

“...My soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord.”

2 Nephi 11:5

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This address was given Thursday, April 30, 2015 at the BYU Women’s Conference
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Good morning, sisters! And, what a glorious morning this is. I love you! And I love what it feels like when we gather together as sisters under the direction of the Lord. I love BYU Women’s Conference. The two years I served as conference chair embedded this conference in my heart forever.

Now I know it’s spring, but to me it feels just like Christmas. Being here with you today is every bit as wonderful as opening gifts on Christmas morning! When we really think about it, our covenants are a gift—a gift from God designed to get us safely back home to Him. And what a gift that is! My dear sisters, despite any anguishing life situation we may presently be in, it can feel like Christmas every day if we truly receive the gift of our covenants every day.

Clearly, Nephi had deep, joy-filled feelings about the gift of our covenants. His words are the theme for this year’s conference: “My soul delighteth in the covenants of the Lord.”¹ (2 Nephi 11:5)

My sisters, I pray that the Holy Ghost will be the True Teacher as we consider the gift of our covenants with the Lord.

We often refer to ourselves as “women of covenant” or as “covenant women.” But what does that really mean? I’ve asked myself that question over and over again in recent months. I’ve also asked other women what it means to them. One friend expressed it this way: “It means I’ve promised God that I will

follow His Son in what I do, think, and say. And I’ve made those promises by entering into sacred covenants that bind me to both the Father and the Son.”

Now before we go any further, let’s put our focus on covenants within the context of the days in which we live. People often ask my husband and me, “What’s one of your favorite places you’ve ever visited?” We typically answer in unison, “Our backyard—a place we don’t get to visit as often as we’d like!”

But seriously, one of my favorite places is Moscow, Russia. Why? Because of what I experienced there within one 24-hour period of time, which commenced on Saturday, June 15, 2013. While my husband taught the priesthood leaders of the area, I had the privilege of being with some of the sisters. I love our Russian sisters. They are spectacular! That Saturday happened to be one of those rare spring planting days in Russia, so less than 100 of us gathered. When I went to the pulpit, I found myself saying something I’d never anticipated: “I’d like to get to know you by lineage. Please stand as the name of the tribe of Israel, as declared in your patriarchal blessing, is spoken.”

These women knew each other, but they didn’t know each other’s lineage. As the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were announced, from Asher to Zebulun, and as the women stood, we were all thrilled with what we were feeling, witnessing, and being taught. We were being taught about the reality of the days in which we now live!

Question: How many of the twelve tribes of Israel do you think were represented in that small gathering of less than 100 women on that Saturday in Moscow? Eleven! Eleven of the twelve tribes! All but the tribe of Levi!

Now here’s another question: How fast does news travel where you live? Pretty fast? Well,

it certainly travels quickly in Eastern Europe. I went directly from that unforgettable gathering to the airport to meet my husband. We then flew to Armenia, where he was to create the first stake of Zion in that country the next day. The first people we met as we got off the plane were the mission president and his wife. And the first thing she said to me was, "I've got Levi!" Just imagine—one of their missionaries, from Gilbert, Arizona, no less, was of the tribe of Levi!

Now when I was a little girl attending Primary in Raymond, Alberta, Canada, I was taught that in the last days before the Second Coming of the Savior, the twelve tribes would be gathered. That was always thrilling and a little overwhelming to think about. So imagine what it was like for me to be with children from all twelve tribes of Israel within one 24-hour period of time. It was far beyond thrilling, and very overwhelming.

My dear sisters, these are the latter days! There has never been a time like this in the history of this earth, ever!

There has never been a more important time than right now to understand the gift our Father has given us as He allows us to make covenants with Him.

One young mother expressed our privilege so well. She said, "To be able to make a covenant with God personally makes me feel like I matter. I really do have a purpose in the great plan of it all. There is no third party or agent 'signing' on my behalf or the Lord's. The promise, the covenant I make, is directly with the Lord."

**8Sisters, there has never been a more important time than right now to understand the power to which we have access because of our covenants. And when we understand the gift of our covenants and the power of God that flows to us through them, we, like

Nephi, will truly delight in the covenants of the Lord.

