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Latter-day Saint Women Podcast Transcript

Keith Erikson | Questions and Doubt, Answers and Peace

KARLIE.

Hello, and welcome to the Latter-day Saint Women podcast, where we share the legacy of women of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. You'll get to know the faithful women who shaped our past and hear from inspiring women and men of faith today. I'm Karlie Guymon.

SHALYN.

And I'm Shalyn Back. We're your cohosts. Today, we're excited to welcome Keith Erickson to the podcast, who is here with us in the studio today in Salt Lake City. Keith, welcome.

KEITH.

Thank you. I'm so glad to be here.

SHALYN.

Well, and we're just so fortunate to be able to meet in person despite so many COVID restrictions lately. We get to safely distance, and we're excited that we get to have this conversation in person, so thank you. Just as a brief introduction to our guest, Keith Erickson grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. He got a bachelor's and master's degree from BYU, a doctoral degree in history from Indiana University, and he has a master of business administration from the University of Texas at El Paso. He is an author, a teacher, and a historian, who currently works in the Church History Department with outreach and special initiatives, and he also sits on the editorial board of the Church Historian's Press. Keith, will you just share with us some of the projects that you're maybe working on right now?

KEITH.



Sure. I have kind of a charge right now to help our department, the Church History Department, get the word out more about things that we do. So we've kind of had a habit of publishing a book and then publishing another book and then publishing another book. And so my job is to say, "Hey, who could benefit from this? And where can we find them? And how can we help connect with them in a way that is meaningful to them?"

SHALYN.

That's awesome, and there are so many things online, too, that are available that—

KEITH.

That's right.

SHALYN.

I'm sure you're working a lot with that, too, to just make people aware of all of these incredible resources.

KEITH.

Yeah, really trying to meet people where they are and offer the things that can help.

KARLIE.

That's awesome.

SHALYN.

Well, in a previous conversation that we had—it was fun—you mentioned that you have four sisters and four daughters, so you're very comfortable around women as an audience.

KARLIE.

—surrounded by women.

KEITH.



Probably most comfortable in this setting. I was the Young Men president for a while, and Scout camp was just weird.

SHALYN.

That's so funny. Well, I thought this was fun that you were actually the Relief Society pianist as a teenager.

KEITH.

I was. It was kind of funny; it was like a top-secret meeting. And they wouldn't let me in at the beginning. They would do something. I had to sit in the hall, and then they would open the door and I'd come in.

KARLIE.

—escort you in.

KEITH.

I'd play the opening song, and then they'd pray. And then this was the olden days when there was a practice hymn, so I'd play that one. And then I had to leave, and so that was my little window into Relief Society.

KARLIE.

You still don't know what we do in Relief Society, right?

KEITH.

You know, I may have attended once or twice for random reasons, but mostly, no. It's a black box filled with dark secrets.

SHALYN.

That's too funny. Well, just to introduce the topic, we've heard from many women who have specific questions about their faith and even doubts that they have. We've also received direction from the General Relief Society Presidency and advisory councils about these same questions too. They're getting lots of people asking them how to strengthen our faith, how to sustain it, and even in a lot of cases, how to get your faith back.



So we are really excited to have Keith here to share some of his insights from his personal life and also professionally. And we just appreciate you being here to share with us.

KARLIE.

So to jump right into the questions, while there are some unique challenges we know to our time, to the technology that we have access to, and how those things affect our faith, questioning our faith isn't really something that's new—or questions about faith or doubts about faith. Members of the Church and really anyone who tries to exercise faith have always had questions and doubts. So Keith, as a historian, we'd love for you to share with us some examples of early members of the Church who had doubts about their religious beliefs or questioned their faith.

KEITH.

Yeah, you make a really good observation there that it is a common experience for every disciple of Jesus Christ to have to gain a testimony and then endure to the end and then kind of withstand the trials and things that happen. It's just part of mortal experience. In the modern times, from the Restoration forward, those experiences also occurred, and they happened in ways that are sometimes similar today. For example, everybody who meets the missionaries and hears the message, well, they wonder and they want to learn things and they want to seek other opinions. So for example, Brigham Young encountered the Church during the first year after it was organized, and he spent nearly two years working through his own questions and concerns to make sure that he was making the right decision. There are other times—there were some tough moments in Kirtland when the bank failed, and there were questions about Joseph and his leadership. One woman really inspired me in that moment; her name was Desdemona Fullmer. And people were harassing her and bothering her: “Why are you still staying with the Church?” And her answer was, “Well, the Lord told me Joseph was a prophet, and He hasn't told me that he isn't.”

