

Our Path to Lasting Personal Peace

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Good morning! It is great to be with you. I thought I would introduce my topic this morning by sharing a brief background on my preparation, as I believe it may be somewhat unique. I was originally invited to speak at a devotional last winter semester in 2023. However, just prior to my assigned speaking date, I received a call informing me that Elder Jeffrey R. Holland needed to take my place. While I would obviously *always* gladly defer to Elder Holland, this turned out to be a particularly special devotional, as Elder Holland announced that Kevin J. Worthen was concluding his time as BYU's president and that our new president would be C. Shane Reese.

For the last few years, I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with two presidents and many great members of the President's Council through a pandemic and other challenges. While we have different backgrounds and varying insights on campus priorities, I have been so inspired by the fully unified focus on you students—collectively and as individuals—as we work with an amazing

campus community to fulfill the divine mission of this university and “become BYU.”¹ As the President's Council, we kneel and pray for you weekly. We love you. And we want to help you experience success at BYU and beyond.

After recently receiving my rescheduled date, I had several individuals ask me if I was going to give the talk I had prepared last winter. I had the same question in my own mind. While I believe that talk was prepared through the personal revelatory process, I initially decided to prepare a new talk—in part because a closely related topic had been masterfully addressed by President Henry B. Eyring in general conference last April,² just a few weeks after my originally scheduled date.

However, as I again spent time in prayer and reflection over the past several weeks, I received a clear impression that the topic I had previously chosen may be even more relevant today. And so, with some minor modifications, I am going to share a message that I originally prepared nearly one year ago.

Steven J. Hafen, BYU administration vice president, delivered this devotional address on March 12, 2024.

At that time, I had a sacred personal experience that led me to consider speaking about the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Shortly after that sacred experience, my wife and I took an impromptu trip to the Oregon coast. Over several days, we visited beautiful sites and went on several amazing hikes.

One hike was particularly memorable, as we found ourselves on a path that was quiet, serene, and cathartically beautiful. [A photo of the path was shown.] At the peak of this path, we walked over to a lookout, where we witnessed an almost indescribable view. [A short video of a scenic view of the ocean from the path was shown.] While at this overlook, I recall turning to my wife to express how amazing it would be if we could somehow capture and keep the feeling of *momentary* peace we were experiencing on this path.

In the days that followed this trip, I found myself reflecting on the convergence of these two experiences that generated two interrelated questions in my mind:

1. How can we increase the frequency and depth of peace in our lives?
2. What is the role of our Savior’s Atonement in this process?

As I prayerfully considered the answers to these questions, the topic of my message became clearer.

My hope today is that my message will in some way influence you to learn or, maybe more importantly, to feel something new about our Savior’s Atonement, which Bruce R. McConkie once described as “the most important single thing that has ever occurred in the entire history of created things.”³

The Power of the Atonement

As the central element of the plan of salvation, Christ’s ineffable sacrifice allows us to overcome death and sin and return to live with Him and our loving heavenly parents. This is the core doctrine of the Atonement. But the power of the Atonement extends well beyond this and can

positively influence every aspect of our lives. As Tad R. Callister, who later became a member of the Seventy, once explained:

*The pursuit of this doctrine requires the total person, for the Atonement of Jesus Christ is the most supernal, mind-expanding, passionate doctrine this world or universe will ever know.*⁴

I cannot conceive of a more important time to be pursuing “the most supernal, mind-expanding, passionate doctrine this . . . universe will ever know.” Why? Because, as President Russell M. Nelson recently said, “we are presently living in what surely is a most complicated time in the history of the world.”⁵

And yet, with his familiar optimistic tone, President Nelson also noted times of wonder and beauty ahead with this reassuring promise of peace:

*My dear brothers and sisters, so many wonderful things are ahead. In coming days, we will see the **greatest** manifestations of the Savior’s power that the world has ever seen. . . .*

*. . . Despite the distractions and distortions that swirl around us, you can find true **rest**—meaning relief and peace—even amid your most vexing problems.*⁶

Think about that! Even in the midst of poignant personal challenges, difficult decisions, and tribulation caused by living in “a most complicated time in the history of the world,” we can experience *peace* through “the *greatest* manifestations of the Savior’s power that the world has *ever* seen.”

