

Holy Places

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Every April the Area Seventies from throughout the world gather in Salt Lake City, along with the General Authorities and general auxiliary presidencies, for instruction from members of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Presidency of the Seventy. The instruction focuses on the most fundamental and most pressing issues of the Church—things like temple work, strengthening members, the Atonement, and hastening the work of salvation. It is a privilege to sit at the feet of these inspired leaders and to learn what is on their minds and in their hearts.

Two years ago, in April 2013, President Thomas S. Monson addressed the group and spent all of his time talking about just one topic: you—the youth of the Church. Think about that. Of all the important things that President Monson could have addressed—missionary work, temples, or Church leadership—he said that it was the youth of the Church that had been on his mind the most. He noted that as youth today, you are living in a time of infinite promise, a time when you will face unique challenges. He observed that you are truly a royal generation, reserved to come forth in this special time for particular purposes.

President Monson’s remarks reminded me of two comments made by Elder Neal A. Maxwell. Speaking to youth at a BYU fireside a number of years ago, Elder Maxwell said:

The highest compliment I can pay to you is that God has placed you here and now at this time to serve in his kingdom; so much is about to happen in which you will be involved and concerning which you will have some great influence.¹

In another setting Elder Maxwell provided some additional context for that statement. Referring to the early days of this dispensation, he stated:

The Church has done many difficult things, and from these achievements one would not wish to detract. But all the easy things the Church has had to do have been done. From now on it is high adventure!²

Now, Elder Maxwell did not say that everything the early Saints did was easy. Clearly that was not the case. Those early stalwart

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Church members faced challenges that were daunting—challenges that would test the souls of the most valiant of us. However, Elder Maxwell did say that all the “easy things” that needed to be done have been done. “From now on, it *is* high adventure!” You have been reserved to come to earth at this time of high adventure because God knows you are capable of meeting the challenges which that adventure will bring.

Today I would like to discuss with you a few ideas about what you might do to prepare yourselves to successfully encounter the high adventure that lies ahead of you, both individually and as members of God’s kingdom here on earth.

My advice begins with a scriptural admonition, one that some of you will recognize as the Young Men and Young Women theme from two years ago: “Stand in holy places.”³ If you are to succeed in your role in the high adventure that is in your future, you must be grounded in the strength that comes from worthily being in holy places, where you can feel and be strengthened by the Spirit. As the Church handbook makes clear, those “holy places include temples . . . and chapels.”⁴ Regular church and temple attendance will bring great power in your lives—power you will need to face both the everyday and the extraordinary challenges you will encounter.

But in today’s world, more will be expected of you than to just stand in holy places. My plea is not just that you stand in holy places but that you make holy the places in which you stand.

As Sister Sharon G. Larsen, a former member of the Young Women general presidency, once explained:

Holy places can be wherever you are—alone, in a crowd, with strangers, with friends. The road to Jericho was treacherous and formidable. Thieves infiltrated the bushes and trees waiting to ambush any traveler. It took a kind and courageous

*Samaritan to change that road from a haunted place to a holy place.*⁵

As followers of Christ, we are capable of doing more than standing in holy places. We can make any place holy—not just our temples and chapels but also our homes, our work-places, and our locker rooms. We have the ability, like the good Samaritan, to change the areas in which we stand from haunted places to holy places.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland illustrated how this can happen when he spoke of the experience of Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail. If there were any place likely to be considered unholy or haunted, it would be that small jail, located near the western frontier of America, in the winter of 1838–39. As described by Elder Holland:

*The jail . . . was considered escape proof, and it probably was. It had two stories. The . . . main floor was accessible to the outside world only by a single small, heavy door. In the middle of that floor was a trapdoor through which prisoners were then lowered into the lower floor or dungeon. The outside walls . . . were . . . two feet thick, with inside walls of 12-inch . . . logs. These two walls were separated by a 12-inch space filled with loose rock. Combined, these walls made a . . . virtually impenetrable barrier four feet thick.*⁶

Joseph and his companions spent more than four months in that setting.