And so along the way—and pioneers would struggle. We often tell stories and sing songs and represent it like there's faith in every footstep, every single footstep. And every pioneer never had questions or worries. Well, the data, if we go back and look at it, show other things. People get to the valley, and they say, “No, this isn't for me.” And they go back home.



They go back to their families. Some of them go back to their churches. And so, yeah, we move into the 20th century, people start wondering about evolution and science. And so Latter-day Saints are part of a broader world, a broader conversation about religion and science. And we're also part of our faith journey in conversion and enduring to the end and life experiences. And all of those things at different times and in different combinations make people wonder, "What do I really believe, and do I really want to stick with this?"

SHALYN.

I really appreciate hearing that because I feel like it's always going to be something. You know, we do have such ease of access to information with the internet and things like that, but we didn't have the same challenges as crossing the plains and, you know, leaving our homes and everything. And it's like, "Oh, this isn't for me." And so I appreciate that perspective. And just kind of as a follow-up to this discussion about the impact that our time or technology may have on us in relation to our faith, what about things like gender or age or location? What kind of impact do those things have on who questions our faith or what doubts they may have about the gospel?

KEITH.

Yeah, that is a really great observation. I don't know that demographic characteristics cause us to question some kind of level that women don't question more than men. But what I do think happens is when we question, when we wonder—and we all do inevitably—whatever the prompting, whether it's life experience or something that's going on in our broader society. But when that happens, I do really strongly believe that who we are shapes how we think about things. One example that I often encounter—and lots of people ask questions to me. I've worked for the Church for about eight years now, and that has kind of put a target on you: "Oh, hey, you work there. Let me ask you this question."

SHALYN.

You know everything.

KEITH.

Yeah, they assume you know everything. But an example of this is the topic of plural marriage. It's a topic that causes questions for everybody—men and women, people in the United States, people in



Europe. It's just a strange thing that's different than what we do, and it prompts questions. But one thing that's been interesting for me to observe is that many of the questions related to plural marriage touch women differently. For example, there are ways to think about plural marriage that make it seem like being a woman means you're not significant in this. You're just a thing; you're given to a man, and a man will have multiple of these. And so for women, there becomes a question of their identity and value—

KARLIE.

And value.

KEITH.

—and their place in the kingdom and “What does God think about me?” And men often don't think about that. And it's been interesting, sometimes I have conversations with a husband and a wife together, and we start talking, the wife and I, about your identity, your value. And the man is sitting there like, “Huh, I never thought of that before.”

KARLIE.

It's a revelation.

KEITH.

Then he has more insight on why this is so troubling for his wife, because he's thinking about other aspects of plural marriage, which cause questions and concerns and worries, but it's not the same. I think questions about LGBTQ issues are questions that touch different people in different ways. And we often see in addition to the individual who has questions about their identity and coming out in their family and how they fit, we've seen, in particular, mothers have an especially strong reaction to the way their children are treated or perceived or the injustices—and fathers to some extent too, yes. But there's definitely within the community and kind of in the literature, mothers have a very—

KARLIE.

That bond.

KEITH.



And they're really feeling it differently than their child and differently than their spouse sometimes and differently than people around them. So yes, who we are as we wonder about things is really important. So there can't just be, "Here's the answer for everyone."

SHALYN.

Right.

KEITH.

And it reminds me when the Savior ministers to people one by one. You know, I think about times when He healed somebody who was blind and another blind person comes to Him. Jesus doesn't say, "Oh, I already did this. Check the website; there's the categorical answer for blind people." No, that person is blind, and Jesus heals that person. And I think that's really important that our questions are ours, and they're related to our identity; they're related to our life history, our personal experience. And so answers become a personal thing for us and for our personal relationship with God.

SHALYN.

And in some ways, I think that's difficult, because it would be nice to just go to a website and get an answer. But then it's also more beautiful when we have the opportunity to have it be meaningful to us, where we are in our lives, based on our experiences and our perspective. It does become so much more meaningful and so much more valuable when it's so personal.

KEITH.

Yeah, and you know, God and Jesus want a personal relationship with us. And the Holy Ghost is like this amazingly capable personalizer. We can talk about the Holy Ghost generally: "Oh, did you feel the Spirit?" People feel the Spirit. But what the Holy Ghost really does is as a personal gift to every single person. That means someone could give a sermon, and every single person in the congregation could and the promises should feel something uniquely personal just for them. And sometimes I feel that the personalization promise is one that we don't always go up and claim. We'll walk out of a meeting and say, "Oh, I felt good." But we should also say, "No, I should have felt something just for me, for who I am and where I came from before I got here today." And that's really, really powerful.



SHALYN.

That is.

KARLIE.

