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“Thank God for Scarlet Fever”

Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone
Keynote Address
April 1, 1988

This is my second experience of joining with you at general conference time. It is not an easy adjustment to work an additional assignment in during this “oh, so busy week.” However, the good your organization is doing is of such mighty import, I felt constrained to accept your kind invitation to speak and share some of my feelings, attitudes, and experiences as one now described in the modern vernacular as an “adult child of a dysfunctional family.”

It probably goes without saying that most in this room are aware of my background. My father was an alcoholic and my parents were divorced. We received no child support nor alimony from my father after the divorce. To my knowledge he smoked about two-and-a-half packages of cigarettes a day until he died. Eventually, through Alcoholics Anonymous, he overcame his drinking. He lived the last five years of his life without drinking once. He never could, or at least he never did stop smoking. His death was caused from cancer, liver, and kidney problems. He was only 60 and he suffered excruciatingly before his death.

My mother, on the other hand, died in her 79th year with a smile on her lips and not one particle of pain. It seemed only just that this magnificent woman died without suffering. She lived without companionship for 43 years, raised seven children, worked nights while we were young, and gave her all for her children. No one will ever know the extent to which she suffered through those long years of unpaid bill collectors, worrying about food for her children, or clothes for her family. Somehow I cannot ever recall her complaining about her lot. I know she must have, but it must not have been in front of us, the children.
When I was about 10 or 11 some of the family came down with scarlet fever. In those days that meant we were quarantined, unable to leave the premises. Dad must have stayed with a relative so he could continue to work. Mother was quarantined in the home from late winter to early spring with seven children. We were quarantined for four weeks. When the doctor came to the house to lift the quarantine, two of my other brothers were not feeling well. The doctor examined them, and they were just coming down with scarlet fever. He quarantined the family for an additional three weeks. It’s a good thing they were sick. As you can imagine they were not all that popular.

Something happened during that seven week period that was more priceless than rubies or diamonds. A family otherwise fragmented by drink, unmet needs, unconsidered feelings, low self-esteem, and embarrassment—we were compelled to be together. A miracle happened. We were not a religious family but we had a mother who was idealistic and had great integrity. With five boys and two girls all cooped up, it’s a wonder the house was still standing at the end of seven weeks. As I recall, it was from about the second week in February through the first week in April. I do not really remember exactly, only that it was cold and the season changed.

We got up together, had breakfast together, we did the dishes, and cleaned the house every day. Then our oldest brother—who was in junior high school—taught us all the exercises he had learned in his gym class. By the time our quarantine ran out I was doing 74 push-ups, 13 chins, and dozens of other athletic skills. I came to love and respect my older brother during those seven weeks. He filled a masculine role in our lives. You cannot believe how fast we could do the dishes. Every day we would time ourselves after almost every meal.

Mother would read to us. We listened to the old Philco Radio and could hardly wait for programs like “Jack Armstrong, the all American boy,” “I love a Mystery,” “Jack Benny,” and “Amos and Andy.” We gathered around the radio and drew close to each other.

Even poor families can become very selfish. Often, in fact, their poverty turns them inward where self-esteem is so low they are constantly concerned with what others are thinking about them.

Every night mother sang us to sleep. We may have sung along. But she always turned out the light. We would listen as she
sang. Despite the darkness, I do not think any of us ever had a concern about safety as long as she was there.

During those seven weeks I grew to love and respect my mother, my brothers and sisters, and prize them as the dearest of friends. We turned to each other and found qualities and talents we did not know existed. We learned some of the most important lessons in life during that period of quarantine—lessons which reach down through the decades to today with profound impact. I thank God for what scarlet fever did for our family.

Many years ago—about thirty years ago—I read a book entitled *Dynamic Leadership* by Lynn Fluckinger. As I prepared this talk, I returned to the bookshelf in my office and extracted this book. It has been a constant reference for me over the years. For my purpose today I want to use just one quote from it.

Any excuse for nonperformance, however valid, softens the character. When a man uses an excuse he attempts to convince both himself and others that unsatisfactory is somehow acceptable. He is perhaps unconsciously attempting to divert attention from performance, the only thing that counts, to his own want for sympathy. The user is dishonest with himself as well as with others. No matter how good or how valid, the excuse never changes performance. (Wilford Lynn Fluckinger, *Dynamic Leadership*, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1962, pp. 53-54.)

