

# *Christ's Atonement, Invitations to Act, and Promised Blessings*

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Sisters and brothers, thank you for your faith in Jesus Christ, thank you for your courage to stand as a witness to His name, and thank you for all that you do to become—and help others to become—true followers of Jesus Christ and to enjoy the blessings of the holy temple. You are beautiful; you are loved.

Almost every time I am on a university campus, I remember my early days as a college student. I graduated from high school in Hawaii. During my senior year, most of my friends were planning to attend college. This was a new idea for me, as none of my family had ever attended college. I visited with my high school counselor to express my desire to pursue university studies. She was surprised and chuckled just a little—or maybe a lot. She kindly suggested other options besides university studies. I left her office disappointed but not *discouraged*.

I then visited with my high school basketball coach and asked him what options I had to attend college. He was honest and mentioned one way

that I could be able to attend college was on an athletic scholarship. So I started to gather news articles about my success as a high school athlete and wrote letters to several colleges. This was before Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and email. I received many rejection letters, and many colleges did not respond. Fortunately I did receive a partial scholarship to play basketball at Brigham Young University–Hawaii.

A few weeks before school began, I met with an academic advisor to sign up for classes. She mentioned that because BYU–Hawaii was a religious institution, I would need to take religion courses as part of my academic studies. At the time I was a faithful Muslim as a member of the Nation of Islam. I expressed a desire to better understand the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, and it was recommended that I enroll in a New Testament course.

Also during our conversation, the academic advisor examined my high school transcripts and was quite surprised. She said that because of

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my academic performance in high school (or lack thereof) I would be placed on academic probation, and she mentioned that if I did not achieve at least a 3.0 GPA in each of the first two semesters at BYU–Hawaii, I would lose my athletic scholarship. I mentioned to her that I had received a thirty-five on the ACT. She was surprised. I said, “Yes, I got a seventeen the first time and eighteen the second.” In reality, I had not taken the ACT.<sup>1</sup>

Well, the rest of the story is that I obtained the needed GPA, played NCAA Division 1 basketball, received a PhD from Arizona State University, and finished my professional career as a CPA and as an associate professor of accounting at the University of Alabama. With love for and faith in Jesus Christ, determination, hard work, and a lot of help, much good can be achieved.

Upon completing my PhD, I taught here at BYU in the Marriott School of Business as an assistant accounting professor. My wife, Stephanie, and I had not attended BYU at any point of our academic studies, so we really wanted to know about the lifestyle here and the challenges students face on this campus. During the first six months that I was a professor at BYU, we lived in Wyview Park—married student housing. We moved with our four young children into a very tight and cozy three-bedroom apartment of no more than about eight hundred square feet.

Each morning I walked to the Tanner Building for work, which provided an opportunity to visit with students and to learn of their challenges and the uniqueness of the BYU campus community. Over the next eight years as a faculty member, I gained an appreciation for the goodness, determination, and courage of BYU students. You become faithful, devoted, intellectually capable, and spiritually discerning as you come unto Christ in all aspects of your lives.

From these experiences and others, I have come to realize that as we come unto Christ, He follows a pattern of instruction to provide inspiration and spiritual strength. He teaches eternal truths, extends invitations to act, and promises blessings to those who act in faith to fulfill His invitations.<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Mormon prophet Lehi demonstrated an example of this principle when he shared a vision of the tree of life with his family.

Two of his sons, Laman and Lemuel, had questions regarding the symbolism associated with this vision.

Laman and Lemuel asked Nephi, their younger brother, “What meaneth the rod of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree [of life]?”<sup>3</sup>

Nephi, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, exemplified Christ’s pattern of instruction. He replied by teaching an eternal truth and extending an invitation with promised blessings:

*And I said unto them that [the rod of iron] was the word of God; and whoso would hearken unto the word of God, and would hold fast unto it, they would never perish; neither could the temptations and the fiery darts of the adversary overpower them unto blindness, to lead them away to destruction.*<sup>4</sup>

Christ, through His servant Nephi, extended the invitation to hearken and to hold fast to the word of God. As we accept this invitation, the Lord has promised that we will never perish and neither can the temptations and the fiery darts of Satan overpower us or lead us to destruction—an invitation to act with the promise that through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice, death, and Resurrection, we will find true happiness in Him.

