

A Perfect Brightness of Hope

By Elder Jeffrey R. Holland
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Because the Restoration reaffirmed the foundational truth that God does work in this world, we can hope, we should hope, even when facing the most insurmountable odds.

Last October, President Russell M. Nelson invited us to look *ahead* to this April 2020 conference by each of us in our own way looking *back* to see the majesty of God's hand in restoring the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sister Holland and I took that prophetic invitation seriously. We imagined ourselves living in the early 1800s, looking at the religious beliefs of that day. In that imagined setting, we asked ourselves, "What's missing here? What do we wish we had? What do we *hope* God will provide in response to our spiritual longing?"

Well, for one thing, we realized that two centuries ago we would have dearly hoped for the restoration of a truer concept of God than most in that day had, hidden as He often seemed to be behind centuries of error and misunderstanding. To borrow a phrase from William Ellery Channing, a prominent religious figure of the day, we would have looked for the "parental character of God," which Channing considered "the first great doctrine of Christianity."¹ Such a doctrine would have recognized Deity as a caring Father in Heaven, rather than a harsh judge dispensing stern justice or as an absentee landlord who had once been engaged in earthly matters but was now preoccupied somewhere else in the universe.

Yes, our hopes in 1820 would have been to find God speaking and guiding as openly in the present as He did in the past, a true Father, in the most loving sense of that word. He certainly would *not* have been a cold, arbitrary autocrat who predestined a select few for salvation and then consigned the rest of the human family to damnation. No, He would be one whose every action, by divine declaration, would be "for the benefit of the world; for he loveth the world"² and every inhabitant in it. That love would be His ultimate reason for sending Jesus Christ, His Only Begotten Son, to the earth.³

Speaking of Jesus, had we lived in those first years of the 19th century, we would have realized with great alarm that doubts about the reality of the Savior's life and Resurrection were beginning to take significant hold within Christendom. Therefore, we would have hoped for evidence to come to the whole world that would confirm the biblical witness that Jesus *is* the Christ, the literal Son of God, Alpha and Omega, and the only Savior this world will ever know. It would have been among our dearest hopes that other scriptural evidence be brought forward, something that could constitute another testament of Jesus Christ, enlarging and enhancing our knowledge of His miraculous birth, wondrous ministry, atoning

sacrifice, and glorious Resurrection. Truly such a document would be “righteousness [sent] down out of heaven; and truth [sent] forth out of the earth.”⁴

Observing the Christian world in that day, we would have hoped to find someone authorized by God with true priesthood authority who could baptize us, bestow the gift of the Holy Ghost, and administer all gospel ordinances necessary for exaltation. In 1820, we would have hoped to see fulfilled the eloquent promises of Isaiah, Micah, and other ancient prophets regarding the return of the majestic house of the Lord.⁵ We would have thrilled to see the glory of holy temples established again, with the Spirit, the ordinances, the power, and the authority to teach eternal truths, heal personal wounds, and bind families together forever. I would have looked anywhere and everywhere to find someone authorized to say to me and my beloved Patricia that our marriage in such a setting was sealed for time and all eternity, never to hear or have imposed on us the haunting curse “until death do you part.” I know that “in [our] Father’s house are many mansions,”⁶ but, speaking personally, if I were to be so fortunate as to inherit one of them, it could be no more to me than a decaying shack if Pat and our children were not with me to share that inheritance. And for our ancestors, some of whom lived and died anciently without even hearing the name of Jesus Christ, we would have hoped for that most just and merciful of biblical concepts to be restored—the practice of the living offering up saving ordinances on behalf of their kindred dead.⁷ No practice I can imagine would demonstrate with more splendor a loving God’s concern for every one of His earthly children no matter when they lived nor where they died.

Well, our 1820 list of hopes could go on, but perhaps the most important message of the Restoration is that such hopes would *not* have been in vain. Beginning in the Sacred Grove and continuing to this day, these desires began to be clothed in reality and became, as the Apostle Paul and others taught, true anchors to the soul, sure and steadfast.⁸ What was once only hoped for has now become history.

