time and energy. Anything that doesn't is a distraction. Brigham Young said it this way: "If only we could catch the vision . . . that we will in due time inherit eternal life, if we could only glimpse it, I tell you there is nothing that we are called to pass through but what we would willingly describe as a blessing."

Of course our faith will be tried. Of course we will have tests of our endurance, of our desires, and of our convictions. Said Lorenzo Snow: "The Lord . . . will try us until He knows what He can do with us. He tried His Son Jesus. Thousands of years before he came upon the earth the Father had watched His course and knew He could depend upon Him when the salvation of worlds should be at stake. . . . So . . . He will . . . continue to try us, in order that He may place us in the highest positions in life and put upon us the most sacred responsibilities" (*Millennial Star* 6 [24 August 1899]: 532). It is in moments of disappointment, heartache, and loneliness that we often make decisions that forge our faith, mold our characters, and fortify our convictions about the only source of strength and solace that satisfies. And that is Jesus Christ.

It is significant that the famous last words of prophets ancient and modern inevitably point us to Christ. Ether admonished us in his last words to "seek this Jesus of whom the prophets . . . have written" (Ether 12:41). Moroni sealed the Book of Mormon with his plea that we "come unto Christ, and be perfected in him" (Moroni 10:32).

In King Benjamin's last recorded address, he bore this resounding witness of Christ: "If ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, . . . and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world . . . —I say, that this is the man who receiveth salvation. . . . Believe in God; believe that he is." Then he counseled us to "always retain in remembrance the greatness of God" (Mosiah 4:6–11).

Yet, how quickly we forget. The word *remember* is used in the Book of Mormon 136 times—which is not surprising in the story of a people with roller-coaster spirituality who experienced visions and miracles, only to forget with lightning speed what they knew and had felt. Repeatedly they were admonished to *remember* the covenants they had made, to *remember* the purpose for their existence, and to *remember* the greatness of the Holy One of Israel (2 Nephi 9:40). Helaman's last words to his sons included this powerful counsel: "Remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation" (Helaman 5:12).

And it's no wonder. They and we face the same challenge—that of maintaining an eternal, spiritual focus in a temporary, temporal world. One of the business magazines that comes to my office publishes a special edition each summer called *The Good Life*. This summer's edition features articles about everything from exotic vacation hideaways to one-of-a-kind designer clothes. With the exception of a few scantily clad models showing off the

latest in scuba gear, there is nothing offensive in the magazine. Nothing, that is, except for its basic premise, which is at least a distraction if not an out-and-out lie, because it suggests that the good life can be purchased with money and that material pleasures bring happiness.

It's not that there is anything wrong with enjoying the finer products this world has to offer—unless they become our object. Or unless we come to believe that they are the source of joy. It won't surprise you that I found no mention of the fruits of the Spirit or the Savior's healing balm in this magazine. I found myself wondering which expensive suit of clothing or which island bungalow would help you if your heart were breaking or if you longed for a feeling of peace. Which is why we are counseled to "fast and pray oft" (Helaman 3:35), and to pray "continually without ceasing" (Alma 26:22), that the purpose of life and the knowledge of the Redeemer will never be far from our minds. Weekly we partake of the sacrament to renew our covenant to "always remember" the Lord (Moroni 4:3; 5:2). Imagine how our perspective and behavior would be affected if we always remembered Him, because remembering the Lord and remembering who we are seem to be inseparably connected.

In *The Lion King*, the lion cub Simba forsakes his heritage and turns to riotous living after the death of his father, Mufasa. But when that lifestyle fails to satisfy his inner self, Simba turns to the heavens in a moment of desperation. His father responds by appearing to him, and after listening to Simba try to justify his behavior, Mufasa delivers profound parting words: "You have forgotten who you are, because you have forgotten me."

As our testimony of God the Father and His Son Christ expands and matures, our view of ourselves and our potential does likewise, and we begin to focus more on life forever than life today. But when we forget our Father and His Son, we forget who we are, and almost inevitably our behavior disappoints us.

How then do we remember the Lord during a time when the adversary has unleashed his most potent strategies? Captain Moroni provides a model for our day. For just as he prepared his people to face an army larger and more ferocious than his, so are we at battle with a sinister strategist who is devoted to our destruction.

Moroni prepared his people spiritually and temporally. His preparations were so extensive that the Lamanites were "astonished exceedingly, because of the wisdom of the Nephites in preparing their *places of security*" (Alma 49:5; emphasis added).