In the oft-quoted scripture in the book of John, we learn that this peace is a pinnacle blessing from our Savior Jesus Christ:

*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*⁷

Brothers and sisters, as you and I navigate this complicated world, I testify that our path to lasting personal peace is through the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

Peace

“The peace of God, which passeth all understanding,”⁸ was described by Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin as “an inner calm and comfort born of the Spirit that is a gift of God to all of his children, an assurance and serenity within a person’s heart.”⁹

Elder Marvin J. Ashton said this about peace:

*It is very significant that when Jesus came forth from the tomb and appeared to his disciples, his first greeting was, “Peace be unto you.” (Luke 24:36.) Peace—not passion, not personal possessions, not personal accomplishments nor happiness—is one of the greatest blessings a man can receive.*¹⁰

While we should all pursue happiness and joy, it seems to me that peace is the premier prize that is exclusively attainable through Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Right before He entered the Garden of Gethsemane to begin that sacrifice, the Lord said:

*These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*¹¹

Isn’t it interesting that just before Christ started His atoning sacrifice and just after He was resurrected He spoke of peace?

None of us will experience a life absent of tribulation—even major trials at times—but by “overcom[ing] the world,” Christ allows us to “be of good cheer” even in the midst of personal anguish or challenge!

With this in mind, I ask each of you to consider this question: How often do you feel this peace in your life—an inner calm that transcends all understanding—regardless of the ups and downs of your personal circumstances?

Interested in gathering some data, I conducted an informal survey a few weeks ago, asking this question of more than 650 local young single adult members, including many here today. The results were insightful:

- a. Every day (149)
- b. At least once a week (366)
- c. A couple times a month (116)

d. Rarely (40)

e. Never (14)

Although I was pleased that many are feeling peace in their lives, some even daily, it is also clear that for many, lasting personal peace can be somewhat elusive. And sadly, a small number even indicated they rarely or never feel this peace. Regardless of how you might currently answer this question, consider how dramatically your life would change if you *always* felt this peace.

Five Blessings from the Transformative Power of the Atonement

Brothers and sisters, our Savior’s Atonement changes lives—it can transform your life! With its infinite power, there are innumerable ways this can happen—far too many to share here today. But I would like to focus on five transformative principles—perhaps better labeled as blessings—from our Savior’s Atonement that will lead us on our path to lasting personal peace. As I do so, I will strive to illustrate the potential impact of these five blessings by sharing a personal experience about one of the largest decisions my wife and I have made in our marriage. But these blessings really apply to any major or minor decision, trial, or circumstance, so I would invite you to consider applying these principles to experiences in your own life. The aim of this application is personal relevance and revelation, and I pray the edifying power of the Spirit will help with this divine process.

After our missions, while here at BYU, my wife, Brooke, and I started seriously dating. As we discussed the possibility of marriage one night, she asked me an unexpected question.

She said something like, “Would you be open to adopting a child at some point after we have some of our own kids?”

While this was certainly a major question, at this time I was so smitten with Brooke that she could have asked me almost anything and I would have said, “Absolutely—sounds great to me!”

And that is exactly how I answered her question.

Well, fast-forward twelve years and four kids later, I found out she was actually serious. That

is when she brought back up for discussion the question I had long forgotten. As she did so, my response this time was quite different. I found myself instantly cogitating on all the reasons adopting a child would not make sense. I won't go through the list that entered my mind, but one of the primary reasons is demonstrated by this picture. [A photo of the Hafen family of six was shown.]

At this point we were already a family of six with four wonderful children. In the subsequent weeks as the discussions continued, I found myself searching for and sharing a variety of reasons with Brooke on why we should not pursue adoption.

