

A Life Centered on Jesus Christ

S. MARK PALMER

It is a tremendous honor for me to congratulate you graduates on your hard-earned and well-deserved achievement. In the best of times, the rigors of a university education will test and stretch us. During the past two pandemic years, you have faced unique challenges. But you persevered through the uncertainties of online learning, masks, and isolation—and here you are. I would like to give a special callout to our international graduates from more than sixty countries around the world. I too was an international student at BYU, and I know something about the loneliness, financial struggles, and cultural adjustments that come with studying far from home. To each of you in this class of 2022, we are proud of you and we salute you.

Forty years ago I sat where you are. Actually, if I am really truthful, I am not sure if I sat where you are. But I do have a photo that shows me in my rented graduation gown standing in front of the famous BYU entrance sign, just like many of you did today. But in all honesty, I can't remember

the graduation ceremony. I am sure it was wonderful and the speakers were great. But just to be sure that forty years from now you can say with confidence that you did attend your graduation, I am going to give you some helpful tips.

I will start by talking to those of you here who are celebrating with your graduates. How grateful we are for you parents, loved ones, friends, and faculty members who have supported and encouraged these graduates. Later today or tomorrow, each graduate will be handed their diploma. So that they never forget the excitement of the moment, tip number one is to take your fancy camera or simply your phone, get the settings right, and *focus* correctly. Don't set your focus on the official handing them their diploma. Get the focus right on that which matters most—your graduate.

My second tip is to *center* your graduate in the viewfinder. Don't be distracted by the handsome chap calling and waving to his mum. Just stay centered on the graduate.

S. Mark Palmer, member of the Presidency of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this commencement address on April 21, 2022.

Next, as your graduate begins their walk—provided they don't trip—you will then want to *recenter* them in your viewfinder. Maybe you will want to do that especially if they do trip! Recentering will keep you from taking a photo of someone else.

So those are three tips from a very amateur photographer—*focus*, *center*, and *recenter*.

The rest of my remarks are for you graduates. After today, many of you will begin packing away your books, loading up the U-Haul, and saying final goodbyes to cherished classmates and loved professors. As you then commence this next stage of your life journey, I likewise give you three tips. The advice will also be to *focus*, *center*, and *recenter*. But I feel much more sure about this advice than I do about my photography advice.

Focus on What You Can Control

Let me start with focus. In August 2020, my wife, Jacqui, and I briefly returned from Africa to Salt Lake City, where I had the unexpected blessing of joining President Russell M. Nelson for lunch. I told him how intimidating it was for me to sit next to the prophet of the whole world.

With a gentle smile, he said, "Just eat your soup. You will get over it."

At the time, the COVID-19 pandemic was causing real fear and suffering in the countries where we were serving, so I asked, "President Nelson, very soon I will be returning to our beloved brothers and sisters on the African continent. Is there a personal message you would want me to share?"

He paused thoughtfully and then gave this profound answer: "Tell them that some things are out of our control, so we should focus on those things that we can control—specifically on how we live our lives. We need to live our lives in such a way that we are always ready to meet our Maker."

You all look so happy today, but I am sure that there are some of you who are a little anxious about an uncertain future. You will have little control over wars or conflicts, over pandemics or personal illness, over inflation or recessions, or even over how you will be treated by a boss or a coworker. But you can control whether you respond to such events with faith or with fear.

I have watched our prophet and apostles respond to crises and suffering with deep emotion but never with fear. The Savior taught us to "be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you."¹

You can control the way you treat others, especially those with whom you disagree. Focus on applying these radical teachings of Jesus Christ: "Love your enemies."² "Pray for them which despitefully use you."³ "Forgive all."⁴

Nelson Mandela is a hero to many and is revered around the world as a symbol of freedom. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for helping bring an end to the terrible system of racial segregation in South Africa known as apartheid. He is also an example of someone who had little control over his circumstances while he was imprisoned for an astonishing twenty-seven years—longer than many of your lifetimes. Yet despite the inhumane conditions within his prison on Robben Island, he focused on what he could control by learning the Afrikaans language of his prison guards and by seeking to understand and appreciate their shared humanity. Once free, he chose to focus on reconciliation and truth rather than on bitterness or revenge. He is famously reported to have said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies."⁵ As an elder statesman, Nelson Mandela taught that "what counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others."⁶

So my tip number one is: Let us choose to live our lives by focusing on what we *can* control rather than on what we cannot control.