As recent tragic events have demonstrated in a devastating fashion, we too need places of security. Places where we are safe—not only physically and emotionally, but spiritually. May I suggest three.

Strengthening Ourselves Spiritually

Our first place of security lies within our own testimonies, which form the foundation of our faith. A personal witness of Jesus Christ, and the ability to hear His voice, provide our first and most reliable line of defense against the adversary. When all else fails,

the Savior will not. But His mercy, His wisdom, and His strength cannot reach us if we do not believe in Him and seek Him.

I am technologically impaired. I can't even make my VCR stop blinking. But I've used a computer for twenty years, and I can't imagine life without it—though frankly I only know how to do a few things well. Compared to my brother, who works in the software industry, I'm illiterate. He knows how to do much more using the same computer and the same programs than I do. At least a hundred times he has offered to show me how to work better and faster. But he always offers when I'm right in the middle of a huge deadline, and I don't have time to learn how to do things better and faster. I continue to just get by, doing what I know how to do well but leaving a tremendous source of power untapped.

How many of us are just getting by spiritually rather than learning how to access the divine power available to those who seek for it? Brigham Young declared that "we should learn how to take into our possession every blessing and every privilege that God has put within our reach" (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, sel. John A. Widtsoe [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1954], 53).

After a trip abroad, Eliza R. Snow said: "I have thought much since I returned, how necessary for [us] to be more of a distinct people than what [we] are, to be . . . different from the rest of the world as our privileges are more exalted—we should be a shining light to the nations of the earth. But I often say to myself, are we what we should be?" (*Woman's Exponent*, 16 September 1873, 62).

We are distinct from the women of the world—not only because of what we know, but because of the spiritual privileges that accompany those gifted with the Holy Ghost and endowed with power in the House of the Lord. The Lord places no limits on our access to Him. But we, unfortunately, often do. We limit ourselves when we sin; when we are lazy spiritually; when we fail to ask and seek. The sixth section of the Doctrine and Covenants is a rich tutorial about our accessibility to the Spirit. We are told that if we ask, we will receive; that if we inquire, the mysteries of God will be unfolded to us; and that if we build our lives upon the rock of Jesus Christ, neither earth nor hell will prevail against us (D&C 6:5, 11, 14, 23, 34). In the Sermon on the Mount the Savior promised that "*every one* that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth" (Matthew 7:7; emphasis added). He didn't say the cute ones, or the really smart ones, or those with two or more children. He said *every one* who seeks and asks.

The best way I know to strengthen our personal testimonies and protect ourselves from evil is to seek to have as many experiences with the Lord as possible. When Satan tempted Moses, he rejected him outright, saying, "I will not cease to call upon God . . . for his glory has been upon me, wherefore I can judge between him and thee" (Moses 1:18). Moses resisted the master of evil by relying upon previous experience with God, which had taught him to discern good from evil and to treasure the fruits of the Spirit. There is nothing as exhilarating as the Spirit, and those most susceptible to Satan are those who have not tasted of its sweetness, who do not hearken to its promptings, and who are left to deal with

life alone.

Having meaningful experiences with the Lord comes through earnest fasting and prayer, by repenting and obeying, and through immersing ourselves in the temple and in the words of God. And they come as we submit ourselves to the Lord, for He will not force Himself upon us. Among Amaleki's last words were these: "I would that ye should come unto Christ . . . and offer your whole souls as an offering unto him" (Omni 1:26). This process of total commitment takes time and is not easy.

But it is only when we yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit that we can hope to overcome the natural man, who wants to control, is self-indulgent and absorbed, rarely if ever wants what is good for him, and is impatient, egotistical, and demanding. When Jesus said, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matthew 26:41), He was doing more than commenting on sleepy disciples.

Yielding ourselves to the Lord always requires sacrifice, and often a sacrifice of our sins. How many favorite sins are we holding onto that alienate us from the Spirit and keep us from turning our lives over to the Lord? Things such as jealousy, or holding onto a grudge, or being casual about the Sabbath day, or the wearing of the garment, or what we watch or read? Imagine the rippling impact on our lives and our families if every one of us determined at this moment to sacrifice something that is dulling our spiritual senses!

Yielding ourselves to the Lord, from whom we may obtain greater strength than we will ever muster on our own, is the only source of strength in this life and happiness in the life to come. Truly, we must lose our lives to find them. Two weeks ago I met a sister missionary who was the first young woman in her Bulgarian city to be baptized. Her family has disowned her. Yet she said through her tears: "I had never heard of Jesus Christ. But when the missionaries taught me about Him, it was like hearing something I already knew. I love this gospel, and now I have a great responsibility in how I live, because Jesus Christ has changed my life."