In light of this statement, consider the following—no one else possesses us. We have God-given traits as well as the endowment of free agency both of which have come trailing down through the eternities. Eleanor Roosevelt said, “No one else can make you feel inferior without your consent.” Things are never hopeless until our minds have surrendered. Possibly one of the great principles to be shared with children or adults from dysfunctional families is a statement made by President Hugh B. Brown. Perhaps he was responding to a statement made by Ridgwell Cullum in his book *The Men Who Wrought* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs Company, 1916], p. 25) where he stated, “Night claims from the overburdened soul the truth which daylight is denied.” President Brown said, “Yes, but no matter how dark the night, the dawn is irresistible.” All of us who occupy space on this great planet will be tested in one way or another. We are continually engaged in a sifting process. Robert Louis Stevenson expressed his own trials of life in these words:

For fourteen years I have not had a day of real health. I have wakened sick and gone to bed weary, yet I have done my work unflinchingly. I have written in bed and out of bed, written in hemorrhages, written in sickness, written torn by coughing, written when my
head swam for weakness—and I have done it all for so long that it seems to me I have won my wager and have recovered my glove. Yet the battle still goes on: ill or well is a trifle so long as it goes. I was made for contest, and the Powers-That-Be have willed that my battlefield shall be the dingy, inglorious one of the bed and the medicine bottle. (Robert Louis Stevenson, cited in O. C. Tanner, *Christ's Ideals for Living* [Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Sunday School Union Board], 1955, p. 204.)

As adult children of dysfunctional families, we cannot hide behind our peculiar testing and justify our conduct on the basis of someone else's failure—whether parent or child. I am not referring to extreme cases tied to incest or severe physical abuse. Rather, I am referring to the many who are content to lay the blame for their lack of “mature balance” in life at the feet of their parents who were drinkers or involved in drugs.

For 16 years now I have traveled all over the Church as a General Authority. I have shared my story even though it embarrasses me. There are many hundreds and thousands over the years who have related to my story and background. They have quietly whispered in my ear, “my background is just like yours, my father or mother is an alcoholic.” Every week I speak to the youth 12 to 25 in each stake I visit. Always several of them will whisper similar things in my ear. Mothers seem to gain hope that because I came from a family with an alcoholic father, their children can also be normal and well adjusted and may serve in high places in the Church.

Some may think because I talk about it a great deal that I still have some hang-ups. I think I do not. I loved my father, but I did not respect him. Now some of you are psychiatrists and some psychologists. What I have just said reminds me of the psychiatrist and some psychologists. There was a psychiatrist walking through a park with a friend. They met a psychologist coming the other way; the psychiatrist said to the psychologist, “Hello,” to which the psychologist responded, “How are you?” As they walked on the psychiatrist said to his friend, “Now, what do you suppose he meant by that?”

Also, I heard about two psychiatrists who met on the street and the one said to the other, “I passed your house the other day.” The other man said, “Thanks.”

One psychiatrist answered the door and there was a man standing there with a duck perched on his head. The psychiatrist said, “You do have a problem.” The duck responded, “Yes, how do I get this guy off my fanny?
As I say, I feel well adjusted, but some trained in psychiatry may feel differently.

I do not resent my father, but rather feel sorrow for all the things which I prize in my life that are important, that he did not have.

We have in the teachings of the Church profound truths to which we subscribe. In one of the great sermons delivered by President Spencer W. Kimball—one which he entitled “Absolute Truth”—he made the following statement.

God, our Heavenly Father—Elohim—lives. That is an absolute truth. All six billion of the children of men on the earth might be ignorant of him and his attributes and his powers, but he still lives. All the people on the earth might deny him and disbelieve, but he lives in spite of them. They may have their own opinions, but he still lives, and his form, powers, and attributes do not change according to men’s opinions. In short, opinion alone has no power in the matter of an absolute truth. He still lives. And Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Almighty, the Creator, the Master of the only true way of life—the gospel of Jesus Christ. The intellectual may rationalize him out of existence and the unbeliever may scoff, but Christ still lives and guides the destinies of his people. That is an absolute truth; there is not gainsaying.

The watchmaker in Switzerland, with materials at hand, made the watch that was found in the sand in a California desert. The people who found the watch had never been to Switzerland, nor seen the watchmaker, nor seen the watch made. The watchmaker still existed, no matter the extent of their ignorance or experience. If the watch had a tongue, it might even lie and say, “There is no watchmaker.” That would not alter the truth.

