



Joy

IN THE FACE OF DEATH

By **Jerri A. Harwell**

I have always said that after studying the life of Job, I think it's important whether we go out of this life praising the Lord or cursing His name. Since we don't know which breath will be our last, it's best to always praise the Lord with every breath, thought, deed, and word.

So I agreed 100 percent when President Russell M. Nelson, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said in the October 2016 general conference, "When the focus of our lives is on God's plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives."¹

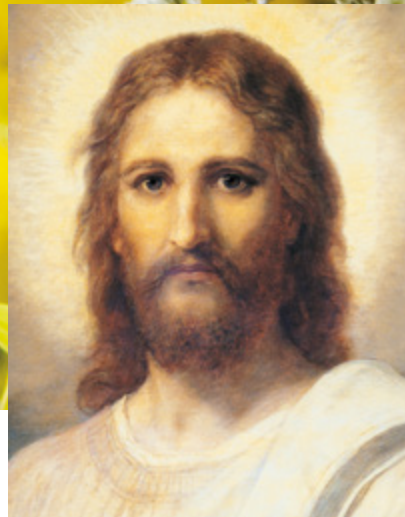
In 2012, as I lay in the hospital, diagnosed with two huge blood clots in my lungs, I didn't know which breath would be my last, and it was time to "walk the talk." Every time I awoke, I'd pinch myself, open one eye, and look around to see if I was in the spirit world or still in the hospital. After determining I was still earthbound, I thanked God.

On my first day in the hospital, a doctor hurried in and asked me if I wanted to be intubated if my lungs should fail. I realized she was asking about putting a tube down my throat to keep me breathing. I responded yes.

The doctor hurriedly turned to leave, stopped, turned back to me, and asked, "If your heart should fail, do you want us to get it started again?" Thinking about all I still wanted to do in life and the joy I felt about life, I replied, "Doc, I still have a great deal to do in life; save me." She then said, "Let me hurry and get this into your records," and rushed out of the room.

I thought, "Wow, this is serious." I could die at any moment. Was I ready?

Yes, I was. I was at peace. I was at a good place in life; I could still rejoice in life. I could still praise God in every thought and word. I continued to praise God for the life I had lived, the love I felt, and the family I had—even with all of the ups and downs.



Why was I lying in bed not doing anything? Well, if any act could be my last, I didn't want to be watching television. My daughter Rene thought I must be bored, so she brought a book for me to read. But if my next thought was my last, I didn't want to be reading just any book. I lay contemplating life, the gospel, and my relationships.

Thinking each meal could be my last, I ordered steak and potatoes for lunch and dinner. "Might as well die happy and well fed," I told myself.

I attempted to plan my funeral with my husband and children, but they didn't want to listen. While I was hopeful and positive, I thought it best to be prepared for any event.

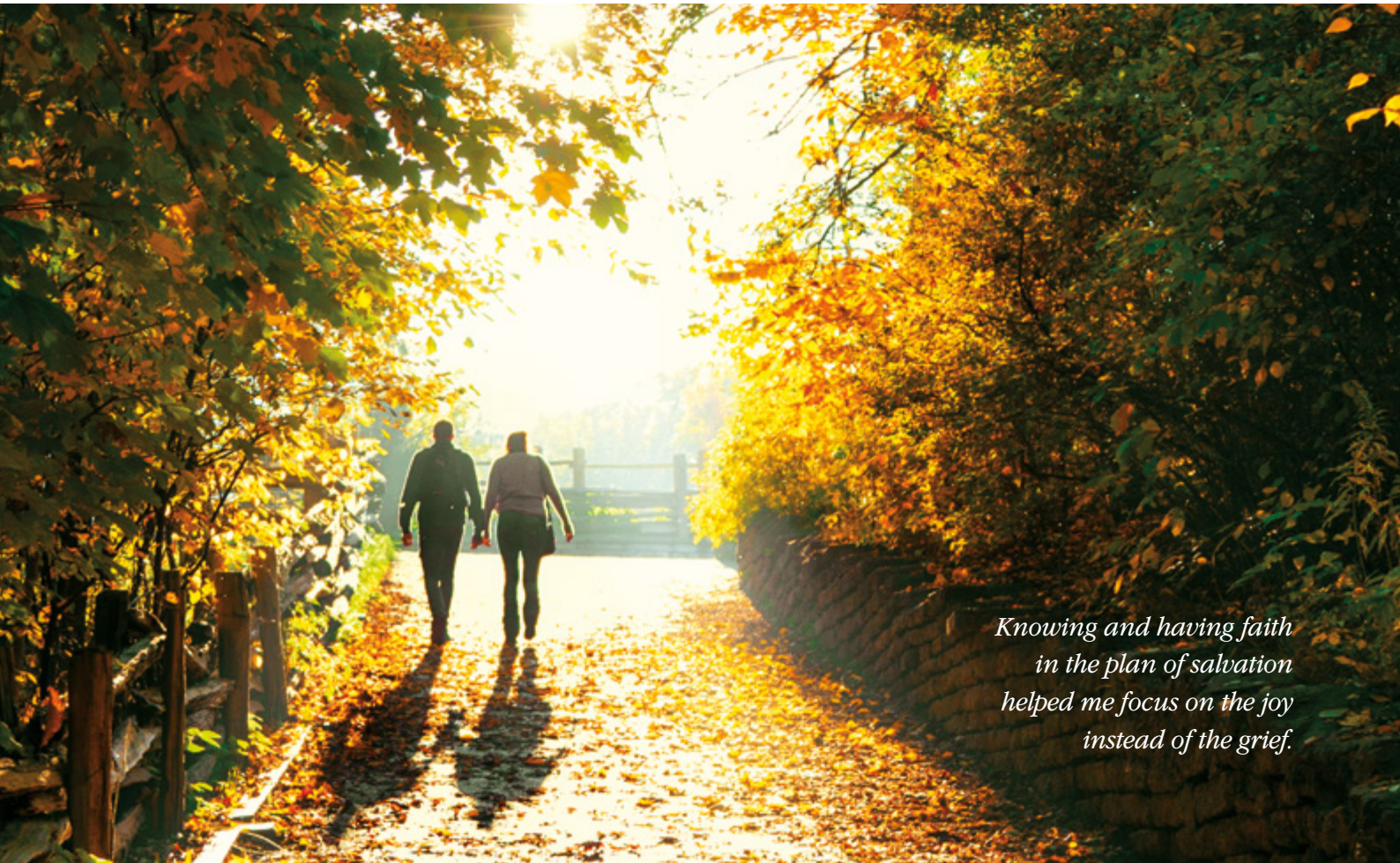
I had recently experienced planning a funeral. About five months before, my youngest son, Morgan, had died unexpectedly at just 21 years old. He had died without my holding him one last time.

