

Embracing Our Highest Worship

Some Thoughts on Our Approach to the Temple

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I understate the matter when I say the temple strikes different Church members differently. I have friends who entered the temple for the first time many years ago and felt immediately at home. Indeed, they resonate with President Henry B. Eyring, who once said, “The first time I walked just a few feet into the temple I had the feeling that I had been here before. In an instant, the thought came to me that what I recognized was a sense of peace beyond anything I had felt before in this life, but that I seemed to recognize, and almost remember.”¹ Some friends find in the temple an inexhaustible fount of allegorical, scriptural, and symbolic allusions. Some members—steeped in the history of the modern Church or of early Christianity—find the temple endlessly fascinating, resonating with Church scholar Hugh Nibley, who devoted a great deal of his life and work to illuminating connections between the temple and the ancient world.² Still others love the temple because they do their duty in all things and understand the temple to be one such responsibility. Others find in the temple a haven from worldly concerns, going there to find peace, solace, and revelation. And, of course, any

1. Henry B. Eyring, *Special Witnesses of Christ*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/video/special-witnesses-of-christ/2019-07-0030-henry-b-eyring-1080p>. See also “Special Witnesses of Christ,” *Ensign* 31, no. 4 (April 2001): 11.

2. For example, see Hugh W. Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (1978): 41–78; and Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, ed. Don E. Norton, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 12 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992).

individual member may belong to one or all of these groups or may move between them throughout life.

Others, however, find that the temple puzzles, frustrates, challenges, or even alienates them. I have friends who have been to the temple many, many times and yet feel spiritually disconnected there. Many of these friends dutifully attend—sometimes even frequently—but find themselves wishing the temple connected with them more viscerally or that they at least felt more generally comfortable there. Other friends—especially some women I know—wish the temple felt more welcoming. Some find the temple anachronistic or at least distant, others sense it to be forbidding, and still others find it confusing and downright uncomfortable.

My purpose in this essay is to show that our *approach* to the temple matters. Writing about the temple is a fraught exercise because we promise not to discuss some details of our temple worship. Nonetheless, as Elder David A. Bednar clarified in his April 2019 general conference talk, “Many Church members are unsure about what appropriately can and cannot be said regarding the temple experience outside of the temple.” He then quoted President Ezra Taft Benson, who taught that because of our unsureness (about which elements of temple worship are sacred), “we are sometimes reluctant to say anything about the temple. . . . As a consequence, many do not develop a real desire to go to the temple, or when they go there, they do so without much background to prepare them for the obligations and covenants they enter into.” Still, Elder Bednar reminded us that while we should keep sacred the specific temple symbols we have covenanted not to discuss, nonetheless “we may discuss the basic purposes of and the doctrine and principles associated with temple ordinances and covenants.”³ This essay aims squarely to do that.

I will not elucidate the history of temple ordinances or the specific meaning of particular symbols—there are others better qualified for those tasks. Rather, I intend to share some perspectives that have helped me as I think about temple worship and hope this approach will be helpful for others. I hope, in particular, that this essay might prove meaningful for Church members who are preparing to enter the temple for the first time. Preparation for a person’s initial temple experience matters deeply, and I hope that this paper will help open a member’s view to how temple worship fits into the rest of our theology and lived religious experience.

3. David A. Bednar, “Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing,” *Ensign* 49, no. 5 (May 2019): 103.

Section 1: On Preparing for Liturgical Worship

To begin with I'll offer this observation: after a lifetime of worship in a meetinghouse of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, showing up at the temple and expecting more of the same is not likely to prove very effective. What we do in the temple differs dramatically from what we experience each Sunday at church, and the ways we approach temple worship affect how much we are able to learn there. By analogy, if in college I show up to a geology class expecting a lecture with a Power-Point and get instead a field trip into the mountains to collect rock specimens, I am likely to leave frustrated (and perhaps with a lot of blisters). This does not indicate that such a field trip is not valuable as a teaching method but rather that my lack of preparation did not equip me to learn effectively from what I experienced. Before we consider any particular temple theme, then, we may find use in considering how we think about temple learning. I have found a few observations to help me in this regard. None of these is meant as "the right way" but rather is intended to broaden the frame of reference we use to approach this form of worship.

The first is to note that the medium is not the message.

In many ways, going to the temple is like reading the Bible on an ancient scroll. In a church that distinguishes itself by employing lay clergy, meeting in generally plain buildings, and using prayers and speeches that are unscripted and never uniform or standardized (with ordinance prayers being the exception), the formality and elegance of the temple can be quite different from our usual experience. What's more, the temple further distinguishes itself because in it we are asked to symbolically place ourselves amid the retelling of certain scriptural stories. Even though the stories can largely be found verbatim in the Bible and the Pearl of Great Price, the method of their presentation in the temple differs dramatically from our weekly church experience.

What I mean to observe here is simply that many Church members who pass through the temple for the first time can become so distracted by the unusual and, especially for lifelong members, unexpected aspects of the *presentation* of the temple ceremony that they may fail to recognize that the very large majority of what the temple teaches concords comfortably with the gospel truths we teach in our chapels every week. At its heart, the temple endowment invites us to become like Jesus and promises that doing so will prepare us to return to God's presence. To facilitate this being reborn in Christ, the temple invites us to covenant to sacrifice, to obey the law of chastity, and to consecrate our gifts to

build God's kingdom.⁴ It is important to recognize the centrality of these promises to temple worship; these promises square with what a typical Latter-day Saint youth learns growing up in the Church. A recognition that the medium is not the message can lend the temple's lessons a more familiar ring.

That said, even as we recognize that the medium is not the message, we can nonetheless remain open thereafter to the lessons that come to us *from the medium*. That is, just because the temple's pedagogy differs from what we are accustomed to does not mean it is less meaningful; indeed, the participatory and vicarious nature of much of what we do in the temple is pregnant with spiritual symbolism.