For the past several months, I've been thinking nonstop about covenants. I've immersed myself in the scriptures; studied the words of prophets, seers and revelators; listened more attentively than ever to the words of our baptismal, temple, and sacrament covenants. I've asked great women from various places around the world—from Preston, England to Tokyo, Japan—what it means to them that they have made covenants with God. And further, as I have immersed myself in family history research, I've felt the unmistakable urgency of those now living on the other side of the veil who are desperate to make covenants with God, now.

After all of that, I've come to the following conclusion: When it comes to making and keeping covenants with God, nothing is more important, and nothing is more filled with power.

I'll never forget a fascinating interchange I had with a young friend I'll call Amy. Late one Saturday night, as I was working against the clock to complete a major project, I received an email from Amy, who was in distress. She wrote, "I was asked to speak, last minute, at my ward Relief Society activity this Wednesday. The topic is stress. I sent out a survey last night to 75 of the women here in BYU married student housing to find out what is stressing them out. After receiving their responses, I realize that I NEED HELP!!!!"

As I read through the survey responses, these young wives and mothers reported they were experiencing stress, depression, anxiety, and marital intimacy problems. They listed as the cause of their problems school, finances, lack of sleep, housework, homework, feelings of failing at everything, and an inability to balance all of their responsibilities.

I wondered how I should respond. What would really make a difference for these women? And what could be offered, during a 22-minute Relief Society message, which could possibly reduce the real-life distress of these young mothers? As I thought about Amy's difficult assignment, my experiences with family history and temple work filled my mind. As counterintuitive as this may seem, I felt compelled, in a way I could not deny, to encourage Amy to offer a 21-day experiment to her Relief Society sisters.

So I emailed back, "Invite the sisters to make a sacrifice of time to the Lord by increasing their time in family history and in temple work for the next 21 days." Amy accepted this suggestion, and the results were remarkable. Here are just three examples of what happened.

One young wife and mother wrote, "During the 21 days that I increased my temple attendance and my family history work, I not only felt happier, I felt a sense of relief. I felt a weight had been taken off my chest. When I made time to do these things—which is hard because we all are busy—I found that somehow I had more time to get other things done that needed to be done."

Another woman was able to stop taking her medication for anxiety. Her positive changes in mood, energy, and inspiration were so dramatic that she wrote, "My husband started to pray in gratitude for the increased Spirit in our home since I have been making sacrifices of time to the Lord in temple and family history work."

And yet another sister reported, "I have a two-year-old and just had a baby last week. The 21-day experiment helped with the end of my pregnancy. The sacrifice of time to do family history was something I could do sitting down that was productive and brought the Spirit! It gave me more purpose and helped me not to focus on the discomforts of the end of my pregnancy."

Sisters, my suggestion to a group of overtaxed, exhausted young mothers may seem counterintuitive, and the results highly improbable. It may even seem cruel to ask a woman who feels as though she's barely surviving to make a sacrifice of time to the Lord. But these young mothers proved that it works.

It works for women who have made covenants with God. Why?

Because when covenant women keep their covenants, they have greater access to the power of God.

The power of God flows into them, and that power, His power, generates a decrease in stress, an increase in energy, more and clearer revelation for their lives, renewed focus, courage to make needed changes, an increase in patience, and more time for what matters. That's what these young mothers taught me as they kept their covenant of sacrifice.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson taught that increased spiritual power comes to us as we keep our covenants. He was explicit in his counsel that "in times of distress, let your covenants be paramount, and let your obedience be exact."² ("The Power of Covenants," *Ensign*, May 2009.)

That's exactly what those young covenant women did! They were in distress, they focused on their covenant of sacrifice, they let that covenant be "paramount," and they were exactly obedient. And what happened? Their distress fell away!

Would you be willing to try an experiment? What would happen if between now and Christmas we each selected a 21-day period of time and then did whatever it took in order to make a sacrifice of time to the Lord by increasing the time we spend in temple work and in family history work during those 21

days? What blessings, miracles, and other positive changes would come to our lives?