A few days ago I received a letter from a great young man and good friend who is serving a mission in Italy. He has been there for a year and has yet to see a baptism, so you can imagine the range of his emotions. In that context, consider what he wrote: "Before my mission I thought I had a testimony, but truly it was just a weak one. I have seen the Master take my life and begin to sculpt, form, and design it. It has been amazing! At times it hasn't been easy, to say the least. I have had to succumb to His will. The thing is that I know all the sculpting, forming, and designing are not finished and that the Lord has just begun. It will take more than a lifetime to get the finished product. But it will be worth it."

It *will* be worth it, because if we will let Him, if we will come unto Him, if we will submit ourselves to Him, the Lord will change our lives.

In this day and age we cannot afford to be casual about our testimonies. Satan never sleeps. And neither can we. But the promise for our diligence is magnificent. It is to us as it was to Captain Moroni's people: "Those who were faithful in keeping the commandments of

the Lord were delivered at all times . . . [and] there never was a happier time among the people of Nephi" (Alma 50:22–23).

Strengthening Our Families

The second most important place of security is the family, which President Howard W. Hunter said is "the most important unit in time and in eternity and, as such, transcends every other interest in life" (*Ensign*, November 1994, 50).

No wonder, then, that Lucifer and his lieutenants are attacking the family on every front. Experts predict that the twenty-first century will bring a dramatic redefinition of the family—one that would almost certainly undermine what God intended it to be. The Proclamation on the Family warns that "the disintegration of the family will bring upon [us] . . . the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets" (*Ensign*, November 1995, 102).

Our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, was speaking directly to us as sisters when he declared, "The home is under siege. So many families are being destroyed. . . .

"If anyone can change the dismal situation into which we are sliding, it is you. Rise up, O women of Zion, rise to the great challenge which faces you. . . .

". . . My challenge to you . . . is that you will rededicate yourselves to the strengthening of your homes" (*Ensign*, November 1998, 99–100).

If the world can't look to us for a clear signal about the sanctity of marriage, motherhood, and the family, where can it look? I love President Heber J. Grant's statement that "the mother in the family far more than the father, is the one who instills in the hearts of the children, a testimony and a love for the gospel . . . and wherever you find a woman who is devoted to this work, almost without exception you will find that her children are devoted to it" (*Gospel Standards* [Salt Lake City: Improvement Era, 1969], 150). I cannot speak from experience about motherhood, but I can speak from observation. Whenever I am tempted to whine about my hectic life, something inevitably reminds me of you who are mothers and the exceptional load you carry. That is when I stop complaining, because I'm not sure that it's even possible for me to work as hard as you do. And I am sure that I'll never have your influence, which is a result of the billions of acts of service, compassion, and patience you perform as you nurture your children and nudge them towards exaltation.

Just because I have not had the privilege of bearing children does not mean that I am unconcerned about the family. I have a family that includes seventeen nieces and nephews, and I work hard at being their favorite aunt. Though I would do anything for these children, I have often wondered just who is really helping whom.

I had one such experience recently. I was assigned to speak at general conference. Such an assignment is both a privilege and a pressure, and only after several weeks of hard work did I finally complete the message I felt prompted to prepare. But then, just days before conference, I came to understand that the talk I had prepared was not the one I should

deliver on Easter Sunday. It seemed inconceivable to start over, but that is what I had to do. I had three days to prepare an entirely new talk.

And after slaving day and night for weeks on the first message, I was emotionally, physically, and spiritually spent. All of this transpired on Friday, and I worked that afternoon, through the night, and all the next day. By Saturday evening I had written dozens of pages of mediocre text—none of which I could use. I was depressed. I had no ideas. And fear was gripping every cell of my body. Late Saturday evening I decided to lie down for a few hours.

Then something happened unlike anything I have experienced before. When I arose at 3:00 Sunday morning, I felt optimistic and full of energy. I turned on my computer, opened my scriptures, and began to write. Nine hours later the talk was basically done. Parting the Red Sea would have been no more miraculous to me.

Now, for the rest of the story. When my two sisters learned about my plight, they sprang into action, contacting everyone in our family and asking them to fast, beginning Saturday afternoon. I'll never forget my sister Michelle saying, "We'll get all of your nieces and nephews fasting for you. That will work."