I pray that the Holy Ghost will enlighten each of us as we understand the eternal truth regarding the Atonement of Jesus Christ and act in faith to fulfill the Lord’s invitations so that we might receive His promised blessings.

### **An Eternal Truth**

Think about the last few hours of Christ’s life. It was the season of the Passover, a major Jewish holiday that celebrates the exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It was during this time that Jesus instituted the sacrament. The scriptures record:

*Jesus took bread and blessed it, and brake, and gave to them, and said, Take it, and eat.*

*Behold, this is for you to do in remembrance of my body; for as oft as ye do this ye will remember this hour that I was with you.*

*And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them; and they all drank of it.*

*And he said unto them, This is in remembrance of my blood which is shed for many, and the new [covenant] which I give unto you; for of me ye shall bear record unto all the world.*

*And as oft as ye do this ordinance, ye will remember me in this hour that I was with you and drank with you of this cup, even the last time in my ministry.*<sup>5</sup>

Jesus taught His beloved apostles the significance of the sacrament and that through this holy ordinance we are connected to Christ and He is connected to us. Following the administration of the sacrament, He spoke these words to Peter:

*Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat:*

*But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren.*<sup>6</sup>

Jesus Christ is our “advocate with the Father,”<sup>7</sup> and I believe He continually prays for you and for me that our faith in Him will “fail not.”

After describing the administration of the sacrament and Christ’s counsel to Peter, the New Testament records that Jesus walked with His apostles to the Mount of Olives and Gethsemane, the place of the olive press. In the book of Luke we read:

*And he came out, and went, as he was wont, to the mount of Olives; and his disciples also followed him.*

*And when he was at the place, he said unto [His apostles], Pray that ye enter not into temptation.*

*And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and [He] kneeled down, and prayed.*<sup>8</sup>

Sisters and brothers, picture in your mind Jesus instructing His apostles to pray to overcome temptation and then withdrawing Himself “from them about a stone’s cast”—around thirty to forty yards. He then knelt down to pray, saying, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”<sup>9</sup> At this moment Jesus knew He would take upon Him the sins and sorrows of the world, and He may have asked, “Father, is there another way for me to pay this price for the human family? Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.”

*And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.*

*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*<sup>10</sup>

The Savior felt the pain of all our sins and of all our infirmities, heartaches, depression, anxiety, and feelings of being marginalized, abused, forgotten, and mistreated. Every mortal experience that causes us to feel pain, anguish, and disappointment, Christ felt in this very hour. The pain was so great that it caused Jesus to bleed from every pore of His body.<sup>11</sup>

Well, you know the rest of the story. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Jesus was arrested and beaten, and a crown of thorns was placed upon His head. He was judged and condemned to death. He was forced to carry a crossbeam to the place of execution known as Calvary. The execution squad nailed His hands and feet. Jesus suffered more pain. Finally, Jesus gave up His life so that you and I may enjoy this life in greater abundance as we prepare for eternal life with God: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>12</sup>

On the first Easter Sunday morning, Jesus Christ was resurrected. His body was reunited with His spirit into a perfect, glorified body, and He invited His disciples and others, saying:

*Come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins, [anguish, and pains] of the world.*<sup>13</sup>

Jesus Christ also said:

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

*For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.*

*He that believeth on him is not condemned.*<sup>14</sup>

The Atonement of Jesus Christ is an eternal truth.