Center Your Life on Christ

My second tip is to always center your faith and your lives on Jesus Christ.

Thirty-three years ago, right here in the Marriott Center, President Howard W. Hunter made this profound statement and promise: "If our lives and our faith are centered upon Jesus Christ and his restored gospel, nothing can ever go permanently wrong."⁷

So what does a Christ-centered life look like? A Christ-centered life is being faithful to covenants.

It is loving and serving others. A Christ-centered life rejoices in eternal family relationships. It prioritizes “the riches of eternity”⁸ over the riches of the world. A Christ-centered life humbly accepts that “to be learned is good if [we] hearken unto the counsels of God.”⁹ A Christ-centered life is full of joy.

The promise in President Hunter’s bold statement is that when our lives and our faith are centered on Jesus Christ and His restored gospel, “nothing can ever go permanently wrong.”

Some may question this, saying, What about good and faithful people who suffer or even die unexpectedly? Surely that is permanent.

The Lord answers with these reassuring words given to the Prophet Joseph:

*Thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;
And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high.*¹⁰

“For . . . in Christ shall all be made alive.”¹¹

Now my young brothers and sisters, no matter what troubles or challenges come your way—and they will come—I invite you to continue to center your lives on Jesus Christ and exercise your faith in Him. As you do, you will be able to say with the apostle Paul, “We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair;”¹² “for we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord.”¹³

Twelve years ago, our twenty-four-year-old daughter was in the MBA program here at BYU. Sister Palmer and I were serving as mission leaders in Spokane, Washington, when she called with the shocking news that doctors had discovered a brain tumor. The personal sorrow of seeing a child face such an uncertain future was profound and deep. As a father, I felt an overwhelming desire to protect her, to fix the problem, or even to take her place as she went in for surgery. I realized I would give up any amount of wealth to somehow purchase her health. But none of those things were an option, and it was very humbling to recognize that it was all out of our control.

My journal describes a sleepless night following her surgery. I was tossing for hours with

thoughts that were a real test of my faith. The surgeon had just told us that he had been unable to fully remove the tumor, so the future looked dark and uncertain. Even as I tried to look for bright spots, it felt so easy to question God’s seeming lack of response. What about the priesthood blessing I had given her two nights earlier, in which I had felt prompted to make assurances based on promises made in her patriarchal blessing? What about the many prayers and much fasting on her behalf from literally all around the world?

At 4:00 a.m., I knelt in our hotel and poured out my heart to God on behalf of our precious daughter, who was full of faith and living a life centered on Jesus Christ. After that long and sleepless wrestle, I felt an answer that, no matter the outcome, I must go forward with faith and trust in Jesus Christ. All I could do was surrender my will to His. Eventually a sense of peace came, and my pleading prayer changed to a prayer of thanks. I thanked God for His love and for the blessings of the gospel in our lives. As I left my knees, I knew that we would be able to face whatever lay ahead, whether she was healed—or not.

Everyone’s story will be different. In our daughter Jasmine’s case, what lay ahead were years of continued uncertainty that included radiation and chemotherapy but also beautiful miracles of marriage and children. Through it all, she has continued to center her life on Jesus Christ, and she inspires all with her boundless optimism and with her faith. For she too shares in the assurance that no matter what happens in the future, nothing will ever go permanently wrong, thanks to eternal covenants made with a loving God.

Recenter Your Life Often

My third piece of advice is to recenter often. Think about a GPS or a mapping app. When we have trouble seeing ourselves in relation to our destination, a message pops up saying, “Recenter.” If we ignore the message, we quickly lose track of our relationship to our destination. But as we recenter ourselves within the chosen route, once again we can focus on reaching our destination. On our journey to eternal life, there will be times when we need to recenter our lives on Jesus

Christ and His restored gospel. Recentering is a lifelong process.