I think that this is such a good and specific piece of advice for people with questions. I think of maybe when I've had questions or doubts, and I've looked to others for, "What answer did you get on this?" And sometimes I think there's a hesitancy to share maybe on a broad or general level specific answers received. Or other times it's like, "Well, that doesn't help any." If someone shares with you the answer they received, it's like, "That doesn't answer the question." So I think this is good and tangible advice. If you have a question, seek your own personal answer. And we know how that theoretically comes about. We study, we pray, we wait, and we trust, and we learn how the Spirit speaks to us. And I think that can be a helpful pattern or path for people with these questions.

KEITH.

Yeah, when people struggle, when we struggle, it's because we lack peace. I mean, that's what a struggle is: "I don't have the peace that I'm looking for." And it's been really inspiring to me that one of the titles of the Savior is the Prince of Peace. And instruction that He gives in multiple times in different scripture is that the Holy Ghost will speak peace to our minds and to our hearts. And I think that connection about the peace that we seek in these moments and the peace that Jesus offers and the peace that can come to us through the Holy Ghost, that's the goal at a personal level. That relationship is the one that matters the most.

SHALYN.

And it's not that we can't gain insight from other people's experiences. I feel like that's really important in storytelling and sharing what we've gone through. It can be a real inspiration and really beneficial to those around us. But I have for sure made the mistake of maybe being really prescriptive in my answers that, you know—if people have questions. And that is not helpful, because we are just not in the same place. And I feel like sharing our stories in a way that's applicable for us but also leaves room for other people to take what they need from that for their personal lives, I think is important. And from my perspective, not to judge them where they're at, you know: "Well, this worked for me. Why isn't this working for you?" kind of thing.



KEITH.

Right. And so much bad advice comes from a good place, somebody saying, “This worked for me; it should work for you.” And the advice giver needs to realize this worked for me, great; but it might not work for them.

KARLIE.

That might be where it ends—“It worked for me.”

KEITH.

Sometimes it hurts them. And sometimes there are people who may have had this kind of question a long, long time ago, and they may have forgotten it. And I’ve talked to people who said, “Well, I went to my bishop, and he just said, ‘Well, don’t worry about it. It’ll all work out,’ because he worried about it 30 years ago, but I’m worrying about it today.” But for that person today, now they have two burdens. They have the thing they were worried about and “Why did it feel like my bishop just dismissed me?” And so it can add—if we’re not aware that what worked for us might not fit, we may unintentionally be adding to the burden that they carry.

KARLIE.

So, good advice there for both people seeking questions and also those maybe offering counsel or just being a listening ear to those asking the questions. So thank you. Keith, thus far, we’ve kind of talked about maybe specific questions or concerns we have about doctrine or history. But in this time that we live, as we continue to trudge through this pandemic, we also hear lots of questions about how to have faith over fear, the fear of the unknown, which can also lead to doubt and then these challenges like anxiety and depression that just add to this already difficult situation. So while some of our doubts may stem from, again, these specific questions, how can we remain faithful when maybe just generally we’re feeling discouraged or alone or disconnected from that peace that we’re really trying to seek?

KEITH.

Yeah, I like how you put it, because there are so many layers, and they get so tangled up. And it’s usually not helpful to think about it. And sometimes analysts will try and do this and carve out every little thing as if it were a thing. Like “Well, it’s 12 percent your depression, and it’s 14



percent the economy, and it's 33 percent your upbringing." You can't do that because they all layer on top of each other. But they are really important layers, the life experience around us. I appreciate that you brought up questions about our own mental health because those are important generally, but right now during the pandemic, that is one of the places where we're wearing ourselves out. We're just trying so hard to keep going. And sometimes we just have to say, "You know what, it's okay that I'm feeling down, that I'm feeling lost, that I'm feeling disconnected from people. I've only ever seen people as little squares on a screen for the last three weeks." And so I think we need to give ourselves space to do that and that there are longer-term conditions that always play a factor. And this isn't a Latter-day Saint thing or a not Latter-day Saint thing, but individual experiences with depression or with scrupulosity or with anxiety, those factor in.

So what starts as maybe a historical question then gets a layer of anxiety added to it. It's like what we were talking about polygamy earlier. So there's a historical side to polygamy; then there's an anxiety component, which could be, "Is this going to happen again? Is this going to have to be my experience?" And then that could—depending on the reaction, there's a depression part of, "I don't want that to be part of my experience." So they all get connected. And it's important to think about questions, I think, in a couple of different dimensions. One is, there's a cognitive component, or an informational component. Tell me the facts about plural marriage. And I think the Gospel Topics essays that the Church published and things that we've published in the Church History Department, like *Saints* or *The Joseph Smith Papers*, they're really good at giving that informational thing. "Oh, you have a question about the book of Abraham; here's some information about it." But there's another dimension that we're kind of talking about here, which is the emotional dimension and this is the fact about the topic, but "What does that prompt in my feeling or my reaction?" And that's the part that is personal, and it's also just as important and in some cases, maybe even more important.