Elder Holland continued:

The food given to the prisoners was coarse and sometimes contaminated, so filthy that one of them said they “could not eat it until [they] were driven to it by hunger.” On as many as four occasions they had poison administered to them in their food, making them so violently ill that for days they alternated between vomiting and a kind of delirium, not really caring whether they lived or died. In the Prophet Joseph’s letters, he spoke of the jail being

*a "hell, surrounded with demons . . . where we are compelled to hear nothing but blasphemous oaths, and witness a scene of blasphemy, and drunkenness and hypocrisy, and debaucheries of every description."*⁷

Elder Holland included further descriptions from Joseph Smith's letters:

"We have . . . not blankets sufficient to keep us warm; and when we have a fire, we are obliged to have almost a constant smoke."⁸

"Our souls have been bowed down"⁹ and "my nerve trembles from long confinement."¹⁰

"Pen, or tongue, or angels [could not describe] the malice of hell that I have suffered."¹¹

That is not the kind of place that you or I would describe as holy. And yet it was in that setting that the Prophet received and recorded some of the most sublime revelations of this dispensation, including sections 121, 122, and 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was so profound in that jail that B. H. Roberts, as Elder Holland noted, rightly referred to it as a "prison-temple."¹²

Surely if such a place can become holy, then the places in which we find ourselves can similarly be altered. Once again, as Sister Larsen stated, "Holy places can be wherever you are—alone, in a crowd, with strangers, with friends." Or, as Elder Holland put it:

We love and cherish our dedicated temples and the essential, exalting ordinances that are performed there. . . . They are truly the holiest, most sacred structures in the kingdom of God, to which we all ought to go as worthily and as often as possible.

*But . . . when you have to, you can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord in **any** situation you are in. Indeed, let me say that even a little stronger: You can have sacred, revelatory, profoundly instructive experience with the Lord **in the most miserable experiences of your life**—in the worst settings.¹³*

Haunted places truly can become holy places.

So what do we need to do to have the power to make such a change in the places in which we stand? The first thing is to recognize that we cannot do this alone. No matter how good we are, no matter how talented we are, no matter how influential we are, we do not have the ability to make such changes on our own. The sole source of such transformational power is God. If we are to make haunted places into holy places, we need to tap into His power.

How do we do that? Let me suggest a simple two-step process: We must first align ourselves with Him, and then we need to bind ourselves to Him. It is that simple. If we align ourselves with God and then bind ourselves to Him, we will be endowed with power to transform prisons into temples, humble dwellings into celestial abodes, and places of despair into havens of hope.

So how do we align ourselves with God? He has indicated that the best way to do that is to believe in and align ourselves with His Only Begotten Son.¹⁴ We align ourselves with God by becoming true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ—by patterning our lives after His example. When we do that, we are changed in significant ways. As explained in the Church handbook:

As we become true followers of Jesus Christ, we experience a mighty change of heart and "have no more disposition to do evil." . . . As we live the gospel of Jesus Christ, we grow line upon line, becoming more like the Savior in loving and serving others.¹⁵

Let me suggest two simple practices that can help us come into more complete alignment with the Savior: daily scripture study and daily prayer.

I know that these are not new suggestions. You have all heard them before, but I worry that in this regard we can—to use Alma's words to his son Helaman—become "slothful because of the easiness of the way."¹⁶

When I was called as a bishop of a young single adult ward many years ago, our stake president was a wise, loving, and very seasoned priesthood leader. He had been a bishop, a stake president, and a mission president. He had seen it all. At one of our early training meetings he urged us to encourage our ward members to engage in daily scripture study and daily prayers. He said, “I have yet to find anyone who is studying the scriptures and praying on a daily basis who has an ongoing serious problem with the Church and its commandments.”

