

Pointing Our Souls to Christ

NEILL F. MARRIOTT

Hello, BYU students, faculty, staff, friends, and family! Really, we Southerners are more comfortable just saying, “Hi, y’all!”

Now before we launch into this devotional, I have to share a little experience I had on May 1, 2014, with your wonderful and, at the time, brand-new BYU president, President Kevin J Worthen. He, Sister Worthen, and I, along with about a thousand Relief Society sisters, were standing at long tables in the Smith Fieldhouse filling food boxes for humanitarian aid. We had on hairnets—nice yellow ones.

I ended up standing next to President Worthen for a while. His job was to hold open a plastic bag while I poured beans and lentils into the bag. We were doing pretty well until either the next plastic bag wasn’t opened enough or I got distracted and missed the bag, because suddenly President Worthen had lentils falling all over his shoes. There he stood, with little beans on his feet and a hairnet on his head.

He looked at me with a somewhat mournful smile and said, “Well, this is my first day on the job.”

President Worthen, you’ve come a long way!

Place Your Focus on Christ

Brothers and sisters, I hope that when we walk out of this devotional, the Spirit will have assured us of two certainties. First, I hope that we will know that when we focus on Jesus Christ faithfully and intently, we draw His strength into our souls. Second, when we act on this spiritual strength and do things His way, we will understand more deeply that there is no other name or way whereby salvation can come to us, “only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.”¹

How do we focus consistently on Christ and act on His strength? We *choose* throughout the day to be open to the Spirit and to act on those promptings. We covenant weekly to always remember Christ. President Russell M. Nelson has taught,

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“Nothing invites the Spirit more than fixing your focus on Jesus Christ.”²

When I was a little girl, during the hot, muggy Louisiana summers, my father would promise us kids that if we were ready and waiting when he got home from work, he would take us swimming at the city park pool.

At 5 p.m. on most afternoons, I and two of my younger brothers lined up on the hot cement curb in front of our house, dressed in our swimming suits with towels around our necks, peering seriously down the street at the corner. Even the hot pavement couldn’t break our concentration—though sometimes we would jump back to the cool grass of the front yard for a moment, we would not shift our gaze from the far corner of the street.

When Daddy’s green Ford rounded the corner, we cheered, jumping up and down.

He would get out of the car, pull his tie off, and say, “I’ll be right back.” Soon he would return in his swimming suit, and we would be on our way to the pool.

Why did we three young kids stay so sharply focused? Why were we so certain we would get to go swimming? Because we knew our father. Because we knew he loved us, and we had felt his love. Because he kept his promises, so we trusted him. And because we knew he had power that we didn’t have: he could drive a car and get us to the swimming pool! So we focused on him—our unfailing driver—and trusted that he would get us where we wanted to go.

Do we truly know the Lord, feel His love, and trust His almighty capacity to take us to a place of healing, love, and progress? If so, do we look to Him steadily?

Where is your focus during daily life, and where is your focus when you are facing challenges? President Nelson has said, “My brothers and sisters, I plead with you to make time for the Lord!”³

What is the ratio of time we spend between making time for the Lord and making time for the world? When we want answers, do we first look to the trending opinions of others or the philosophies of the world? Do we first search the internet, hoping that we will find out how to have

confidence in social situations or how to choose a major or that we will discover tips for getting along with our roommate or even ways to be healed from the deepest wounds in our hearts? Is the Lord far from the thoughts and intents of our hearts?

If we depend only upon the world and its answers, we are going to be disappointed sooner or later. Spiritual wisdom, real peace, healing, and godly discernment come to us from Jesus Christ through the Holy Ghost. They do not come from the opinions of the world.

We choose the direction of our thoughts and actions. We choose where we turn for help.

It takes mental effort to look to Christ when other places offer quicker answers. The more we look to Him, remember Him, and learn of Him in the scriptures, the more we will trust Him and go in His name to Heavenly Father for direction.

Look Where You Want to Go

I recently had a delightful conversation with an Olympic champion. Her name is Noelle Pikus Pace, winner of the silver medal in the skeleton race in the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Russia. I asked Sister Pace, along with her husband, Janson, about skeleton sledding and how in the world she steered the sled, since she was flat on her stomach with her hands at her sides as she moved along the ice at about ninety miles per hour. Let’s hear what she had to say [a video was shown]:

Neill Marriott: *Noelle, thank you. It’s a privilege to be here in your beautiful home with you and Janson. I am so honored that you would spend time with me. I don’t know a thing about skeleton racing or sledding or whatever you call it, but would you just talk to us about what it is, how you race, how you train, how you steer, how you flop down on your tummy on that sled and scoot down the track, and what part Janson has played?*

Noelle Pikus Pace: *So skeleton is a crazy headfirst sport, where an athlete runs and jumps headfirst onto their stomach on a tiny little cookie sheet. We fly down the side of a mountain going ninety miles an hour, and we steer using our shoulders and our knees, applying pressure—just light pressure—to guide the sled the*

entire way down a mile-long course to hopefully and ultimately cross the finish line.