And there's a story in the New Testament that really illustrates this for me, and it's when Lazarus dies. And before his death, his sisters had sent word to Jesus: "Lazarus is sick. Come and heal him." That is an expression of faith. They recognized their brother was sick. They knew kind of cognitively, informationally, Jesus healed people. And so they sent the expression, "Please come and heal Lazarus." Well, Jesus delays. Lazarus dies. When Jesus shows up, Mary and Martha come out, and they are in despair. They're in distress. Their brother has died. And it's interesting to me, a couple of things that happened. One, they



say to Jesus, “If you had been here, he wouldn’t have died.” And at the same time, that expression is both a really personal, emotional expression of distress, and it’s an expression of testimony. They’re saying, “We know you heal people, and if you’d been here, you could have healed him.” And so sometimes we think, “Oh, either I have a faith or I have a doubt.” But Mary and Martha are showing that they’re expressing both of those at the same time. They’re really frustrated and sad, and they’re expressing faith. And to me, the next interesting thing in the story is what Jesus does. He doesn’t answer with new information, which He has. He has information.

“Oh, by the way, I also bring people back from the dead. You just haven’t seen that yet.” But He doesn’t answer with information; He weeps. This is the shortest verse in the scriptures: “Jesus wept.” This is the moment when they come out with their emotions just stretched out to the breaking point. His first answer is to weep with them and to mourn with them and to let them know that the distress part of their question is just as important as the informational part of the question. And so they mourn together.

SHALYN.

And He does not dismiss them.

KEITH.

And He doesn’t dismiss them; He validates it. Your feelings are just as important as facts or answers. And then after ministering to their feelings, then He reveals more about His mission and His power. You know, now you kind of imagine things. What if He just ignored their feelings and called Lazarus out? They probably would have still had some trauma to work through. And I think they still had trauma to work through—to watch your brother die and then watch him come back. You know, the rest of the story isn’t like, “How did therapy go after that?” But what I think is the really important thing is in that moment, Jesus knew that their feelings, administering to their feelings, are just as important as whatever the subject of the question was. And I think that’s something, you know, as Latter-day Saints—and women are better at this than men. I’ll speak generally about men. We’re really good—like if someone has a problem and the answer is, “Well, go help them move” or “Go shovel their snow” or “Bring them a dinner,” as Latter-day Saints, we’re good at that.



But when the solution is “Listen to them for 45 minutes and then cry,” we have a harder time with that. Like “Well, can we just send you a meal?” That’d be a lot easier. But it’s hard; it’s really hard, emotional ministering work.

KARLIE.

I love that as a historian, you’re also bringing this perspective of the emotional aspect of questions. And what I also think is interesting is that two different people could have the same information but have different emotions.

KEITH.

Yeah.

KARLIE.

And accepting that and realizing maybe we have the same background and we have the same information on these issues, or generally we’re having the same experience living in the world in 2022, but it’s okay if we’re having different emotions about that, and then addressing those emotions.

KEITH.

And sometimes that triggers people. They’ll look around and say, “Well, people in my family are having questions or people around me. Should I?” And I don’t think you need to, because you are different people. You’ve had different experiences. And, you know, I’m the oldest of seven, so we will joke, the younger ones, they lived a totally different life than the older ones. But the reality is we all are individuals. Even though we grew up in the same families or the same towns, we have individual experiences. And just because something’s happening around you doesn’t mean it has to happen to you. So be your own individual, too, as you think about this.

SHALYN.

Well, that leads perfectly into the next question, because one of the questions that we see that’s very specific is “How can I remain faithful when so many people around me are leaving the Church?” And there are so many various reasons, and there’s not even one reason. As we mentioned before, there are so many layers to who we are and what we’re experiencing and going through at any given moment. But like you said, people might start to



question, “How can I remain faithful when other people around me are losing their faith?” And this is especially applicable, I’m thinking, to women who have children or spouses who are no longer associating with the Church. And it can be really distressing and really discouraging and sometimes confusing. So, Keith, we would love to know, what would you suggest that we do when someone in our family or a friend is losing their faith or doubting their testimonies of the restored gospel, and how can we not let that affect our own faith?

KEITH.

Yeah, that’s a good question. We often ask, “How do I help them?” But I really like, “How do I help myself? How do I keep myself together?” I think—and this is again just kind of me speaking personally—I think the key to faith and testimony is our personal relationship with the Lord. And so, the things that cultivate that relationship and strengthen it, I think, are the things that really matter.