I must confess that the first thought that came to my mind—sparked perhaps by the skepticism that legal training seems to inculcate in people—was, “Surely that can’t be true. It is way too simple.”

But I can assure you now, more than twenty-five years later, after having served as a bishop twice, as a stake president, and now as an Area Seventy, I have yet to find anyone who is studying the scriptures and praying on a daily basis who has an ongoing serious problem with the Church and its commandments. It really is that simple. The daily practice of serious study of the scriptures and sincere prayer keeps the Savior enough in our minds and the Spirit enough in our lives that we will either make the necessary corrections to stay in overall alignment with the Savior or we will stop studying and reading the scriptures and praying because it is too uncomfortable.

This does not mean you won’t have challenges or questions. You will. But daily scripture study and daily prayer will keep you on the path—will keep you aligned with the Savior and our Father in Heaven—to such a degree that you will find, over time, you are a better person, one more able to not only stand in holy places but also make holy the places in which you stand.

But alignment with God in the abstract sense is not, by itself, sufficient to generate the power to transform our lives and the places

we inhabit. We must not only align ourselves with God—we must also bind ourselves to Him. We need to draw upon God’s power not only to meet the challenges we face but also to be transformed by them. And we do that by binding ourselves to Him. As Elder Holland explained, “Every experience can become a *redemptive* experience if we remain bonded to our Father in Heaven through that difficulty.”¹⁷

And how do we bind ourselves to God? Through covenants. As Sister Linda K. Burton once noted, “Making and keeping covenants means choosing to bind ourselves to our Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ.”¹⁸

Covenants are “sacred and enduring promise[s] between God and His children.”¹⁹ In the words of Elder D. Todd Christofferson, “In these divine agreements, God binds Himself to sustain, sanctify, and exalt us in return for our commitment to serve Him and keep His commandments.”²⁰

I think we sometimes underestimate the centrality of covenants in the gospel plan. It was only a few years ago I consciously recognized that the title of our scriptural collection of modern revelation focuses on covenants. We call those scriptures the Doctrine and Covenants. Maybe it would be more clear if we referred to it as the Doctrine and *the* Covenants, because those two things constitute the focus of revelation in this dispensation: the doctrine, meaning the principles of truth we need to understand, and the covenants, which lead us to employ and effectuate those truths in our lives.

Covenants are so powerful because it is through covenants that God’s general promises are made operative in our individual lives. Elder Christofferson explained it this way:

Our covenants supply strength—they produce the faith necessary to persevere and to do all things that are expedient in the Lord. . . . In the first place, the promised fruits of obedience become evident, which confirms our faith. Secondly, the Spirit

*communicates God's pleasure, and we feel secure in His continued blessing and help. Thirdly, come what may, we can face life with hope and equanimity, knowing that we will succeed in the end because we have God's promise to us individually, by name, and we know He cannot lie.*²¹

My advice to you in this regard is the same as that given by the Lord to Emma Smith in section 25 of the Doctrine and Covenants: "Cleave unto the covenants which thou hast made."²² *Cleave* does not mean to casually and lightly grasp. It means "to cling or hold fast to; to attach oneself."²³ The word *cleave* derives from the Old Norse word *klifa*, which means "to . . . climb by clinging."²⁴ That is a pretty good visual image of how we can increase our potential for good. We climb upward by clinging, by hanging on with all our might to the covenants we have made with God, secure in His promise that He will keep His end of the agreement if we keep ours.

If we do align and bind ourselves with God, it will make a profound difference both to the quality of our lives and to the lives of others in ways we may not fully recognize. Let me illustrate by reference to the image of a lighthouse.

All of us are familiar with lighthouses. They send out a beacon of light that can hopefully be seen in the worst weather. They mark the line where the sea ends and the land begins—a very important marker for those who are piloting boats in bad weather. Lighthouses are fixed and immovable. They are constant, and sailors can therefore rely on them.