Marriott: *And the sled is only about three feet long, isn't it?*

Pace: *Yeah, it's about three feet, and it weighs about sixty-five pounds, so it has got some weight to it. Janson actually built and designed my sled for the 2010 and 2014 Olympic Games, so he actually knows a lot more about the content of the sled. And then I enjoy driving it down the track.*

Marriott: *Janson, how did you know how to do this, and how does she move one shoulder and get it to go? What does the sled do?*

Janson Pace: *I had a small background in designing with Solidworks, a 3D modeling program, and it seemed like a fun opportunity for me. More important, she really needed a sled to get down the track. I realized that in order for her to be able to focus and to get down the track where she needed to go, she needed some equipment that was going to help her do that. And she struggled for a while to find the right equipment, so I just crossed my fingers one day—one summer, I guess I should say—and went to work.*

Noelle Pace: *A lot of prayer—a lot went into that.*

Marriott: *This is a long journey. You were injured in—was it 2004?*

Pace: *So leading up to the 2006 Winter Olympic Games, I was hit by a bobsled. I remember realizing at that time when this Olympic dream was just taken in a split second that I had a choice to make. I could either look back and be upset and frustrated that I missed out on this grand opportunity or I could choose to move forward. At that time I decided to move forward with the help of a great team, with the support of my husband, my family, and so many wonderful people around me. We were able to come back. And in order to do that, I had to set goals along the way.*

Marriott: *So how do you get to the finish line, to the goal, when you have no steering wheel? There doesn't seem to be any visible sign of control.*

Pace: *So as a rookie, a lot of times you make the mistake of thinking that it's these massive changes that you need to make in order to get yourself down the track. But as an elite athlete, you start to realize that it's the subtle changes and that something as simple as looking where you want to go will put you where you need to be.*

"Where you look is where you go" was a statement that I would tell myself for years leading up to that Olympic podium. Just look where you want to go and then make the subtle adjustments to get there.

Marriott: *Well, thank you. Thank you for your wisdom, your courage, and your determination to make it after having broken legs and all kinds of problems before. But I just have in my mind your statement that you go where you look. To me there is great wisdom in that, and it applies to our life and to all our decisions and choices. So thank you for the great example you've been. It's been a joy to talk to you.*

Pace: *Thanks so much.*

Sister Pace said, "Where you look is where you go." She also said that she made subtle changes in her efforts to run the race. It is not usually a massive change that we need to make to return to the Lord and His ways.

Where do you want to end up? Ultimately we want to go home to our glorious celestial home with our heavenly parents. And the Savior is the only way back to our heavenly parents' presence. Our acceptance of His act of Atonement is essential. Elder Tad R. Callister wrote, "Though our life seems empty or pointless, . . . there is a miraculous rebirth . . . that emerges with our acceptance of the Savior and his Atonement."⁴ Do we understand the absolute truth stated in 1 Nephi 10:6? "All mankind were in a lost and in a fallen state, and ever would be save they should rely on this Redeemer."

We need help. We need grace. And we will have it if we rely on Christ!

Sometimes, when His grace seems slow in coming, we must prove that we are serious about relying on Christ. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf spoke of "active waiting and . . . staying with something and doing all that we can . . . , even when the desires of our hearts are delayed."⁵

When our twenty-one-year-old daughter, Georgia, was critically injured in an accident, her father and I were serving a mission in Brazil. We hurriedly got a flight back to the United States. We trusted that the Lord would answer our fervent prayers. Georgia was given a priesthood blessing by a worthy priesthood holder—her brother—and we knew the Lord had the power to heal her. But she died before our plane landed. We had prayed that she would live.

Did the Lord hear our prayers? Yes. Did He answer them in the way we had pleaded He would? No. Should we have bitterly turned away from Him and looked to some other source for peace and understanding? No. There is no other source of lasting peace and eternal life than Jesus Christ. Sometimes we feel overwhelmed with our troubles, but the Lord is stronger than our challenges. He gives us strength and inspiration to face them.

I love Nephi’s perspective when Laman and Lemuel complained, saying that Laban, keeper of the plates of brass, “is a mighty man, and . . . he can slay fifty; then why not us?”⁶

Nephi declared, “Let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than . . . Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands.”⁷

The Lord is mightier than our fears, our disappointments, our weariness, and even our deep wounds of the heart! He is the great healer and guide through our deep waters; He waits for us to come to Him.

It is true that we have to shoulder our burdens and do hard work, but when we look with hope and love to Christ, we will be given compensating blessings that will bind us to Him in powerful ways—even if our challenge remains.

