

The Transformative Power of Covenants

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Nephi wrote in the first verse of the Book of Mormon, “I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents.”¹ This passage tells me something quite endearing about Nephi: he recognized that his parents contributed to who he was. I wonder if Nephi was teaching us that we are each deeply influenced by our relationships. While I am not Nephi, I do want to acknowledge that me being here today is a result of goodly, loving parents and a supportive clan that means the world to me.

Wyoming is my ancestral home. I grew up and graduated from high school in Cody. My parents and grandparents grew up in Star Valley. When I meet someone from Wyoming, I immediately think of them as a kindred spirit or a long-lost friend.

I often find myself trying to convince my students studying to be school psychologists to go work in Wyoming. School psychologists work one-on-one with struggling students, consult with teachers and parents frequently, and implement a variety of academic and behavioral supports for students. Because of the way that education is funded in Wyoming, school psychologists in Wyoming school districts tend to have smaller caseloads and generous resources to meet the needs of the children they serve.

The quality of life in Wyoming includes clean air, amazing mountains, great skiing, and no traffic—except when the Fourth of July parade takes over Main Street and tourists have to wait until the parade ends. Wyoming has wide open spaces, no state income tax, a beautiful temple located in the corner of Star Valley, and sincere, salt-of-the-earth people.

When we travel to Wyoming and cross the state line, my soul seems a bit more at ease and whispers, “You are home. These are your people. All is right with the world.”

Just as I feel at home and connected to Wyoming and its people, gospel covenants connect us to each other and especially to the Savior. President Russell M. Nelson shared this idea about covenants in his October 2011 general conference address. He said:

*When we realize that we are children of the covenant, we know who we are and what God expects of us. His law is written in our hearts. He is our God and we are His people.*²

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Covenants Bind Us to Christ

Being on the covenant path can give us a sense of belonging and connectedness, especially a connection to the Savior. Covenants bind us to Christ, and, because we are bound to Him, we can become like Him.

Being bound to Christ means that we know Him. We feel His comforting love. We feel His guiding hand in our lives. Because we feel His amazingly generous and compassionate love, we have a desire to love as He does.

When I really feel that godly love, I find that I am more inclined to focus on building up those around me. As I feel that love, being less judgmental seems a bit easier, and being generous rather than stingy seems like the right thing to do.

This idea of being bound to Christ is explained by Adam S. Miller in his book *Grace Is Not God's Backup Plan*. Miller wrote, "Only a willingness to trust God's promise can make you Abraham's seed."³ Miller emphasized that trusting God is a vital part of covenant keeping.

How can we trust God if we don't know Him? We certainly can know God in an academic way, but that feels rather one-dimensional and not very compelling. The Savior wants something much more fulfilling for us. He wants us to share our hearts with Him—our whole hearts, even the unbelieving, unknowing, selfish, worried, or whining parts of our hearts.

When I really understand God's love, I understand that He will accept my whining, doubting heart. He will help me to become increasingly more understanding of His ways. He will help me to become more compassionate and charitable over time. We change as we are building a steadfast covenant relationship with the Savior.

Psychological research is replete with evidence that, during therapy, one of the key factors that creates change in a client is the positive, warm, trusting relationship between the therapist and the client. This trust is not a "one-and-done" event. Many therapists maintain that for change and healing to occur in counseling, trust needs to deepen over time. As this trust deepens, the tender, scary, and painful pieces of what brings us to counseling can gently be uncovered and

explored. This allows for healing to begin and for long-lasting change to happen.

This safe, trusting relationship that facilitates meaningful growth in counseling is exactly what Christ offers us in a covenant relationship. He promises that He will take the tender, scary, and painful parts of our stories and help us make sense of what is happening. Similar to the work of an effective psychologist, the Lord promises that He will help us find new ways to move through what is difficult. And because Christ is the expert counselor, He is always understanding, accepting, and willing to listen to our stories again and again.

Covenants Transform Us

Sister Bonnie D. Parkin, former Relief Society general president, said, "Covenants—or binding promises between us and Heavenly Father—are essential for our eternal progression. Step-by-step, He tutors us to become like Him by enlisting us in His work."⁴

Sister Parkin emphasized how covenants transform us. Christ gently tutors us to love as He does. During Christ's earthly ministry, He repeatedly reached out to those who were suffering, those who were different, and those who were on the margins. Our covenant-keeping task seems to be the same: to love as Christ loved. And for me, that starts with suspending judgment.

As a missionary in Louisiana, I learned a very valuable lesson about loving in a godly way. I am grateful to have served with companions, members, a mission president, and those who were learning about the gospel. They taught me lessons that enriched my life far beyond the time that I spent as a full-time missionary.

