

Developing Eyes to See

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Welcome to a new semester! Wendy and I are so thrilled to have you back on campus! We have missed seeing your bright faces. We have missed attending events with you, and we are looking forward to a fantastic semester with all of its promise and hope. I am particularly grateful to have my wife by my side. Over the break, she and I celebrated our thirtieth anniversary together, and I love her even more today than I did thirty years ago! One of us has aged well—the other less so! I will leave it to you to figure out which one is which. She truly is the love of my life.

Wendy is the perfect example of a “[doer] of the word.”¹ Without question, the best decision I have made in my life was to marry Wendy Wood in the Manti temple. She is such an example to me of one who has a strong testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and who lives that testimony by her daily efforts to serve and love those with whom she comes in contact. I am so much better of a person because I am sealed to her for all time and eternity. I love you, Wendy.

You have each been on my mind and in my prayers during this season in which we have taken time to be with family and friends. It has also been an amazing time to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ—the reason for the hope within us!² After spending my first full semester as president of Brigham Young University, I am regularly reminded of the sacred trust that has been given to Wendy and me. That trust was articulated so clearly by Elder D. Todd Christofferson in his charge given to us during the inauguration. Elder Christofferson invited us—and I mean *us*: you, Wendy, and me—“to commit [our] time and talents in leading the university during this second half of its second century and to help it become what prophets past and present have foreseen it would become.”³

Elder Christofferson then charged me with being “the university’s chief moral and spiritual officer,” which includes the responsibility

C. Shane Reese, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on January 9, 2024.

*to teach and amplify the university's mission with each member of the university community. Ensure that each understands and fully embraces this mission and can inspire others to be a light to the world, even as they withstand the challenges of our day. . . . Help [all on campus] realize their divine identity as sons and daughters of God and as disciples of Jesus Christ who can lead in their families, the Church, and their communities.*⁴

The importance and urgency of this charge has continued to weigh heavily on my mind. As Wendy and I spend more and more time with you—and I mean *you* collectively and, more importantly, *you* individually—we love you deeply and want you to claim all that God has planned for you. He wants you to be happy and to find the joy for which you were created. He wants you to achieve your dreams and all that He has in store for you—here and into the eternities. We know that your individual choices will have so much to do with God's aspirations for your life becoming a reality. Fulfilling these aspirations and the charge from our prophetic leaders is our task as individuals and as a campus community of covenant belonging. It is a tall order.

God wants *us* to become like *Him*. It is our collective work at BYU to help one other along this journey of discipleship.

While we were with a group of students in London in December, we went to a production of the Charles Dickens's 1843 classic *A Christmas Carol*. In this masterpiece, Scrooge went from bad to great after his fateful encounters with four spirits. Likewise, in Leo Tolstoy's 1869 novel *War and Peace*, the young Pierre Bezukhov grew out of youthful excess and learned to be a spiritually grounded husband and father. The heroine in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 *Jane Eyre* navigated a challenging childhood and developed the capacity to make complex life choices that ultimately led to her happiness.

God loves comeback stories in which we become something better and someone more.

In the Book of Mormon—which we will study together this year—we learn of Alma the Younger, who rebelled against his father's teachings but

eventually repented and chose to become a mighty missionary. And there is Sariah, who worked through questions and frustrations to achieve a strong witness and testimony of God's plans for her and her family—helping the family on their journey to the promised land. Zeezrom, who first used his intellectual gifts to lie and foment contention, experienced a change of heart and became a servant of God.

These faithful disciples of Jesus Christ yearned for more and developed eyes to see what they needed to become. All of them changed in ways big and small. All of them “became.”

Now it is our turn to write our individual and collective stories of becoming.

As we work together to become the university that “prophets past and present have foreseen it would become”—that is, as we “become BYU”—I hope that we will have the vision for what “becoming BYU” means for each of us in our individual lives.⁵

In my inaugural response, I urged us to strive to become the BYU of prophecy by

1. Strengthening the student experience
2. Retaining and strengthening a focus on undergraduate teaching
3. Reinforcing our “double heritage”—or being “bilingual”—for faculty, staff, and students
4. Developing the courage to be different
5. Building a covenant community of belonging
6. Investing in mission-inspired scholarship
7. Focusing on mission-aligned hiring⁶

Doing all of these seven things will require us to see our studies and our work through a gospel lens rather than merely seeing the gospel through a societal lens or a disciplinary lens or any other lens that limits our vision and perspective. In other words, if we are to become the BYU of prophecy, we will need eyes to see.

Put another way, we will only develop eyes to see as we view our lives, our world, and our circle of influence through a gospel lens. President Russell M. Nelson provided a powerful and prophetic description of what it means to view all that we do through an eternal gospel lens:

When you make choices, I invite you to take the long view—an eternal view. Put Jesus Christ first because your eternal life is dependent upon your faith in Him and in His Atonement. It is also dependent upon your obedience to His laws. Obedience paves the way for a joyful life for you today and a grand, eternal reward tomorrow.