We all have hindsight, insight, and foresight. In hindsight, I realize my insight and foresight at that time were severely lacking! Gratefully, Brooke's strong impression compensated for my weakness, and she continued to nudge me to discover my own answer on adoption. So I spent several weeks doing research, writing down my thoughts, and praying. Over time, I became frustrated that I was not finding a clear answer. After an additional conversation, Brooke and I thus agreed to fast and attend the temple with this exclusive purpose.

This leads me to the first blessing that originates from the transformative power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, leading us on our path to lasting personal peace.

Our Savior's Atonement Purifies. The Atonement *purifies* our impure thoughts and actions. We all have moments of fallible proclivities in our lives. Whether they have occurred because of conscious acts of commission or unintended mistakes of omission, the atoning sacrifice of our Savior can restore us to purity.

In the book of Mosiah, King Benjamin taught that "the natural man is an enemy to God . . . unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit . . . and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord."¹²

As we repent of our shortcomings—both minor and major—we are sanctified and become Saints, or more *pure*. President Nelson has taught us that

"daily repentance is the pathway to purity, and purity brings power."¹³

As Brooke and I prepared to go to the temple for an answer, I recall kneeling in prayer. But rather than just asking Heavenly Father to bless me with an answer, this time I focused much of my prayer on a contemplative and exhaustive acknowledgment of my weaknesses. While I didn't believe I had made major mistakes that would have prevented personal revelation, I remember a desire to be more humble and thorough in my quest for forgiveness this time.

My experience in the temple was uplifting, as it always is, but I felt slight disappointment as I was preparing to leave without the distinct answer I was seeking. I exited the dressing room and went to the lobby to wait for Brooke. After I had been waiting a few minutes, a couple from one of our early BYU married student wards who I hadn't seen in nearly ten years walked into the lobby.

After exchanging some pleasantries, I asked them what was new in their lives. Their response surprised me: they shared that after having had four children, they had recently adopted a child.

As you might assume, this was exciting news to me! I asked them several detailed questions about their adoption experience. It was abundantly clear that they already viewed the adoption as a huge blessing to their family. As they were leaving, I sat back down, contemplating what they had just shared.

And then it happened! I was flooded with a spirit so undeniably strong that I will never forget it. With tears welling up, I felt these words enter my mind: "This is your answer. Move forward with adoption."

While I haven't had many experiences in my life that were this dramatic, I have had many times in which questions have been answered or decisions were simplified through revelation. And I am so grateful for this experience and testify that it came because of the *purifying* power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

As we repent, our Savior's Atonement *purifies* us so that we can better align ourselves with the will of the Lord. It is the key that unlocks

the revelatory gate. This revelation can provide positive, life-altering support in every phase of our lives.

Our Savior’s Atonement Enables. The Atonement *enables* us to progress beyond seemingly disabling challenges, events, and decisions. While the greatest manifestation of this enabling power helps us to overcome death and sin, the continuous and intimate power of the Atonement can also support our daily progression in mortality.

Elder David A. Bednar has helped us all better understand the enabling power of the Atonement. He said:

*Many Church members are much more familiar with the nature of the redeeming and cleansing power of the Atonement than they are with the strengthening and enabling power. It is one thing to know that Jesus Christ came to earth to die for us. . . . But we also need to appreciate that the Lord desires . . . not only to direct us but also to empower us.*¹⁴

Receiving the mutual conviction to move forward *enabled* Brooke and me to fully unite in our decision to adopt. I don’t have time to cover the various twists and turns of the adoption process, but it involved multiple adoption agencies, several countries, frustrating bureaucracy, delayed background checks, and other challenges. Although we certainly didn’t recognize it at the time, with hindsight we realize that some of these obstacles actually played a direct role in leading us to our daughter. In the end, the very obstacles that were seemingly inhibiting our adoption progress were actually helping us find her. We simply had to stay faithful and allow the Lord to direct us.