Let Go of Old Debris

Looking humbly and constantly to the Lord leads us to repentance—a change of heart and action. In 2021 our prophet, President Nelson, said, “I have thought about the need for each of us to remove, with the Savior’s help, the old debris in our lives.”⁸

“Old debris”! I have felt the weariness of old debris. Whether it is troubling doubt about gospel

truths, sin, resentment, fear, anger, confusion, pride, or other things, do you have old debris in your life? The Spirit can lead us to honestly recognize and remove our deep-seated baggage.

In Jacob 4:5 we read of the Nephites’ faith: “We keep the law of Moses, it *pointing our souls to [Christ]*” (emphasis added).

What points your soul to Christ? Do you have a support system that turns you to God? These Nephites had witnesses that pointed their souls to Christ.

In Hebrews 12:1–2, we read:

Seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside . . . the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

I love that phrase—“great . . . cloud of witnesses.”

Our daughter-in-law Marian Marriott is a mother of seven and a runner who, in fact, just ran the Salt Lake City half-marathon in the rain and cold two weeks ago.

When she ran, she had her support team of family—her husband, brother, and father—to cheer her on along the way. Marian was encompassed about by her cloud of witnesses who let her know that she could finish that race. We need to be each other’s witnesses—witnessing that with Jesus Christ, we too can finish our race.

Did Marian run her race dragging along a full garbage can behind her? No, of course not! She ran the race setting aside all encumbrances that could hold her back, focusing solely on the finish line—no debris. And she made it!

We, too, are running a race of life. We, too, have a cloud of witnesses to point our souls to the finish line and to our Author and Finisher, Jesus Christ. Perhaps we have a garbage can full of debris that is slowing us down. Let’s actually do as President Nelson said and “remove . . . the old debris in our lives.”

To me, that means repent and clean up our thoughts, our actions, and our relationships. We have people all around us to help with this removal! When life is full of concerns, let’s look

to the witnesses of the Lord all around us. These witnesses could be like unto those pieces of equipment that Janson and Noelle Pace mentioned. Sister Pace needed her sled to get her to the finish line. For us, maybe our sled is the scriptures, our temple covenants, the gift of the Holy Ghost, the prophets, our family, and our friends and ward leaders—anything that points us to Christ. With their witness, we are encouraged to turn to Him and begin the process of letting go of sins that so easily beset us!

We may even add *new* personal debris that is limiting our access to the Spirit. My husband, David, and I have been remodeling part of our home, and I have become easily beset with temptations! I have to be on my guard, because when I sit down to study the scriptures each morning, if I am not careful, a strange phenomenon occurs. I reach for the scriptures and, lo and behold, I find a home decor magazine in my hand! If I stare at this magazine instead of moving it away, I suddenly realize that there is a lampshade or a rug for sale that I am sure I need. Then I just *have* to hop on the laptop to see if I can find them and if they are on sale—and there I go down a home decor rabbit hole while the scriptures just wait.

Now, those magazines are not sinful, but they don't matter compared to eternal truths. They have no power to bring us spiritual guidance that will bring us back to the Lord.

In 2009, President Uchtdorf gave a conference talk on what matters most. He spoke of a plane crash in which over one hundred people were killed.

After the accident, investigators tried to determine the cause. The landing gear had indeed lowered properly. The plane was in perfect mechanical condition. Everything was working properly—all except one thing: a single burned-out lightbulb. That tiny bulb—worth about 20 cents—started the chain of events that ultimately led to the tragic death of over 100 people.

Of course, the malfunctioning lightbulb didn't cause the accident; it happened because the crew placed its focus on something that seemed to matter at the moment while losing sight of what mattered most.⁹

What do you want most? What matters most to you?

Look Intently to Christ

Truly, Sister Pace is right: where we look is where we go. So in our daily plans, actions, and conversations, let us look to the Savior, connecting to Him, the source of our strength and happiness.

Focusing on eternal things requires mental, emotional, and spiritual effort! President Nelson counseled us, “The Lord loves effort, because effort brings rewards.”¹⁰ We really can't be casual if we are going to successfully obey and connect with the Lord.

What does it mean to love God with *all* your might? Have you ever been stretched to your absolute limit? Have you ever given *everything in you* to keep Him in your daily thoughts and attitudes?

My family and I were rafting on the Green River some years ago. We had been told by our guide to stay in the boat. If we decided to jump out when the water was calm, we were told to stay close to the boat, because if we got close to the rapids and were far from the boat, the guide wouldn't be able to get us out in time. However, if we were in the water and were far away from the boat and we got close to the rapids, we were to turn and put our feet out to push off the rocks. I did not like the idea of pushing off rocks or being bounced around in the rapids!

But I was having fun out in the water and was moving rather quickly ahead of the raft when I heard the loud sound of the rapids ahead. I turned back and yelled, “Pick me up!”

The guide yelled back, “Swim toward us!”

