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GOSPEL STUDY FOR
INCARCERATED WOMEN

This Is a Test. It Is Only a Test.



THE CHURCH OF
JESUS CHRIST
OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

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(*ENSIGN*, JULY 2000, 62–66)

Sister Dew caught the vision of why she should practice piano

My mother made me take piano lessons, and because I am her oldest and she had not yet been worn down by the task of prodding five children to practice every day, she kept me practicing despite my whining. The fact that I eventually studied piano for 15 years is largely a tribute to her resilience. I wish I had a dollar for every time she said I would thank her one day for all of the musical torture.

As always, she was right. I have thanked her, again and again, for that introduction to the keyboard, because somewhere between those first bars of “Here we go, up a row, to a birthday party” and “Rhapsody in Blue,” I fell in love with music, especially classical music, which in its more magnificent passages made my heart feel like it was going to leap out of my chest—in other words, it made my young spirit soar.

Here again, my mother deserves all the credit. I couldn’t have been more than 10 or 11 when she gave me a stack of classical albums, introducing me to some of the great composers whose works were characterized by dramatic musical passages and what I call the Big Finish.

I would lie in front of the stereo for hours, listening to the third movement of Rachmaninoff’s second piano concerto or his “Prelude in C-sharp Minor,” all the while imagining myself at a shiny black concert grand in Carnegie Hall. I pictured my debut there, standing ovation and all. I imagined that I would be humble but brilliant—brilliant enough

to move an entire audience, including my mother, to tears. Somewhere in all of my daydreaming, I caught a vision of how it would feel to play so beautifully that others’ hearts would soar.

At that point, she no longer had to encourage me to practice. Once I had a vision of the possibilities, the motivation to master the piano came from inside. Am I saying that practicing suddenly was enjoyable? Absolutely not! It was often sheer drudgery. But I found a technique that helped me endure those tedious hours of practice, day in and day out. When I set out to tackle a new piece, I would master and memorize the Big Finish first, all the while visualizing myself in a concert where the audience jumped to its feet at the last chord. Imagining how grand the Big Finish would be kept me going through months of rehearsal on technical passages that didn’t provide nearly the same sense of drama but that had to be mastered nonetheless.

In short, my progress on the piano and my motivation to practice increased dramatically when I caught a vision of my potential.

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A vision of our possibilities

We are temporarily afflicted with the amnesia of mortality. But just as my spirit was stirred by the majesty of those dramatic musical passages and the possibility of performing them flawlessly, through the power of the Spirit we can often

“catch a spark,” as President Joseph F. Smith taught us, “from the awakened memories of the immortal soul, which lights up our whole being as with the glory of our former home.”¹ It is the Spirit that will also shed light upon our ultimate potential—the grandest finish of all.

If, on the other hand, we are not able to catch a vision of the Big Finish, meaning a clear image of who we are and what we are becoming, how can we be willing to practice? Life, like classical music, is full of difficult passages that are conquered as much through endurance and determination as through any particular skill.

A vision that we are children of God can help us survive our life’s tests

Years ago, this announcement used to interrupt television programming in the United States: “This is a test of the emergency broadcasting system. It is only a test. If this were a real emergency, you would be notified through this station.”

Indeed, this life *is* a test. It is a test of many things—of our convictions and priorities, our faith and our faithfulness, our patience and our resilience, and in the end, our ultimate desires. Yet there are times when the vision and hope of a Big Finish are dimmed by immediate demands, days when one might wish for a mortal exam that was a little more manageable.



Thankfully, our experience here is an open-book test. We know why we’re here, and we have from prophets ancient and modern an extensive set of instructions. But at the risk of sounding simplistic, may I suggest that the mortal experience is largely about vision—our vision of ourselves and our

ultimate Big Finish. And vision is determined by faith. The firmer our faith in Jesus Christ, the clearer our vision of ourselves and what we can ultimately achieve and become.

“Where there is no vision, the people perish,” . . . (Proverbs 29:18). And perhaps nothing is more vital to our spiritual survival than a vision of who we are and what we can become, of our intrinsic value to the Lord, and of the unparalleled role we must play in these latter days. We are literally the offspring of God, His begotten sons and daughters, with the potential of exaltation [see Acts 17:29]. “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:16–17).