As we settled on adopting from China through its nontraditional adoption channel, we received access to a website that listed potential adoptees. Each of these files contained basic medical and background information about each child—most of whom had been abandoned at or near birth due to China’s one-child policy and other factors at that time. The files also contained small pictures of each child.

Brooke started going through these files one by one. As you might imagine, this was an interesting process that generated many mixed emotions. But early in the process, Brooke saw this picture, and her mixed emotions were immediately replaced with an immense and intense feeling of connection and love! [A photo of a baby was shown.]

Brooke had received direction through the Holy Ghost that this little girl was the one. She then sent the photo and file to me, and I had a similar experience. We had found our daughter!

How blessed we feel to have been directed and strengthened through the *enabling* power of our Savior’s Atonement in finding her!

Elder Kevin W. Pearson of the Seventy explained, “Without the strengthening and enabling power of the Atonement, it’s impossible to stay on the path and endure.”¹⁵

“Enabling power” is divine assistance. When life goes differently than we want—and it often does—this divine assistance helps us make the right pivots and helps us keep moving forward in faith on the path to lasting personal peace.

Our Savior’s Atonement Assures. The Atonement *assures* us—even in moments of unsureness. A fundamental part of the plan of salvation is to experience the probationary state of mortal life and to exercise the gift of agency. As mortals in this plan, we all face ongoing trials that provide opportunities for us to strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, most of us experience some uncertainty every day. Thankfully, our loving Father in Heaven provided us with a process to consistently overcome times of uncertainty. In Isaiah we are taught, “And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and *assurance* for ever.”¹⁶

President Nelson reinforced this great blessing:

*Each time we partake of the sacrament, we promise **again** to take the name of the Savior upon us, to remember Him, and to keep His commandments. In return, God **assures** us that we may **always** have the Spirit of the Lord to be with us.*¹⁷

It took about seven months from the time that Brooke first discovered our daughter—whom we had now named Taya—until we picked her up in southern China. During this time we had days filled with excitement and elation, but we also had some days filled with anxiety and frustration. Even with the conviction that we had both received, there were many uncertainties. Gratefully we also experienced ongoing *assurance* that we had made the right decision. And the day we met Taya for the first time brought us all the assurance we will ever need. [Photos of meeting Taya were shown.]

I kept a blog throughout the adoption experience. Here is what I wrote the day that we met Taya for the first time:

Well, the day we have been waiting so long for finally came! I don't remember being this nervous in a long time. We took a bus thirty minutes from our hotel to where the local civil affairs people were meeting us with our new little girl. Earlier this morning our guide had explained that it would be a very tough day for all the kids being adopted—and so it was. They brought five kids in at the same time, and most were crying, as everything was new to all of them. Most of the adults were also crying, but for different reasons. We have not seen a picture of Taya since she was around 12 months old (over six or seven months ago). But when they brought her in the room, Brooke and I both looked at Taya and then at each other, and no words needed to be spoken. We knew she was ours, and oh, was she beautiful! It is a moment we will always remember.

Later that evening I completed the blog for that day by writing this:

As I reflect upon a pretty amazing day, I find myself also thinking back on the past couple of years and the process that we went through in getting here. . . . I certainly have had questions and fears come to mind throughout. . . . But if the feeling that I feel right now as I look at Taya is accurate, then she is going to be a huge blessing to our family. What a ride it will be!

And what a ride it has been! How grateful we are for the *assurance* we received in this process through the power of our Savior's Atonement.

In times of uncertainty and challenge, the power of the Atonement *assures*—allowing us to stay on the path to lasting personal peace.