As most of us have, I had a missionary companion who I thought was difficult. Her ideas about keeping our apartment clean were quite different from mine. She preferred not to run the air conditioner during the summer months because our house was poorly insulated, and she thought that the air conditioning would quickly go through the walls. However, running the air conditioner in Louisiana in the summer seemed reasonable to me. This companion was easygoing, but I was

a stickler for following the rules. Her view of the mission rules was much more flexible than mine. I struggled to see her strengths, and I was often critical of her in my mind, which I am sure leaked into my actions. The members loved her, and she easily connected with those who were learning about the gospel. In contrast, I was worried about keeping the rules.

While serving with that companion, I was irritated that my experiences were not what I was expecting from what was often portrayed as “the best two years [or eighteen months] of your life.” During my scheduled interview with my mission president, I shared my frustration about my companion and my lack of understanding about how to fix the problem. His incredibly wise response was that I should try to see my companion as God saw her. As I slowly implemented his admonition, her idea of cleanliness did not seem to bother me as much. I began to appreciate her easygoing nature, and I came to consider her flexibility with some mission rules as a person-focused strength.

Reflecting on this experience now helps me to see that God cares about how well we love. Rules are important and they have their place, but certainly there are times when we need to consider if we are prioritizing rules over people.

Covenants Guide Our Actions

In the book *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women*, there is a record of Matilda Dudley Busby, who helped organize the Salt Lake City Thirteenth Ward Relief Society in 1854. Matilda suggested a “covenant” for Relief Society members that was similar to the covenant suggested by Emma Smith in the Nauvoo Relief Society. The covenant asked sisters to be unified and to not speak ill of each other or of Church leaders. This covenant was a way for the sisters to build relationships of trust with each other. This Relief Society covenant was asking the sisters to be sure that they had each other’s backs.⁵ We can have each other’s backs and still experience conflict, but this type of covenant asks us to address conflict in respectful ways.

This kind of covenant seems both difficult and doable. Rather than judge, I can recognize that I

do not know the hidden trauma, hurts, or fears of others. Instead, I can offer gentle curiosity and understanding. I can recognize that I may not understand where their journey has taken them or the contingencies that are playing out in their lives, but I will have their back.

For example, as a school psychologist I often worked with youth who had behavioral challenges—those children who had temper tantrums and meltdowns in school. One guiding principle that I tried to remember while working with these children was that their explosive or maladaptive behavior made sense to them. When behavioral outbursts happened, the child probably did not see any other option. My goal was to try to teach them ways to regulate their emotions and then to find healthy ways to solve problems. When I listened and tried to understand how the behavior made sense to the child, I found that I was more likely to help them learn and practice new, effective behaviors. And then we celebrated their progress.

Covenants Allow Us to Build Relationships

Practicing acceptance and suspending judgment is part of being on the covenant path because they are necessary in building loving relationships.

In the book of Mosiah, we learn again that covenants, specifically our baptismal covenants, teach us how to care for each other. In Mosiah 18:8–9 we read:

Ye are desirous to come into the fold of God, and to be called his people, and are willing to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light;

Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God, and be numbered with those of the first resurrection, that ye may have eternal life.

Until my mother passed away about three years ago, I did not realize what it meant “to mourn with those that mourn.” When my mother passed,

our family felt an outpouring of love from neighbors, family, and friends. I am not sure that those who mourned with us understood how their kindness comforted us so deeply.

My mother passed away on a Monday evening. On the afternoon of that day, after having spent the weekend in the very small hospital in Afton, Wyoming, my mother had been thrilled to be discharged and return home. My husband, Frank, and I had spent the weekend helping my father and visiting my mother and had left for Utah that afternoon after getting my mother settled at home.

That evening the Relief Society president was visiting my parents when my mother apparently suffered another stroke. The Relief Society president stayed with my father until the ambulance arrived. She contacted the bishop, who then met my father at the hospital. My mother could not be revived in the emergency room and passed away there. My parents' bishop stayed at the hospital with my father for at least three hours until Frank and I could return to Star Valley. The bishop had stayed with my father so that my father would not have to go home to an empty house by himself at midnight. Then, in the following days, the bishop helped us to plan the funeral. The Relief Society planned a lovely lunch for our family after the funeral, and they cheerfully served us the traditional meal with ham and funeral potatoes.

There were other ways that people mourned with us. A day or two after my mother's passing, someone brought a generous tray of deli meats, cheeses, and spreads that we picked at daily. Someone else brought the really thick, tasty kind of bacon and farm-fresh eggs. Friends and family came from long distances for the funeral, even when it was not convenient or easy. Others sent lovely flowers and plants, and, thanks to Frank's green thumb, they are still alive and remind me of the generosity of dear friends. In my conversations with these sweet people, their acts of service did not seem to be any great sacrifice to them. Their generous and gracious acts helped us to feel the Savior's love. We had a sense that we were not alone at a time of deep sadness. Their efforts to keep their covenants and to comfort us in Christlike ways still mean so much to me.