Increasing our faith

But how do *we* get a clear vision of who we are? Light is a key to vision! And Jesus Christ is the ultimate Light, the “light which shineth in darkness” (D&C 6:21), the light which chases “darkness from among [us]” (D&C 50:25). Faith in Jesus Christ is the key to vision, to seeing ourselves as the Lord sees us. So to improve our vision, we must increase our faith in and connection to the Savior.

It is no accident that faith in Jesus Christ—not only believing *in* Him but *believing* Him—is the first principle of the gospel. President Gordon B. Hinckley has said, “Of all our needs, I think the greatest is an increase in faith.”²

We sometimes tend to define unbelievers as apostates or agnostics. But perhaps that definition is far too narrow. What about those of us who have received a witness of the divinity of the Savior and yet deep in our hearts don’t believe He will help *us*? We believe He’ll help others—President Hinckley, the Quorum of the Twelve, the stake Relief Society president—but not us.

We accept the Savior’s gift by believing that He really will help us

Have you ever carefully selected a gift for someone only to present the gift and have it fall flat? Perhaps a simple “Thanks” feels nonchalant and even ungrateful. Similarly, it must be disappointing

to the Lord, who offered the ultimate sacrifice, when we by our unbelief essentially refuse His gift and therefore His offer of help [see D&C 88:33].

An unwillingness to believe that the Savior stands ready to deliver us from our difficulties is tantamount to refusing the gift. It is tragic when we refuse to turn to Him who paid the ultimate price and to let Him lift us up. *Life is a test* [see Abraham 3:25]. But divine assistance is available to help us successfully complete this most critical examination.

More than once Nephi chastened his older brothers for their unbelief. “How is it that ye have forgotten that the Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him?” (1 Nephi 7:12). How indeed? It is a question we might ask ourselves. The Lord *can* do all things. But it is our faith in Him, even our willingness to believe, that activates the power of the [Savior’s] Atonement in our lives. “We are made alive in Christ because of our faith” (2 Nephi 25:25). I love Nephi’s words when he tells his brothers, speaking of the Lord, “And he loveth those who will have him to be their God” (1 Nephi 17:40)—or in other words, those who accept Him and His gift.

One would think it would be easy to embrace and have faith in [Jesus Christ and] the gift of the Atonement. But I fear that some people know just enough about the gospel to feel guilty that they are not measuring up to some undefinable standard but not enough about the Atonement to feel the peace and strength it affords us. Perhaps some of us don’t know how to draw the power of the Atonement into our lives; others aren’t willing to seek its blessings. And some don’t ask because they don’t feel worthy. It is quite the irony—that the gospel of Jesus Christ, which contains the power to save every human being and to strengthen every soul, is sometimes interpreted in such a way that feelings of inadequacy result.

Seeing ourselves clearly

Do you remember the exchange in the animated classic *The Lion King* between the deceased King Mufasa and his lion cub, Simba, who turns to riotous living after his father’s death? Simba sees his father in a vision, and when he attempts to justify

his aimless lifestyle, his father teaches him a divine truth: “You have forgotten who you are because you have forgotten me.”

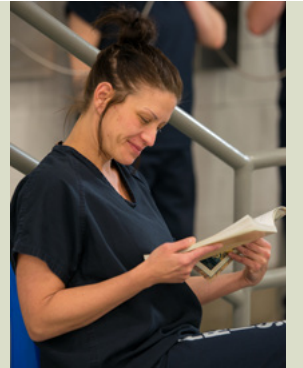
Why Should I Care?

Life is hard, and you might feel hopeless or helpless at times.

Jesus Christ sacrificed for you.

He stands ready to help if you only ask.

You deserve His help because He loves you.



The closer we grow to our Father in Heaven, the more clear and complete becomes our vision of who we are and what we can become. I have tender feelings about the connection between our faith in the Lord and the way we see ourselves, because I have spent much of my life struggling to feel that I measured up. Growing up, I was painfully shy. The phrase “social reject” comes to mind. To make matters worse, I hit 5 foot 10 inches in the sixth grade. Five-foot-ten is not a popular height for a sixth-grade girl. I was a Mormon in a very non-Mormon community. The fact that I had a great jump shot didn’t translate well socially. The guys were my best friends—but not my dates. And I was a farm girl. Though our little town had all of 4,000 residents, there was a clear social distinction between those who lived in town and those in the country. There was nothing cool about being a tall, sturdy (as Grandma used to call me), Mormon farm girl. I couldn’t do what my friends did or go where they went. I was different, and for a teenager, different is deadly.