Thus our look back at 200 years of God’s goodness to the world. But what of our look ahead? We still have hopes that have *not* yet been fulfilled. Even as we speak, we are waging an “all hands on deck” war with COVID-19, a solemn reminder that a virus 1,000 times smaller than a grain of sand⁹ can bring entire populations and global economies to their knees. We pray for those who have lost loved ones in this modern plague, as well as for those who are currently infected or at risk. We certainly pray for those who are giving such magnificent health care. When we have conquered this—and we will—may we be equally committed to freeing the world from the virus of hunger, freeing neighborhoods and nations from the virus of poverty. May we hope for schools where students are taught—not terrified they will be shot—and for the gift of personal dignity for every child of God, unmarred by *any* form of racial, ethnic, or religious prejudice. Undergirding all of this is our relentless hope for greater devotion to the two greatest of all commandments: to love God by keeping His counsel and to love our neighbors by showing kindness and compassion, patience and forgiveness.¹⁰ These two divine directives are still—and forever will be—the only real hope we have for giving our children a better world than the one they now know.¹¹

In addition to having these global desires, many in this audience today have deeply personal hopes: hope for a marriage to improve, or sometimes just hope for a marriage; hope for an addiction to be conquered; hope for a wayward child to come back; hope for physical and emotional pain of a hundred kinds to cease. Because the Restoration reaffirmed the foundational truth that God does work in this world, we *can* hope, we *should* hope, even when facing the most insurmountable odds. That is what the scripture meant when Abraham was able to hope against hope¹²—that is, he was able to believe in spite of every reason *not* to believe—that he and Sarah could conceive a child when that seemed utterly impossible. So, I ask, “If so many of our 1820 hopes could begin to be fulfilled with a flash of divine light to a mere boy kneeling in a patch of trees in upstate New York, why should we not hope that righteous desires and Christlike yearnings can still be marvelously, miraculously answered by the God of all hope?” We all need to believe that what we desire in righteousness can someday, someday, somehow yet be ours.

Brothers and sisters, we know what some of the religious deficiencies in the early 19th century were. Furthermore, we know something of today’s religious shortcomings that still leave the hunger and hope of some unfulfilled. We know a variety of those dissatisfactions are leading some away from traditional ecclesiastical institutions. We also know, as one frustrated writer wrote, that “many religious leaders [of the day] seem clueless” in addressing this kind of decline, offering in response “a thin gruel of therapeutic deism, cheap symbolic activism, carefully couched heresy, [or sometimes just] uninspiring nonsense”¹³—and all at a time when the world needs so much more, when the rising generation deserves so much more, and when in Jesus’s day He offered so much more. As disciples of Christ, we can in our day rise above those ancient Israelites who moaned, “Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost.”¹⁴ Indeed, if we finally lose hope, we lose our last sustaining possession. It was over the very gate of hell that Dante wrote a warning to all those traveling through his *Divina Commedia*: “Abandon all hope,” he said, “ye who enter here.”¹⁵ Truly when hope is gone, what we have left is the flame of the inferno raging on every side.

So, when our backs are to the wall and, as the hymn says, “other helpers fail and comforts flee,”¹⁶ among our most indispensable virtues will be this precious gift of hope linked inextricably to our faith in God and our charity to others.

In this bicentennial year, when we look back to see all we have been given and rejoice in the realization of so many hopes fulfilled, I echo the sentiment of a beautiful young returned sister missionary who said to us in Johannesburg just a few months ago, “[We] did not come this far only to come this far.”¹⁷

Paraphrasing one of the most inspiring valedictories ever recorded in scripture, I say with the prophet Nephi and that young sister:

“My beloved brethren [and sisters], after ye have [received these first fruits of the Restoration], I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. ...

“... Ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, *having a perfect brightness of hope*, and a love of God and of all men. ... If ye shall[,] ... saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.”¹⁸

I give thanks, my brothers and sisters, for all we have been given in this last and greatest of all dispensations, the dispensation of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. The gifts and blessings that flow from that gospel mean everything to me—everything—so in an effort to thank my Father in Heaven for them, I have “promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep.”¹⁹ May we press forward with love in our hearts, walking in the “brightness of hope”²⁰ that lights the path of holy anticipation we have been on now for 200 years. I testify that the future is going to be as miracle-filled and bountifully blessed as the past has been. We have every reason to hope for blessings even greater than those we have already received because this is the work of Almighty God, this is the Church of continuing revelation, this is the gospel of Christ’s unlimited grace and benevolence. I bear witness to all of these truths and so much more in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.