In a chapel far from Salt Lake City, in a place where a member of the Quorum of the Twelve rarely goes, a father approached me. He led his young son by the hand. As they reached me, he looked down at the boy, called him by name, and said, nodding his head towards me, “This is an Apostle.” I could tell by the sound of the father’s voice that he was hoping his son would feel more than that he was meeting a dignified visitor. He hoped that his son would feel a conviction that priesthood keys were on the earth in the Lord’s Church. His son will need that conviction again and again. He will need it when he opens a letter from some future prophet he has never seen calling him to a mission. He will need it when he buries a child or a wife or a parent. He will need it for courage to follow direction to serve. He will need it for the comfort that comes from trusting a sealing power that binds forever.

Missionaries will invite investigators to meet a bishop or branch president today with the same intent. They hope that the investigators will feel far more than that they have met a nice man or even a great man. They will be praying that the investigators will feel a conviction that this apparently ordinary man holds priesthood keys in the Lord’s Church. The investigators will need that conviction when they go into the waters of baptism. They will need it when they pay tithing. They will need that conviction when the bishop is inspired to give them a calling. They will need it when they see him presiding in the sacrament meeting and when he nourishes them by teaching the gospel.

And so missionaries and fathers, and all of us who serve others in the true Church, want to help those we love gain a lasting testimony that the keys of the priesthood are held by the Lord’s servants in His Church. I speak today to encourage all who labor to instill and strengthen that testimony.

It will help to recognize some things. First, God is persistent and generous in offering the blessings of priesthood power to His children. Second, His children must choose for themselves to qualify for and receive those blessings. And third, Satan, the enemy of righteousness, has from the beginning tried to undermine the faith necessary to receive the blessings made possible by priesthood power.

I learned about those realities from a wise teacher nearly 25 years ago. I spoke in an ancient theater in Ephesus. Bright sunlight flooded the ground where the Apostle Paul had stood to preach. My topic was Paul, the Apostle called of God.

The audience was hundreds of Latter-day Saints. They were arranged on the rows of stone benches the Ephesians sat upon more than a millennium before. Among them were two living Apostles, Elder Mark E. Petersen and Elder James E. Faust.

As you can imagine, I had prepared carefully. I had read the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, both those of Paul and his fellow Apostles. I had read and pondered Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians.

I tried my best to honor Paul and his office. After the talk, a number of people said kind things. Both of the living Apostles were generous in their comments. But later, Elder Faust took me aside and, with a smile and with softness in his voice, said, “That was a good talk. But you left out the most important thing you could have said.”

I asked him what that was. Weeks later he consented to tell me. His answer has been teaching me ever since.

He said that I could have told the people that if the Saints who heard Paul had possessed a testimony of the value and the power of the keys he held, perhaps the Apostles would not have had to be taken from the earth. That sent me back to Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. I could see that Paul wanted the people to feel the value of the chain of priesthood keys reaching from the Lord through His Apostles to them, the members of the Lord’s Church. Paul was trying to build a testimony of those keys.

Paul testified to the Ephesians that Christ was at the head of His Church. And he taught that the Savior built His Church on a foundation of apostles and prophets who hold all the keys of the priesthood.

Despite the clarity and the power of his teaching and his example, Paul knew that an apostasy would come. He knew that apostles and prophets would be taken from the earth. And he knew that they would, in some great, future day, be restored. He wrote of that time to the Ephesians, speaking of what the Lord would do: “That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him” (Eph.
Paul looked forward to the ministry of the Prophet Joseph Smith, when the heavens would be opened again. It happened. John the Baptist came and conferred on mortals the priesthood of Aaron and the keys of the ministering of angels and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins.

Ancient apostles and prophets returned and conferred upon Joseph the keys they held in mortality. Mortal men were ordained to the holy apostleship in February of 1835. Priesthood keys were given to the Twelve Apostles in the latter part of March 1844.

The Prophet Joseph Smith knew that his death was imminent. He knew that the precious priesthood keys and the apostleship must not be and would not be lost again.

One of the Apostles, Wilford Woodruff, left us this account of what happened in Nauvoo as the Prophet spoke to the Twelve:

“On that occasion the Prophet Joseph rose up and said to us: ‘Brethren, I have desired to live to see this temple built. I shall never live to see it, but you will. I have sealed upon your heads all the keys of the kingdom of God. I have sealed upon you every key, power, principle that the God of heaven has revealed to me. Now, no matter where I may go or what I may do, the kingdom rests upon you.’” (“The Keys of the Kingdom,” *Liahona*, Apr. 2004, 42; *Ensign*, Apr. 2004, 30.)

Every prophet that followed Joseph, from Brigham Young to President Hinckley, has held and exercised those keys and has held the sacred apostleship.