When you are confronted with a dilemma, think celestial! When tested by temptation, think celestial! When life or loved ones let you down, think celestial! When someone dies prematurely, think celestial. When someone lingers with a devastating illness, think celestial. When the pressures of life crowd in upon you, think celestial! As you recover from an accident or injury, as I am doing now, think celestial!⁷

Thinking celestial requires us to have eyes that can see and comprehend things that are eternal, even things celestial. In section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants—a revelation known as the Olive Leaf that has been described as “the basic constitution of Church education”⁸—we learn of the importance of having eyes that are singularly focused and that can see celestially:

And if your eye be single to my glory, your whole bodies shall be filled with light, and there shall be no darkness in you; and that body which is filled with light comprehendeth all things.⁹

Developing eyes to see allows us to focus resolutely on celestial things such that our lives are filled with light that chases away the darkness. When the darkness has departed, then we are led to a deeper understanding of “all things.” Now, for us as students, faculty, and staff, there may be nothing more important to our work at BYU than understanding all things. Fortunately for those of us who might sometimes feel like we have math phobia or writer’s block or are a little tone deaf, there may be no greater scriptural promise than to be able to understand all things. Keeping our eyes focused intently on things celestial will help us to understand the seemingly impossible-to-understand topics and subjects.

Today I hope to help us understand more about what it means to have eyes to see. In particular, I hope to help us develop the ability to see

ourselves as part of a Christ-centered, prophetically directed university of prophecy; to develop the spiritual gift of seeing others as God sees them; and to see ourselves as daughters and sons of God.

Eyes to See Our Role at BYU

Fulfilling Elder Christofferson’s charge to become the BYU of prophecy will require each of us to see our individual role within that lofty charge. Whether you are a faculty member wondering how you can strengthen your students’ experiences in and out of the classroom or a student pondering how you can have an inspiring learning experience, I hope that you will involve the Lord in your search and that you will pray for eyes to see yourself as a vital and irreplaceable part of our becoming BYU.

As my wife said earlier, we so often note that you don’t see just exactly how amazing you are. And we hope that you will see yourself as a vital and irreplaceable part of our becoming BYU. For us to be successful—both collectively and individually—at distinguishing ourselves from our peers, we must be deliberate in our focus on our undergraduate teaching mission. This strong focus on our undergraduate teaching mission will strengthen the scholarship we pursue—both as faculty and as students—in part because our scholarship will be motivated by that strong focus on our undergraduate students. As has been reiterated frequently, teaching and scholarship are not competing interests but rather mutually reinforcing aspirations. We will need to see our unified teaching and research mission through a student-centric and gospel methodological¹⁰ lens in order to understand our individual roles in that endeavor.

We need eyes to see ourselves and those around us as capable of fulfilling our double heritage as BYU citizens, students, faculty, and staff. As President Spencer W. Kimball reminded us, this will require us to be “bilingual”—to speak with confidence and power about things of the Spirit even as we “speak with authority and excellence” about things of our disciplines.¹¹ At BYU we are as committed to the language of the Spirit as we are to the language of our chosen field of study.

Our commitment to a double heritage inspires us to foster an environment at BYU in which covenant keepers increasingly seek to become a Zion community. Within that community, our desire for unity leads us to the service and sacrifice that breed belonging, and we will be blessed by the Lord. We will feel the joy that comes from making, keeping, and living our sacred covenants. That kind of joy is absolutely infectious. As we honor covenants, we serve and sacrifice in ways that promote powerful feelings of belonging, which in turn reinforce our devotion to our covenants. This virtuous cycle intensifies at every step the kind of joy that marks a Zion community. A crucial first step in launching this virtuous cycle is experiencing a vision of that cycle and its benefits. This requires that we have eyes to see others as God sees them.

Eyes to See Others

At this point, in the spirit of both academic honesty and honoring the temple recommend requirement of striving for honesty in all of my dealings with my fellow men and women, I need to acknowledge a primary source for my remarks today. Ever since hearing Sister Michelle D. Craig’s talk about developing “eyes to see” in the October 2020 general conference, I have reflected on a story that she shared about responding to a prompting to do something completely unexpected. The prompting she received was a result of asking herself two questions—questions that I commend to each of us. Sister Craig described what happened when she asked herself the following questions:

“What am I doing that I should stop doing?” and “What am I not doing that I should start doing?”

Months ago, during the sacrament, I asked myself these questions and was surprised by the impression that came. “Stop looking at your phone when you are waiting in lines.” Looking at my phone in lines had become almost automatic; I found it a good time to multitask, catch up on email, look at headlines, or scroll through a social media feed.