And sometimes people turn these into a checklist. It drives me kind of crazy, you know, like, “Well, did you read your scriptures? Did you say your prayers?” But that’s not really how it succeeds, at least from my experience. The question needs to be, “Am I communing with God? Do I feel like I’m getting a message from Him today? And if I didn’t, then why not?” A lot of times we’ll say in church or something like, “Oh, tell us an inspiring story.” And someone will talk about their mission or how they met their spouse 30 years ago. We actually do a thing in our family home evening where we make people say something that happened that week, in the last seven days, about “How did you live the gospel and feel the Lord and have a connection?” because that actually drove me crazy. One time, when I was an elders quorum president, I almost banned every comment that started with “When I was on a mission.” But I had a counselor who told me that for some people, that was the last time they felt it, and it was important for them to share it. And I understood that and didn’t ban it. But my follow-up was, “If that was the last time you got an answer from God, then you’re overdue.” And so, how can you do that? Through prayer, through scripture study, through seeking to feel the Holy Ghost. The promise is constant companionship. And then we tell stories like, “Yeah, six months ago, I had this thing.” No, constant companionship should be a lot more recent. And so, I think anything we do—if people around us are struggling, because they will, anything we do to keep that personal, constant connection with God is where we need to be thinking about.



KARLIE.

I like what you're bringing up about having more recent experiences with the Spirit. And I think part of why maybe we struggle with that—we look back on experiences—is because our faith does change and evolve over a lifetime. And also, the way that we communed with God on a mission is not really easily replicated. You know, I think of my own life. I have a three-year-old and a one-year-old. There are not two hours of study happening in the morning, you know.

KEITH.

Two hours of study and 42 prayers a day.

KARLIE.

Yeah, yeah. And so, I think we think, “That was a really spiritual time because I was doing all of these things,” and it's allowing our faith to change and evolve. And it's like, “Okay, what is a realistic way for me to commune with God?” Maybe it's sitting in silence for just a few minutes, maybe it's reading a quote, maybe it's listening to a song that I'm like, “I really feel God's love when I listen to this Primary song,” or singing with my three-year-old. So I think it's allowing our faith to change and evolve, and maybe you could speak to that too.

KEITH.

Yeah, that's so right, because our faith does grow and our relationship with God grows. And imagine it like a person. If you met a person, and the first time you meet them, they say, “Hi, what's your name? What do you do? Where do you work?” all of that. And then the next time you meet that person, they say, “Hi, what's your name? Where do you work? What do you do?” You would be like, “Wait a minute. We know each other; we have a relationship.” And then if they do that 10 times, you're like, “This isn't even a relationship; this is a ritual or something.” And so, we have to be evolving in how we talk to God and how we let Him talk to us. One metaphor that I really like in scripture—Paul uses it, but it shows up in lots of other places—that there are “fruits of the Spirit,” that “there are multiple things.” And so, yeah, I felt something as a missionary, but I can feel something different now. And maybe I've never had a dream about something—all my dreams were weird and random, but right now, as I'm exhausted as a parent and I collapse, maybe that is a moment where I have a dream and a communication is going to happen that way.



And so, yeah, there are so many ways that the Holy Ghost will speak to us. If we just think, “Well, when I feel the Spirit, I feel this,” we’re like having that same conversation every time we go to God. We tell Him our name and what we do. And He’s got so much more to say to us. And so yeah, thinking of examples, I remember things as a new parent that I would do differently, that I didn’t do before, like read a little kid version of the scriptures with my kids. I can’t tell you how many times I’d be staring at that book and think, “Oh, I never noticed that in that story,” because whoever wrote the narrative or especially the artists, they depict something that I had pictured it differently in my head. And there I am having this moment with like a little kid’s illustration. But it’s not me and it’s not the illustration; it’s the Holy Ghost. That was what opened the door to say, “Here’s a thought. Here’s a way to think about it differently.” My kids also have been fountains of random questions that I never thought about. But people at church do that, callings with the youth, they’ll ask questions and I’ll say... “Huh, wow.”

SHALYN.

And that’s great. Asking questions, this is great. We don’t want people to think you can’t question where you are.

KEITH.

Exactly.

KARLIE.

I was so impressed, I’m thinking of a conversation I had with my dad just recently, and I asked a pretty difficult question. And my dad just was like, “You know, I don’t know.” He didn’t rush to tell me what I should think or testify to me. He was just like, “That’s a good question, and I don’t know.”

KEITH.