But lighthouses also have another role to play for those who are piloting boats in bad weather. In addition to marking the place where the sea ends and the land begins, lighthouses can, with the help of other lights, guide sailors through treacherous waters where there are reefs and other unseen barriers that might sink the ship. In such situations there is often only one safe passage to the harbor, and the only way the pilot knows the ship is

in that passage is by maneuvering the ship so that the light at the top of the lighthouse aligns with the carefully placed light on the shore. Once the ship is in that position, it can proceed safely, as long as those lights—the one in the lighthouse and the one on the shore—are in alignment with each other. If they are out of alignment, the ship is off course, and there is considerable risk of a tragic shipwreck.

In the October 2012 general conference, President Boyd K. Packer related an incident that explains this very well. On one occasion he was assigned to a stake conference in Western Samoa. As part of the conference the group had to travel from Savai'i to Mulifanua on Upolu Island. They had originally planned to go by plane, but weather conditions prevented that, so they set out on a forty-foot boat. What they did not know is that they were headed into the center of a ferocious tropical storm. After many hours they crossed the rough seas and arrived at the harbor at Mulifanua. President Packer explained what happened next:

We arrived in the harbor at Mulifanua. There was one narrow passage we were to go through along the reef. A light on the hill above the beach and a second lower light marked the narrow passage. When a boat was maneuvered so that the two lights were one above the other, the boat would be lined up properly to pass through the dangerous rocks that lined the passage.

But that night there was only one light. Two elders were waiting on the landing to meet us, but the crossing took much longer than usual. After watching for hours for signs of our boat, the elders tired and fell asleep, neglecting to turn on the second light, the lower light. As a result, the passage through the reef was not clear.

The captain maneuvered the boat as best he could toward the one upper light on shore while a crewman held [a] flashlight over the bow, searching for rocks ahead. We could hear the breakers crashing over the reef. When we were close enough to

see them with the flashlight, the captain frantically shouted reverse and backed away to try again to locate the passage.

After many attempts, he knew it would be impossible to find the passage [without the second light]. All we could do was try to reach the harbor at Apia 40 miles (64 km) away. We were helpless against the ferocious power of the elements.²⁵

The group eventually made their way to safety, but it was a harrowing experience. President Packer observed, “I do not know who had been waiting for us at the beach at Mulifanua. . . . But it is true that without that lower light, we all might have been lost.”²⁶

Let me share a similar story:

More than a hundred years ago, a well-known Protestant preacher, Dwight L. Moody, shared a story of a ship trying to enter the Cleveland harbor on a very stormy night.

The ship’s captain could see the bright light of the Cleveland harbor lighthouse. However, the lower lights weren’t visible at all. The lower lights were the way that ships identified the centerline of the safe entry to a harbor.

Because the lower lights were not burning that night, the ship missed the entrance to the harbor and crashed into rocks. Many lives were lost.

At the end of his sermon, Moody said, “Brethren, the Master will take care of the great lighthouse; let us keep the lower lights burning.”²⁷

One of the members of Moody’s congregation that day was a man named Philip Paul Bliss, a musician. Bliss was so inspired by the lesson in Moody’s sermon that he wrote a hymn, which in our hymnbook is entitled “Brightly Beams Our Father’s Mercy.” Many of you will be familiar with the hymn. All of you should be. With the image of the lighthouse and these experiences in mind, listen to the first verse of that hymn:

*Brightly beams our Father’s mercy
From his lighthouse evermore,
But to us he gives the keeping
Of the lights along the shore.*

*Let the lower lights be burning;
Send a gleam across the wave.
Some poor fainting, struggling seaman
You may rescue, you may save.²⁸*

The lighthouse of God’s love for His children is ever present and never moving. Some people will see it and will be drawn to it, but they may not know how to get to it. They will be looking for someone—some lower light—to show them the safe passage to that light. Their feelings may be like those found in a letter President Monson received from a less-active member of the Church: “I know where the Church is, but sometimes I think I need someone else to show me the way, encourage me, take away my fear, and bear testimony to me.”²⁹

There may be many around you in the places in which you stand who are in the same position. They want to do what is right, they want to have greater peace in their lives, and they want to come closer to God, but they are unsure of how to do it. Your example may provide the lower lights they need to see the safe passage. More may depend on your scripture study, prayer, and covenant keeping than just your well-being. Others may be affected by your doing these things as well.