Beyond this, however, many of the temple's distinctive elements deepen our temple experience. In a world forever abuzz and always noisily on the move, the temple asks us to still ourselves and to dwell for a time within the quiet corridors of our minds. There, the hubbub of life outside dims, and we are asked to wait where the only sounds are muted organ music, the nearly imperceptible padding of feet, and the occasional whispered conversation. Indeed, can you think of another place in modern life where groups routinely organize and voluntarily surrender their mobile devices? There may be a few—Buddhist meditation sessions, for example—but such other examples (and they are, in my experience, extremely rare)—are the exceptions that prove the rule; the whole point, as in the temple, is to provide an escape from a world that is “too much with us” (in a way more pervasive than Wordsworth ever could have imagined).⁵ Indeed, multiple modern writers have chronicled the profound, often troubling, and not yet fully understood ways technology is warping our brains.⁶ In this context, the stillness of

4. For a list and discussion of the covenants made in the temple endowment, see The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 27.2, August 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/general-handbook/27-temple-ordinances-for-the-living>. Several General Authorities have also listed the covenants entered into in the endowment ceremony in various publications. See Bednar, “Prepared to Obtain Every Needful Thing,” 103; Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 121; and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Preparing to Enter the Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2002).

5. William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much with Us,” Poetry Foundation, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45564/the-world-is-too-much-with-us>.

6. Among these are Nicholas Carr and Sherry Turkle. Carr is a former *New York Times* reporter who wrote a fruitful chronicle of the ways the internet warps our ability

the temple offers a welcome respite. The temple invites us to be wholly, uninterrupted, and deeply present—that presence is a prerequisite for meaningful religious experience.

Along these same lines, the temple both arrests our senses and matters so much in part because it is heavily liturgical.⁷ As Latter-day Saints, we are accustomed to a weekly worship experience that largely changes based on the time of year, the needs of the congregation, and the personalities and spiritual insights of the participants. Anyone who has grown up a member of the Church understands this intuitively—we adjust our expectations for a meeting depending on who is speaking. We understand that some orators will address us more eloquently than others, and, while we may never have articulated this, we are accustomed to Christmas-focused sermons at Christmastime, Easter-centered services in the spring, and perhaps even a paean to the pioneer spirit in July. Furthermore, with rare exceptions, our services distinguish themselves by their very accessibility. Rarely if ever would a believer walk into one of our meetings and be unable to access the meaning of what was going on. This is not to say that there are not deeper layers of symbolism to what happens in our meetings (in the case of the sacrament, especially, this is particularly evident), but so long as a visitor can understand the admittedly sometimes opaque vernacular (“ward,” “stake,” “D&C,” and the like), the words and scenes unfolding in the meeting are so compelling in part because they are so intuitive.

to think. He argues that while members of previous generations venerated the ability to mentally “scuba dive” (that is, to dive deep and ponder long on a single subject), the internet is changing not just what but how we think by making most of us incapable of such scuba diving. Instead, he says, we are able only to water ski. By the same token, Dr. Turkle has extensively documented the ways in which the internet is changing how we feel and how we relate to those around us. She has written a series of books demonstrating that today’s youth largely don’t *want* life’s messy emotions and complicated situations and are thus often retreating behind the safety of a screen to shield themselves from difficult interpersonal emotions. In so doing, however, they have, as a generation, experienced an unparalleled, precipitous, and immensely concerning slide in their ability to feel empathy. All of this is not to suggest we should return to the 1980s, before the internet was available widely, but simply to acknowledge that its effects are not purely positive. Carr, in particular, argues that our brains are wired to savor rest, to seek quiet times, to need gaps between streams of input. While he does not, of course, mention Latter-day Saint temples, I would argue they fit squarely into the space he argues is increasingly important. See Tyler Johnson, “Reclaiming Reality: Doctoring and Discipleship in a Hyperconnected Age,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2018): 7–38.

7. Liturgy is “a rite [ordinance] or body of rites prescribed for public worship.” Dictionary, Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “liturgy,” accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liturgy>.

The temple stubbornly refuses to conform to this set of expectations. Where we are accustomed to accessibility, the temple furnishes us with sermons spoken almost entirely in a rarefied, symbolic, and almost mystical tongue. Where we weekly nestle comfortably into a world of seasonal sermons and rotating hymns, the temple remains constant time after time and year after year (we will address the occasional changes to temple liturgy below). Where our chapels offer their teachings freely, the temple guards its truths more closely; when worshipping in the temple, genuine and sustained effort is often required to access the meaning behind the layers of symbols.

When we enter the temple, we must radically revise our expectations for worship. We must prepare ourselves to be challenged. We must acknowledge that the meaning of what we experience will not necessarily flow easily into our hearts the first, second, or even tenth time. We must know that liturgical worship matters just as much, even though it differs significantly from our usual weekly worship. The temple will demand that we return to it, again and again, throughout our lives, prepared to accept rays of truth as they come. Over time, we can learn that sometimes the process of revelation may be as slow as a tree that grows imperceptibly.

In the temple, we relearn to speak our worshipful language; we soften and humble ourselves to prepare for the reality and truth that will seep into us over years. We must not imagine we will leave after our first trip understanding in any large part the meaning of the ritual. The meaning of the temple awaits our seeking, but that quest may take many years; indeed, we will likely never exhaustively plumb its depths. This stubborn insistence on learning “line by line” over a lifetime will increasingly seem countercultural in the era of fast food, Google, two-day Amazon delivery, and ChatGPT. But this steady unfolding does not make what we learn less true or less important—indeed, this gradual distillation reminds us that many of life’s most important truths can be learned in only this way.

We can further enhance our temple experience by considering what we might call a “meta-approach,” that is, by asking not just, *What do we make of the temple?* but also, *How do we think about the temple?* In this endeavor, we can learn much from our approach to great art. A number of years ago, my wife and I visited Italy as a celebration to mark the end of my medical training. Among the many artistic marvels we saw, Michelangelo’s *David* stands out as the grandest. Its size, understandably, struck us first—his head towers seventeen feet off the ground. As a doctor, however, the detail that most impacted me was the bafflingly lifelike way in which the artist depicted a vein snaking its way down the upper surface of *David*’s hand

(see fig. 1). This vein spoke to me because I have punctured similar veins to draw my patients' blood. I know that veins are spongy, wormlike things that often slink away just when you think the needle is inside. What struck me, though, is that it seemed I could have taken a needle and punctured David's vein—even though it's sculpted from marble.

The hyperrealistic illusion is remarkable.