Is it any wonder that President Nelson has taught us over and over again the importance of keeping our covenants, repenting daily, partaking of the sacrament, attending the temple as often as possible, and learning to hear Him? These are the very ways that we can recenter our lives and stay focused on the covenant path leading to eternal life.

Let me share a personal example. Six years after I graduated from the BYU MBA program, our extended family had a reunion on this campus. My parents and many family members came from New Zealand. I did not know that these few weeks would be the last time I would see my father, whom I greatly respect and love. At that time, my mind was always swirling with whatever real estate deals I was working on, and I woke up every day just so excited to go to work. We had a young family with four very young children, and I suppose I was on the fast track and beginning to enjoy the outward trappings of worldly success.

Looking back now, I suspect my father was worried about my priorities. I remember him taking me aside and counseling me about what was most important—especially pleading with me to take precious time with my children and with my wife and to make sure that I served faithfully in Church callings. Somewhat impatiently, I kept thinking, “Why are we having this conversation? I already know these things.”

But in his gentle way, Dad was giving me a father’s final counsel to focus on what matters most. His counsel was a reminder to recenter my life. I will always be grateful for the sacred experience of receiving a father’s blessing in the Wilkinson Center at the end of that family reunion.

A few months later he passed away, and I realized I had participated in the sort of experience we read about in the Book of Mormon, in which holy men such as Nephi, Moroni, and Helaman leave their final counsel and invite those they love to “believe in Christ,”¹⁴ to “come unto Christ,”¹⁵ to “build [their] foundation”¹⁶ on Jesus Christ, and to “offer [their] whole souls as an offering unto him.”¹⁷

Now my wonderful young brothers and sisters, as you leave this exceptional university full of hopes and dreams, we express our great love and our admiration for you. Every time I walk on this campus, I feel such gratitude for our BYU students, for the way you represent the Church, and for the light and the goodness that I see within you. We have confidence in you, and you give us great confidence in the future. I thank you for the extraordinary contributions I know you will make in your families, in your church, in your communities, and in your careers.

Above all, as you leave with your diplomas in hand, I invite you to *focus* on that which is within your control, to *center* your faith and your life on Jesus Christ and His restored gospel, and, as needed, from time to time, to *recenter* your life on Him. I promise that doing so will lead to true and lasting joy.

I close with my witness that Jesus Christ lives. I testify that He leads this Church through living prophets and apostles. He is the Prince of Peace and in times of turmoil has the power to heal broken hearts and calm troubled souls. Because of His great love for each of us, He has provided the way—and He is the way—to eternal life. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Doctrine and Covenants 68:6.
2. Luke 6:27.
3. Luke 6:28.
4. Doctrine and Covenants 64:10.
5. Nelson Mandela, quoted in John McTernan, “Nelson Mandela Had a Unique Gift: He Was Able to Govern in Poetry,” *Telegraph.co.uk*, London, 6 December 2013; also quoted in David Horsey, “Nelson Mandela Transformed Himself and Then His Nation,” *Opinion, Los Angeles Times*, 6 December 2013. See Alan Brandt, quoted in Ashton Applewhite, *Thinking Positive: Words of Inspiration, Encouragement, and Validation for People with AIDS and Those Who Care for Them* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 45: “Resentment is like taking poison and hoping it’ll kill someone else.” See also Bert Ghezzi, *The Angry Christian: How to Control, and Use, Your Anger* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1980), 99:

Resentment is like a poison we carry around inside us with the hope that when we get the chance we can deposit it where it will harm another who has injured us. The fact is that we carry this poison at extreme risk to ourselves.

6. Nelson Mandela, address delivered at the ninetieth birthday celebration of Walter Sisulu, Johannesburg, South Africa, 18 May 2002.

7. Howard W. Hunter, "Fear Not, Little Flock," BYU devotional address, 14 March 1989.

8. Doctrine and Covenants 38:39; see also Jacob 2:18–19.

9. 2 Nephi 9:29.

10. Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–8.

11. 1 Corinthians 15:22.

12. 2 Corinthians 4:8.

13. 2 Corinthians 4:5.

14. 2 Nephi 33:10.

15. Moroni 10:32.

16. Helaman 5:12.

17. Omni 1:26.