If men are really humble, they will realize that they discover, but do not create, truth. (Ensign, [September 1978]: 2–7.)

Sometimes it may be easy to blend the philosophies and the principles of the scholars with the doctrines and principles of the church to the point that we lose a firm hold on the absolute truths.

We are God’s spiritual children and that is an absolute truth. He has eternal and unconditional love for us. He would not consign his children to an eternity of sorrow, sadness, remorse and despair. His work and glory is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” (Moses 1:39.)

There is hardly anything more sad in this world than abandonment of or by those we once loved. An absolute truth is that God could not or would not abandon us. We may be tested to the limit, but to those who trust in him, He, through his Son gives this assurance.
Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30.)

What an important concept it is to have faith in the fidelity, kindness, love and compassion of a God who is our eternal Father. Sometimes as counselors we bury our own lack of faith behind the philosophies and teachings of the so-called “experts.” Even after an angel had appeared to the four brothers Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi—Laman and Lemuel again began to murmur. But Nephi who had faith declared to his brethren, “Let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty or even than his tens of thousands?”—an absolute truth. (1 Nephi 3:31, 4:1).

“Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14). As counselors we need all the professional training possible, then in addition we need to live clean, sweet, pure lives so that the Spirit will strive with us. We must have faith in miracles. We must plant our feet in the concrete of absolute truth and not be ashamed of those who mock and frown from the “great and spacious building.” (1 Nephi 8:26.)

Victor Hugo wrote a great truth which might well be considered by this group. Said he,

For there are many great deeds done in the small struggles of life. There is a determined though unseen bravery, which defends itself foot to foot in the darkness against the fatal invasions of necessity and baseness. Noble and mysterious triumphs which no eye sees, which no renown rewards, which no flourish of triumph salutes. Life, misfortunes, isolation, abandonment, poverty, are Battlefields which have their heroes; sometimes greater than the illustrious heroes. Strong and rare natures are thus created; misery, almost always a stepmother, is sometimes a mother; privation gives birth to power of soul and mind; distress is the nurse of self-respect; misfortune is a good breast for great souls. (Les Miserables, p. 573.)

We have in this Church the principles, teachings, disciplines, and answers far above those in the outside world. We are the best in the world in many things. We have the answers for all who will listen regarding dysfunctional families or any related problems. The world may not believe, and the professionals may mock, but it will ever be thus. Albert Einstein said, “Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”
And Voltaire said something that aligns itself with these principles, “Nothing can stand the assault of sustained thinking.” As we consider and apply the teachings and principles formed in the Church we will find opposition, but when we consider sustained, inspired thinking as it relates to social problems in the world, we are the leaders.

Now may I share five principles which I think apply to this topic.

1. Charity and purity bring peace; indulgence and transgression bring ill consequences.

A man and woman came to my office. They appeared to be a lovely couple. Over 40 years ago while he was in the military in a distant land she committed adultery with a member of the Church who had recently returned from a mission. Whether it was the lust of the flesh, loneliness, or need for companionship, she made some foolish mistakes. Upon his return from duty and after an anonymous phone call or two, she confessed her indiscretion. The husband took 20 minutes to tell all of the details and background leading up to her unfaithfulness.

He told of his own purity and his personal standard during that period. He had remained faithful to his wife. She sat in my office with her head bowed as he told this story of her unfaithfulness. He wept and sobbed with emotion as he told what she had done. I asked if he had been faithful all of those years since they were married. He went into a circuitous explanation of his own conduct. He was a man of many words. I felt like I was being verbally manipulated to keep from getting to the truth. I kept asking questions which he kept skirting. I knew that in order to help I must have him come clean. Every time he tried to go into a long explanation and digress, I pulled him back by direct questions about his involvement.

Finally, I found that he had been sexually abused by an older cousin. After his military career he had been homosexually involved with several partners over a long period of time. He had been involved as recently as three years ago. After I felt that I had a full and complete confession, then I could exercise ecclesiastical judgment on behalf of the Church.

It was interesting to me that he seemed to draw more sorrow out of her unfaithfulness than his own. When I questioned her I felt an absolute and total repentance. She was submissive, sorrowed greatly, bitterly ashamed and found no fault in anyone
but herself. I felt a great spirit of forgiveness sweep over me in her behalf. It was interesting that I did not have feelings of peace with the Spirit that he was equally repentant. He seemed to have a hard time forgiving his wife, which almost led me to believe that he felt she was responsible for his transgressions.