Sister Dew felt inadequate as a young woman

The summer after my sophomore year I had an experience that convinced me I was destined to a



life of mediocrity. Our small MIA went to a youth conference, and one of the classes I attended was on the dreaded topic of self-esteem. One day, mid-lecture, the presenter suddenly pointed at me and asked me to stand and introduce myself. I could manage nothing more than to mumble my name and slump back down in my chair. It was pathetic.

I had obviously not demonstrated what the speaker was hoping for, so she pointed to another young woman in the audience—a tall, thin girl with beautiful long hair. Poise oozed out of her cells as she stood and introduced herself, concluding with a gracious word of thanks to the speaker for her marvelous presentation. All the while I was thinking, “Oh, sit down. She didn’t ask for a eulogy.” But the comparison between the two of us wasn’t lost on me. The lecturer only made things worse when she said, “It seems that the young girl from Kansas doesn’t feel as good about herself as the girl from Salt Lake City.”

I can still picture myself in the back seat of our car as we drove home to Kansas. In between little bursts of tears, I contemplated the future, and things didn’t look promising. I didn’t measure up, and I feared that I never would. Now, I don’t want to overstate things. I had great experiences growing up, and I had disappointing experiences. Just like you. But I suffered with a deep feeling of inadequacy.

I pleaded with God to change my circumstances, because I believed I could never be happy until He did. Instead, He changed my heart. I asked Him to take away my burden, but He strengthened me so I could bear my burdens with ease.

She learned to focus on what she did have rather than what she didn’t have

My insecurities followed me to college at BYU, and as a result I suffered socially, scholastically, and spiritually. When, during graduate school, a friendship ended in a disappointing way, I hopped in my little Toyota and drove home for a few days of consolation. For a week I moped around the house feeling sorry for myself. Then one afternoon I walked down to my brother’s room and noticed his journal on his nightstand. Brad was 13, and I thought it might be fun to see what pearls of wisdom he had written. The entries were predictable—about sports and girls and motorcycles. But then I came to the entry he had made the day I arrived home unexpectedly from BYU: “Sheri came home from BYU today. I’m

so glad she's home. But she doesn't seem very happy. I wish there was something I could do to help her, because I really love her."

As you can imagine, the tears began to flow. But the sweet emotions unleashed by my brother's words triggered an even more powerful sensation, for almost instantly I had a profound feeling of divine love and acceptance wash over me and, simultaneously, a very clear impression that I ought to quit focusing on everything I didn't have, because I had enough, and start doing something with what I did have.

For me, it was a profound moment. I didn't pop up and suddenly feel confident about life, but I couldn't deny that the Spirit had spoken and that the Lord loved me and felt I had something to contribute. It was the beginning of seeing myself with new eyes.

"He would never desert us"

In my early 30s I faced a personal disappointment that broke my heart. From a point of view distorted by emotional pain, I couldn't believe that anything or anyone could take away the loneliness or that I would ever feel whole or happy again. In an effort to find peace, comfort, and strength, I turned to the Lord in a way I had not before. The scriptures became a lifeline, filled as they were with promises I had never noticed in quite the same way—that He would heal my broken heart and take away my pain, that He would succor me and deliver me from disappointment.

Fasting and prayer took on new intensity, and the temple became a place of refuge and revelation. What I learned was not only that the Lord *could* help me but that He *would*. Me. A regular, farm-grown member of the Church with no fancy titles or spectacular callings. It was during that agonizing period that I began to discover how magnificent, penetrating, and personal the power of [Jesus Christ and His] Atonement is.

I pleaded with God to change my circumstances, because I believed I could never be happy until He did. Instead, He changed my heart. I asked Him to take away my burden, but He strengthened me so I could bear my burdens with ease (see Mosiah 24:15). I had always been a believer, but

I'm not sure I had understood what, or who, it was I believed in.