Sisters, just as keeping our covenant of sacrifice will bring the power of God to our lives, I've learned from covenant women that the power of God also flows to them when they keep their covenant of service!

While the world would tell women that the very best way to be rejuvenated is by taking a vacation, or going on a shopping spree, or visiting a spa, I believe that covenant women are far more likely to be rejuvenated through serving, especially if they are able to delight in that covenant together with other women.

I learned that principle 16 years ago, right here at BYU Women's Conference in 1999. I was serving as the Women's Conference chair, and during our months of planning, several of us had the idea that adding a service project to the conference would be powerful. The idea felt inspired. We thought others would cheer! But we were wrong. Dead wrong.

Some on the committee felt strongly that a service project would backfire. One statement made during an exchange filled with energy has been emblazoned upon my memory ever since: "Women don't come to Women's Conference to serve; they come to relax and get away from it all!"

Gratefully, the Relief Society General Presidency saw wisdom in the idea, and ultimately the very first service event at a BYU Women's Conference unfolded. That pioneering effort of 1999 was thrilling! It was successful beyond anything any of us imagined, even though it now pales in comparison to the scope of service rendered right here, every year.

Sixteen years later, I am even more convinced that weary covenant women are revitalized as the power of God flows into

their lives when they keep their covenant of service.

As we keep our covenants, to what else do we have access? Joseph Smith declared that if we as covenant women "live up to (our) privilege," the angels will not be able to be restrained from being our associates. Our "privilege" includes our covenants. Our covenants are a "privilege"! Therefore, as we live up to our covenants, the angels will not be able to be restrained from being our associates. 3 (Relief Society Minute Book, Nauvoo, Illinois, Apr. 28, 1842, Church History Library, 38.)

We could also say it this way: As we keep our covenants, we can ask for angels to help us. Literally!

It was during Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's April 2010 general conference talk that I first learned this truth. He said, "Ask for angels to help you." He said it with such clarity, and yet in a manner that implied this was something we all knew. But for me it was an entirely new principle. I wanted to call out, "Wait! Wait! What? You mean I could have been asking for angels to help me all this time?"

Without intending to sound too dramatic, I can say with all candor that Elder Holland's six words changed my life. "Ask for angels to help you." That counsel changed my prayers, changed my understanding of the very real help from heaven that is always available to us as we keep our covenants.

I started to ask for assistance from those on the other side of the veil from that moment on. Now I'm not talking about praying for fantasy angels with wings to magically fairy-dust our problems away. I'm not talking about praying to angels. I'm talking about praying to your Heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus Christ, for those on the other side to be "dispatched" (Elder Holland's word) to assist you. Perhaps a loved one or two could be sent to help you with whatever you need.

Can you imagine the effort it took those angels who pushed from the rear of handcarts as they helped the pioneers over the steep, snowy, windy, freezing, jagged terrain of Rocky Ridge? If angels can manage that, they can certainly help you and me over our present Rocky Ridges.

We know the Lord gets His work done with the help of His angels. So could you use a little more help in your life? If so, keep your covenants with more exactness than ever before. And then ask for angels to help you with whatever you need. Or ask for them to be dispatched to help those you love.

Does your child need help? Is your husband in trouble? Does your aunt need comfort? Does your best friend need direction? Ask for angels to be assigned to help them. As a covenant-keeping woman, you can do just that!

One of my former institute students, let's call her Barbara, followed through with that suggestion with thrilling results. Barbara has served as proxy for many of my ancestors. During a few particular temple sessions, Barbara had special experiences with a woman named Genevieve and with Genevieve's sisters. Barbara felt a deep connection with them. So she prayed and asked if Genevieve and her sisters, who now live on the other side of the veil, could be dispatched to help Barbara's own sister, who lives on this side of the veil. Barbara's sister had not been active in the Church for years, and she was having heart-wrenching difficulties with some rigorous life events.

Here are Barbara's words: "I prayed that my sister could find peace in this world; that she could find direction back to Heavenly Father; that the sisters of Genevieve could help her find her way back, and watch over her in this process. A few weeks later my sister told me that she was taking her three boys to church! Later she asked me how to get her

patriarchal blessing. The eldest boy turned eight this summer and was baptized. And my sister is now attending temple preparation classes."