Charity and purity bring peace, and transgression and indulgence only bring a troubled heart. I believe both had repented, she to a full and total degree, he to a lesser point. Each will feel the relief and peace in direct proportion to his or her degree of repentance.

2. We lose much of value and precious time when we let our dysfunctional family affect our service and utility.

One missionary in the mission field was a wonderful young man. However, every time I received a weekly letter it stated the same thing. “President, I don’t like myself. I haven’t liked myself since I was in 4th grade.” (I have often wondered what happened in fourth grade or at that age.) He said he did not know how his companion or the missionaries in the district could like him. He thought “negatively about himself the whole of the day... every day.”

Finally, during one personal interview with him I said, “Elder, you are the supreme egoist. How dare you think about yourself all the time. I know it is all negative, but you do not have a right to spend the two years you have committed to the Lord to think about yourself. From this time on I want you to think about the Lord and others, investigators, missionaries, members, your family, but not about yourself.” I was pretty forceful with him. Now that may not have been an appropriate way to approach his problem, but it worked. He stopped thinking about himself and went on to become a great zone leader. A short time after I counseled with him, in his weekly letter he said, “President Featherstone, you have saved my very life.”

Francois René de Chateaubriand said, “In the days of service all things are founded, in the days of special privilege they deteriorate, and in the days of vanity they are destroyed.” Adult children of dysfunctional families do not have the right to be endlessly thinking about themselves. It is a type of supreme selfishness.

Another way of saying this comes from the prophet Ezekiel. There was a saying that was common in Israel and offensive to God. The Lord gave strong counsel in these words, “As I live, saith the Lord, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this
proverb in Israel." What was the proverb or saying: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2–3). It sounds like the Lord was tired of ancient Israel hiding behind an excuse.

3. God is a worker of miracles, even when it seems that he has withdrawn his blessings.

The greatest miracle in our lives may come at the moment of our darkest trial. In 2 Kings 4:8–36 we read the following account of Elisha.

And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed Shunem, where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread.

And she said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually.

Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither.

And it fell on a day, that he came thither, and he turned into the chamber, and lay there.

And he said to Gehazi his servant, Call this Shunammite. And when he had called her, she stood before him.

And he said, What then is to be done for her? And Gehazi answered, Verily she hath no child, and her husband is old.

And he said, About this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son. And she said, Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid.

And the woman conceived, and bare a son at that season that Elisha had said unto her, according to the time of life.

And when the child was grown, it fell on a day, that he went out to his father to the reapers.

And he said unto his father, My head, my head. And he said to a lad, Carry him to his mother.

And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died.

And she went up, and laid him on the bed of the man of God, and shut the door upon him, and went out.
And she called unto her husband, and said, Send me, I pray thee, one of the young men, and one of the asses, that I may run to the man of God, and come again.

And he said, Wherefore wilt thou go to him to day? it is neither new moon, nor Sabbath. And she said, It shall be well.

Then she saddled an ass, and said to her servant, Drive, and go forward; slack not thy riding for me, except I bid thee.

So she went and came unto the man of God to mount Carmel. And it came to pass, when the man of God saw her afar off, that he said to Gehazi his servant, Behold, yonder is that Shunammite:

Run now, I pray thee, to meet her, and say unto her, Is it well with thee? is it well with thy husband: is it well with the child? And she answered, It is well.

And when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught him by the feet: but Gehazi came near to thrust her away. And the man of God said, Let her alone; for her soul is vexed within her; and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me.

Then she said, Did I desire a son of my Lord? did I not say, Do not deceive me?

Then he said to Gehazi, Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thine hand, and go thy way; if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not again; and lay my staff upon the face of the child.

And the mother of the child said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And he arose, and followed her.

And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor hearing. Wherefore he returned, and met him, and told him, saying, The child is not awaked.

And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed.

He went in therefore, and shut the door upon them twain, and prayed unto the Lord.

And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon the child; and the flesh of the child waxed warm.

Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.

And he called Gehazi, and said, Call this Shunammite. So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said, Take up thy son.

As President Hugh B. Brown said, “Death is not the end, it is putting out the candle because the dawn has come.”
4. Love is essential.

The French scientist, Chardin, stated, “Someday after we have mastered the winds and the waves and gravity, we will harness for God the energies of love and then for the second time in the history of the world man will have discovered fire.”