Even if Michelangelo's hyper-realism strikes us with immediate meaning, however, I've also realized over time that such realism is not the only moving form of art. Some art that does *not* directly depict the details of objective reality can move us equally, even if more obliquely. Over the years, for example, I have encountered examples of Monet's *Water Lilies* in several museums. These paintings affect me deeply—they convey the translucence of murky water, the undulating reflection of sunlight on a rippling pond, and the ephemeral beauty of flowers. Yet Monet's artistic toolkit could not be more different from Michelangelo's. Whereas closer inspection of David's sculpture brought an immediate "wow," similar inspection of a Monet painting leaves me puzzled because any square inch of his painting, taken in isolation, holds little meaning or beauty. His impressionism impresses only when absorbed as it was meant to be—as an entire work and without trying to match every brushstroke to an objective concrete detail (see fig. 2).⁸ Importantly, this is not to say that Monet's paintings do not convey truth, but only that they convey truth in a different way.

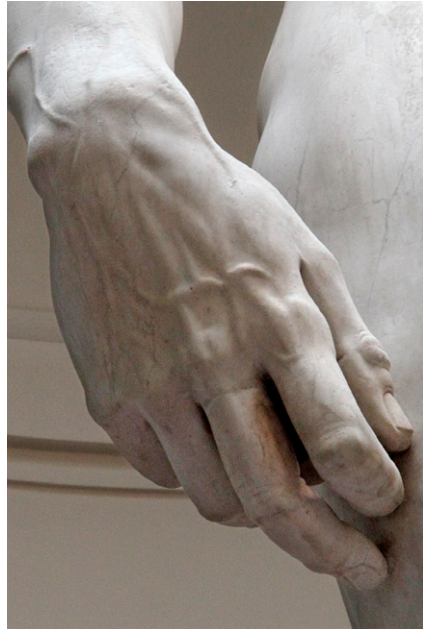


FIGURE 1. *David's* right hand. Photo by Rabe!, shadows lightened, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Florenz_-_David_von_Michelangelo_03_-_Hand.JPG, CC BYU-SA 4.0 license.

8. There are doubtless books written on Monet's technique, and I have no doubt many of them contain detailed explanations of why his work impresses on microscopic examination; I write as one who loves art but who has absolutely no understanding of the underpinnings of painting.



FIGURE 2. Detail from one of Monet's *Water Lilies*, 1906. The Art Institute of Chicago. CC0 license; public domain.

I have found that a parallel holds true in the temple. When I first began attending the temple, I was obsessed with “figuring it out” and “getting it right.” Because some details of the ceremony are available only there, I would at times wait an entire session to hear a phrase or clause, trying to discern what it meant. This would sometimes enlighten me but would just as often leave me frustrated or confused. I wanted the temple to be like *David*. My approach widened, however, one day when I was talking to a friend who had joined the Church just a year before. Preparing for his mission, he had gone through the temple. When I asked him what he thought, a look of serenity overtook his face and he said that it had been “beautiful” because he “just let it all wash over [him].”

Surprised that I had never thought of approaching the temple this way, I experimented on my next visit and tried approaching the temple in the way he had suggested, and, just as my friend had experienced, the beauty of the temple spilled over me in a new way. I have some difficulty articulating exactly what my experience looked like. The best I can do is to say that for many years previous to this experience, I had approached the temple largely as one might approach a lecture in preparation for an important exam—I went with specific questions and in search of a set of answers. It was as if I intuited—though I never thought of it this way *per se*—that the answers themselves were what would matter.

After talking with my friend, however, instead of approaching the temple only as a lecture, I learned also to approach it as a sunset. When I sit on a mountainside and watch the sun disappear beyond the horizon, I am not obsessed with answering questions or collecting facts. I am not future-oriented but am, instead, present. What I understand of the temple

now that I didn't before is that while there are times I go to the temple for answers—either concerning my problems or concerning theology—there are other times I go only to be there and to let the beauty of the moment fill my soul.

Appreciating the temple from a new vantage point opened up to me truths that had previously been hidden. The point is not so much the details of my then-new approach but, rather, the fact that multiple approaches each convey a different facet of truth, like turning a diamond to let the light play differently off each of its facets. If temple worship begins to lose its meaning, it may be worth considering whether a different approach will illuminate a new facet of truth.

Section 2: Revelation and Rhetoric— Language's Limits and the Temple's Meaning

In this second section, I want to approach an issue that matters profoundly as we approach temple worship. Experience tells me that one of the aspects of temple worship that matters the most is the way we think about words and their relationship to divine truth.

As I alluded to at the beginning of this essay, there are some for whom the temple seems not merely distant but downright foreign. I recognize this and do not approach this topic lightly. Whatever else the temple is, it is serious. The language we use there and, particularly, the promises we make are not to be ignored or skated over. Because the temple does not simply invite us to explore or to think but to solemnly covenant, whatever issues a person might have with what they do in the temple are not just theoretical. The covenantal nature of the temple impresses the temple's teachings on us emphatically, leaving little room for personal discretion. I understand well why some faithful, earnest Church members may struggle with certain core aspects of temple worship and wonder how they can continue to attend.

I remember, for example, a woman who spoke in our stake conference in 2013 about her ten-year quest to reconcile the impulses of her heart with those of her mind. In particular, she struggled with aspects of the temple experience that treated men and women differently; she could not understand how to square these aspects with her testimony of the perfect love of heavenly parents who equally embraced every man, woman, and child. Part of the point of her talk was that the answers to her longing questions did not come quickly or easily. Beyond that, however, I sensed an equally important, if perhaps less obvious and intuitive, truth—and that is where I would like to turn our attention now.

While that sister considered the details of the answers she received too sacred to share, her story reminds me that one of the most important epistemological keys to understanding the temple is better appreciating the relationship between truth and our understanding of it, as well as the relationship between truth and the words we use to convey it. Her talk brings to my mind the great gospel principle that some of the most beautiful, nourishing eternal truths can be found at the heart of paradoxes—and one of these paradoxes lies at the center of our temple worship: If temple ordinances are of eternal importance, how can they ever change? Because we do not talk about the details of the temple ceremony outside the temple, and because we generally do not discuss the particulars of the temple ceremony’s evolution in print or in our meetings, some members may be unfamiliar with the idea that the temple ceremony has undergone significant changes over the decades, but this is a truth prophets have repeatedly taught. For example, in 2019 the First Presidency made the following statement: “Whenever the Lord has had a people on the earth who will obey His word, they have been commanded to build temples. Scriptures document patterns of temple worship [beginning in ancient times]. . . . Over . . . many centuries, details associated with temple work have been adjusted periodically, including language, methods of construction, communication, and record-keeping. Prophets have taught that there will be no end to such adjustments as directed by the Lord to His servants.”⁹

President Nelson later expanded on this theme at length in general conference in 2021 when he taught, “Current adjustments in temple procedures, and others that will follow, are continuing evidence that the Lord is actively directing His Church. He is providing opportunities for each of us to bolster our spiritual foundations more effectively by centering our lives on Him and on the ordinances and covenants of His temple. When you bring your temple recommend, a contrite heart, and a seeking mind to the Lord’s house of learning, *He* will teach you.”¹⁰

These statements would seem initially to stand in contrast to the way many members have traditionally conceptualized temple worship. For example, President Brigham Young is often quoted, “Your *endowment* is, to receive all those ordinances in the House of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back

9. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “First Presidency Releases Statement on Temples,” Church News, January 2, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/first-presidency-releases-statement-on-temples>.