Maybe the essence of being a covenant-keeping Saint is nothing big or grandiose. Rather, it is the small simple act of showing up with love and empathy. Baptismal covenants, as taught in the Book of Mormon, are essentially asking us to show up for each other, to be aware of each other's needs, and to take care of each other as we can.

Covenants Improve Relationships

Just as our baptismal covenants guide us in building relationships, temple covenants also focus on relationships. James E. Talmage taught:

*The ordinances of the endowment embody certain obligations on the part of the individual, such as covenant and promise to observe the law of strict virtue and chastity, to be charitable, benevolent, tolerant and pure; to devote both talent and material means to the spread of truth.*⁶

James Talmage taught that covenants ask us “to maintain devotion to the cause of truth . . . and to seek in every way to contribute to the great preparation that the earth may be made ready to receive her King, the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷

Temple covenants ask us to build the kingdom of God, which is sharing the joy and peace of the Savior's love. From this perspective, we can't be charitable, benevolent, tolerant, and pure in a vacuum; relationships are where we practice being benevolent, tolerant, and pure.

There are no qualifiers on the charge to whom we need to devote both talent and material means. Our covenant means that we should treat a homeless person with dignity and that we could let someone go ahead of us in traffic.

The parable of the good Samaritan teaches us that we can be charitable and benevolent to those who are different and unknown.⁸ It also teaches us to have healthy boundaries. The good Samaritan did what he could to take care of the beaten traveler for two days, and then he trusted that others could continue caring for the traveler. We can be benevolent and have healthy boundaries.

Making and keeping temple and baptismal covenants is something to be practiced, and

practicing means that we are expected to make mistakes. We do not practice something we know perfectly. I recently listened to a podcast in which the speaker noted that her GPS does not reprimand her or yell at her when she makes a wrong turn. Rather, the GPS voice just simply states, “Recalculating route,” even after the driver has made several wrong turns. Similarly, when we make a wrong turn on the covenant path, Christ just helps us to recalculate so that we can arrive at our destination.

Some may approach covenant keeping with a sense of urgency and fear, but I suggest that this may not always serve us well. What if we could embrace our efforts to keep covenants as an actual journey, one that allowed a sense of enjoyment with time and energy devoted to stopping and smelling the roses? It seems probable that a sense of urgency and fear may distract us and possibly blind us from effectively building steadfast covenant relationships. That sense of urgency and fear may make it difficult to see and meet the needs of those who we can care for and those who we need to uplift and comfort.

Covenants Are Personal

Sister Rosemary M. Wixom, a former Primary general president, taught about covenants in a BYU devotional. She said:

A covenant is personal. It is so personal that it is given to us individually, and often our very own name is said in conjunction with the ordinance that accompanies the covenant. By living our covenants with the Lord’s help, He sculpts us into a masterpiece.⁹

Sister Wixom teaches us two key ideas: (1) covenants are individual and (2) covenants transform us to become more like Christ.

Reflecting Our Individual Relationship with the Savior

The outward appearance of covenant making and covenant renewing looks the same for each of us. If we were observing each other taking the sacrament, it would look basically the same. Similarly, making temple covenants looks the

same for each of us. But because our covenants are relational and reflect our individual relationship with the Savior, how I walk the covenant path is distinct to me, and how you walk the covenant path is distinct to you.

I love that we learn in the temple that living things are created to fulfill the measure of their creation. God created me to fulfill the measure of my creation—not the measure of your creation or anyone else’s creation.

I am deeply grateful for the personal revelation I have received that has guided me in my career and in my efforts to be a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, colleague, teacher, professor, and psychologist.

My covenant path led me to pursue education and a career in which I have tried to serve Heavenly Father’s children. I earned my graduate degree in school psychology from BYU just a few months after the birth of our daughter, Erin. A few weeks after graduation, we moved to Kansas, where Frank worked to fulfill his career goals. Five years later, Frank was transferred to Missouri. While in Kansas and Missouri, I worked in a series of full-time and part-time positions as a school psychologist.

After working for about ten years, Frank and I carefully prayed and decided that I would apply to doctoral programs in school psychology; we would figure out our next steps after I had offers from graduate programs.

After being accepted into the doctoral program in school psychology at the University of South Florida, we sold most of our belongings and headed to Tampa with our three children. As I worked to complete school, the Lord kept His covenant to comfort those who need comforting. The sisters in our Tampa ward helped to care for our children. A sister let me use her laser printer to print the final copy of my dissertation. Others fed and entertained us. They all kept their covenants to care for others. Frank was blessed to find meaningful work that later opened important doors for him at Utah Valley University. I learned that God cares deeply about thesis and dissertation data. As part of my covenant path, that experience taught me again that God would not fail us.

