

"Press Forward with a Steadfastness in Christ": Stand for Truth and Righteousness

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My heart is full. We have experienced so much together these past few days. It is very humbling for me to stand before you at the close of this remarkable conference. I have prayed fervently over this responsibility. I think of the words of our very capable conference chair, Sister Wendy Watson, "This once-in-a-lifetime BYU Women's Conference 2000 is celebrating a new millennium and the birth of the Savior." What a celebration this has been as we have recommitted to follow Him. As women of God we can, we will, we must.

Through the blessings of modern technology, we have been connected with our sisters across the street and across the world. And through the blessings of the gospel, we have felt a closeness to our sisters, even beyond the veil. It is my fervent and humble testimony that the heavens are very much open to women today. They are not closed unless we ourselves, by our choice, close them.

It is as though together we have been to Jerusalem and walked where Jesus walked, and felt His presence there.

Together, we have drunk of living water that quenches spiritual thirst, the very water Jesus offered the woman at the well in Samaria (see John 4:5–26). We have witnessed the remarkable power, strength, and influence of righteous women united in a worthy cause of enormous service to mankind.

Now the time has come for us to return happily to our homes and press forward. I think of the report of a sister who, following an inspiring conference, returned to her home gathered her family to share her plans for a higher standard of excellence in their home. She explained: to avoid any contention, there was to be no unkind word spoken by anyone at any time under any circumstance. Can't you just feel the resolve of this righteous mother? To help secure this high level of conduct, she announced that the first person to speak an unkind word would have his or her mouth washed out with soap. The plan was clear. Then someone asked her the hard question, "And did you follow through?" to which she

responded, "Yes," and it tasted terrible."

Life is real. The bills may not be paid, the beds may not be made. A wandering child may not yet have returned home, a fragile relationship may still be of concern, an ailing loved one may not have been healed in spite of fervent prayers. But hopefully, we are better prepared with faith and vision, the direction and the decision, as women of God, to do better than we have ever done before. We need take only one step at a time, one day at a time, in the right direction. As a child in Primary, I remember standing and singing with my whole heart and soul, "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, To shine for him each day¹." I remember thinking that He really needed me. And I remember how I felt deep inside, singing, "I'll be a sunbeam for him."¹ I can if I but try. Sisters, He still needs us to shine for Him each day, every day. We can if we but try. And we will try.

This is our time to "Arise and shine forth, that [our] light may be a standard for the nations" (D&C 115:5).

In a time past when the power of the adversary sought to destroy the purposes of God, leading people astray and changing the standard, we read that Captain Moroni took his coat, tore a piece, and wrote on it, "In memory of our God, our religion, and freedom, and our peace, our wives, and our children" and fastened it on the end of a pole (see Alma 46:12). He fearlessly declared his position.

Today we don't need a coat or a pole but with the same unrelenting courage can we thwart the forces of evil that are marshaled against the purposes of God? Can we press forward with steadfastness in Christ having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and all men? The words of Nephi are very clear, "Ye [meaning you and me] must press forward" (2 Nephi 31:20). I think that means to keep moving in the right direction with determination and boldness. I can hear in my mind today my mother's voice when I was a child, saying to me as I would leave on an errand for her, "Ardeth, come straight home; do not dilly dally by the way side." This admonition had greater meaning years later while reading the words of President George Q. Cannon, "You may dally by the wayside; you may fool away your time; you may be idle, indifferent and careless; but you only lose thereby the progress that you ought to make."²

Can we be a light to the nations in a darkening world and raise a standard by pressing forward with steadfastness in Christ? My message at the close of this conference is to testify that (1) we can. God has made it possible. (2) we will. Life has meaning, purpose and direction. (3) we must. We are women of covenant.

First, we can press forward. Our Savior marked the path and lead the way. We have entered the gate through the waters of baptism. We have received the Holy Ghost. We are on the path (see 2 Nephi 31:5). Our Father in Heaven wants us to be happy, very happy. He is our Father. The great plan of happiness of which Alma speaks (see Alma 42) is God's plan for us. Not happiness in the way we might commonly think of happiness, but rather eternal happiness with all that the Father has and with our families together forever. It is this

happiness that the Savior has made possible for us.