10. Russell M. Nelson, “The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation,” *Liahona* 45, no. 11 (November 2021): 95, emphasis original.

to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels, being enabled to give them the key words, the signs and tokens, pertaining to the Holy Priesthood, and gain your eternal exaltation in spite of earth and hell.”¹¹

Nothing in President Young’s statement weighs in against the possibility of the temple ceremony changing, per se, but his emphasis is on the ordinances having eternal significance, and it seems at least mildly surprising in that context to hear President Nelson emphasize repeatedly that there will be “no end” to the “adjustments” that will come to the temple ceremony. Still, this juxtaposition—of eternal truths next to endless adjustments—can actually bring us to a vital and central insight regarding the way we understand the nature of truth.

Imagine for a moment an enormous white granite wall that is covered with sacred text. Let’s further imagine that this text is not just sacred but contains the actual information—the key—needed to get into heaven. That is, if you know every word written on the wall, you will understand the entirety of truth and gain access to the highest and holiest heavenly realms. In this analogy, what matters is knowing all the words. Essentially, the point of coming to understand what is written on the wall is not the piecing together of some larger, coherent story but, instead, simply uncovering and learning all the words themselves. The rub in our analogy, however, is that the wall is almost entirely covered by an opaque curtain. Within this analogy, revelation is, quite literally, the sequential unveiling of parts of the wall. For those of us who believe in restored Christianity, we accept that certain sections of the wall were uncovered by the Bible. Joseph Smith, because of his visions and the scriptures he translated and otherwise revealed, ripped further sections of curtain off the wall. As we seek personal inspiration, we uncover further corners that heretofore have remained obscure. Thus, today the wall still towers over us, with large sections of writing still obscured from us by the cloth that has not yet been ripped away, but with other sections revealing themselves to us readily (after all, we believe God will “yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God” [A of F 1:9]).

There is merit to this analogy, and I believe this is how many of us intuitively picture our relationship with ultimate truth, but the analogy strikes me as at least incomplete and perhaps even spiritually dangerous, for reasons I will articulate momentarily. The analogy’s virtue is that it reminds us of the importance of words in learning divine truth. The Book

11. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 2:31 (April 6, 1853), emphasis original.

of Mormon, as one example, repeatedly talks about “the power of the word” (2 Ne. 1:26; 4 Ne. 1:30; see also 1 Ne. 15:24 and Alma 31:5), and our religion’s focus on both written and oral scripture (such as when someone speaks under the influence of the Spirit, as described in D&C 68:4) illustrates the great emphasis we place on understanding truth through words.

Nonetheless, for all its merits, the danger with this analogy is its suggestion that each morsel of truth is self-contained and that it bears no necessary relationship with any other. In other words, according to this understanding, if each word I uncover on the granite wall is only going to be checked against its correlate—and nothing else—on Judgment Day, then all that matters is understanding each piece of the gospel separately. Taken to an extreme, this approach can suggest that gospel truth is very nearly like a cosmic spelling test where, so long as we can correctly spell each of the divine words, we will be admitted to heaven as we might to some enormously selective divine college. Not only that, but in its extreme form this approach can lead us to worship *words* instead of God—as if our understanding of *descriptions* of God mattered more than God *himself*. This approach atomizes truth into millions of disconnected fragments and privileges what we know over who we are and what we do. Coming to understand truth, after all, matters chiefly as it catalyzes Christian conversion and allows us to become new creatures in Christ.

Truth is not a million fragments; it is one great whole.

Thus, I believe a more complete analogy for how we come to understand truth is suggested by a favorite children’s book: *You Are Special*.¹² In it, a carpenter creates a class of little wooden people—the Wemmicks. These little people are variably kind and cruel to each other, but most of them define themselves by how other wooden people treat them. One beleaguered little wooden man—Punchinello—meets a mysterious Wemmick woman who blithely ignores the comments of her contemporaries. When Punchinello—who is the recipient of many slights from other Wemmicks and who feels those slights acutely—asks this woman how she manages it, she replies she no longer cares what other wooden people think because she has gone to see Eli, the Carpenter. She tells Punchinello a bit about Eli but soon says that if he wishes to really understand, he can only do so by coming to know Eli himself. The book ends at the conclusion of Punchinello’s first visit to Eli—teasing that Punchinello has only the faintest glimmer of understanding of who *Punchinello* is, who *Eli* is, and what they really have to do with each other but offering the implicit promise that a deeper understanding is yet to come.

12. Max Lucado, *You Are Special* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1997).

Analogies abound in this story, but a couple matter particularly for our purposes here. The first is that if the operative question in the story is, “What is it like to know Eli?” the truth that is the answer to that query cannot be meaningfully understood as millions of fragments. Eli is an emotional, visceral, palpable, loving being—not a collection of words. This gets to the second important analogy: each important thing to be understood about Eli can only be understood in the context of all the other things that need to be understood about Eli. The little wooden woman could have told Punchinello how tall Eli was or what his voice sounded like or how things were arranged in his shop. This may have been interesting, and it may have even been factually correct, but it would not have been true or at least would not have been transformative truth.

The key theme here is as Joseph taught: “It is the first principle of the Gospel, to know for a certainty the character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another.”¹³ None of these truths or any of their constituent parts can be understood in isolation—they must be considered as pieces of the great whole. The temple aims to teach us these very things, but we would do well to remember the lessons Punchinello and Eli teach us as we try to learn.