### Invitation and Promised Blessings

Jesus’s invitation is simple, and His promised blessings are assured, as He declared:

*Come unto me, all ye that labour 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.*<sup>15</sup>

Do we recognize His invitation? Do we recognize the power we can have from His promised blessings? Christ invites us to come unto Him with the promise that He will give us *rest*. President Russell M. Nelson described exactly what this rest is. It is “*relief and peace.*”<sup>16</sup> Christ invites us to take His yoke upon us and to learn of Him, for He is “*meek and lowly in heart.*” Again, this is the promised blessing: we will find rest, for His “*yoke is easy*” and His “*burden is light.*”

So how do we do it? How do we come unto Christ and receive His yoke and His rest? Let me offer three things we can do to come unto Him more fully.

#### 1. Receive Ordinances and Make and Keep Covenants

First, we come unto Jesus Christ as we receive His ordinances and make and keep covenants with Him. President Nelson said:

*Each person who makes covenants in baptismal fonts and in temples—and keeps them—has increased access to the power of Jesus Christ. Please ponder that stunning truth!*

*The reward for keeping covenants with God is heavenly power—power that strengthens us to withstand our trials, temptations, and heartaches better.*<sup>17</sup>

In January 2013, I was called to serve as the first African American stake president in Alabama. Our family had moved to Alabama about fourteen months earlier, so we were relatively new to the stake, which covered more than fifteen hundred square miles and had twelve congregations. Thus

I felt the need to visit each of the twelve congregations so they could get to know me and I could get to know them.

On one of my first visits, I was invited to meet with a brother after the sacrament services. As we met, he reached into his pocket to hand me his temple recommend. This brother was serving as a temple ordinance worker. As he handed me his temple recommend, he explained that he could not sustain or support a person of color serving as his stake president. He also shared that he had a problem with me being married to Stephanie, a person not of my race.

This brother was sincere and honest with his problems and concerns. He was self-aware enough to recognize how the disease of racism was affecting his ability to come unto Christ. He felt unworthy to worship in the house of the Lord, to receive ordinances, and to make and keep his covenants with the Lord. I responded by giving this brother back his temple recommend and then sharing that if he had a problem with me because of my race and my marriage, then he needed to worship God in the house of the Lord more, not less.

Temple worship can help us appreciate the beauty of God’s creation in all its variety. The temple can help us see beyond ourselves, our neighborhoods, and our nations. As we truly come to understand the ordinances and covenants of the temple, we come to recognize that the Lord loves diversity. The Lord observed when He finished His work, “*And I, God, saw everything that I had made, and, behold all things which I had made were very good.*”<sup>18</sup> The Lord loves diversity. He loves me and He loves you. He wants us to know that we belong to His family. We are children of God. We are truly brothers and sisters.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson shared the following:

*We cannot permit any racism, tribal prejudice, or other divisions to exist in the latter-day Church of Christ. The Lord commands us, “Be one; and if ye are not one ye are not mine.” We should be diligent in rooting prejudice and discrimination out of the Church, out of our homes, and, most of all, out of our hearts. . . .*

*A sense of belonging is important to our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.*<sup>19</sup>

Later, I shared with this struggling brother that if he had a problem with me, it was a problem he needed to work out with the Lord. Please know that I have no problem with the way I look. I am comfortable in my own skin. Furthermore, I have no problem with the way Stephanie looks. She is beautiful beyond comparison. I then shared that I was more than willing to help this brother overcome his problem if he would let me. I sensed that he desired to change. He was humble and loved Christ just as I did.

In this instance, I asked if I could bring Stephanie with me to have dinner with him and his family in their home as their stake president.

Two months later, I again visited the area, and we had dinner in his home with his family. A friendship developed over the next five years, and when I was released as his stake president, we embraced each other with such a feeling of love and brotherhood. We both had come to understand the spiritual power that is received from priesthood ordinances and through keeping covenants with the Father and His Son. President Nelson declared that “yoking [ourselves] with the Savior [through ordinances and covenants] means [we] have access to *His* strength and redeeming power.”<sup>20</sup>

How do we come unto Christ? We yoke ourselves to Him as we receive His ordinances and make and keep our covenants with Him.