I think of the faithful Bolivian woman who drove her llama herd on the Altiplano day after day. Think of the monotony of it all. One day two young missionaries came to her humble home and taught her about the great plan of happiness, about the mission of the Savior, the doctrine of the Atonement, the resurrection, and the promise of eternal life. With her golden brown face turned upward, her dark eyes wide and trusting and with tears rising to overflowing, her heart being flooded with the Spirit, she whispered her emotions, "You mean He did that for me?" To her earnest question, the Spirit bore witness to her soul. She again whispered, this time not in question but in reverent awe, "He did that for me." With that testimony burning in her soul and ours, as women of God we can press with steadfastness in Christ. He made it possible.

The Savior went all the way, through the agony of the Garden of Gethsemane, taking upon Himself the sins of the world, to the cross where even in the last moment of His suffering, He prayed for His crucifiers. He died on the cross. He gave His life for us.

All this was followed by the profound message of the empty tomb: "He is not here: for he is risen" (Matthew 28:6). Yes, this is what He did for you and for me. Is it asking too much for us to press forward with steadfastness? All the way? Every day?

When we determine to take a stand and commit to go the whole way, our whole life, our Father in Heaven will be with us the whole way, our whole life. Not just our immediate concerns, our temporary hurts and our pains, but our whole lifetime experience. The writings of C. S. Lewis suggest this idea: You know what it is like when you go to the dentist to get rid of a toothache? That's all you really want—get rid of the ache. But he won't stop there. He grinds and grinds until the decay is removed. He says, ". . . this Helper who will, in the long run, be satisfied with nothing less than absolute perfection, will also be delighted with the first feeble, stumbling effort you make tomorrow to do the simplest duty."³

I've discovered it's not the straight and narrow path or the rod of iron that causes the ache for most of us. We want to be good, but it's the terrain that causes the strain, the pain, and the gain. It is our ups and downs, our trials and tests, our hurts and heartaches, our fears and failures. With our limited perspective, those times we may think our Father in Heaven has forgotten us, in time we will look back and realize he was with us all the way.

At the throne I intercede;

For thee ever do I plead.

I have loved thee as thy friend,

With a love that cannot end.

Be obedient, I implore,

Prayerful, watchful, evermore,

And be constant unto me,

That thy Savior I may be.⁴

Shall we not press forward all the way?

We Will Press Forward

We can and we will. Our Relief Society declaration re-confirms "We are beloved spirit daughters of God, and our lives have meaning, purpose, and direction."⁵ When we understand the purpose of the great plan of happiness, we begin to plan with a purpose. Our plans include not only what we are to do but also what we want as a result. It is the vision of our possibilities that lifts the burden and weariness of doing to an exhilaration of accomplishing. It is when we keep the vision of our purpose that we are filled with life and light. Our greatest accomplishments may not be visible or measurable, but priceless in value. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "All things are for your sakes. . . . For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; . . . we look not at things which are seen but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:15, 17–18).

In the book *The Little Prince*, we read of the fox speaking to the Prince. "Good-bye," said the fox. "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."⁶ When we press forward with steadfastness in Christ with a perfect brightness of hope, our lives have meaning. We begin not only to look but also to see, not only to touch, but also to feel, not only to talk, but also to communicate. Our otherwise routine activities can become an offering on the altar of God. We don't just serve, we nurture. We don't just take a loaf of bread, we share the bread of life. We're not just teaching a class, we're changing a life. Our gospel study is not to just know about Him but to know Him and strive to become like Him, filled with the love of God. Our lives have meaning and purpose.

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We must keep the vision of the tree of life, the love of God, else we can become weary, even in well doing, and find ourselves surrounded by the mists of darkness in our exhaustion. With a firm grip on the iron rod but without the vision of the tree of life, we might be focused on the blisters on our hands and forget the hands scarred with nail prints. It is our vision of what we are working for, what we are living for, and what we want to happen in our lives that elevates us to a higher level of living because it gives meaning to everything we are doing.

When we begin to understand, even in part, the magnitude of the promises of eternal life, then all the doings, the assignments, the calls, the programs, the activities, the dos and the don'ts, the peanut butter and jam smeared on the kitchen table, and yes, even the laundry, take on a whole new meaning. In the vernacular of the day, one might say we have a paradigm shift. A burden ceases to be a burden once we see the purpose for it.