When I felt rejuvenated Sunday morning, I was given to know that I was being strengthened because of the fasting and prayers of my family and perhaps particularly because of the willingness of my nieces and nephews to help Aunt Sheri. I have never experienced such a restoration of mind and spirit in so short a period. Once again I ask, who is really helping whom? I simply could not have done what I had to do if my family had not united to call upon the Lord in my behalf. What if our parents had not taught us to fast and pray as children? What if my siblings hadn't done the same in their homes? But everyone was ready and willing to respond when I was in need. My family provided a safety net during a time of great challenge.

The foundation of the Church and the hope of the future is the family, and there is no place of security like it. There is power in the family that we will find nowhere else, a power that spans generations and reaches across the veil. My Grandma Dew's last written words were those asking to be released from her calling because she had become ill. She wrote, "I hope the Lord does not think I have said no to Him. I love the gospel so very much and also this work." Grandma died one week later. But she left behind a legacy of faith that influences me to this day. Our eternal families provide a vital place of security.

Strengthening the Church Family

The third place of security is the Church, or the Church family. As individuals and families we need additional protection from the storms of the world: "The gathering together upon the land of Zion, and upon her stakes, may be for a defense, and for a refuge from the storm, and from wrath when it shall be poured out . . . upon the whole earth" (D&C 115:6).

The tragic events at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, have

demonstrated how desperately we need each other's support. Within minutes after teenage gunmen began their rampage, a large number of members and leaders had gathered to search for their youth. It took the stake president some time to locate all of the bishops, who were already searching out their flock. A fundamental characteristic of followers of Christ is our willingness to take care of each other.

I have experienced this kind of care myself, for as much as I love my family, life would not be as full were it not for my Church family. I am often asked why I feel comfortable as an unmarried member of a family-oriented Church. I do not understand this question, which implies that I would be happier if I were not a member of the Church. It also implies that happiness comes only to those whose lives are ideal—which would make for a very small group of happy people. So isn't the question really, How does someone in nontraditional circumstances feel a sense of belonging in this Church?

The answer has been articulated repeatedly by President Gordon B. Hinckley when he has identified the three things each new member—and, I submit, each member—of the Church needs: friends, a responsibility or the opportunity to serve, and nurturing by the good word of God (*Ensign*, May 1997, 47).

I have never felt ignored in the Church because I have had opportunities to serve that have strengthened my testimony and blessed me with my dearest friends. I will ever be grateful to the stake president who called me to serve as the Relief Society president in a married stake. In my call he sent a message that what we have in common is far more important than any differences we may have. If there is anywhere in the world where every one of us, regardless of our personal circumstances, should feel accepted, needed, valued, and loved, it is within our Church family. And every one of us can reach out to others and help them feel a sense of belonging.

Such inclusiveness thwarts Lucifer's purposes, for he despises a united people. Said President George Q. Cannon: "[The devil] hates the Latter-day Saints because they act together. . . . If we would split up and divide, . . . then the devil . . . would rejoice" (*Gospel Truth*, comp. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974], 1:210). No wonder Satan delights when we cluster ourselves based on social standing, ethnicity, and a host of other superficial criteria. Among his most divisive tactics is his campaign to polarize us according to gender and to confuse us about the distinctive nature and supernal value of our respective assignments as men and women. This tactic, left unchecked, threatens the unity of our Church family.

When our general presidency is interviewed by the press, we invariably field questions that imply that Latter-day Saint women are dominated and ignored. I find this curious, for I have been unable to identify any organization anywhere in the world where women have more influence than in this Church. Not long ago our presidency had the privilege of hosting Madame Jehan Sadat, the widow of the former president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat. One of her first comments to us was "The women in your Church have such great leadership opportunities. It is wonderful!" Hundreds of thousands of us in more than 160 nations have the rights and responsibilities of presidency, and thousands more are called

to teach men, women, youth, and children. Where else do women bear such weighty responsibility and enjoy such respect? There is no other organization for women that rivals the Relief Society, which is the only such organization founded by a prophet of God.

Though the Prophet Joseph Smith organized the Relief Society "after the pattern of the priesthood," and stated that the Church "was never perfectly organized until the women were thus organized," (*Woman's Exponent* 12, 1 September 1883, 51) there are some who cite the fact that as sisters we are not ordained to the priesthood as evidence that our work is less significant than that of men. But such a view of the Lord's plan is incomplete and narrow, for the gospel of Jesus Christ embraces an ennobling doctrine regarding women. Said Elder Bruce R. McConkie, "In all matters that pertain to godliness and holiness and which are brought to pass as a result of personal righteousness . . . men and women stand in a position of absolute equality before the Lord" (*Ensign*, January 1979, 61).