Yeah, I think in terms of evolving in our communion with God, one thing I didn’t do as a missionary, which I do now as a boring adult, is I sit in traffic jams and I’ve turned off the radio or podcasts or something. And so there’s like a moment which I’m just like, “Okay, what do you have God? Here I am. I’m not doing anything else. What can you help me with?” And you know what? He always has an answer. Whenever I ask, “Do you have any advice for me? What am I not doing as well as I should?” There are answers, little nudges. There are thoughts.



KARLIE.

It's an interesting way to approach communing with God.

SHALYN.

Yeah, so you said a couple of things that stood out to me. You talked about this constant companionship that we have with the Spirit, and then your kids bring a different perspective. My oldest daughter was recently baptized, and so, of course, we're having so many conversations about the Holy Ghost and things like that. And one of her cute little New Year's resolutions that she made in school was to be nicer to her sisters. And so we kind of talked about that, and like "When you're nice to your sisters and you feel good, that is the Spirit of God just helping you know that that was a good decision and that you're doing a great job." So it's interesting to me, these different perspectives that we can have as we're teaching in different moments of our lives.

KEITH.

Yeah, that really calls to my mind some verses in Doctrine and Covenants, section 11, where it's talking about the Holy Ghost. We often think of things like peace or love or happiness, but in that section, it says that the Holy Ghost leads us to do good and to deal justly and to walk humbly. And so, we need to learn to recognize when I'm having a feeling about an injustice, that's the Holy Ghost. Sometimes people think, "Oh, injustice is just whatever." No, the Holy Ghost is leading us to deal justly. So if we have that feeling, that is one of the ways that it comes in. To be humble, we see something big and overwhelming—you mentioned your father, to say "I don't know" is the Holy Ghost leading you to walk humbly in a space where you should be humble in this space. So yeah, there are so many ways that the Holy Ghost can touch us, and sometimes, like with your child, somebody needs to say, "Hey, that's the Holy Ghost," because we just kind of feel it. And that's one of the occupational hazards, I guess, of having the constant companionship for such long a time; you kind of forget about it, you're not used to it. And then somebody has to say, "No, that's what that is. Pay attention to it."

SHALYN.

Especially in this context of questions that we have. If we're open and seeking, then anytime can be an opportunity to hear an answer.



KEITH.

Right. And we often think, “Oh, I’m only going to get an answer if I’m at church or reading scriptures.” Well, Church history teaches us something so much better, because what prompts Joseph Smith to ask and wonder and learn about things? Well, sermons of other preachers. Yeah, reading the scriptures. Oh, there’s a social club in town called Masons, so he joins. He looks at it; he wonders things. He’s always interacting with the environment. And so, can you feel the Holy Ghost reading the news or scrolling through Twitter? Yeah, you should be. As you interact with the world around you—

KARLIE.

In traffic.

KEITH.

—in traffic, you know, God wants you to be thinking about things and connecting with Him as you do so.

SHALYN.

I love that.

KARLIE.

And what I think about as we’re having this discussion is that when you are in a situation of feeling like you’re standing alone—we’re talking about if a spouse has left or children or family members or just close friends—it can really cause you to feel a lack of confidence. And strengthening that relationship and that connection can help bring that confidence, that it’s like, you know, “I know that you’re feeling that way, but actually I feel this way,” or “I have had these experiences.” And that can strengthen our confidence, which really is just trust and faith in God.

KEITH.

Oh, I love what you said about confidence and trust and faith. And I’ll add one more thing to the bundle. Section 121 in the Doctrine and Covenants talks about confidence coming from the Holy Ghost and having confidence waxing strong in the presence of God. Confidence is an interesting thing because it’s not like a light switch that turns off or



on. Confidence grows and grows and grows, and then sometimes it just kind of dwindles away. But the Holy Ghost can help strengthen your confidence.

KARLIE.

Thank you, Keith. I love that insight. Now, we kind of want to ask you personally—you've talked about your experience as a Church historian and people coming to you with questions they've had—have you experienced times when you've questioned your faith based on something you've learned or discovered? And how have you faced these doubts and overcome them?

KEITH.

Yes, of course. I've come to understand faith as a dynamic process, as a growing process. And there are metaphors throughout the scriptures about this. You plant a seed and then it grows. It becomes a tree. It bears fruit. So yes, in that dynamic process, there's always a kind of—and if we stay with the plant metaphor, there are adverse weather conditions, there are good weather conditions, there are drought years. If my faith is going to grow and live like a living thing, then it's going to be interacting with the environment and whatever is going on there. So, definitely, yes.

