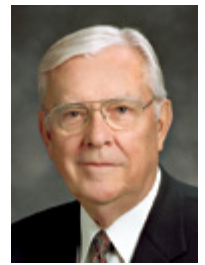




An Epistle from an Apostle



**By President
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I raise my voice to
warn you of some
of the challenges
we face today.

The Apostle Paul kept in touch with the ancient Saints through letters, or epistles, that he sent to different branches communicating his love, direction, and teachings. Because I am unable to personally meet with all of you, I will verbally give to you my own epistle to express my love, gratitude, and teachings.

To the Saints in Corinth, Paul wrote, “Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God” (1 Corinthians 1:1).

I also have been called to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ, and as a special witness of the Lord, I testify, as Paul did in his letters, that Jesus Christ gave Himself for us and that the Father raised Him from the dead (see Galatians 1:1, 4). I further testify that Jesus Christ restored His Church through the Prophet Joseph Smith in these last days and that the fulness of the gospel and the blessings associated with eternal covenants are available to all who will believe and follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

In greeting you, I use Paul’s words: “Unto the church of God . . . , to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, . . . grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:2–3).

My brothers and sisters, to keep our gospel hearts healthy, we need regular check-ups. As I have prayed for heaven’s help, I have received some recommendations for you that will keep you spiritually healthy and strong.

Paul warned the Saints in his own day of the spiritual dangers they faced. To the Galatians he wrote:

“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:

“Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.



“But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:6–8).

I raise my voice as Paul did, that there are those “that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ.” I would be shirking my duty if I did not raise my voice to warn you of the challenges we face today.

Individuals who don't stay focused on the simple doctrine and gospel of Jesus Christ will eventually listen to false teachers and self-declared prophets and adopt worldly philosophies.



Two Powers in the Universe

My brothers and sisters, never forget that there are two powers in the universe: one invites us to choose the right and experience eternal joy and happiness, and the other invites us to choose the opposite, bringing sadness and regret. Our doctrine teaches us that life is a test—a time to see which invitation we will accept.

I remind you of Jesus's prophecy regarding the last days in which we now live: “For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Matthew 24:24). We are saddened when we witness some of the “very elect” deceived, as Jesus warned.

Recently I visited a small grove of sequoia trees planted many years ago on the Brigham Young University campus. A friend of mine explained to me that sequoias are the world's largest trees and

that they can grow to 286 feet (87 m) tall in the wild. They can live more than 3,000 years.

One of the trees died and needed to be cut down, leaving only a stump to remind anyone passing by that a tall, majestic tree once stood there. The campus arborist wanted to know what had killed the tree, as the sequoia certainly did not die of old age. After an examination, he determined that the tree's feeding roots had died from a lack of water.

How was that possible since the tree had flourished there for more than five decades? The arborist discovered that the aquifer that nourished the little grove had shifted as an unintended consequence of the construction of a new building, just east of the grove.

To me this is a perfect analogy of what happens when stalwart Church members—the “very elect,” those who for all appearances seem to stand tall and erect in the faith—die spiritually.

Like the dead sequoia, these Church members once received their spiritual nourishment from the well of living water offered by Jesus Christ. But for one reason or another, they have shifted away from the source of spiritual nourishment, and without that nourishment their spirit was dulled, and they eventually died spiritually.

How can we ensure that our spiritual feeding roots are always connected to the well of living water?