From an eternal perspective we know little about the reasons specific assignments were given to men and women. Because of that the adversary seeks to create confusion about something that need not be confusing. What we do know is that the Lord has declared His will on this matter, and for reasons known to Him, our assignments as sisters do not require that we be ordained to the priesthood, though the assignments of worthy men do require ordination. This difference in the stewardship between the sons and daughters of God need not concern us. We should feel secure about the manner in which the Lord administers his kingdom.

I do. I feel secure because I trust the Lord, and this is an issue of faith. This is His Church. He stands at its head. And it is inconsistent within His divine character to undermine or diminish the contribution or value of any of us.

Regrettably, some priesthood bearers treat women inappropriately and live beneath the privileges they hold. But on this issue President Hinckley has been clear: "I believe that any man who offends a daughter of God will someday be held accountable, and the time will come when he will stand before the bar of judgment with sorrow and remorse" (*Ensign*, November 1989, 95). Gratefully, the abuses of a relative few do not negate the blessings of the priesthood, which are eternal and make anything this world has to offer pale by comparison. The Lord's plan assures that all our Father has is available to all who qualify.

President Joseph Fielding Smith explained that "the Lord offers to his daughters every spiritual gift and blessing that can be obtained by his sons" (*Improvement Era*, June 1970, 66). Elder James E. Talmage added that "in the sacred endowments associated with the ordinances [of] the house of the Lord, [it is clear how dramatically] woman shares with man the blessings of the priesthood" (*Young Woman's Journal*, October 1914, 602).

All of us, men and women alike, receive the gift and gifts of the Holy Ghost and are entitled to personal revelation. We may all take upon us the Lord's name, become sons and daughters of Christ, partake of ordinances in the temple from which we emerge armed with power (D&C 109:22), receive the fulness of the gospel, and achieve exaltation in the celestial kingdom. These spiritual privileges derive from the Melchizedek Priesthood, which

holds the "keys of all the spiritual blessings of the Church" (D&C 107:18).

As sisters we are not diminished by priesthood power; we are magnified by it. When respected and exercised righteously, this power unites rather than separates us. Elder Talmage stated that "the world's greatest champion of woman and womanhood is Jesus Christ" (James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1972], 475). I believe it, and in His plan I have complete trust.

A penetrating question related to the blessings of the priesthood is why more of us, men *and* women, don't more earnestly seek the blessings available by virtue of this transcendent power. Throughout the Doctrine and Covenants the word *receive* is used to mean having faith in, or accepting as true. Do not all of us, including we who are not ordained, *receive* or activate the blessings of the priesthood in our lives by first believing the priesthood to be the power of God and having faith in its governance, by seeking those blessings and keeping sacred covenants, and by sustaining those who are ordained and called to lead us.

As Brigham Young taught, "The Priesthood is given to the people . . . and, when properly understood, they may actually unlock the treasury of the Lord, and *receive* to their fullest satisfaction" (*Discourses of Brigham Young*, 131; emphasis added). It is the power of the priesthood that unlocks the door to heaven and allows us to understand the mysteries of God. The question we might therefore ask ourselves is, Are we *receiving* the privileges and unspeakable blessings associated with the gift of priesthood power?

Recently Carol Thomas of the Young Women general presidency and I had an unforgettable experience in Cali, Colombia. After a long evening of meetings, and because we were to catch a predawn flight, the presiding stake president asked the large congregation to remain seated while we departed. But upon the final "amen," several dozen priesthood leaders jumped to their feet and formed two lines, creating a pathway from the chapel outside to a waiting van. As we walked through this sheltered passageway, I was deeply moved. In that setting, there was no need to protect us. But the metaphor was clear. In that instance, priesthood leaders were symbolic of priesthood power. It is the power of the priesthood that marks the path leading to eternal life, clears the path, and protects the path. Within the priesthood is the power to separate and safeguard us from the world; the power to subdue the adversary and surmount obstacles; the power to comfort, bless, and heal; the power to enlarge our capacity and enable us to hear the voice of the Lord; the power to strengthen marriages and families and bind us to each other; and the power to triumph over mortality and come unto Him. These blessings may be received by every righteous, seeking son or daughter of God. As President Harold B. Lee taught, "Through the priesthood and only the priesthood may we . . . find our way back home" (*Be Loyal to the Royal within You*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year [Provo, 20 October 1956], 2).