If I were to think about an experience—I'm going to narrate this because it's in the past. This was one that happened when I was in graduate school, and so there was a personal layer and then there was a professional layer and then a religious layer. And so, the question is about race and racism. And at a personal level, we had a friend of our family who was an African American, and she was learning about the gospel. She wasn't a member of the Church. We had met her in the graduate school community. A really wonderful person. And then we started talking about Church, and she started meeting with the missionaries. And so, at a personal level, she was asking questions and the missionaries were just blinking. And so we were helping them out, you know, as part of the conversation. But we had this intense personal layer that a person that we knew, that we cared about had questions about. Now the religious layer—questions about the history of our Church and racism in our past and inequities in practice. And so, our friend, she was trying to make sense of them. And together we were learning more about them, more than she knew before, and for me, more than I knew as I had dug deeper than I had before to figure some things out. Then at the same time, another layer here is that I was taking several courses that dealt with the really big systemic inequities in our earth. I'm



talking about wars and genocide and mass murders of other people based on their ethnicity or their race.

Some people ask a simple question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” And at this professional level, I was dealing with, “Why do billions of bad things happen to billions of people over millions of years?” and just this tremendous weight of the trauma of life. So looking back, I can now carve those out into some little layers. But in the moment, they were all blurred together. And it was just kind of like our Church’s history, our friend’s questions, global genocide and war.

And I remember a day, I was walking across the campus. It was winter. There were no leaves. It was cold, snow on the ground. I looked up at the sky, kind of this big open sky, and I talked out loud. I was kind of yelling at God, “What’s going on?” and expressing my frustrations and my concerns. And then an interesting thing happened—nothing happened. I’m just yelling at the sky. But later when I was quieter, I was reading in the book of Moses, and I’m reading in chapter seven, where Enoch is talking with Jehovah, and then Enoch sees what I had been studying as history; Enoch sees it as future. He sees what would happen and ultimately the destruction of people at the flood and that kind of great wickedness. I just felt in that moment, “Oh, Enoch and I are encountering big-scale trauma.” And Enoch turns to Jehovah, and he sees Jehovah weeping. And for me, the insight, the revelation that came when I was yelling at God was not that He wasn’t there, that He wasn’t listening, that He didn’t care but that He was weeping. And Enoch was as shocked. And now I’m kind of like really close with Enoch in the story. Enoch is shocked, and he says to Jehovah, “You’re not supposed to be weeping. How can you be weeping? You’re God. You’re all powerful. You did this.”

And so, Jehovah says, “Well, I created them. I love them. I know them. I gave them their agency. They hate one another. They’re killing each other. They’re destroying each other.” And then Enoch gets this perspective into Jehovah. And then Enoch starts weeping, and it says it’s bitter; it’s the most bitter thing that there could be. And to me, that was the moment where I realized that it wasn’t that God forgot the world and all of these terrible things happened but that He knows about it and that He’s weeping. And we have a saying that people often use, “Oh, did you see the hand of God in history?” And I think that’s an important thing. But what I learned through this experience is that we also need to learn how to see the tears of God in history. We need to see the places where He is weeping, where He is mourning. And as we do that, there are other



things that God does that we start to see. When we look for the weeping God, we start to see—there's a phrase in the scriptures that I love, "that he swallows things up." That's the phrase.

A famous one is Paul talks about the sting of death being gone. In Mosiah, it talks about "the sting of death being swallowed up." There's another time where Alma and the missionaries working with him suffer all kinds of tribulations and list this whole list of things, and then it says, "All of those were swallowed up in the joy of Christ." And all through this experience, kind of what I learned was, "Yeah, there are really tough things, but God also swallows them up." And if we were to put like a scale on it—I had 87 units of suffering today. Well, God swallows that up with 88 units of joy. That's like a really simplistic way to say it, but that's what they're saying is that God will swallow it up. He doesn't take it away; you don't not feel sorrow and pain and trauma and stress. But if you find the God who has tears in history and who has tears in your personal history, then there's also compensatory strength and help that He offers.

KARLIE.

Wow, what a beautiful example. Thank you. And not the answer that you were really looking for, right?

KEITH.

No, it wasn't. And you're right, one of the things I had to learn is that often issues that we debate in public, they get a contentious framework, and it's often an either-or polarized framework—this or that. And frankly, it's been my experience that God is in neither one of those polls. He's bigger than all of them, and He's in between and He's around. And if you're going to find God, it's not going to be defending one of those hilltops in that battle; it's going to be in a different quiet place somewhere where He is, and you see His perspective on it, not the perspective of the two warring camps.

SHALYN.

Wow. Well, thank you so much, Keith. We love having historians on here. We love the perspective that they bring from their profession. And you have such a great grasp on the history of the Church and those who are involved in the history of the Church, and then to balance that with your own faith, it's really valuable to me. And I love having you



come and share your personal insights as well as what you've learned from your research.