President George Q. Cannon (1827–1901), a counselor in the First Presidency, taught: "When we went forth into the waters of baptism and covenanted with our Father in heaven to serve Him and keep His commandments, He bound Himself also by covenant to us that He would never desert us, never leave us to ourselves, never forget us, that in the midst of trials and hardships, when everything was arrayed against us, He would be near unto us and would sustain us. That was His covenant."³

A willingness to believe

And it all begins with the willingness to believe. "For if there be no faith among the children of men God can do no miracle among them" (Ether 12:12).

Do you believe that the Savior will really do for *you* what He has said He will do? That He can ease the sting of loneliness and enable you to deal with that haunting sense of inadequacy? That He will help you forgive? That He can fill you with optimism and hope? That He will help you resist your greatest temptation and tame your most annoying weakness? That He will respond to your deepest longing? That He is the only source of comfort, strength, direction, and peace that will not change, will not betray you, and will never let you down?

Father of lies

The adversary, of course, is intent on obstructing our vision and undermining our faith. He will do anything and everything to confuse us about who we are and where we're going because he has already forfeited his privilege of going there.

Satan wants us to fail the test on earth—to give up any hope of the Big Finish. Indeed, through eons of practice the adversary has perfected the arts of deception, deceit, despair, and discouragement. See if any of the following techniques sound familiar.

1. He tries to blur our vision of why we're here and get us preoccupied with this life. He would have us distracted by and involved in anything and everything except what we came for.



2. He wants us to feel insignificant—that no matter how hard we try, we'll never make much of a difference.
3. He tries to wear us down by creating the image that it is not important to endure to the end.
4. He encourages us to judge and evaluate each other—a practice that is demeaning to both the person who judges and the one who is judged.
5. He whispers that life is not fair and that if the gospel were true we would never have problems or disappointments.
6. He attempts to numb us into letting our standards slide.
7. He promotes feelings of guilt and discouragement.
8. He works hard to undermine our innate tendency to nurture and care for others.
9. He would have us stymied by the commandment to become perfect.
10. He would have us so busy that there's no time to live the gospel, no time to fast and pray, to immerse ourselves in the scriptures, to worship in the temple—all the things we need to do to "study" for our mortal test.
11. He delights in portraying religion as restrictive and austere rather than liberating and life-giving.

The fight for right

The antidote to the distractions of the adversary is Jesus Christ. Light *is* stronger than darkness. Jesus Christ illuminates our vision of who we are and why we are here and gives us courage to move forward in the journey toward our heavenly home. The potential reward *is* too good to be true, a Big Finish that makes Rachmaninoff pale by comparison.

Just as Satan's motives have been clearly identified, so are the Savior's, whose express work and glory is to "bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). "He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world, even that he layeth down his own life that he may draw all men unto him" (2 Nephi 26:24). The contrast between the Savior and Satan is stunning. It is the quintessential difference between light and dark, arrogance and humility, self-interest and charity, power used to destroy and power used to bless. It is the battle between good and evil personified.