When we focus on Jesus Christ and the plan of salvation, we really can have joy—no matter what is happening in our lives.

You see, Morgan was incarcerated when he died.

He was transported from jail to the emergency room. Once he arrived, his heart kept failing and was restarted numerous times. A medical helicopter was called and then cancelled because the doctor could not keep him stable enough for transport.

Months later, when I could bring myself to read the autopsy report, I learned he had had an enlarged heart and had succumbed to a viral infection.



*Knowing and having faith
in the plan of salvation
helped me focus on the joy
instead of the grief.*

I accepted his death. What else could I do?

A friend once told me that he personally does not believe we are here one day longer or one day shorter than God intends. I thought of my son. I was happy for him.

I was also thankful and filled with joy that my husband, Don, and I had driven two and a half hours and visited him the day before his death.

Yes, we grieved, as did Morgan's siblings. But knowing and having faith in the plan of salvation helped me focus on the joy instead of the grief. The thought of an eventual joyous reunion with Morgan and my parents kept me going.

A few hours after learning of our son's untimely death, my husband still had been able to joyfully praise God. The call had come in the middle of the night; it was still dark out, and we were in shock as we were standing in our family room. Don had said, "You know, in 24 years of marriage, this is our first tragedy; God is good." He still saw the joy in our lives. He was right. We had had Morgan for 21 years. I was grateful for that time with him. I did not question my faith.

In fact, it was not until six weeks later that the idea of questioning my faith came up. As a college professor, I assign students to write a letter to me the first day of class to introduce themselves and to ask me two

questions so they can get to know me better. I had mentioned my son's dying.

One student asked, "Did losing your son make you doubt your faith?" What? Doubt my faith? Doubt God? The question had never entered my mind. As the Psalmist wrote, "Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord" (Psalm 150:6).

Still I rejoiced in life, or so I thought.

Prior to my son's death, I had always enjoyed the holidays. I enjoy singing the Christmas hymns, especially "Joy to the World" and its first line, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come" (*Hymns*, no. 201). Why *wouldn't* I feel joy? I even played Christmas music throughout the year.

But five years after Morgan's death, after our Thanksgiving dinner, one of my sons remarked, "This is our first Thanksgiving dinner together as a family since Morgan died." I realized he was right. For the past few years, I had not cooked our traditional meal on Thanksgiving. My husband and I went out to dinner, joking about how much easier it was for us. In reality I was still grieving. Where was the joy?

The scriptures teach us that in the premortal life, we rejoiced when we were told of the plan of salvation—"when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7).

We knew death would be a part of that plan, and we still rejoiced. We need to keep an eternal perspective; we must pass through the experience of death to return to our Heavenly Father. We will experience the death of friends and loved ones—and yes, even our own death at some point. As my Aunt Mamie used to say, "Our tomorrows aren't promised."

President Nelson was right. We can truly feel joy when we understand and focus on the plan of salvation, regardless of what has happened, what is happening, or what may happen in our lives. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

NOTE

1. Russell M. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival," *Ensign*, Nov. 2016, 82.

RECOGNIZING AND ACKNOWLEDGING JOY IN OUR LIVES

The scriptures teach us how to see and acknowledge the joy in our lives. Here are a few examples:

- *2 Nephi 2:25*: "Men are, that they might have joy."
- *2 Nephi 10:23*: "Cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves"—in other words, agency is a reason for joy.
- *Doctrine and Covenants 11:13*: The Spirit is a source of joy for the soul.
- *Doctrine and Covenants 59:13*: Fasting is equated with joy.
- *Doctrine and Covenants 136:29*: Prayer is a cure for sorrow and is a key to a joyful soul.
- *Doctrine and Covenants 19:39*: Reading the scriptures and the Lord's promises contained in them brings us joy.
- *Doctrine and Covenants 42:61*: Revelation brings joy.
- *Alma 29:13–16*: We should have joy in the success and righteous labors of others.
- *Doctrine and Covenants 6:31*: We can "have joy in the fruit of [our] labors." Faith and good works within the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring us joy.