Let me close with an example of how one whose light was burning bright affected others and turned what was a haunted place, at least for one person, into a holy place. It comes from an article written by Rick Reilly, who in my opinion is one of the best sportswriters of our time. It was written in the fall of 2012. Because he writes so well, I will quote extensively from his version of the story:

In the scrub-brush desert town of Queen Creek, Ariz., high school bullies were throwing trash at sophomore Chy Johnson. Calling her “stupid.” Pushing her in the halls. [Making it, I would say, a haunted place.]

Chy’s brain works at only a third-grade level because of a genetic birth defect, but she knew enough to feel hate.

“She’d come home every night at the start of the school year crying and upset,” says her mom, Liz Johnson. “That permanent smile she had, that gleam in her eye, that was all gone.”

Her mom says she tried to talk to teachers and administrators and got nowhere. So she tried a whole new path—the starting quarterback of the undefeated football team. After all, senior Carson Jones had once escorted Chy to the Special Olympics.

“Just keep your ear to the ground,” Liz wrote to Carson on his Facebook page. “Maybe get me some names?”

But Carson Jones did something better than that. Instead of ratting other kids out, he decided to take one in—Chy.

He started asking her to eat at the cool kids’ lunch table with him and his teammates. “I just thought that if they saw her with us every day, maybe they’d start treating her better,” Carson says. . . .

It got better. Starting running back Tucker Workman made sure somebody was walking between classes with Chy. In classes, cornerback Colton Moore made sure she sat in the row right behind the team.

Just step back a second. In some schools, it’s the football players doing the bullying. At Queen Creek, they’re stopping it. And not with fists—with straight-up love for a kid most teenage football players wouldn’t even notice, much less hang out with. . . .

It’s working.

“I was parking my car yesterday, and I saw a couple of the guys talking to her and being nice,” says offensive lineman Bryce Oakes. “I think it’s making a difference around here.”

And the best thing is? The football players didn’t tell anybody.

“I didn’t know about any of this until three weeks ago,” says Carson’s mom, Rondalee, who’s raising four boys and a daughter by herself. “He finally showed me an article they wrote here locally. I said, ‘Are you kidding me? Why didn’t you tell me this?’”

All of a sudden, Chy started coming home as her bubbly self again. When her mom asked why she was so happy, she said, “I’m eating lunch with my boys!” . . .

I get emailed stories like this a lot, but most of the time they don’t pan out. They turn out to be half true, or true for the first week but not the second. But when I walked into the Queen Creek High School cafeteria Tuesday, unannounced, there was 4-foot-high Chy with 11 senior football players, eating her lunch around the most packed lunch table you’ve ever seen, grinning like it was Christmas morning. . . .

“I thank Carson every chance I see him,” says Chy’s mom. “He’s an amazing young man. He’s going to go far in life.”

Nobody knows how far Chy Johnson will go in life. The life expectancy of those afflicted with her disease, microcephaly, is only 25–30 years. But her sophomore year, so far, has been unforgettable. [I might say it has been turned from a haunted place into a holy place.] . . .

But what about next year, when Carson probably will be on his Mormon mission and all of Chy’s boys will have graduated?

Not to worry. Carson has a little brother on the team, Curtis, who’s in Chy’s class.

“Mom,” he announced at the dinner table the other night, “I got this.”

