

JOY AND SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL

*By President Russell M. Nelson
President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles*

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My dear brothers and sisters, today I would like to discuss a principle that is key to our spiritual survival. It is a principle that will only become more important as the tragedies and travesties around us increase.

These are the latter days, so none of us should be surprised when we see prophecy fulfilled. A host of prophets, including Isaiah, Paul, Nephi, and Mormon, foresaw that perilous times would come, that in our day the whole world would be in commotion, that men would “be lovers of their own selves, ... without natural affection, ... lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God,” and that many would become servants of Satan who uphold the adversary’s work. Indeed, you and I “wrestle ... against the rulers of the darkness of this world, [and] against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

As conflicts between nations escalate, as cowardly terrorists prey on the innocent, and as corruption in everything from business to government becomes increasingly commonplace, what can help us? What can help each of us with our personal struggles and with the rigorous challenge of living in these latter days?

The prophet Lehi taught a principle for spiritual survival. First, consider his circumstances: He had been persecuted for preaching truth in Jerusalem and had been commanded by the Lord to leave his possessions and flee with his family into the wilderness. He had lived in a tent and survived on what food could be found on the way to an unknown destination, and he had watched two of his sons, Laman and Lemuel, rebel against the teachings of the Lord and attack their brothers Nephi and Sam.

Clearly, Lehi knew opposition, anxiety, heartache, pain, disappointment, and sorrow. Yet he declared boldly and without reservation a principle as revealed by the Lord: “Men are, that they might have joy.” Imagine! Of all the words he could have used to describe the nature and purpose of our lives here in mortality, he chose the word joy!

Life is filled with detours and dead ends, trials and challenges of every kind. Each of us has likely had times when distress, anguish, and despair almost consumed us. Yet we are here to have joy?

Yes! The answer is a resounding yes! But how is that possible? And what must we do to claim the joy that Heavenly Father has in store for us?

Eliza R. Snow, second General President of the Relief Society, offered a riveting answer. Because of Missouri's infamous extermination order, issued at the onset of the grueling winter of 1838, she and other Saints were forced to flee the state that very winter. One evening, Eliza's family spent the night in a small log cabin used by refugee Saints. Much of the chinking between the logs had been extracted and burned for firewood by those who preceded them, so there were holes between the logs large enough for a cat to crawl through. It was bitter cold, and their food was frozen solid. That night some 80 people huddled inside that small cabin, only 20 feet square (6.1 meters square). Most sat or stood all night trying to keep warm. Outside, a group of men spent the night gathered around a roaring fire, with some singing hymns and others roasting frozen potatoes. Eliza recorded: "Not a complaint was heard—all were cheerful, and judging from appearances, strangers would have taken us to be pleasure excursionists rather than a band of gubernatorial exiles."

Eliza's report of that exhausting, bone-chilling evening was strikingly optimistic. She declared: "That was a very merry night. None but saints can be happy under every circumstance."

That's it! Saints can be happy under every circumstance. We can feel joy even while having a bad day, a bad week, or even a bad year!

My dear brothers and sisters, the joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

When the focus of our lives is on God's plan of salvation, which President Thomas S. Monson just taught us, and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives. Joy comes from and because of Him. He is the source of all joy. We feel it at Christmastime when we sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come." And we can feel it all year round. For Latter-day Saints, Jesus Christ is joy! That is why our missionaries leave their homes to preach His gospel. Their goal is not to increase the number of Church members. Rather, our missionaries teach and baptize to bring joy to the people of the world!

Just as the Savior offers peace that "passeth all understanding," He also offers an intensity, depth, and breadth of joy that defy human logic or mortal comprehension. For example, it doesn't seem possible to feel joy when your child suffers with an incurable illness or when you lose your job or when your spouse betrays you. Yet that is precisely the joy the Savior offers. His joy is constant, assuring us that our "afflictions shall be but a small moment" and be consecrated to our gain.

How, then, can we claim that joy? We can start by "looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" "in every thought." We can give thanks for Him in our prayers and by keeping covenants we've made with Him and our Heavenly Father. As our Savior

becomes more and more real to us and as we plead for His joy to be given to us, our joy will increase.

Joy is powerful, and focusing on joy brings God's power into our lives. As in all things, Jesus Christ is our ultimate exemplar, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross." Think of that! In order for Him to endure the most excruciating experience ever endured on earth, our Savior focused on joy!

And what was the joy that was set before Him? Surely it included the joy of cleansing, healing, and strengthening us; the joy of paying for the sins of all who would repent; the joy of making it possible for you and me to return home—clean and worthy—to live with our Heavenly Parents and families.

If we focus on the joy that will come to us, or to those we love, what can we endure that presently seems overwhelming, painful, scary, unfair, or simply impossible?

One father in a spiritually precarious situation focused on the joy of finally being clean and right with the Lord—the joy of being freed from guilt and shame—and the joy of having peace of mind. That focus gave him the courage to confess to his wife and bishop about his problem with pornography and his subsequent infidelity. He is now doing everything his bishop counsels him to do, striving with all his heart to regain the trust of his dear wife.

A young woman focused on the joy of staying sexually pure to help her endure the mocking of friends as she walked away from a popular and provocative, but spiritually dangerous, situation.

A man who frequently demeaned his wife and indulged in angry outbursts at his children focused on the joy of being worthy to have the Holy Ghost as his constant companion. That focus motivated him to put off the natural man, to which he had too often succumbed, and make needed changes.

A dear colleague recently told me of his past two decades of heavy trials. He said, "I have learned to suffer with joy. My suffering was swallowed up in the joy of Christ."

What will you and I be able to endure as we focus on the joy that is "set before" us? What repenting will then be possible? What weakness will become a strength? What chastening will become a blessing? What disappointments, even tragedies, will turn to our good? And what challenging service to the Lord will we be able to give?

As we diligently focus on the Savior and then follow His pattern of focusing on joy, we need to avoid those things that can interrupt our joy. Remember Korihor, the anti-Christ? Spewing falsehoods about the Savior, Korihor went from place to place until he was brought before a high priest who asked him: "Why do ye go about perverting the ways of the Lord? Why do ye teach this people that there shall be no Christ, to interrupt their rejoicings?"

Anything that opposes Christ or His doctrine will interrupt our joy. That includes the philosophies of men, so abundant online and in the blogosphere, which do exactly what Korihor did.

If we look to the world and follow its formulas for happiness, we will never know joy. The unrighteous may experience any number of emotions and sensations, but they will never experience joy! Joy is a gift for the faithful. It is the gift that comes from intentionally trying to live a righteous life, as taught by Jesus Christ.

He taught us how to have joy. When we choose Heavenly Father to be our God and when we can feel the Savior's Atonement working in our lives, we will be filled with joy. Every time we nurture our spouse and guide our children, every time we forgive someone or ask for forgiveness, we can feel joy.

Every day that you and I choose to live celestial laws, every day that we keep our covenants and help others to do the same, joy will be ours.

Heed these words of the Psalmist: "I have set the Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. ... In [His] presence is fulness of joy." As this principle is embedded in our hearts, each and every day can be a day of joy and gladness. I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.