

Blessings of a Testimony

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A few weeks ago I spoke with a recent Brigham Young University graduate in New York City. During the conversation I detected a slight accent. I asked the young man if he was from another country. He said his homeland was Brazil, where he had spent the first 23 years of his life. Since few foreign converts are financially able or academically prepared to attend the university, I asked if he was a second- or third-generation member.

"No!" he responded. "I was a convert at age 17."

I then asked, "How much education did you have at the time of your conversion?"

His answer, "I had completed the eighth grade."

I was even more surprised. "How did you make it to BYU?" I inquired. "What motivated you to move forward with your education?"

In essence he responded, "The truths of the gospel and a mission experience convinced me of the importance of further study. Before my mission I learned about the principles of eternal progress. During the mission I had the opportunity to teach these principles to others. As I rubbed shoulders with other missionaries who had high educational aspirations, I became convinced of my own potential. When I returned from the mission field, I was deter-

mined to complete high school and move on to college. I earned a high school diploma within two years while working and saving and then applied for admittance to Brigham Young University. I was accepted. I have finished a bachelor's degree and an MBA and now have excellent employment with a large multinational corporation that utilizes my talents in both the United States and Brazil."

Simple but profound truths that we often take for granted had an enormous impact on the young Brazilian's life. He took to heart the dictum to seek "out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118). He believed the revelations that state: "It is impossible for a man [or woman] to be saved in ignorance (D&C 131:6); that "the glory of God is intelligence" (D&C 93:36); that

whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and

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obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. [D&C 130:18–19]

Since the conversation, I have reflected again and again on the blessings of a testimony, of receiving “truth in the inward parts” (Psalm 51:6). In general we are aware of the eternal consequences of having gospel principles burned in our souls by the power of the Holy Ghost. The redemption of the soul and the inseparable connection of body and spirit coupled with eternal glory come to mind. These are of ultimate importance. But there are also more immediate blessings that flow from a testimony like that enjoyed by the young Brazilian. Not only was his eternal path changed forever, but so was his life in mortality. The motivation to improve his personal circumstances was a direct consequence of his conversion and faith. This motivation caused him to obtain an education that then led to employment well beyond anything he had dreamed of as a teenager in Brazil.

The motivation to improve one’s lot in life is not the only earthly consequence of conversion. There are many temporal blessings that flow from a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These include protection from the swirling winds of immorality, alcohol, tobacco, and drugs; a comfort and peace of mind that results from knowing one is not alone; a power to bless others and lighten their loads; the courage and strength to face adversity; an ability to cope with death, given a knowledge of its purpose and nature.

My list is not exhaustive. I suggest you ponder the blessings of a testimony with respect to your life. See if you can add to the list. In the time remaining I will discuss three blessings, in addition to education, that I believe are especially pertinent to members of the BYU community. The first is protection from the whirlwinds of the adversary; the second is the companionship of good friends; and the third concerns the courage and strength to face adversity.

Protection from the Whirlwinds of the Adversary

After many years of missionary work, Ammon spoke to his brothers about their successful labors and how their sheaves or converts needed to be gathered into garners in order for them not to be wasted. Looking forward to our time, he further stated that those gathered in the garner would

not be beaten down by the storm at the last day; yea, neither shall they be harrowed up by the whirlwinds; but when the storm cometh they shall be gathered together in their place, that the storm cannot penetrate to them; yea, neither shall they be driven with fierce winds whithersoever the enemy listeth to carry them. [Alma 26:6]

My grandfather was a farmer. I remember the garner or granary on his farm. After the exhausting task of harvesting the grain, the grain was transported to the granary for winter storage. The purpose of the granary was to provide a safe haven for the harvest, to protect the wheat and corn from the coming storms, from the rain and snow that could destroy it. In addition, the garner provided protection from predators who desired the harvest for their own purposes. As the grain entered the garner, it was checked for contaminants. It was also fumigated or cleansed as a precaution and certified as to its cleanliness.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell has stated that the temple is a garner for Church members (see “Coordination of Full-Time and Stake Missionary Work,” Regional Representative Seminar, 30 March 1990, p. 6). It is a place of refuge from the storms of life. He has pointed out how important it is for new converts to progress to the temple in order to be preserved. Through temple covenants members are endowed with power to protect themselves from the evil that swirls about them. Like the grain entering the garner, those entering the temple have been cleansed of contaminants

through repentance, baptism, and the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they have been certified as being clean and worthy of entrance.

Brigham Young University is also one of the Lord's garnerers. So, too, are BYU—Hawaii, Ricks, the LDS Business College, and the seminaries and institutes spread across the earth. Each is an important gathering place for young members of the Church as a refuge from the storm. The protection provided is both temporal and spiritual. BYU is among the Lord's most important garnerers because the sheaves gathered into it are relatively young and tender. Students are at a critical stage in life. Many are on their own for the first time. Most students will make three or four of life's most important decisions while at the university. These include the quality and type of education, a mission, marriage, and employment. BYU often plays an important role in each decision.