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a noted family specialist, has observed that “every child should spend a substantial amount of time with somebody who’s crazy about him . . . there has to be at least one person who has an irrational involvement with that child, someone who thinks that kid is more important than other people’s kids, someone who’s in love with him and who he loves in return . . . you can’t pay a woman to do what a mother will do for free.” *(Psychology Today, May 1977, p. 43)*

I have a grandson named Joseph. He is totally deaf. My daughter, Jill, has this “irrational involvement” with him. She is crazy about him, and he loves her. One day I was sitting in the living room reading; I was all alone. Joseph came into the room. Above our stereo we have a picture of Jill in her wedding gown. She is a beautiful woman, and I am crazy about her. Joseph walked over to the stereo and put his hands up on the stereo, like we might do with a pulpit. He stared almost without moving at this 24" x 30" framed picture of Jill. He must have stood there for nearly five minutes while I watched. It was almost like I had a little window into his mind and I could see inside. I imagined what that little 3-year-old boy was thinking.

Many people will find the hope and help they need when they find that someone who is absolutely nuts about them.

There are shepherds in the land and “the shepherd does not recoil from the diseased sheep.” In the book of Ezekiel 34:2–6, 12, 16 we read:

> Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves: should not the shepherds feed the flocks?
> Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock.
> The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.

And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered.
My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them.

As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.

I will seek that which was lost, and bring again that which was driven away, and will bind up that which was broken, and will strengthen that which was sick: but I will destroy the fat and the strong; I will feed them with judgment.

There are shepherds for every flock. We do well to consider the righteous consequences of a leader who functions under the full mantle of his or her ecclesiastical responsibility.

5. Gethsemane may be our Prayer Garden as well.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote these magnificent words in her poem which she entitled “Gethsemane.”

GETHSEMANE

In golden youth when seems the earth
   A Summer-land of singing mirth,
When souls are glad and hearts are light,
   And not a shadow lurks in sight,
We do not know it, but there lies
   Somewhere veiled under evening skies
A garden which we all must see—
   The garden of Gethsemane.

With joyous steps we go our ways,
   Love lends a halo to our days;
Light sorrows sail like clouds afar,
   We laugh, and say how strong we are.
We carry on; and hurrying, go
   Close to the border-land of woe,
That waits for you, and waits for me—
   Forever waits Gethsemane.

Down shadowy lanes, across strange streams,
   Bridged over by our broken dreams;
Behind the misty caps of years,
   Beyond the great salt fount of tears,
The garden lies. Strive as you may,
   You cannot miss it in your way,
All paths that have been, or shall be,
   Pass somewhere through Gethsemane.
All those who journey, soon or late,
Must pass within the garden’s gate;
Must kneel alone in darkness there,
And battle with some fierce despair
God pity those who can not say,
“Not mine but thine,” who only pray,
“Let this cup pass,” and cannot see
The purpose in Gethsemane.
(Ella Wheeler Wilcox, Poems of Power
[Chicago: W. B. Conkey Co.], pp. 147–48.)

All of humanity must face a Gethsemane. The comforting thought
which we might want to consider is this. Jesus, in that brief
agonizing moment in Gethsemane, went through every conceivable type of suffering. It is my understanding that he not only
suffered for the transgressor, but for all. Every feeling of despair
and loneliness which the widow feels he has felt. The abandonment
and devastation which comes to every orphan, those who are unemployed or desperately ill, those who are homely or
beautiful, rich or poor all have feelings which he has felt. He
descended below all, that he might ascend above all. Every hurt
or ache or sorrow we feel he has experienced to a degree that
not one of us can comprehend.

There are numerous principles of the gospel that tie directly to
the solving of social and emotional problems. I think in time we
will find that every true principle, every positive therapeutic
benefit, all healing ties back to the Atonement of the Lord Jesus
Christ and to his ministry. So my testimony today is, whether it be
a woman with an issue of blood, a Shunammite widow, a
quarantined family with scarlet fever, an incest victim, or an adult
child of a dysfunctional family, we can, and we will minister.

I love the Lord. He is my King and I am his subject—subject
to all he would demand of me. He is my liberator and I am free,
he can and will set the world free. He is not only the Son of God,
He is God. He is compassionate, kind, long suffering, meek and
lowly, and He is the magnificent obsession of my life. He is my
very dearest friend. I bear witness that He lives and is the center
of all faith, hope, and charity. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone is a member of the First Quorum of
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