How can we explain such miracles? Mormon tells us, "My beloved [sisters], have miracles ceased? Behold I say unto you, Nay; neither have angels ceased to minister unto the children of men. . . . And the office of their ministry is to call men [and women] to repentance, and to fulfill and to do the work of the covenants of the Father." 4 (Moroni 7: 29, 31)

Now let's shift and talk about the power of perspective our covenants can provide. We know that our covenants with God did not start here on this earth, and they will not end here! We know that we made covenants with God premortally. Perhaps that's one of the reasons we "shouted for joy."

Sisters, we are grateful for the veil of forgetfulness. It heightens the testing feature of our mortal probation. And wow, what a test this is turning out to be for each one of us! But if the veil was lifted and we could look back, we would see ourselves as His spirit daughters making premortal covenants with God our Heavenly Father.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught that we made premortal covenants about particular assignments, callings, and missions we would fulfill here on earth. Perhaps that's why some callings bring such a reassuring feeling at the very same time we feel so ill prepared! Fulfilling the wonderful missions for which we were sent to earth is one of the sure ways we can find peace and joy in this spook alley of mortal life.

Elder John A. Widtsoe taught that we covenanted premortally to be partners with the Father and the Son in Their work to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" 5 (Moses 1:39.)

When we made that premortal covenant, did we ever imagine just how much time we would need to spend shepherding and rescuing others? How many hours teaching and preaching the gospel? Did we have any clue about the number of hours on FamilySearch and Family Tree we would need to spend? And the numerous hours in the temple we would need to devote, all so we could fulfill this stunning premortal covenant?

Did we have any idea about how many things we would need to give up doing so we would have time to help others return Home to receive all that the Father hath?

My dear sisters, here is what I strongly believe about the power of perspective our premortal covenants would provide: I believe that if we could see ourselves making our premortal covenants with Heavenly Father, all of our anguish, grief, and heartache would fall away. And we would say, "Oh, now I remember! This heart-wrenching experience makes sense now!"

Here's another example. Think of this truth: Commencing with Adam and Eve, all righteous men and women who love the Lord and have accepted His gospel have made covenants with Him.

Think of any of the covenant woman down through the ages whom we love and admire—from Sarah and Rachel to Sariah and Rebecca, from Lois to Abish, from Sister Noah to Sister Daniel, from Sister Peter to Sister James and Sister John, from Eve to Emma and Eliza. Each of these women made the very same covenants with God that you and I made. Therefore, our covenants with God connect us with other women who have made covenants with God. I love to think of that!

The very fact that temple covenants and ordinances seem so different from our Sunday worship meetings is just another

testimony of their truthfulness. They are ancient! Literally the Ancient of Days, meaning Adam, with Eve received those covenants—our very covenants—from God!

Now just for a moment, imagine two gigantic mirrors placed parallel to each other with their reflecting surfaces facing each other. Picture the more than 15,000 of us here today standing in front of one of the mirrors and looking into it, with the other mirror parallel behind us. What would we see? We would see numberless images of women, stretching into infinity. Can you see that in your mind's eye? Freeze-frame that image. As you look at that picture, you are seeing the number of covenant women with whom you and I are connected each and every time we make a covenant with God. And each and every time we keep those sacred obligations.

It has been said that the present fascination some women have with social media is related to the need women have to be connected with other women, to support each other, to know what's happening in each other's lives, to have other women know and approve of what we're doing. We want "witnesses" for our lives!

With the image of the two parallel mirrors in mind, let's consider this question: Do we as covenant women need more friends on Facebook? Or do we need to experience more of the beautifully familiar, unmistakably divine feeling of being connected with perhaps more accurately said, reconnected with—millions of other women who have made covenants with God?

On a day when we don't think anyone cares about us and our struggles or about all we've been trying to do, what would happen if we took just a moment to look with our mind's eye into those two parallel reflecting mirrors and see the truth? Because the truth is that each and every day you and I let our covenants influence our thoughts and words and actions, we are inseparably connected to

millions and millions of covenant women women from the beginning of time down through each and every gospel dispensation. Talk about friends we hope will “like” us!