A key temporal as well as eternal blessing provided by the university is a first-class education in a moral environment. In Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's terms, the "modern winds of immorality swirl luridly around" us ("Personal Purity," *Ensign*, November 1998, p. 75). These winds blow through every level of society. BYU is an oasis from the storm because almost all who enter these halls of learning have a testimony of the sacredness of the human body, knowing that one's body and spirit have been purchased with a price and that life-giving processes are reserved for marriage. Individuals without testimonies, whether at other universities or in the world generally, often do not understand the severe temporal consequences of immoral acts. They do not understand that the lack of sexual discipline is one of the greatest causes of unhappiness on this earth. Families are destroyed by it or never formed because of it. Children are deprived as a result of it. How grateful we should be to associate with so many faculty, staff, and students who understand these fundamental truths and live accordingly.

Some universities are struggling with binge drinking. University officials in many parts of the nation are worried about alcohol-related deaths among students. A few administrators have taken steps to eliminate alcohol from their campuses. Not only does alcohol take lives but it interferes with the learning process. For those students with a testimony of the restored gospel, alcohol is not a problem. The BYU community largely escapes the destructive consequences associated with alcohol, tobacco, and drugs. Like a stake of Zion, the university is "a defense, and . . . a refuge from the storm" (D&C 115:6).

One of the more obvious temporal advantages associated with the Word of Wisdom is a healthier, longer life. A UCLA study has shown that LDS Church members live about 10 years longer than their U.S. counterparts. The UCLA report indicates that Mormon high priests who never smoked cigarettes and who engage in regular physical activity have "some of the lowest mortality rates ever reported from cancer and cardiovascular disease for any population group" (Vicki Beck, "UCLA School of Public Health Study Finds Mormon Health Practices Linked to Unusually Low Rate of Cancer and Cardiovascular Deaths," *UCLA News*, 5 December 1989; see also James E. Enstrom, "Health Practices and Cancer Mortality Among Active California Mormons," *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* 81, no. 23 [6 December 1989], pp. 1807–14). The Word of Wisdom must be a frustration to Lucifer, whose objective is to shorten life or, at a minimum, to make life miserable. The revelation, received in February 1833, is now 166 years old. It has stood the test of time and is a remarkable witness of the temporal and spiritual blessings offered to the Saints. The revelation promises health, wisdom, knowledge, and the ability to "run and not be weary, and . . . walk and not faint" (D&C 89:18–20). The UCLA study provides clear evidence of the fulfillment of the promise.

The Companionship of Good Friends

Another major benefit of a testimony is the companionship of good friends. This advantage exists for Church members in general but is especially applicable to membership in the BYU community. While serving as president of the Asia North Area a few years ago, I met a recent convert whose conversion story helped me understand how a testimony builds trust among the members and allows strong friendships to be formed.

The young Japanese man was not a Christian prior to meeting the missionaries. His interest in the message was modest, but he continued to study because he enjoyed the association with the missionaries. The major stumbling block for him was a feeling of self-sufficiency; he did not understand or feel the need for a Savior. After receiving the lessons, the seed did not swell within him because he had not paid the price to receive a personal witness. The missionaries were perplexed and wondered what they should do. One day they showed him a film called *The Bridge*. The film illustrates the power of Christ's atonement as a father is forced to choose between saving his son's life or the lives of passengers on a train. The film clearly underscored the dependence of the passengers on the father's decision. The young man's thoughts were provoked, and he could not sleep that night—but still there was no witness.

The next morning he went to the optician shop where he served customers needing eyeglasses. During the day an elderly woman entered. Her glasses were broken. He remembered her coming in before, but she had not had sufficient money to purchase new glasses. On this day she again showed him her broken spectacles and asked if the money she now had was sufficient. It was apparent that she was still short of funds. Then a thought came to him: "I have some money. I can make up the difference." He told her that her money was

enough, took the broken spectacles, and made an appointment for her return.

When she returned a few days later, the glasses were ready. He handed them to her and she put them on.

"Miemasu! Miemasu!" [I see! I see!] Tears streamed down her cheeks in gratitude for her sight.

At that point a burning sensation was felt deep within Manabu's soul as he was encompassed by the Holy Spirit. As she left, he exclaimed, "Wakarimasu! Wakarimasu!" [I understand! I understand!]

His eyes and heart were opened as he felt the Savior's love and knew that there is Someone greater than himself.

This spiritually defining moment caused a paradigm shift in the young man's life. He knew the gospel was true. His trust in the missionaries and Church members soared. No longer was he just a receiver. Following his baptism he would stay after church meetings to meet with investigators and share his feelings and insights. He became a nurturer and a strong witness of the truth. Reaching out to others became a natural instinct. Never again would he be alone. Not only did he enjoy the companionship of the Holy Spirit, but his friendships with others in and out of the Church multiplied.