Essential Habits

The Lord outlined simple, personal habits that keep us rooted, grounded, and connected to Him. Such habits, when done with full purpose of heart, real intent, and without hypocrisy and deception, allow us to be unwavering disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These essential habits include the things that seem to easily slip away in the rush of our very

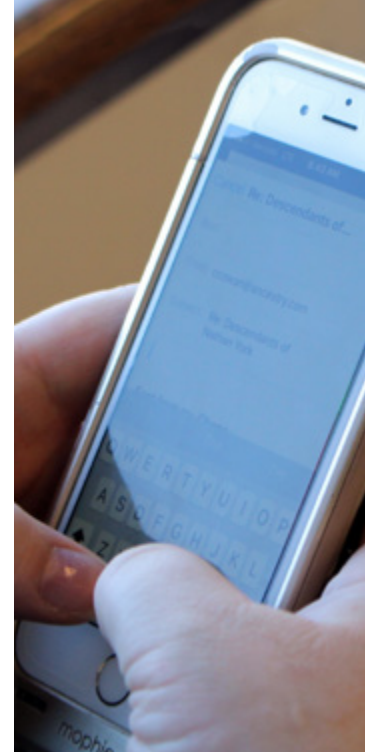
busy lives, even when we are engaged in good things like pursuing an education, working to support a family, and involving ourselves in community and Church service.

They include sincere daily prayer, faithful fasting, regular study and pondering of the scriptures and the words of the living prophets, making the Sabbath day a delight, partaking of the sacrament with humility and always remembering the Savior, worshipping in the temple as often as possible, and, finally, reaching out to the poor and lonely—both those close by and across the world.

When someone stops doing these simple but essential things, they cut themselves off from the well of living water and allow Satan to muddy their thinking with his deceptively polluted water, which clogs arteries of faithfulness and drains the spirit with counterfeit nutrition. Sin and guilt cloud the mind—leading many to deny past inspiration and revelation and causing a “de-conversion” from the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One thing that is constantly on my mind is knowing that individuals who don’t stay focused on the simple doctrine and gospel of Jesus Christ will eventually listen to false teachers and self-declared prophets and adopt worldly philosophies. These alternative voices include:

- The allure of prideful wealth.
- Wants that overrule needs, thus increasing personal debt.
- Recreation and entertainment that can take away from the wholesome goodness of the gospel.
- Activities that prevent us from properly observing the Sabbath day.
- Podcasts and internet sites that raise questions and doubt without being intellectually honest enough to adequately and honestly present the Lord’s perspective.



Help Others Find Answers

Let me make sure that you understand this important point. There is absolutely nothing wrong with asking questions or investigating our history, doctrine, and practices. The Restoration began when Joseph Smith sought an answer to a sincere question.

Parents, auxiliary leaders, Church teachers (including seminary and institute teachers), bishops, and stake presidents: When someone comes to you with a question or a concern, please do not simply brush off the question. Do not tell him or her not to worry about the question. Please do not doubt the person’s dedication to the Lord or His work. Instead, help the person find answers to questions.

I am concerned when I hear of sincere people asking honest questions about our history, doctrine, or practices and then being treated as though they were faithless. This is not the Lord’s way. As Peter said, “Be ready always to give an answer to every man [or woman] that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15).

We need to do better in responding to honest questions. Although we may not be able to answer every question about the cosmos or about our history, doctrine, and practices, we can provide many answers to those who are sincere. When we don’t know the answer, we can search answers together—a shared search that may bring us closer to each other and closer to God. Of course, we may not always find satisfying answers to our questions. At such times, it’s good to remember that there is still a place in religion for faith. Sometimes we can learn and study and know; sometimes we have to believe and trust and hope.

Help those with questions to realize that the Lord does not require His Saints to have advanced degrees in history and doctrine. Therefore, we should not expect that parents, leaders, and teachers will have all the answers to every



question. Even among the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, there are those who have very different backgrounds and training that allow a sharing of a wide range of experience during our discussions and deliberations.

When I have a question that I cannot answer, I often turn to those who can help me. The Church is blessed with trained scholars and those who have devoted a lifetime of study, who have come

with their neighbors. We make a very serious mistake when we compare our lives with those who have much wealth, forgetting that most of us have already prospered in the land. Please be content and enjoy the blessings you have already received instead of becoming a slave to unwise use of consumer debt. Never, ever fail to pay your tithing, and make generous offerings to help the poor.