## 2. *Become Engaged Learners*

Second, we come unto Christ as we become engaged learners. President Nelson gave this invitation to each of us:

*Immerse yourself in the scriptures to understand better Christ’s mission and ministry. Know the doctrine of Christ so that you understand its power for your life. Internalize the truth that the Atonement of Jesus Christ applies to you. . . .*

*The more you learn about the Savior, the easier it will be to trust in His mercy, His infinite love, and His strengthening, healing, and redeeming power.*<sup>21</sup>

We become engaged learners as we study the holy scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon, which is another testament of Jesus Christ.

President Nelson shared this thought about the Book of Mormon:

*When I think of the Book of Mormon, I think of the word **power**. The truths of the Book of Mormon have the **power** to heal, comfort, restore, succor, strengthen, console, and cheer our souls.*

*. . . I promise that as you prayerfully study the Book of Mormon **every day**, you will make better decisions—**every day**.*<sup>22</sup>

What an invitation, what a promise as we seek to come unto Christ as engaged learners of the holy scriptures, including the Book of Mormon.

## 3. *Minister to the One*

Last of all, we come unto Christ as we minister to the one by using the ministering principles to love, to share, and to invite.<sup>23</sup> The first and great commandment is to love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength.<sup>24</sup> As we increase our desire to love God with all our heart by keeping His commandments, the Lord will deepen our ability to love our neighbors and to love ourselves. Our love for God should be the primary motivator in all that we do as we seek to minister to the one. With love, we share our time, our experiences, our resources, and our vulnerabilities as we nurture and help each other. Sharing vulnerabilities builds unity. None of us are immune from life’s challenges, trials, weaknesses, heartaches, and disappointments.

As we minister with love and share thoughts, experiences, and resources to meet the needs of those we serve, we can invite them to come and see, to come and help, and to come and belong. We can invite those who we love to feel what we feel and to know what we know through the Holy Ghost.

In July 2022, Stephanie and I returned home from Manchester, England, after serving as mission leaders. We love the United Kingdom and its people and its culture. As mission leaders, we interviewed missionaries every six weeks, and during one of these interview sessions, I met with a wonderful sister missionary. Our relationship over the previous few months had deteriorated to the point that there was a lack of trust between



us. Unfortunately, the early part of our interview together intensified these feelings of mistrust. I was very direct with her, and she was very direct with me. We spent most of the interview defending our own points of view. The frustration of this interview was clearly reflected in my countenance and with my words.

In the middle of our conversation, this good sister missionary requested a priesthood blessing from me. The request came at a heated point of the interview.

I thought to myself, “You must be joking. You are asking me for a blessing now? This makes no sense.”

Unfortunately, I not only thought these words but also expressed them out loud.

The interview concluded, and I went to explain to Stephanie what had just transpired.

Stephanie said, “No, you didn’t just do that, did you?”

It was obvious that I had made a terrible mistake. I found an empty room at the church building and knelt to pray to my Heavenly Father in the name of Jesus Christ.

The words spoken to me through the Holy Ghost were clear: “Peter, Peter, she is not yours. She is mine. Love her like I would love her.”

I responded, “Yea, Lord, You shared this with me once before. Please help me.”

Again I received the reply: “Peter, Peter, she is not yours. She is mine. Love her like I would love her.”

I arose, found this good sister, and apologized for my lack of understanding and for my lack of showing love for her. We spoke again, and this time I spent more time listening to understand and to ascertain her needs. Once we came to understand each other, I asked if she still wanted the blessing. I invited Stephanie into the room and gave a priesthood blessing. I do not recall the words spoken, but each of us felt an increased love from God and for each other. Angels ministered to each of us in that room at that most sacred moment.

So how do we come unto Christ? We yoke ourselves to Him by receiving ordinances and making and keeping covenants, by becoming engaged learners, and by ministering to the one as He would minister to His children.