This also leads us to remember another key principle for understanding truth, including in the temple: language is a necessary but meager and ultimately insufficient vehicle for doing the very thing it purports to do: communicate truth. Words can persuade and even move us, but they nonetheless remain mere symbols. I can write you a letter and tell you what it is like to be in Yosemite Valley when the sun sets on a newly laid blanket of snow, but reading what I write will not be the same as having been there. This is not only because of the manifest inadequacy of my writing but because of words’ qualitative insufficiency. All of this is why Joseph Smith referred, in a letter to W. W. Phelps, to the “crooked broken scattered and imperfect language” and specifically prayed that God would hasten the time when he would be delivered “from the little narrow prison almost as it were total [*sic*] darkness of paper pen and ink.”¹⁴

What does all this teach us about learning in the gospel, in life, and in the temple?

13. “History, 1838–1856, Volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” 1970, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed March 3, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/342>.

14. Joseph Smith to William W. Phelps, November 27, 1832, in Matthew C. Godfrey and others, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2013), 320.

Everything.

When the temple—or any other fountain of holy water, for that matter—confronts us with a seemingly dissonant teaching—a phrase, a chapter, a discourse, whatever—that does not concord with the remainder of our holistic understanding of truth, we would do well to take that teaching into our hearts, consider it carefully, and wait.

That waiting can clarify, enlighten, and instruct.

One effect of that waiting may be that our wisdom will grow and we will understand in a way previously hidden to us that the teaching agrees with what we know of the gospel but that the agreement between our understanding and this apparently new, or seemingly contradictory, principle requires a new paradigm, a broader reference frame, or a key connecting insight we lacked before but now have. Alternatively, we may learn that what we thought we understood about what we learned in the temple (or anywhere else) is not actually what the temple teaches or, rather, cannot be understood as we first supposed. As another option, a second principle, sometimes learned many years down the road, may shed key light on the first principle in a way that unlocks to our view the beauty of that first truth. And, in other instances, that piece of holy writ (whether in the temple or anywhere else) that seems out of joint with the rest of what we know will eventually fade into the background precisely because the very words themselves are changed. There have been, after all, many changes to the temple ceremony itself over its lifetime. It has evolved from a personal ceremony led by the Prophet Joseph himself, and lasting “through the day,”¹⁵ to a ceremony that was shortened but always performed with live actors, to one that is largely recorded and projected on a screen.

These types of changes may at first unsettle us—if the temple reflects holy and unchanging truth, then why or how should it ever change?

But it is here again that the competing conceptions of language and its relationship to truth become so important. Above, I outline two analogies for the way we learn truth—that it is like uncovering words on a wall and that it is like coming to know a carpenter. These analogies both matter but differ in this key way: in the first analogy, the words themselves *are the truth*. In this understanding, well might we be confused and devastated if we were to find that tomorrow a large portion of the

15. Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Richard Lloyd Anderson, eds., *Journals, Volume 2: December 1841–April 1843*, Joseph Smith Papers (Salt Lake City: Church Historian’s Press, 2011), 53–54.

text had been erased and replaced. In the second conception, however, the words are not the truth; they are merely one way to try to *express* the truth. Furthermore, we must readily acknowledge that the words themselves are not just quantitatively but also qualitatively inadequate. Even our greatest poets, when trying to communicate what Ralph Waldo Emerson (who was one of them) called “that divine idea,” fall short. Indeed, of that truth, Emerson said, “We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents.”¹⁶

This second understanding matters so much because it frees us from a slavish devotion to the words themselves. Please don’t misunderstand; this is not to suggest that the words don’t matter. Nothing about this understanding questions that. Imperfect words remain the major mode for communicating ideas between persons and across time. Still, a richer understanding of truth equips us with the tools—and humility—necessary to approach all of our divine texts with a spirit of charity and forgiveness that appropriately considers the mortality of the human vehicles of all divine revelation. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, “When you see imperfection, remember that the limitation is *not* in the divinity of the work. As one gifted writer has suggested, when the infinite fulness is poured forth, it is not the oil’s fault if there is some loss because finite vessels can’t quite contain it all.”¹⁷

It is in this light that we not only understand but can wholeheartedly resonate with the protestations of multiple Book of Mormon prophets—as well as Joseph Smith—that they are not adequate vessels for the truth they were tasked with revealing. Indeed, the Prophet Joseph is quoted as saying, “It was an awful responsibility to write in the name of the Lord.”¹⁸ We often make the mistake of thinking of the Book of Mormon as if it were etched into those plates by God’s own divine finger, with no human intermediary. But such is insistently not the case. The truth contained therein was carried first in the hearts of the prophets who wrote the book. They then set to the work of recording the truth as best they knew how.

Moroni provides the perfect example. As he is wrapping up his herculean task of completing what would become the Book of Mormon, he worries he is not up to the task of communicating what he has been

16. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” Emerson Central, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://emersoncentral.com/ebook/Self-Reliance.pdf>.

17. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Lord, I Believe,” *Ensign* 43, no. 5 (May 2013): 94, emphasis original.

18. “History, 1838–1856, Volume A-1 [23 December 1805–30 August 1834],” 162, Joseph Smith Papers, accessed February 17, 2023, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-a-1-23-december-1805-30-august-1834/168>.

commanded to convey. His plea is plaintive; he leaves his fears naked on the page: “And I said unto him: Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; for Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith, but thou hast not made us mighty in writing; for thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them” (Ether 12:23).

Nephi, who is one of the Book of Mormon’s other main authors, may initially come off as more confident in his writing ability, but ultimately he reveals himself to harbor just the same set of fears: “And if they [the things I have written] are not the words of Christ, judge ye—for Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that they are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, *notwithstanding my weakness*” (2 Ne. 33:11, emphasis added).

However we wish to understand Nephi’s anxiety—whether it is about his writing abilities, the adequacy of ancient words for modern readers, or whether he, too, is fretting about the qualitative inadequacy of language—it is clear he fears that those who receive his words will do so dismissively. I believe his initial and apparently more strident challenge—*judge ye!*—rings with a hint of self-doubt, as if he includes himself among the audience he wishes to convince.