But just as in the time of Paul, the power of those priesthood keys for us requires our faith. We have to know by inspiration that the priesthood keys are held by those who lead and serve us. That requires the witness of the Spirit.

And that depends upon our testimony that Jesus is the Christ and that He lives and leads His Church. We must also know for ourselves that the Lord restored His Church and the priesthood keys through the Prophet Joseph Smith. And we must have an assurance through the Holy Ghost, refreshed often, that those keys have been passed without interruption to the living prophet and that the Lord blesses and directs His people through the line of priesthood keys which reaches down through presidents of stakes and of districts and through bishops and branch presidents to us, wherever we are and no matter how far from the prophet and the apostles.

That is not easy today. It was not easy in the days of Paul. It has always been hard to recognize in fallible human beings the authorized servants of God. Paul must have seemed an ordinary man to many. Joseph Smith’s cheerful disposition was seen by some as not fitting their expectations for a prophet of God.

Satan will always work on the Saints of God to undermine their faith in priesthood keys. One way he does it is to point out the humanity of those who hold them. He can in that way weaken our testimony and so cut us loose from the line of keys by which the Lord ties us to Him and can take us and our families home to Him and to our Heavenly Father.

Satan succeeded in undermining the testimony of men who had, with Joseph Smith, seen the heavens opened and heard the voices of angels. The evidence of their physical eyes and ears was not enough when they no longer could feel the testimony that the priesthood keys were still in place with Joseph.

The warning for us is plain. If we look for human frailty in humans, we will always find it. When we focus on finding the frailties of those who hold priesthood keys, we run risks for ourselves. When we speak or write to others of such frailties, we put them at risk.

We live in a world where finding fault in others seems to be the favorite blood sport. It has long been the basis of political campaign strategy. It is the theme of much television programming across the world. It sells newspapers. Whenever we meet anyone, our first, almost unconscious reaction may be to look for imperfections.

To keep ourselves grounded in the Lord’s Church, we can and must train our eyes to recognize the power of the Lord in the service of those He has called. We must be worthy of the companionship of the Holy Ghost. And we need to pray for the Holy Ghost to help us know that men who lead us hold this power. For me, such prayers are most often answered when I am fully engaged in the Lord’s service myself.

It happened in the aftermath of a disaster. A dam in Idaho broke on a June day. A wall of water struck the communities below it. Thousands of people, mostly Latter-day Saints, fled their homes to go to safety.

I was there as the people faced the terrible task of recovery. I saw the stake president gather his bishops to lead the people. We were cut off in those first days from any supervision from outside. I was in the meeting of local leaders when a director from the federal disaster agency arrived.

He tried to take over the meeting. With great force he began to list the things that he said needed to be done. As he read aloud each item, the stake president, who was sitting near him, said quietly, “We’ve already done that.” After that went on for five or ten minutes, the federal official grew silent and sat down. He listened quietly as the stake president took reports from the bishops and gave directions.
For the meeting the next day, the federal disaster official arrived early. He sat toward the back. The stake president began the meeting. He took more reports, and he gave instructions. After a few minutes, the federal official, who had come with all the authority and resources of his great agency, said, “President Ricks, what would you like us to do?”

He recognized power. I saw more. I recognized the evidence of keys and the faith that unlocks their power.

It happened again when a man and his wife arrived back in town just after the dam had broken. They didn’t go to their home. They went first to find their bishop. He was covered in mud, leading his members in mucking out homes. They asked what he would have them do.

They went to work. Much later, they took a few minutes to check on their own house. It was gone. So they went back to work wherever their bishop asked them to help. They knew where to go to get the Lord’s direction for service in His Church.

I learned then as I have since how the stakes of Zion become places of safety. They become like a great family, united, caring for each other. It comes by simple faith.

By faith they are baptized and receive the Holy Ghost. As they continue to keep the commandments, that gift becomes constant. They can recognize spiritual things. It becomes easier to see the power of God working through the common people God calls to serve and lead them. Hearts are softened. Strangers become fellow citizens in the Lord’s kingdom, united in loving bonds.

That happy condition will not last without a constant renewal of faith. The bishop we love will be released, as will the stake president. The Apostles we followed in faith will be taken home to the God who called them.

With those continual changes comes a great opportunity. We can act to qualify for the revelation that allows us to know that the keys are being passed by God from one person to another. We can seek to have that experience again and again. And we must, in order to receive the blessings God has for us and wants us to offer to others.

The answer to your prayer is not likely to be as dramatic as it was when some saw Brigham Young, as he spoke, take on the appearance of the martyred Prophet Joseph. But it can be as sure. And with that spiritual assurance will come peace and power. You will know again that this is the Lord’s true and living Church, that He leads it through His ordained servants, and that He cares about us.

If enough of us exercise that faith and receive those assurances, God will lift up those who lead us and so