The same opportunity exists in the BYU community. The common gospel bond shared by the vast majority increases trust among students, faculty, and staff. Because we are "children of the covenant" (3 Nephi 20:26), we "bear one another's burdens, that they may be light; . . . mourn with those that mourn; . . . and comfort those that stand in need of comfort" (Mosiah 18:8–9). One of the great blessings emanating from Brigham Young University is the opportunity for enduring friendships to be established.

The Courage and Strength to Face Adversity

Another of the great blessings of a testimony is the hope that comes from a knowledge of and belief in the plan of salvation. The plan provides an eternal perspective that helps the believer cope with day-to-day trials. Job's expression of hope derived from his testimony is a classic:

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:

And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God:

Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me. [Job 19:25–27]

Job was able to withstand the adversity thrust upon him by Satan: poor health, loss of family and friends, and loss of wealth. In spite of the hardships that befell him, he was true to the end because of his personal witness that he was a son of God, that God had a plan for him, and that his faithfulness would result in salvation.

I knew a woman whose life paralleled Job's. Her name was Joan Kinder. She was a deeply religious woman with a quick wit, a bright mind, and an engaging personality. Children and adults loved her, and she loved them. She was one of the most cheerful persons I have known. I had the privilege of teaching her the gospel as a British missionary in the mid-1950s. A decade earlier, at age 20, she had fallen in love and was engaged to be married. It was the mid-1940s, and World War II was still raging in Europe. Her fiancé was drafted into the British army and sent to the front. She became employed in a munitions factory and waited for his return. Near the close of the war the young man's family received a letter telling of his death.

For a period of time Joan was at a loss. She joined the British equivalent of our Women's Army Corps and was sent to the Far East. In

Hong Kong she met another British soldier. They fell in love and were married. Eventually they returned to England and found a home to rent in her native town. He was posted a few miles away. It was not long before they were blessed with a son.

Two years later the husband was assigned to another post some distance from their home. It was decided that she would wait for him to be established before moving to the new area. A few months went by with him returning each weekend. Each time he would suggest they wait just a little longer before making the move. Then one weekend he failed to return. She visited the base the next week. He told her that an assignment had kept him. She was uneasy, feeling that something was happening to their marriage. Within a few weeks he told her about another woman and that he wanted a divorce. She was devastated. Her son was now three years old and would grow up without a father.

It was during this time that the missionaries knocked on her door. She invited them in, took a Book of Mormon, and promised to read it. Within a few days she completed reading the book. A special spirit accompanied the reading and, while praying about the predicament and challenges that confronted her, a feeling of peace came along with a witness of the sacred nature of the book. The missionaries were surprised upon their return to find a convert. But she insisted on waiting a few months before joining the Church. She felt time was needed to see if her husband would change his mind. More than anything, she hoped to save her family. Time passed, and the divorce became final. She then joined the Church.

From the beginning of her membership, she was a full-tithe payer in spite of the meager income available to support her son and herself. She worked in a small shop where her boy could be with her until he entered school. Then she became a seamstress in a factory with better pay. Her leadership abilities eventually

resulted in her becoming part of the management staff. When her son was grown, she emigrated to this country and found employment with the Family History Department of the Church. She was a specialist in reading old English and old German manuscripts.

One day she received a call from the British Embassy in Washington, D.C. They asked for a meeting and sent a representative to see her. She was told in the meeting that her son had been killed while on business in a foreign country. For a period of time there was a sadness in her eyes and a heaviness in her heart. Then the cheerfulness returned. The twinkle in her eyes, her quick wit, and her love for people were irrepressible. My children loved to be in her presence. There was something special about this deeply faithful woman.

Not many years after her son's death, Joan was crossing a street in Salt Lake City on her way to work. The morning sun had just topped the mountains in the east, and a woman driving east failed to see Joan in the crosswalk. Apparently Joan was not aware of the car coming at her. She may have been thinking about the wonderful blessings of the gospel of Jesus

Christ that had come into her life. Suddenly there was an impact. The car hit her with tremendous force. Her time in mortality was over. A short time later I received a call from a common friend informing me of the accident and her death. I have thought often about this wonderful, interesting woman. Her life was filled with tragedy. Most of the things she wanted in life never materialized. One did—the greatest one! She found the hope that comes with a testimony of the gospel. In the end, that satisfied her. She knew she would see her son again. Parents and friends were eternal. She found joy in the gospel here and knew that unspeakable joy would be hers on the other side of the veil.

Brothers and sisters, may we appreciate the wonderful blessings available to us in this life through the gospel of Jesus Christ. May our testimonies motivate us to improve our lot in life, to withstand the temptations of the adversary, to enjoy good friends, and to face adversity with hope and courage, knowing that unspeakable joy awaits us in the eternities. This is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.