Taken together, these observations suggest an expansive conceptualization of truth that cannot be contained entirely by any set of symbols or any finite text. Thus, it is not surprising that the temple ceremony has changed in the nearly two centuries since its latter-day inception. Likewise, when we encounter sections of our temple worship that seem not to fit with our understanding, we would do best to be patient until we receive more light and knowledge. We can accept that the temple ceremony itself will continue to be adjusted to better reflect the divine ideas it seeks to mirror—just as the First Presidency said it would in their 2019 statement.¹⁹

In the day when we come to understand all truth, perhaps it will be contained within the words of some as-yet-unknown divine tongue that outpaces even the glories of Shakespearean English, or perhaps it will simply be too beautiful for words. Regardless, it stands to reason that its full beauty will far transcend any current attempt to understand—let alone articulate—it.

19. Church of Jesus Christ, “First Presidency Releases Statement on Temples.”

Thus, those who wrestle, even mightily, to understand one or another aspect of temple truth may find the understanding they seek in any of many ways, but most of those will not be easy or fast. Some will need meekness to allow themselves to change or to better understand, and some may require the patience necessary to await the continued refinement of the ceremony itself to better reflect divine reality.

Whatever the case, understanding temple truth merits patiently working things through.

Section 3: What the Temple Means to Me

Still, all of the foregoing gets us only so far.

Reorienting our approach to the temple can open our hearts and minds to receive truth there. And a more holistic conception of revealed truth—and of revelation itself—allows us wider latitude to learn what the temple can teach us. But all of this still leaves the central question: *What do we go there to learn?*

This is not my question to answer in any final sense. I'm just one guy and have no place declaring doctrine. Still, the temple takes on meaning precisely as we interact with it. It is in that interpersonal interaction that temple ordinances transform from words to life-changing lessons and promises. I'd like to share with you a few of the lessons the temple has most meaningfully taught me.

First, the prominence of the Fall narrative strikes me as initially counterintuitive but ultimately deeply meaningful. After all, a visitor to our weekly worship services or to seminary and institute classes would be forgiven for concluding that we don't much focus on the Fall. Apart from scattered references in manuals and some general conference talks, this is simply not a subject on which we lavish much time. When, for example, was the last time you heard the subject as the theme of a sacrament meeting talk?

Yet in the temple, the Fall takes center stage.

Why is this?

To answer the question, we first must recognize that in few aspects does our theology differ more insistently and markedly than in our belief regarding what happened in the Garden of Eden and why. The Catholic catechism offers a representative example of just how far we depart from the traditional understanding. As it is for most Christians, for Catholic believers the Fall represents the nadir of sin, arrogance, pride, and

selfishness.²⁰ This conception of God's plan places Adam and Eve in a paradisiacal garden they were never meant to leave. Had they obeyed God's command to not eat the fruit, they would have stayed in Eden forever, and they and all their offspring would have been in a state of never-ending bliss.

In this representation, Eve is depicted as naïve, evil, or both—and all women are often painted with that same brush. Furthermore, in this narrative, Satan triumphs (if briefly) by pulling one over on Adam and Eve. Finally, the outcome represents tragedy on a cosmic scale. In effect, God must respond by setting in motion Christ's sacrifice to bridge the gap opened by Eve's arrogance.

But for Latter-day Saints, almost none of this is true. We believe, instead, that God offered to Adam and Eve competing options and allowed them to choose between them: either they could remain in the flat and empty—though still paradisiacal—Eden, or they could venture into the lone and dreary world. Doing so would bring death and sin into the world, but together with death and sin would come the entire gamut of human experience and the ability to genuinely appreciate meaningful opposite pairs (joy and sorrow, darkness and light, pain and comfort). All of this, taken together, would allow Adam, Eve, and all their posterity to learn genuine joy and love—and the effects of the Fall would be redeemed through the perfect love and eventual infinite sacrifice of the Savior Jesus Christ.

Seen in this light, Eve's choice to eat the fruit becomes heroic, even stunning: this was the height of courage and sacrifice. As President James E. Faust once taught, "We all owe a great debt of gratitude to Eve."²¹ Likewise, the Atonement is no longer an after-the-fact remedy to an unforeseen problem but, instead, the culminating step in a preordained plan meant to allow God's children to become like him.

The importance of this story cannot be overstated. Its inclusion in the temple is not meant simply to set the record straight on a few historical, scriptural, or theological details. Instead, the prominence of the Eden narrative suggests it matters deeply. Let's consider why.

First, Eve's wisdom and bravery remind us that we are *meant to experience sorrow, suffering, and loss*. These are not merely the painful

20. See, for example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1.2.1.1.1.7.3.398, accessed April 28, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENGO015/_P1C.HTM.

21. James E. Faust, "What It Means to Be a Daughter of God," *Ensign* 29, no. 11 (November 1999): 101.

byproducts of a plan gone wrong; they are part of the warp and woof of the universe, forces woven into the fabric of everything—experiencing them matters. If we let them, these experiences can educate us and even transform us. Our belief that eternal law necessitated the choice made in Eden suggests that our becoming like our heavenly parents requires suffering. And anyone who has lived very long and suffered very much knows why: if borne meekly, suffering softens us and excavates in our hearts room to love—an excavation that is sometimes exquisitely painful but that can be accomplished in no other way.

Similarly, the Eden narrative suggests an even more comprehensive truth regarding where we should look in life to find meaning. Both the setup and the resolution of the Eden narrative remind us that the universe rests on the back of a seemingly insoluble paradox. After all, God gave two commandments—to not eat the fruit and to multiply and replenish the earth—but we know from 2 Nephi 2 that those commandments could not both be kept simultaneously (see verses 22–25). Eve and Adam had to break one to keep the other. They were forced to choose between competing goods. Eve’s brave choice to embrace the prospect of having children required them to leave the comfort of Eden—paradise could not be kept if they meant to fully embrace joy.

In this light, one of my most powerful temple experiences came many years ago when one day I found that the entire ceremony seemed to fall away from around me—except Eve. During that session, and for no obvious external reason, I found myself transfixed by her dilemma and captivated by the motivations behind her choice—wondering what might have been going through her heart and mind *before* Satan came tempting her to eat the fruit. The image that came to me was of her having decided to eat the fruit long before Lucifer approached her and for reasons he would never comprehend. I came out of the session that day filled with gratitude and an overwhelming sense that the choice she made that day rested on transcendent eternal truth. Sitting in my car after I left the temple, I wrote,

Since long before he came to her, she’d pondered on the tree;
 She sensed some truth lay deep beneath his wheedling, devilish plea.
 The choices pulled like gravities, her soul that way and this:
 Her Father’s voice and close embrace she knew she soon would miss.
 But in a moment to her heart came truth as clear as day—
 If she would know her God in full, this was the only way.
 She strained her faith to see beyond, to glimpse that farther shore—
 Her better angels beckoned her: come see, come feel, know more.