KEITH.

Well, it's been a privilege. Thank you.

SHALYN.

Well, Keith, as we wrap up the episode, we would love to know if there's anything more you would like to share with those listening to the podcast, especially the women of the Church who may have questions. You know, what do they do next? What actions can they take?

KEITH.

Yeah, that's a really good question. And we always have a default hope that there's an action. We want to go read a book, let me listen to this episode, let me do a thing. So maybe I'll give a little bit of a counterintuitive comment that's maybe less of an action, which is there is a phrase in scripture about "waiting on the Lord." And I think it has more nuance than sitting around waiting for time to pass. And maybe if we go back into the history of language, it probably has more connection with people who serve as the wait staff in a restaurant. Anybody who's ever worked that knows that being a waiter is not sitting there. You are doing all kinds of things. And so waiting on the Lord—you know, there's another word "attending to the guest," right? And that's kind of like my mother and my mother-in-law, both are really good at that. You show up at a place, they're like, "Well, take off your coat" and "Are you hungry?" That kind of attentiveness. And so, I think waiting on the Lord is being attentive to what is happening. So for example, we might have a question about this, and then we go to general conference and they talk about something different.

Some people will walk away and say, "Well, why didn't they talk about my thing?" And one possible answer could be the Lord's telling you there's another thing to think about. So be attentive to that, because sometimes we'll zero in and say, "This is my thing; this is my issue. This is all I'm going to talk about, I'm going to worry about." And the Lord is saying, "No, no, there are lots of other things to do." And so being attentive to those lots of other things. And I guess the other one I would offer is for me personally, service has been a place where I've found answers. I worry about something, I wonder about it, I study



it, and I'll spend hours and hours reading in the library and doing things. But the answer, the peaceful resolution doesn't come in the library; it comes when it's 4:00 on Friday afternoon and they say, "Well, these people have to move and they need help at like 5:30 p.m." And you're like, "Oh, I don't really want to do that." But it's in those weird moments where I'm kind of disconnected from everything and I'm just like, "Okay, I'm going to go and I'm going to serve" and I'm holding a box of really cheap stuff or you're moving some particle board shelf or dresser and you're like, "This isn't even worth putting on a truck; it's so old and pathetic." But those are the moments when I find the answers come, when I've stepped beyond my own selfish self. And I kind of narrated that story, it often begins with my selfish self. "I don't want to go. I don't want to do this. Why am I here?" But when I forget my selfish self and jump in with other people, I've found answers come there when I'm not seeking. But I really was seeking earlier or before, but somehow the Lord finds me there better. And so I try to be in those places more often.

SHALYN.

Well, I love the word that you used, "being attentive." And I think—so I'm going back to something else that we talked about when there are people around us who are having questions and having doubts, ultimately, there's really nothing we can do about that except treat them with our love and not being judgmental, being patient, things like that. But then just being attentive to our own relationship with Heavenly Father. That's kind of what I've gotten out of this episode, is with our questions, as long as we're making this effort to commune with God and to serve those around us and to seek after these answers, they'll come. And I just really appreciate that.

KARLIE.

Yeah, Keith, thank you so much for bringing this insight and your expertise. I've been very inspired and uplifted and given some thoughts and ideas that are different than—like you said, we immediately go to, "What can I read? where can I find this answer? Where can I find help to just let me move on?" And I think Heavenly Father, His intent is that we grow and that we develop. And I just really appreciate those thoughts, so thank you.

KEITH.

Well, thank you. It's been a privilege to be with you.



SHALYN.

And to our listeners, thank you for tuning into this episode of the Latter-day Saint Women podcast. We hope you'll continue to tune in and share the episode with your friends and family members, especially if someone has maybe come to mind who might benefit from what Keith has shared. We have also been so grateful to hear from so many listeners via email and on Apple Podcasts reviews, and we hope you'll continue to share your thoughts and your feedback. We love hearing from you. You can contact us at podcast@churchofjesuschrist.org with any suggestions for topics or guests.

KARLIE.

We also want to make sure our listeners are aware that the podcast is available just about anywhere you get your podcasts. So in addition to being on the Church's website, it's also available on the Gospel Library app, Saints Channel mobile app, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Spotify, and elsewhere. So please tune in, subscribe, and continue to share these voices and stories of women and men of faith with your friends and family. And finally, we'd like to thank our wonderful editor, Curt Dahl, our producer, Matthew Mangum, and the many others who support our work on this podcast. Until next time. I'm Karlie Guymon.

SHALYN.

And I'm Shalyn Back. Thanks for listening.