Our prayers become more purposeful and more answerable. Recently, my niece asked her little four-year-old son, Jake, to give the family prayer, to which he responded in his pure and childlike way, "Mom, I only do food prayers." We may still be just doing food prayers when we are forty unless we have a purpose for our communication with God. Our Father in Heaven encourages our communication. He says over and over in the scriptures, ask, ask in faith.

Some years ago when I was called to serve as the Young Women General President, I was searching for answers, for direction, for revelation, for comfort. I didn't just desire, I yearned to know more than I had ever known before about the way to pray more effectively and listen more intently. I wanted to know how to pray with greater faith and how to hear the voice of the Lord in my mind and heart through the Holy Ghost. I am not suggesting we need a calling in the church before we pray mightily to our Father in Heaven but I know that when we do, guidance will come. Guidance at that time came for me while "feasting on the word." In Alma's guidance to his son Helaman, notice how this scripture attends to our actions, our thoughts, and our feelings: "Cry unto God for all thy support; yea, let all thy doings be unto the Lord, and whithersoever thou goest let it be in the Lord; yea, let all thy thoughts be directed unto the Lord; yea, let the affections of thy heart be placed upon the Lord forever." And if that isn't enough, he continues, "Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day" (Alma 37:36–37).

The answers do not usually come all at once, but a reminder of the availability of our Father in Heaven was the reassurance I needed at that time.

When we pray with purpose there is power in prayer. President Gordon B. Hinckley tells us, "Members can fight evil with prayer." Hear his words, "Believe in getting on your knees every morning and every night and talking to your Father in Heaven concerning the feelings of your hearts and the desires of your minds in righteousness. Believe in prayer, there is nothing like it. When all is said and done there is no power on earth like the power of prayer."

In answer to our prayers, our Father in Heaven will open doors for us, soften hearts, heal wounds, spiritual and physical, and just make things better all around. He wants us to be good and He wants us to be happy. On occasion, we will realize that we have been allowed to participate in the answer to someone else's prayer. Often I reflect on the tender message on this card I received from a sister following a women's conference. She writes: "I was touched that you cared to ask who I am and spend your valuable time to look at me. I have

found it so rare that anyone cares, but a stranger has given me hope." To look at her!

When we press forward in our sometimes stumbling ways, striving to share the love of God, I believe there are no little things, a note, a tap on the shoulder, a smile, yes, even in a look we are allowed to minister to one another.

I am inspired by the story of Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie in the book *The Hiding Place*. They were in the horrible concentration camp in Ravensbruck. The hot miserable room where they were confined was infested with fleas. Corrie saw it as a blessing because it kept the guards away and allowed her to share her scriptures with the inmates⁷. Hear her words: "Side by side, in the sanctuary of God's fleas, Betsie and I ministered the word of God to all in the room. We sat by deathbeds that became doorways to heaven. We watched women who had lost everything grow rich in hope. . . . We prayed beyond the concrete walls for the healing of Germany, of Europe, of the world—as Mamma had once done from the prison of a crippled body."⁸

In our lives there is to be opposition, trials, and tests of every kind. When we tally our daily happenings without the perspective of time and seasons, our efforts may appear of little consequence, not heroic like Corrie and her sister Betsie, hardly noteworthy at all. However, in light of the purpose and direction for our lives, in time the tally will be more accurate and often heroic.

The last Mother's Day before my mom went to her eternal rest, as I was pushing her in her wheelchair into the chapel, she whispered half to herself but loud enough for me to hear, "I never liked Mother's Day. It always reminds me of all the things I didn't do as a mother." I leaned over and hoping to put her mind at ease, whispered, "Mom, I don't think you did so badly." She smiled.

When a hailstorm killed Dad's flocks of turkeys and an early frost destroyed the crops of grain more than once, our mom still believed we could have a rich harvest and assured us children that all would be well. Dad moved an old granary next to our house and Mom opened a small grocery store, where she worked her heart out while Dad worked in the fields. They didn't count the number of bushels to the acre, sure evidence of crop failure. The measure of their harvest was to be done in a different way. Mom didn't teach my two sisters and me to sew and cook and such things as other mothers did, but by her side, in our little country store in Canada, she taught us that our customers who came from the Blood Indian Reservation, the Hutterites who came from the nearby colonies, and the immigrants from across the river were not only our customers, but were also our friends who deserved our deepest respect and generosity. We needed them and they needed us. "That's what makes good friends," my mom taught us.