Panicking, I began to swim with all my strength toward the boat, but the current was dragging me backward faster than I was going toward the raft. Everything in me wanted to avoid going over those rocky rapids. I was stroking as hard as I could, training my eyes on the prow of the raft—I was *intent!*

Just at the last moment, the raft came near, and the guide reached out, grabbed me, and tossed me into the raft. We were immediately swept over the rocks and the turbulence.

All of my thoughts and desires had been riveted on making it back to the safety of that raft. Imagine the good that would flood into our lives if we stayed riveted on Jesus Christ and His love no matter what our circumstances.

Jesus Christ has said, “Look unto me in every thought.”¹¹ There is that mental effort again. As we look, the Lord comes into focus in our mind and heart.

Alma the Younger was keenly focused as he reached for the Savior:

While I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world.

Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me. . . .

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more. . . .

And oh, what joy . . . !¹²

We invite power and faith into our lives through our wholehearted allegiance to Christ. And then, despite our weaknesses, we *will* be pulled out of the river, we *will* be driven to the swimming pool, we *will* be supported across the finish line, and we *will* even, when needed, be given the right words to speak. For when we are focused on and yoked to the Lord, He becomes the doer of our deeds.

In Jacob 4:6 we read of the many powerful things we can do by faith in Christ. Then in verse 7 we read, “The Lord God showeth us our weakness that we may know that it is by his grace . . . that we have power to do these things.”

When David and I served a mission in São Paulo, Brazil, my Portuguese was limited at best. My testimony sounded something like, “You nice, me happy, gospel true.”

We gave many stake conference talks, and I always had my same trusty, dog-eared Portuguese talk ready to read. Then one Sunday morning, while sitting on the stand at a stake conference and preparing to step to the podium and read that talk, I was suddenly aware of a strong spiritual

prompting. It went something like this: “Leave your talk on your seat and speak from the heart.” Oh dear!

I became all trembly and twittery! My focus on the Lord sharpened considerably! I turned my hope, thoughts, and feelings over to Heavenly Father, pointedly pleading for help in the name of His Son. I wobbled to the podium, stared out at the audience, and opened my mouth. My verb endings were surely mangled, and no doubt my pronunciation hurt every ear. As I directly focused and concentrated on the Savior’s love and mercy, I was able to share it. The Spirit used those broken Portuguese sentences to convey truth. Many hugs and tears came from members after the meeting.

The Lord will take our earnest, though meager, offering—be it two small fish and a few small barley loaves¹³ or weak Portuguese or a sincere though awkward attempt to mend a relationship—and turn it into a nourishing meal if we come with faith and focus to Him for help.

We really have no power to create good—all good comes from God.

King Benjamin told us to remember our own nothingness.¹⁴

Ammon said, “I know that I am nothing.”¹⁵

Moses declared, “Now . . . I know that man is nothing.”¹⁶

Of course we do have great value, but our mortality and fallenness render us powerless to change ourselves and progress in truth and happiness. We have great need of a Redeemer, and the Lord wants us to understand this and look to Him.

And so, as we do our best, as we face disappointments—which life brings to all of us—and as we still look to and act on our deep trust and obedience to Jesus Christ, we are promised that we will prosper in the land. He is our hope!

The Swiss artist Eugène Burnand created a most poignant painting—in fact, we have a print of it hanging in our home, where it reminds us to look to the resurrected Lord.

In this 1898 artwork, named *The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre on the Morning of the Resurrection*, we see two apostles, Peter and John, running across the Jerusalem landscape at daybreak, ostensibly toward the tomb. Their faces

are peering hopefully and trustingly forward as their coats fly back and their hands are clasped in front. Their entire beings are pointed toward the resurrected Lord. We, too, can be this pointed, this hopeful, this trusting of our Redeemer.

May we take time each day to look to our one source of salvation, healing, power, and goodness—our Savior, Jesus Christ. As we do, I testify that He will draw us close to Him, He will give us loving grace in our daily lives, and, in time, He will bring us back to our heavenly parents.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Mosiah 3:17.
2. Russell M. Nelson, “Make Time for the Lord,” *Liahona*, November 2021.
3. Nelson, “Make Time.”
4. Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 206; emphasis added.
5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Continue in Patience,” *Ensign*, May 2010.
6. 1 Nephi 3:31.
7. 1 Nephi 4:1.
8. Russell M. Nelson, “Welcome Message,” *Liahona*, May 2021.
9. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “We Are Doing a Great Work and Cannot Come Down,” *Ensign*, May 2009.
10. Russell M. Nelson, quoted in Joy D. Jones, “An Especially Noble Calling,” *Ensign*, May 2020.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 6:36.
12. Alma 36:17–20.
13. See John 6:9–14.
14. See Mosiah 4:5.
15. Alma 26:12.
16. Moses 1:10.