He would open doors for us. And He definitely comforted me when the task seemed so difficult and never-ending.

Your covenant path should look different and will look different from mine. Even though our covenant paths are different, there is much that is the same. The Savior is very aware of our needs as we stumble and walk along our different covenant paths. He really is okay with whatever progress we are making. He is there to hold our hands and our hearts when it gets scary and dicey and we have no clue about what to do next.

Transforming Us to Become More Like Christ

The second idea that Sister Wixom teaches us is that keeping covenants is transformative. It is easy to think of covenants as a transaction: if I keep this commandment, then I get this blessing. However, I suspect there is much more to covenant keeping than creating a balance sheet of what laws I have kept and what blessings God owes me. Maybe the blessings that we receive for being obedient are understanding and knowing God more fully and feeling His love more deeply. Maybe the transformation is learning to come to a place of abundance and grace in all of our relationships.

If covenants are transformative, then maybe my baptismal covenants could mean something different to me today than they meant to me when I was eight years old. The covenants that I made in the temple could mean something more than when I was preparing for a mission and getting married.

I was baptized and confirmed a member of the Church as an eight-year-old child, and I have to admit that, even though I was well prepared by my parents, I understood the covenants in concrete ways: I had to be obedient to have the Holy Ghost with me. I had to remember Jesus, keep the Word of Wisdom, continue going to church, and say my prayers. I can't remember the sacrament being all that meaningful as a child.

Shortly after our daughter was born, I was holding her during the sacrament and trying to think sacrament kinds of thoughts. I realized that the Atonement was not just for me; Christ's love

extended to my beautiful daughter, and she too would be blessed eternally by His love. I realized that my maternal instinct to love and protect this child was not just about me and this child; Christ loved her even more than I ever could. I deeply felt His love for her.

Similarly, when I went to the temple for the first time before my mission, the covenants were meaningful, but I was only twenty-one, and my life experience was quite limited. Now, as a middle-aged woman, I have wept with gratitude at the veil and been struck by how the temple gives me an eternal perspective when the daily troubles of the world seem so complicated.

The Covenant Path

A dear friend shared with me that when we take the sacrament, we truly are making and renewing our baptismal covenants, because we are new and different people each week when we take the bread and water.

Maybe when we take the sacrament each week or attend the temple, we could ask ourselves these questions: How have my efforts to keep my covenants transformed me? How have they helped me to know and love God in new and different ways? How have my covenants helped me to love others abundantly?

How we walk the covenant path—by comforting others, strengthening others, and building relationships—is not a path that is easily evaluated using a checklist. Evaluating my progress on this path is a qualitative, open-ended, descriptive consideration of how well I am loving others and how I am building a trusting, joyful relationship with God.

In 2 Peter 3:9 we read:

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

No matter where we are on the covenant path, regardless of our pace or progress, God loves us, and He is not willing for any of us to perish.

As we journey on the covenant path, the Lord's long-suffering is evidence of His patience and desire to walk the path with us. We are bound to Him, and He is bound to us.

To close, I want to share a very short poem that summarizes for me what it means to live a covenant life so that we can become like our Heavenly Parents and the Savior. Rachel Hunt Steenblik in her book *Mother's Milk* wrote this about Heavenly Mother, and I suspect that this characterization of Heavenly Mother could be about each of us. This is the poem:

*Perfection is not Her goal,
love is.*¹⁰

This poem reminds me that the purpose of the covenant path, or of perfection, is about loving others, loving the Savior, and loving our Heavenly Parents deeply. This love transforms us continually as we seek it, as we trust it, as we feel it, and as we strive to share it.

My first hope is that each of us has felt God's love today, and if you have not, that you will. My second hope is that each of us will be transformed by our covenants to love each other in the way

that our Heavenly Parents and the Savior love us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Nephi 1:1.
2. Russell M. Nelson, "Covenants," *Ensign*, November 2011.
3. Adam S. Miller, *Grace Is Not God's Backup Plan: An Urgent Paraphrase of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (self-published, CreateSpace, 2015), 48.
4. Bonnie D. Parkin, "With Holiness of Heart," *Ensign*, November 2002.
5. See Matilda Dudley Busby, "Thirteenth Ward Relief Society Covenant," in Jennifer Reeder and Kate Holbrook, eds., *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 29–31.
6. James E. Talmage, *The House of the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1912), 100.
7. Talmage, *House of the Lord*, 100.
8. See Luke 10:30–37.
9. Rosemary M. Wixom, "The Covenant Path," BYU devotional address, 11 March 2013.
10. Rachel Hunt Steenblik, *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2017), 75.