If you will carefully consider prophetic counsel, you will find your spiritual feeder roots connected to the “well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).



to know our history and the scriptures. These thoughtful men and women provide context and background so we can better understand our sacred past and our current practices. Blessed by this information they provide, I am better equipped to seek the guidance of the Holy Ghost.

The Church is dedicated to transparency and has published precious resources to provide new insights and offer even more context to the story of the Restoration through the Joseph Smith Papers website and the Gospel Topics essays on ChurchofJesusChrist.org. It is a remarkable time to study Church history and doctrine, with abundant resources and experts providing helpful background and understanding of our past. Always pray and follow the prompting of the Holy Ghost, who reveals spiritual truths.

Live within Your Means

I am concerned that some members live beyond their means as they attempt to keep up

Enjoy Each Other’s Company

Some of you may be overprogrammed with lots of activities, including good ones. Please be careful not to overprogram your children. Turn off social media and other outside distractions from time to time to sit and talk and enjoy each other’s company. As I recently taught in general conference, regularly hold a family council (see “Family Councils,” *Ensign*, May 2016, 63–65).

Remember, the Lord counseled us to find time to “be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10; see also Doctrine and Covenants 101:16).

To keep family members occupied and away from what matters most, someone is always creating something new—a new app or game, for example, that prompts young people to look down at their smartphones rather than up to see the beautiful creations of God’s wonderful world or even someone they may want to meet, date, and marry and with whom they could have a real-world relationship that results in eternal blessings.

Love Thy Neighbor

I offer a word about our friends, neighbors, and associates at school and work who are not members of the Church. Although we take seriously the great commission and charge from the Lord “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations,

baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 28:19), we honor and respect everyone’s agency to think and believe—or not believe—as they choose.

If a neighbor, work colleague, or schoolmate is not interested in investigating the gospel, we must always continue to extend the hand of friendship. Our love for them should not be conditional; it should be sincere and without strings attached.

Our children learn best by the example of parents and leaders. Let us be careful regarding what we say about others and how we treat our fellowmen. And remember, we have every right to disagree, but we must not become disagreeable.

Jesus taught, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 19:19). If we are His disciples, we must practice Christian civility and kindness with all we meet, including those who have chosen to disassociate themselves from the Church.

Let us join hands with all people of goodwill in every good cause and include them in our circles of friends and associates. Let us truly welcome them into our chapels and ward activities.

Peace and Prophetic Counsel

My apostolic epistle to you concludes as I testify that if you will carefully consider prophetic counsel, you will find your spiritual feeder roots connected to the “well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14). You will not die spiritually like the beautiful sequoia tree; rather, I testify that you will have more peace, joy, and happiness in your lives by accepting Jesus Christ and the servants He has called and by following His gospel plan. Unless the peoples of the nations turn their hearts back to God and His teachings and plan, we will surely face the consequences revealed in the scriptures.

My beloved brothers and sisters, we are charged to prepare the Church and ourselves for those days that will surely come if the people in the world continue to ignore and disregard God our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The scriptures are clear on the consequences of turning away from God.

We love you. It is my privilege to invite our Heavenly Father to bless you. May you have peace. May you have joy in your hearts. May you have the courage to repent if you need to. If there is something going on in your lives that is not good, may the Lord bless you with the courage to repent and change, beginning today. May the Lord give you the strength to turn your hearts to Him, to love Him, and to serve Him so that you may safely continue through mortality, preparing for that day to be held in the arms of our Father in Heaven and His Beloved Son.

As a special witness of Christ, I testify to you that I know that Jesus is the Christ. He is the Son of God. These things I have said are true, and I hope you will receive my epistle in the spirit in which I have spoken. I testify that this is the Church of Jesus Christ.

May God bless you, my beloved brothers and sisters, as we do all we can to prepare for that day when the Savior and Redeemer of the world will come once again as our Lord and King. ■

From an address, “An Epistle to the Saints of the Utah Salt Lake Area,” delivered at a multistake conference on September 11, 2016.