So, resolute, she set her jaw, resigned now to this plight.
 And with a bite she plunged us into darkness, fear, and night.
 She knew the path she'd chosen would be laced with grief and thorns—
 That from her womb a tearful race of sinners would be born—
 But sensed then, too, that joy in full awaited all her kin
 If through this way of suffering they all would enter in.

The temple invites us to fix our gaze on the moment Eve chose an exodus from comfort and requires us to ask what we can learn by studying and then following her example.

In a sense, then, the temple provides one of our theology's most powerful examples of a woman leading out in bravery and determination to follow the Savior. On one level, Eve's bravest choice is simply to leave the garden and embrace the way of suffering she seems to have known would follow. But her choice does not end there, because beyond the decision to leave the garden, the world into which she invites Adam will come to be defined by a covenant path that is meant to transform both of them, together, into the beings God would have them become.

One consistent emphasis of President Nelson during his prophetic ministry has been to call members to more assiduously walk "the covenant path," which culminates in making temple covenants.²² I fear, however, that we often understand this invitation in a way that greatly impoverishes the meaning of a covenantal life. My experience suggests that many of us act as if the importance of the ordinances of salvation—with their associated covenants—is simply to have received the ordinances themselves, as if they are items to be ticked off a heavenly checklist.

But we have been warned very specifically that this is not the case. In 2000, Elder Dallin H. Oaks taught in general conference,

From such teachings we conclude that the Final Judgment is not just an evaluation of a sum total of good and evil acts—what we have done. It is an acknowledgement of the final effect of our acts and thoughts—what we have become. It is not enough for anyone just to go through the motions. The commandments, ordinances, and covenants of the gospel *are not a list of deposits required to be made in some heavenly account.* The gospel of Jesus Christ is a plan that shows us how to become what our Heavenly Father desires us to become.²³

22. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "New First Presidency Speaks to Members Worldwide," Church News, January 16, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/new-first-presidency-speaks-to-members-worldwide>.

23. Dallin H. Oaks, "The Challenge to Become," *Ensign* 30, no. 11 (November 2000): 32, emphasis added.

Thus, when we enter the temple, one of the primary questions we should be asking is this: What kind of person is the temple inviting me to become? The answer to this question comes as we review the five primary covenants we are asked to make as part of the endowment. Because the endowment presents the arc of Adam and Eve’s journey away from God’s presence and then back into his embrace, the endowment suggests that the covenants they—and, thus, we—make after we have entered the lone and dreary world are key components of the process that then fits us to come back into God’s presence. That is, these covenants help us to become the kind of people God wants us to become.

The meaning of the covenants could fill entire volumes, but for the purposes of this paper, let us consider the first four briefly and then the fifth covenant at a bit more length. We first covenant to live the law of obedience—briefly, we promise to do our (always imperfect) best to keep God’s commandments. Second, we covenant to live the law of sacrifice—briefly, we accept that living of a life of discipleship may at times require giving up even things that are deeply meaningful to us. Third, we consent to strive to live the law of the gospel, which Church leaders have defined as “the higher law that [Jesus] taught while he was on the earth”²⁴—and which we find in distilled form in passages in the Sermon on the Mount. Fourth, we promise to be chaste, meaning we save the sexual part of ourselves to be shared only with our husband or wife.²⁵

And that brings us to the final covenant: to keep the law of consecration.

The original latter-day context for the covenant of consecration comes in Doctrine and Covenants 42. Here the Lord gives early Saints “the law,” which was to be a set of precepts meant to govern their temporal affairs in Zion. While this arrangement was never implemented as intended for very long, it was meant to have worked as follows: If I wished to join the Church, I would legally deed all my property to the Church. Then, penniless, I would have determined a reasonable “stewardship” with the bishop, and he would have made me “steward” over that portion of money, property, and goods in kind. From that point forward, I would be a steward—not owner—of those resources and would thus be accountable for how I used them to bless my family and the world.

24. Church of Jesus Christ, *General Handbook*, 27.2.

25. Listed in detail in “About the Temple Endowment,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed April 19, 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/temples/what-is-temple-endowment>.

As I have grown older, I have come to appreciate more and more the importance of this covenant. In the first place, living the law of consecration invites us to shift the defining paradigm of our lives from *ownership* to *stewardship*. For me, this has become definitional. I still struggle to get this right, but it redefines the way I view everything I have. In a world of *ownership*, I am called to acquire, acquire, acquire—my definition of self largely varies proportionally with the size of my own personal circle of stuff. In the late stages of this worldview, I would become entitled, bitter, and selfish.

But in a world of *stewardship*, I become awed at the blessings heaven has showered on me, anxious to use them to bless and to build. Because I do not “own” anything, I have no more claim on my time, money, and resources than anyone else, and I am constantly worried about whether I am doing enough to get rid of my abundance to lift the poor and help the needy. For those of us who live in the most temporally prosperous era in world history, this recognition—that all that we have does not actually belong to us, but is given as a stewardship—becomes weighty and consuming: Can I ever possibly do enough to adequately discharge the stewardship that has been granted me? This is not to suggest we literally sell all we have and spend our lives in sackcloth and ashes, but instead it becomes an insistent, even incessant, reminder that even if I wear out the rest of my life in service and doing good, I will still fall far short of my full potential.

Paradoxically, though, even as my attempts to use my stewardship to bless the world grow, I find my gratitude growing commensurately. Freed from the incessant nagging of acquisitiveness, I can instead find beauty in sunrises, bird songs, smiles, hugs, and beautiful music. My abundance grows even as I try to give it away.

But the temple is not merely inviting us to a life of asceticism—we are called to consecrate ourselves to build the Church and to build Zion. I would like to think about each of these in turn.

I think we often misunderstand what it might mean to build “the Church,” because we often narrow inappropriately what is meant by “the Church.” It is true, of course, that in one sense “the Church” is a theoretical thing defined by a certain ecclesiology, history, and authority. But this theoretical church model doesn’t really need our building. Instead, when I covenant to consecrate to “build the Church,” I am effectively covenanting to build the people I see around me on Sunday.