The next morning, I found myself waiting in a long line at the store. I pulled out my phone and then remembered the impression I had received. I put my phone away and looked around. I saw an elderly gentleman in

*line ahead of me. His cart was empty except for a few cans of cat food. I felt a little awkward but said something **really** clever like, “I can see you have a cat.” He said that a storm was coming, and he did not want to be caught without cat food. We visited briefly, and then he turned to me and said, “You know, I haven’t told anyone this, but today is my birthday.” My heart melted. I wished him a happy birthday and offered a silent prayer of thanks that I had not been on my phone and missed an opportunity to truly see and connect with another person who needed it.*

With all of my heart I do not want to be like the priest or the Levite on the road to Jericho—one who looks and passes by. But too often I think I am.¹²

Now I doubt that Sister Craig is often, if ever, one who looks on someone in need and passes by. But her experience of asking questions that invite the Spirit to teach us how to develop eyes to see others as God sees them is profoundly instructive for all of us. Asking these introspective questions and then listening for the promptings of the Holy Ghost for how to act will lead us to look beyond ourselves and to find those we can help.

Seeing others as God sees them not only allows us to bless those we see but also provides us with an unexpected but blessed benefit for ourselves. This gift is well described in the gospel of Matthew:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.¹³

In other words, we will find ourselves by looking first for others and seeking to address their needs. Put differently, one of the best forms of self-care is to look first to care for the needs of others. This seemingly ironic statement of losing our lives to find our lives runs in stark contrast

to the current trends toward seeking our own self-interests as a primary mode of coping with personal challenges. Having the eyes to see others and then losing ourselves in serving them becomes a win-win scenario, with both the giver and the receiver being better for the effort.

Eyes to See Our Divine Identity

Relatedly, we need to develop eyes to see our divine identity. I was struck by the emphasis placed on the need to understand our divine identity as a daughter or son of God when President Nelson addressed the young adults in one of the most remarkable talks given to your generation. He indicated that this was perhaps the most important thing for us to learn in mortality. In fact, President Nelson, as the Lord's mouthpiece, suggested that it would be what God Himself would share with us if He were here today:

I believe that if the Lord were speaking to you directly . . . , the first thing He would make sure you understand is your true identity. My dear friends, you are literally spirit children of God. . . .

*Labels **can** be fun and indicate your support for any number of positive things. . . . But if any label replaces your most important identifiers, the results can be spiritually suffocating. . . .*

*. . . No identifier should **displace, replace, or take priority over** these three enduring designations: "child of God," "child of the covenant," and "disciple of Jesus Christ."*

Any identifier that is not compatible with these three basic designations will ultimately let you down. . . .

Make no mistake about it: Your potential is divine. With your diligent seeking, God will give you glimpses of who you may become.¹⁴

When Elder Christofferson gave the charge to us as a campus at my inauguration, he reminded us of the importance of President Nelson's teaching.¹⁵ I solemnly declare to each of you today that you are literally daughters and sons of God! As we make and keep sacred covenants, we are bound to Christ through those covenantal bonds. As we try to emulate the perfect example of Jesus Christ, we become His disciples. And by virtue

of His infinite and atoning sacrifice, He will make more of our lives than we could ever make without Him.

We have discussed the importance of having a vision of BYU and our role in that divinely appointed mission. As we develop our spiritual ability to see others and ourselves as eternal creatures having an earthly experience, we will have more heavenly experiences and create a community of belonging.

I want you to know at the beginning of this new year that I know that Jesus is the Christ, our Redeemer and Savior. He has given us the miraculous gift of resurrection, through which our bodies will become immortal. And His atoning sacrifice has made it possible for all the unfairness of this mortal world to be made right—much of it in our time of mortality and all of it in the eternities. Our Savior stands at the head of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and He has prepared, called, and sustained His prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, to guide that Church in our day. I so testify in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen!

Notes

1. James 1:22.
2. See 1 Peter 3:15.
3. D. Todd Christofferson, "Installation and Charge," charge delivered at the inauguration of C. Shane Reese as BYU president, 19 September 2023.
4. Christofferson, "Installation and Charge."
5. C. Shane Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response," address delivered at his inauguration as BYU president, 19 September 2023.
6. See Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response." See "double heritage" in Spencer W. Kimball, "Education for Eternity," address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967. See "dual heritage" in Kimball, "Installation of and Charge to the President," address delivered at the inauguration of Jeffrey R. Holland as BYU president, 14 November 1980. See "bilingual" in Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

7. Russell M. Nelson, “Think Celestial!” *Liahona*, November 2023.

8. Dallin H. Oaks, “A House of Faith,” BYU annual university conference address, 31 August 1977.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 88:67.

10. See Kimball, “Second Century.”

11. Kimball, “Second Century.”

12. Michelle D. Craig, “Eyes to See,” *Ensign*, November 2020; emphasis in original; quoting Kim B. Clark, “Encircled About with Fire,” Seminars and Institutes of Religion satellite broadcast, 4 August 2015, [churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/satellite-training-broadcast/2015/08/encircled-about-with-fire](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/broadcasts/article/satellite-training-broadcast/2015/08/encircled-about-with-fire). See Luke 10:30–32.

13. Matthew 16:24–27.

14. Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson); emphasis in original.

15. See Christofferson, “Installation and Charge.” See also Christofferson, “Lord God of Hosts, Be with Us Yet,” address delivered at the inauguration of C. Shane Reese as BYU president, 19 September 2023. See also Christofferson, “The Aims of a BYU Education,” BYU university conference address, 22 August 2022.