From our meager resources, I watched her many times tuck into a bag of groceries a sack of cookies that I noticed she never wrote on the customer's bill. I watched as a child would thoughtfully choose candy from the penny candy counter, have it in the sack and the top twisted, and then at the last minute have a change of mind. It was never too late to help a child feel good in any situation and to be concerned for every human being. My mom's

mothering may not have fit the model, but would she not qualify as one pressing forward with steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope and a love of God and of all men? There is more than one way to model righteous mothering.

Sisters, there will be hailstorms and crop failures in our lives and in our families. Things don't always turn out the way we plan. But don't ever let what you haven't done put in question all the good you have done and are doing. A hailstorm may destroy the crops, but with faith in God, I solemnly testify it need not prevent a rich harvest.

We Must Press Forward

Finally, in the words of Nephi, "Ye must press forward . . . in Christ" (2 Nephi 31:20). We are women of covenant, we have taken upon us His name, to always remember Him and keep His commandments, that we may always have His spirit to be with us. Elder Bruce R. McConkie explains, "There is no price too high, no labor too onerous, no struggle too severe, no sacrifice too great, if out of it all we receive and enjoy the gift of the Holy Ghost."²

Our testimonies, our commitments, and our covenants may lie deep inside, but until we take a stand and get rid of all of the distractions that obscure this treasure, it cannot be recognized by ourselves or even trusted by others. It is while one stands undecided, uncommitted, and uncovenanted, with choices waiting to be made, that the vulnerability to every wind that blows becomes life-threatening. Uncertainty, the thief of time and commitment, breeds vacillation and confusion. It is in taking a stand and making a choice that we become free to press forward. We are then released from the crippling position of doubtful indecision and confusion. We then have access to power and blessings, so much so, that we can hardly keep pace with our opportunities.

Blessings are being multiplied in the lives of the Saints as more and more temples are being built. Our labors reach across the street, across the nation and beyond the veil.

President Gordon B. Hinckley's words come as a call and a prayer: "May God bless us with a sense of our place in history and having been given that sense, with our need to stand tall and walk with resolution in a manner becoming the Saints of the Most High, is my humble prayer."¹⁰ Do we hear the call, not with our ears only, but with our mind and heart?

The Lord, speaking through Joseph Smith, testifies, "Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom." The revelation continues with these stirring words, "There has been a day of calling, but the time has come for a day of choosing" (D&C 105:5, 35).

Hear the words of Eliza R. Snow in her hymn, "The Time Is Far Spent." And the last verse,

Be fixed in your purpose, for Satan will try you;

The weight of your calling he perfectly knows.

Your path may be thorny, but Jesus is nigh you;

His arm is sufficient, tho demons oppose.

His arm is sufficient, tho demons oppose.¹¹

Let us prepare ourselves that it might be said of us as Joseph F. Smith said of Eliza R. Snow, "She walked not in the borrowed light of others but faced the morning unafraid and invincible."¹² May God bless us not with borrowed light but with His light, and we shall press forward from this conference with vision, with renewed determination, with confidence and commitment.

True to the faith that our parents have cherished,

True to the truth for which martyrs have perished,

To God's command,

Soul, heart, and hand,

Faithful and true we will ever stand.¹³

We can. We will. We must. I know God lives. I testify of His promise in the words of Nephi, "Wherefore, if ye shall press forward feasting upon the words of Christ, and endure to the end, behold thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life" (2 Nephi 31:20). In the name of Jesus Christ.

1. "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), 60.
2. *Gospel Truth: Discourses and Writings of George Q. Cannon*, ed. Jerreld L. Newquist (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 19.
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 171-72.
4. *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 185.
5. Relief Society Declaration, *Ensign*, November 1999, 92.
6. Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*, trans. Katherine Woods (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), 87.
7. Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 198-99.
8. ten Boom, *Hiding Place*, 211.
9. Bruce R. McConkie, *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 253.
10. Gordon B. Hinckley, "At the Summit of the Ages," *Ensign*, November 1999, 74.
11. "The Time is Far Spent," *Hymns*, no. 266.
12. Joseph F. Smith, as quoted in Susa Young Gates Papers, Miscellaneous History File, LDS Church Archives, 21; see also Carol Lynn Pearson, *Daughters of Light* (Provo, Utah: Trilogy Arts, 1973), 10.

13. *Hymns*, no. 254.