And now, to talk about another perspective, let me tell you of an unexpected journey I’ve been on for the past two and a half years. After studying more than 100 times Elder Richard G. Scott’s October 2012 general conference address entitled “The Joy of Redeeming the Dead,” I have morphed from a woman who basically went into a coma whenever she heard the words “family history” to one who now feels an irrepressible urgency to find a birth, marriage, death, or census record to uniquely identify one more ancestor. I am now a woman desperately driven by the desire not to waste time that I could have spent helping those who are desperate for covenants. And now for me, super-sleuthing a mother’s maiden name trumps watching any detective movie I used to enjoy. And no one is more surprised than I am!

How did this happen? When Elder Scott said to me, with 15 million others listening in, “This work is a spiritual work,” I believed him. And I found myself praying, “Please lead me to those who are ready to make covenants with Thee and receive their ordinances.” That prayer opened the heavens for me!

When Elder Scott taught that “some sacrifice” would be involved, I believed him. But I couldn’t think of anything I could sacrifice. I thought I was using my time really well on things that really mattered. And then I thought about the time I spent playing Scrabble by myself on my iPad. I set Scrabble aside for two months. Now that may not seem like much of a sacrifice, but for me it was giving up a bit of harmless fun.

In the first two weeks, I learned three things I can never forget: First, those on the other side of the veil are very much alive, and not all that cheerful about being called “dead”.

Second, they are eager—no, actually they are desperate—to make covenants with God, and to receive their essential ordinances by proxy, and to be freed from spirit prison! Covenants, and only covenants with their associated ordinances, have the power to unlock the gates behind which our ancestors live.

So as wonderful as it is to know stories about Grandma—for example, that she loved peaches and poems—if we don’t do whatever it takes to ensure that she has the privilege to make covenants with God and receive her essential ordinances, guess what? Grandma is still in prison. And I’m not sure just how long she’s going to be cheerful about that!

The third thing I learned is that we are the only Church on the planet with the power and authority from God to perform these ordinances.

Oh, and actually I learned one other thing: Family history is really fun! Even more fun than Scrabble!

So, if you’d like a little more joy in your life, a little more meaning, more heart-to-heart connections, more focus, energy, motivation, more of so many wonderful things, make time to help those on the other side make covenants with God. The power of God will flow into your life as you do.

What else can we do to keep and increase the flow of God’s power in our lives? President Gordon B. Hinckley taught a great truth at the dedication of the Conference Center in October 2000. In the concluding session of that general conference, President Hinckley’s parting words included this counsel: “The great ‘Hosanna’ salutation in which we participated this morning should remain an unforgettable experience. From time to time, we can repeat quietly in our minds, when we are alone, those beautiful

words of worship.”⁶ (“An Humble and a Contrite Heart,” Ensign, Nov. 2000.)

My dear sisters, if it is good for us to repeat quietly in our minds, when we are alone, the beautiful words of worship of the “Hosanna” salutation, wouldn’t it be good for us to follow that same pattern with other beautiful words of worship?

What about the beautiful words of our baptismal and temple covenants, and other sublime words spoken in the temple? There is spiritual power in the words of our covenants. Do we know the words? Do we know what we said we would do? Do we know what the Lord has promised?

Sometimes when we hear words frequently, they can become background noise rather than a foreground focus to help us worship. But we can change that. We can make a personal plan for learning and remembering the words of our covenants. It will take some effort, but we can do it!

How would our experience with the sacrament change if we imagined the Savior to be The One blessing the bread and water, just as He did for His Twelve Apostles? Can you picture that?

And then, if the Savior stood before us, and while offering the emblems to us and looking directly into your eyes and mine, said, “Are you willing to take upon you my name this week? Are you willing to always remember me? Are you willing to keep my commandments this week?”

Would we then, truly and finally, experience a cleansing of our spirits and “the wounds of [our] spirits being healed, and [our] loads . . . lifted?”⁷ (Melvin J. Ballard in Ballard: Crusader for Righteousness (1966), 132–133.