### **Come unto Him and Be of Good Cheer**

My friends, let us see each other as the Savior sees us. Christ knows our uncertainties, doubts, and concerns. Please know we are children of a loving Heavenly Father who knows us by name. He knows our personalities. He knows our weaknesses and our strengths. He knows our divine potential and destiny, and He allows us to experience tough times because He also knows our courage. He trusts us. He knows we will reach up and reach out to Him through the redeeming and refining power of His Son, Jesus Christ, and of His Atonement.

Christ knows there are people on this campus who feel alone, marginalized, and mistreated and who feel their voices and their concerns are not being heard. Christ knows there are people on this campus who struggle to know of their individual worth and goodness. Christ knows there are people on this campus who struggle with anxiety, depression, and other forms of emotional challenges. Christ knows there are people on this campus who struggle with various forms of addictions, with drugs, with alcohol, and with other forms of self-abuse or self-harm.

Christ is also aware of the people on this campus with sincere desires to help but who are not sure how, for fear of offending or creating more harm. And yes, Christ knows there are people on this campus who are doing so wonderfully well in ministering and in loving so many and yet who may feel overwhelmed and exhausted at times. To all, His invitation to act and His promised blessings are uniquely and lovingly intimate and catered specifically to each of you and carry the same powerful, eternal truth:

*Come unto me, all ye that labour 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.*

Christ has declared, “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.”<sup>25</sup>

My friends—and truly you are my friends—Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is our Savior and Redeemer. He is our Healer. He is our Advocate with the Father. My friends, I leave you with my love. You are beautiful. You are divine. I hope you know that. Each one of you is a child of the living God. I also leave you with my witness that the words of the living Christ are true. Come unto Him and be of good cheer. He has overcome the world, and with Him so can you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. Academically, I was not a very good high school student. I never took the ACT and never received a score of thirty-five on the ACT. This portion of the story was shared during the BYU devotional to be humorous.
2. The new *For the Strength of Youth: A Guide for Making Choices* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2022) follows Christ's pattern of instruction: eternal truths, invitations, and promised blessings.
3. 1 Nephi 15:23.
4. 1 Nephi 15:24.
5. Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 14:20–24; emphasis added. See also Luke 22:19–20; Mark 14:22–24.
6. Luke 22:31–32.
7. 1 John 2:1; Doctrine and Covenants 110:4.
8. Luke 22:39–41. The word *wont* means “accustomed.” When the Savior wanted to be alone, He often visited mountaintops such as the Mount of Olives to pray.
9. Luke 22:42.
10. Luke 22:43–44.
11. See Mosiah 3:7; Doctrine and Covenants 19:18.
12. John 15:13; emphasis added.
13. 3 Nephi 11:14; see also verses 10–15. See also John 20:19–29; Luke 24:36–40.
14. John 3:16–18.
15. Matthew 11:28–30.
16. Russell M. Nelson, “Overcome the World and Find Rest,” *Liahona*, November 2022; emphasis added.
17. Nelson, “Overcome the World.”
18. Moses 2:31; emphasis added.
19. D. Todd Christofferson, “The Doctrine of Belonging,” *Liahona*, November 2022; quoting Doctrine and Covenants 38:27.
20. Nelson, “Overcome the World”; emphasis in original.
21. Russell M. Nelson, “Christ Is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” *Liahona*, May 2021; emphasis in original.
22. Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like Without It?” *Ensign*, November 2017.
23. See “Worldwide Broadcast on Sharing the Gospel,” Share the Gospel, Church of Jesus Christ, 26 June 2021, [churchofjesuschrist.org/share/worldwide-leadership-broadcast-on-sharing-the-gospel](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/share/worldwide-leadership-broadcast-on-sharing-the-gospel); see also “Latter-day Saints Encouraged to ‘Love, Share, Invite,’” news release and video link to worldwide broadcast event, Newsroom, Church of Jesus Christ, 26 June 2021, [newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/latter-day-saints-encouraged-love-share-invite](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/latter-day-saints-encouraged-love-share-invite).
24. See Doctrine and Covenants 59:5.
25. John 16:33.