After years of seeking understanding in the scriptures and in the temple, I have come to know for myself that the priesthood is the power of God to bless and exalt every one of us if we live worthily and seek its blessings. I believe it is imperative that we understand these

blessings and how to activate them, for they will be a vital source of strength and protection in the days ahead. Truly, the priesthood of God distinguishes the Lord's Church from any other, and wherever and whenever its power and blessings are exercised and called upon righteously, there results a tremendous place of security.

Regardless of our personal circumstances as we march forward to fulfill our foreordained missions in this next millennium, it is in our places of security that we will be reminded of who we are, where we are, and what is really important. Such places of refuge are essential in a world that is increasingly hostile to followers of Christ.

Among the adversary's pawns during this century was Hitler, whose evil designs wreaked havoc on the entire world. Early on, Winston Churchill attempted to warn fellow countrymen about this German madman. But Churchill was initially labeled a warmonger, and while England slept, Hitler amassed a huge army and began to put his diabolical scheme into motion.

The young Elder Gordon B. Hinckley was serving a mission in England at the time, and he heard Churchill's speeches of warning. Upon his release, Elder Hinckley toured the European continent. Throughout Germany he watched spit-and-polish Nazi troops goose-step through the streets. But he also noticed a dramatic difference in other countries where troops were undisciplined in demeanor and dress. He later reflected that Hitler had identified his object and knew exactly what he was doing. But the rest of Europe was asleep. Young Elder Hinckley sensed that he had a front-row seat on the bleachers of history (Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996], 80).

We have a front-row seat on the bleachers of an era in which Satan is moving about largely uncontrolled and unchecked. As brutal as Hitler was, our opponent is far more threatening, for what we have to lose is not only our happiness and peace of mind here but also eternal life in the world to come. Satan knows exactly what he is doing. But do we? Are we sleeping, or are we creating places of security where we may insulate ourselves from his advances?

If there were ever a time when the Lord needed righteous, determined women who can distinguish between the adversary's deceptions and the voice of the Lord, it is now. If there were ever a time when the Lord needed women who stand committed and consecrated, it is now. If there were ever a time when the Lord needed women of integrity and purity who live in the world but rise above it, it is now. If there were ever a time when the Lord needed His daughters to be alert to what is happening in society and to defend the sanctity of the home and family, it is now. If there were ever a time when the Lord needed us to have a clear vision of who we are, where we are, and what is important—it is now. We are a sleeping giant ready to awake, for the sisters of Relief Society will increasingly become an anomaly in this world. And because of our cheerful and righteous differences, we will become a beacon and a magnet for countless good women everywhere who are looking for female role models who exhibit compassion and strength, charity and conviction—and who

do so while remaining unsullied by the world.

Might we therefore covenant this very hour to work and watch and fight and pray. To work to strengthen ourselves spiritually every week of every month of every year. To watch over and fortify our families and our Church family so that within the stakes of Zion will exist the strength and unity to help us withstand Lucifer's minions. To fight the adversary in every arena. And to pray with increasing strength and confidence and faith. The Lord has never expected more of faithful women than He does now. But we would not be here if we were not up to the challenge.

The historian Wallace Stegner concluded his foreword to *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* with these words: "That I do not accept the faith that possessed [the Mormons] does not mean I doubt their . . . devotion and heroism. . . . Especially their women. Their women were incredible" (Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964], 13). Our sister forebears *were* incredible. And so are we, with foreordained missions that only we can fulfill.

Captain Moroni raised a title of liberty and invited all who would maintain it to "come forth in the strength of the Lord" (Alma 46:20). President Hinckley has done likewise: "We have work to do, . . . so very much of it. Let us roll up our sleeves and get at it, with a new commitment, putting our trust in the Lord. . . . We can do better than we have ever done before" (*Ensign*, May 1995, 88).

Mormon's last words to his son Moroni were these: "Let us labor diligently; . . . for we have a labor to perform whilst in this tabernacle of clay, that we may conquer the enemy of all righteousness, and rest our souls in the kingdom of God" (Moroni 9:6).

May our faith and our works qualify us for the exaltation of which Mormon wrote. May we come to know that Jesus Christ stands ready to encircle and strengthen and comfort and change every one who seeks after Him. And may we come to testify as did the Prophet Joseph: "And now, after the many testimonies which have been given of him, this is the testimony, last of all, which we give of him: That he lives!" (D&C 76:22). For in a coming day, perhaps sooner than later, the most famous last words of all will be fulfilled—when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Christ. I so testify, adding my witness that we are His daughters, that we are beloved of Him, and that He is our Savior, our Protector, and our Redeemer.