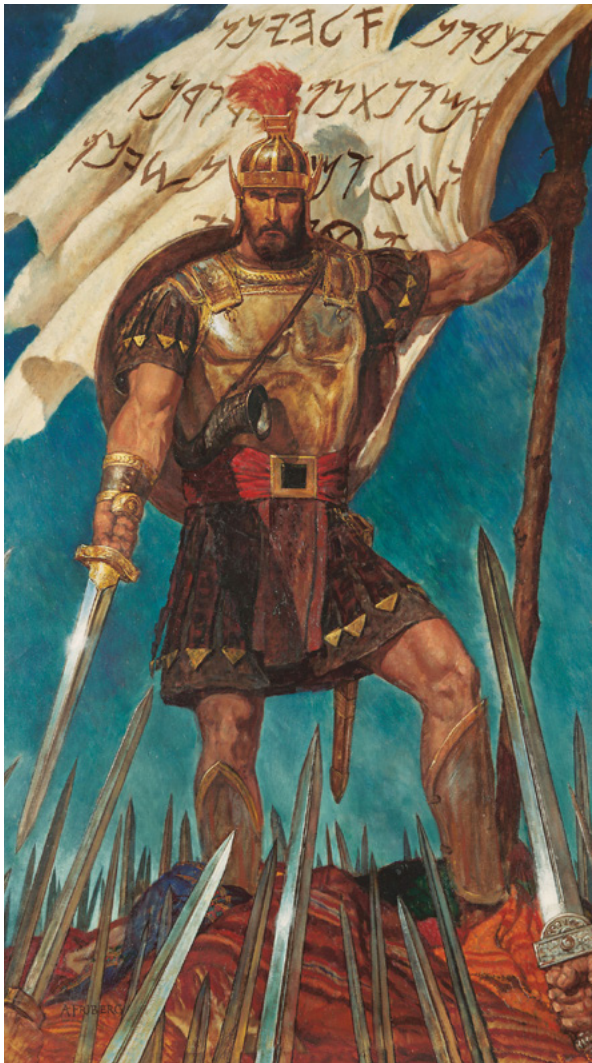
Twelve years ago President Ezra Taft Benson taught: "Never before on the face of this earth have the forces of evil and the forces of good been as well organized. . . . The final outcome is certain—the forces of righteousness will win. But what remains to be seen is *where* each of us . . . will stand in the battle—and how *tall* we will stand. . . . Great battles can make great heroes and heroines."⁴

We are a battalion in the army of the Lord

Are we not like Captain Moroni's armies who, though vastly outnumbered, were "inspired by a better cause, for they were not fighting for

monarchy nor power but they were fighting for their homes and their liberties, . . . yea, for their rites of worship and their church"? (Alma 43:45).

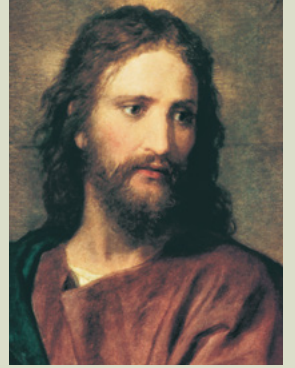
You and I compose a pivotal battalion in the army of the Lord! May we arise in this, the greatest cause on earth. May we go forward together in the strength of the Lord. More than ever He needs our faith and faithfulness, our vitality and our ingenuity, our unwavering commitment and conviction.



Captain Moroni inspired the Nephites by holding up the title of liberty. *Captain Moroni and the Title of Liberty*, by Arnold Friberg.

This life is a test. It is also a glorious privilege. May we work toward the kind of Big Finish the Apostle Paul described: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the

Do It Yourself



Faith is like a seed, requiring care and attention to help it grow (see Alma 32:28–43).

On a separate sheet of paper, write a poem or draw a picture to show how your faith can grow stronger like a seed.

faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord . . . shall give me at that day" (2 Timothy 4:7–8). May we build and keep the faith. May we go forward together with a clear vision of who we are, what we are about, and how vital our contribution is to the Lord's kingdom.

[Note: Subheadings were added or altered in this article. Some source citations were moved from the text of the talk to the endnotes.]

Endnotes

1. *Gospel Doctrine*, 5th ed. (1939), 14.
2. "Lord, Increase Our Faith," *Ensign*, Nov. 1987, 54.
3. *Gospel Truth*, sel. Jerreld L. Newquist, 2 vols. (1974), 1:170.
4. "In His Steps," address to Church Educational System personnel, Anaheim, California, 8 Feb. 1987).

3. Sister Sheri L. Dew taught: "Do you believe that the Savior will really do for *you* what He has said He will do? That He can ease the sting of loneliness and enable you to deal with that haunting sense of inadequacy? That He will help you forgive? That He can fill you with optimism and hope? That He will help you resist your greatest temptation and tame your most annoying weakness? That He will respond to your deepest longing? That He is the only source of comfort, strength, direction, and peace that will not change, will not betray you, and will never let you down?" What is your response to this teaching?

4. Sister Sheri L. Dew listed 11 tactics commonly used by Satan to deceive us in mortality. Have any of these tactics been used effectively against you? What can you do to counter Satan's deceptions?

5. What else have you learned in this lesson that you would like to share?

Name: _____ **Offender #:** _____

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