Lucky girl.³⁰

One person setting an example for others—who probably wanted to help but didn’t know how—and, all of a sudden, a haunted place became a holy place. If you make and keep sacred covenants, if you prepare yourself daily for spiritual experiences through scripture study and prayer, if you align and bind

yourselves with God, a light will emanate from you. Others will be drawn to that light, which is just a reflection of God’s light, and they will be drawn to Him. As that happens, you will not only be able to stand in holy places but you will also make the places in which you stand holy for you and for others.

I bear you my witness that God lives. He has a perfect plan for each one of us. He places us where we can help others. That plan includes the birth, Atonement, death, and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, who leads this work today. I bear you my witness of these elements of the plan and of the truths that have been restored through Joseph Smith, and I do so in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, “But for a Small Moment,” BYU fireside address, 1 September 1974.

2. Neal A. Maxwell, *Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977), 84; see also Maxwell, “The Old Testament: Relevancy Within Antiquity,” CES Symposium on the Old Testament address, BYU, 16 August 1979, scottwoodward.org/Talks/html/Maxwell,%20Neal%20A/MaxwellNA_TheOldTestament-RelevancyWithinAntiquity.html.

3. D&C 45:32; 101:22; see also D&C 87:8.

4. “Strengthening the Home,” *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010), 1.4.1 (p. 4).

5. Sharon G. Larsen, “Standing in Holy Places,” *Ensign*, May 2002.

6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail,” BYU fireside address, 7 September 2008.

7. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail”; quoting Alexander McRae in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century One*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 1:521; quoting letter

from Joseph Smith to the Church, 25 March 1839, *HC* 3:290.

8. Joseph Smith, letter to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839, in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed., comp. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 456; quoted in Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

9. Joseph Smith, letter to the Church in Caldwell County, 16 December 1838, in “Communications,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 6 (April 1840): 85; quoted in Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

10. Joseph Smith, letter to Emma Smith, 21 March 1839, in *Personal Writings*, 449; quoted in Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

11. Joseph Smith, letter to Emma Smith, 4 April 1839, in *Personal Writings*, 463, 464; spelling and capitalization standardized; quoted in Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

12. See B. H. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, chapter 38 heading, 1:521; see also 526; quoted in Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail.”

13. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail”; emphasis in original.

14. See, e.g., 2 Nephi 31:11–12; 3 Nephi 11:32.

15. “The Gospel of Jesus Christ,” *Handbook 2*, 1.2.1 (p. 3); Mosiah 5:2; see also Alma 5:12–15; Moroni 10:32–33.

16. Alma 37:46.

17. Holland, “Lessons from Liberty Jail”; emphasis in original.

18. Linda K. Burton, “The Power, Joy, and Love of Covenant Keeping,” *Ensign*, November 2013.

19. “Covenants,” *Handbook 2*, 2.1.3 (p. 9).

20. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Power of Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 2009.

21. Christofferson, “Power of Covenants.”

22. D&C 25:13.

23. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “cleave” (definition 3), oed.com/view/Entry/34106?rskey=OoB3Ck&result=4&isAdvanced=false#eid.

24. *OED Online*, s.v. “cleave,” etymology (1).

25. Boyd K. Packer, "The Atonement," *Ensign*, November 2012.

26. Packer, "The Atonement."

27. Nicole Sheahan, "Inside Mormon Music: The Lower Lights—'A Hymn Revival,'" *Deseret News*, 29 October 2010, deseretnews.com/article/705386498/Inside-Mormon-Music-The-Lower-Lights-2-A-Hymn-Revival.html?pg=all; see also Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2002), 93.

28. "Brightly Beams Our Father's Mercy," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 335; emphasis added.

29. Thomas S. Monson, "First Presidency Message: Our Responsibility to Rescue," *Ensign*, October 2013.

30. Rick Reilly, "Special Team," Commentary, ESPN.com, 1 November 2012, espn.go.com/espn/story/_/id/8579599/chy-johnson-boys.