These people—in all their imperfection—are, in one sense, “the Church.” So, those of us who have been to the temple covenant to consecrate all we have and are to build those who worship with us. And what

a beautiful promise this is. After all, while not everyone lives in a nuclear family, everyone can belong to a branch or ward. And in these congregations, we come together to celebrate successes and to mourn losses, to live and to love, to welcome babies and to bid farewell to those who die. We cheer each other in winning and hold each other while we cry. Wards can become, in Elder Gerrit W. Gong's words, havens of "covenant belonging."²⁶

In a nation and world that is too often falling apart, wards (or branches) provide safe spaces where people of all ethnicities, economic strata, political persuasions, skin colors, and educational backgrounds come together and weave a community. We can teach one another and care for one another as we pass through the hard things in life. And for many of us, the ward will provide such an endless fount of opportunities that it could be all we will ever need.

And that brings us, finally, to the last covenantal call—to build Zion. Zion can be defined in many ways, but President Russell M. Nelson's prophetic plea for disciples of Jesus Christ to be peacemakers is both urgent and essential. The call to build Zion is, quite simply, our divine mandate to be among those "who spend their lives building up others," as President Nelson put it. "You have your agency to choose contention or reconciliation," he said, "I urge you to *choose* to be a peacemaker, now and always."²⁷ The establishment of Zion depends on it. The Lord prophesied in 1831 that peacemakers would find refuge in Zion, "and there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and [Zion] shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another" (D&C 45:69). We build Zion when we heed President Nelson's urgent call to act: "*Now* is the time to lay aside bitterness. *Now* is the time to cease insisting that it is your way or no way. *Now* is the time to stop doing things that make others walk on eggshells for fear of upsetting you. *Now* is the time to bury your weapons of war."²⁸

Thus, keeping the covenant to consecrate all that we have and are to making peace and building Zion does not need to involve grand acts that will leave an obvious imprint on any noticeable stage. Rather, the majority of what most of us will do in heeding this call—and keeping our promise—will come in the form of daily acts that play out quietly and mostly unnoticed across the world. These are the stars who, by their collective light, make luminous an otherwise inky sky. These are what

26. Gerrit W. Gong, "Covenant Belonging," *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 80–83.

27. Russell M. Nelson, "Peacemakers Needed," *Liahona* 47, no. 5 (May 2023): 101, 100, emphasis original.

28. Nelson, "Peacemakers Needed," 101, emphasis original.

together make the leaven in the loaf or the salt of the earth. These are the myriad ways most of us will make the world a better place—the ways we will hasten the coming of Zion.

When you speak well of a colleague at work—you are building Zion. When you work to fight against “abuse or prejudice [against anyone] because of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or *any other* identifier”—you are building Zion.²⁹ When you put out into the world edifying art or music—you are building Zion. When you provide professional counseling to a teen in trouble—you are building Zion. When you teach French in a troubled high school; when you do research that advances medical cures; when you offer a friend a kind word or a needed smile; if you win an election and go on to bring better resources to the poor—you are building Zion. If you go on to be a CEO, or a nanny, or a board chair, or a PTA president, or a tech leader, or civil rights lawyer, or a woman bringing soup to the homeless, or a doctor bringing care to the dying, or an elder helping your neighbor to move, or whatever good and luminous thing you may one day become—so long as you are leveraging your many gifts, your stewardship, to build and better the children of our heavenly parents—then you are building Zion. In considering all the foregoing, I think of my temple garment. I wear the garment for many reasons, but chief among them is this: as the clothing closest to my skin that virtually never leaves my side, the temple garment reminds me that my covenant to consecrate is total and ever-binding. Whether my service is to my family, my ward, or the wider world, I am to wear out my life in serving, building, and blessing—in making my family, my ward, and the world better.

As an oncologist, I have accompanied many patients as they neared death. I have watched the last breath of air leave the lungs, and I have felt a person’s skin turn cold. Having been there with these patients I’ve grown to love, I will tell you this: When I am called to die, whether that is next year or some sixty years down the road, I will not care how much money I made. Nor will it much matter where I went to school or how high I rose on the corporate (or medical) ladder. But what will bring me the greatest joy will be the loved ones who surround my bed as I breathe my last and—if I’m allowed to look down and see—those who come to mourn at my funeral. Too late, too many of us learn the lesson of Marley’s Ghost from *A Christmas Carol*. When Scrooge tries to

29. Russell M. Nelson, “Morehouse College Peace Prize Award Acceptance Message,” April 13, 2023, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/morehouse-college-peace-prize-award-acceptance-message>, emphasis original.

console him by assuring him he was “a good man of business,” the ghost cries, “‘Business!’ . . . wringing its hands again. ‘Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!’”³⁰

These thoughts of life and death strike me as apropos as we consider the temple because, at the end of the day, the temple is inviting us to consider from the present moment the entire arc of a mortal life. Eve and Adam become our guide in the temple in bravely following Jesus Christ in a life of committed Christian discipleship. This involves, in the first place, finding the bravery to leave the comfortable confines of Eden for the travails of a world suffused in suffering. But the journey does not end there. No, the temple beckons us, by dint of covenants building on covenants, to commit ourselves to *becoming* the kind of people God needs us to be. We Church members constitute only the tiniest fraction of humans on earth—a sliver of a sliver of a sliver. If we are to play a part in being the salt, the light, or the leaven, it will only be by virtue of becoming women and men who follow Adam and Eve’s example in obeying God’s commands to love him and to love our neighbor, sacrificing our own good to lift those around us, living the Savior’s higher law, committing ourselves to lives of chastity, and consecrating all we have and are to building the Church and making the world a better place. By doing our imperfect best to live these covenants, we can eventually be transformed through the grace of Jesus Christ into the type of people who can do God’s work in the world. And thus the end of the eternal arc of all humans, as instigated by Eve and Adam when they blazed a trail out of the garden, will be to arrive back in God’s presence, only, as T. S. Eliot said, “We shall not cease from exploration / and the end of our exploring / will be to arrive where we started / and know the place for the first time.”³¹

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30. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, ebook (Project Gutenberg, 2006), 28, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/19337/pg19337-images.html>.

31. T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, Columbia University, accessed April 19, 2023, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/history/winter/w3206/edit/tseliotlittlegidding.html>.