And what about our temple covenants? What can change for us as we learn, feel deeply, and remember the words of our temple covenants?

Let me tell you about another young friend. Let’s call her Jean. Jean was put on bed rest during her second pregnancy and couldn’t attend the temple for a little while. Jean wrote, “I was sincerely struggling with feelings of being pulled so many different ways and of entering a new season of life that just didn’t lend itself to weekly temple attendance at that point. It was in response to these feelings and prayerful pleadings that the words entered my mind, ‘You may not always be able to go through the temple, but you are always able to have the temple go through you.’ That was my answer and the one I so desperately needed!”

Jean continued, “Now, I daily repeat the words we say in the temple (in my mind, of course) every morning as I get ready for the day. I reverently and with power say those words in my mind. I recovenant and rededicate myself each new day.” Now clearly, Jean had been paying close attention during her previous weekly time in the temple. For many of us, we can start now. Each time we go to the temple, we can really focus on and learn the words of one more covenant, or perhaps those of one more associated ordinance.

And then we can do what President Hinckley advised: “From time to time, we can repeat quietly in our minds, when we are alone, those beautiful words of worship.”⁸ (“An Humble and a Contrite Heart,” Ensign, Nov. 2000.)

A dear friend recently did just that on a day when she didn’t feel well and yet was less than one hour away from a major and highly stressful assignment. She wrote, “As I waited alone in my car before the event, and because I physically didn’t feel well, I chose to focus on the words of the initiatory. As

those words went through my mind, I actually started to feel a little bit better. Plus, they gave me a feeling of peace and assurance that somehow I'd get through the assignment."

Just think of the power that is available to us in our sacred words of worship! My husband taught this profound truth: "The highest compliment is to be called a covenant keeper."⁹ (Russell M. Nelson, "Covenants," Ensign, Nov. 2011.)

My dear sisters, as covenant keepers, our covenants change everything in our lives—for the better. They change our identity and ultimate destination. They change the road we're traveling on through this life—because now, we're on the covenant path that leads back Home. And no GPS of the world can ever find that road!

As covenant keepers, what we want out of life, what we are willing to spend our time, energy, and money on, what we think is entertaining, what we think is appealing—all change. As covenant keepers, our desire to be someone the Lord can count on increases exponentially, no matter what He asks us to do.

As covenant keepers, how we feel about the Savior changes forever. He is real to us in a way He's never been before. How we feel about His Atonement changes. We relish repentance. And we seek gifts of the Spirit, one by one, to turn our weak things into strengths.

As covenant keepers our prayers change—because we are now bound to Heavenly Father, and we're tied closer than ever to our Savior Jesus Christ. Personal revelation becomes something we prepare for and expect.

As covenant keepers our past, present, and future can all change. Everything can change

for the better as we keep our covenants, including our very nature!

So, in the words of Elder Holland, "if you have made covenants, keep them. If you haven't made them, make them. If you have made them and broken them, repent and repair them."¹⁰ ("The Laborers in the Vineyard," Ensign, May 2012.)

My dear covenant sisters, these latter days are our days. Are we ready? We can be, as we make and keep our covenants with God. We can be morally strong covenant women who are sin-resistant Saints—women who, because of time spent in the temple, know how to deal with the adversary and how to pray with power.

We can be diligent covenant women who are true disciples of Jesus Christ in this digital age and who know how to use technology righteously! We can be articulate covenant women who are consistently seeking to understand the doctrine of Jesus Christ so that we are not swayed by every "wind of doctrine"¹¹ (Ephesians 4:14.) that blows through a blog!

We can be enlightened covenant women who seek to understand more about our covenants—women who understand that when we let the Lord know we are serious about learning more, He will teach us! We can be wise covenant women who eagerly remove from our lives anything that is preventing us from receiving even more of God's power.

It is my testimony, my dear sisters, that there is nothing more important than making covenants with God and then keeping them with increasing precision, because making covenants with God calls forth the divine within us. And keeping our covenants with God allows Him to pour His divine power into us.