Our Savior's Atonement Comforts. The Atonement *comforts*—particularly in times of discomfort. While I don't know many of you personally, I believe I can confidently say that many here today are likely experiencing some level of discomfort in their lives. Elder Ricardo P. Giménez of the Seventy noted:

*As we face the storms of life, I know that if we make our best effort and rely upon Jesus Christ and His Atonement as our refuge, we will be blessed with the relief, **comfort**, strength, temperance, and peace that we are seeking.*¹⁸

During the Last Supper, when the Savior promised His apostles peace, He also said this:

*If ye love me, keep my commandments.
And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever. . . .*

*I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.*¹⁹

Now I will return to my story. In the early stages we experienced many uncomfortable times with Taya. This was a hard time for her, as she was trying to process what was happening. She seemed a bit lost and was quite melancholy. She largely just clung to Brooke. And these pictures pretty clearly illustrate how she felt about me in those early days. Thankfully that only lasted a few weeks. [Some photos of Taya were shown.]

Taya's life had changed about as drastically as a life could—new language, new country, new culture, new family, new food, and so many other things. As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, Taya started adjusting to her new environment. But there were still anxious occasions and sleepless nights for her and for us.

Thankfully, throughout this period we also had ongoing experiences in which we felt the comforting feelings of the Spirit. One tender moment happened as we returned home with Taya. After several days in China and a long trip home, we

were worried that she might not react well to seeing our other four kids for the first time. But you can imagine the *comfort* we felt as we entered the house. This was her reaction as she saw our other kids! [Photos of Taya and the other Hafen children were shown.] There was mutual joy and an immediate bond with her new siblings.

Reflecting back on the first couple of years of Taya's life with us, there were times when things were not comfortable. But gratefully those times were more than matched by tender mercies that provided comfort that all would be okay. And that has also been the pattern when other family members have experienced both small and occasionally quite large periods of discomfort in their lives.

Sister Linda S. Reeves, a former member of the Relief Society general presidency, once said:

*Nothing that happens is a shock or a surprise to [Jesus Christ]. He is all-knowing and all-loving. He is eager to help us, to **comfort** us, and to ease our pain as we rely on the power of the Atonement.*²⁰

Through our Savior's Atonement, we can experience the promise that He will never leave us comfortless. What an amazing blessing this is!

Our Savior's Atonement Exalts. The *exalting* power of the Atonement fulfills the preeminent purpose for our mortal journey. Exaltation is the reason for Christ's Atonement. And it is the ultimate desire that Heavenly Father has for each of us. In the October 2006 general conference, Elder Richard G. Scott closed a beautiful talk on the Atonement with this testimony:

*I testify that with unimaginable suffering and agony at an incalculable price, the Savior earned His right to be our Redeemer, our Intermediary, our Final Judge. . . . The secure anchors of His laws will assure safety and success as you scale the challenges you will face. . . . Yours will be a life of peace and happiness crowned with **exaltation** in the celestial kingdom.*²¹

Up until this point, my observed blessings of how the transformative power of the Atonement leads us on our path to lasting personal peace have been focused on mortality. As the crowning

blessing of the greatest event in the history of the human condition, the *exalting* power of the Atonement provides the bridge from mortality to the highest state of eternal glory. While this incomprehensible blessing is not something we experience in this life, I do believe our loving Heavenly Father allows us to taste of this fruit (to reference Lehi's dream²²) at times. Such experiences not only strengthen our desire to achieve exaltation but also help us further realize lasting peace in mortality.

I have had very few of these cherished moments. But one such moment occurred as I knelt around an altar in the Mount Timpanogos Utah Temple with my family on the morning of November 15, 2008. This was the day that Taya was sealed to our family for eternity! [A photo was shown of the Hafen family all dressed in white.]

Now we definitely have much work to do in achieving this eternal goal—particularly the father of this family—but I am ever grateful for this experience that provided me with a glimpse, no matter how small, of what exaltation might be like. I can only imagine how amazing eternal life with family and loved ones will be.

Ensuring a Personal Path to Lasting Peace: Reminder and Invitation

In summary, our Savior's Atonement

- Purifies
- Enables
- Assures
- Comforts
- Exalts

In a world full of acronyms, my hope is that you will remember this one. Not because these five words conveniently spell the word *peace* but rather because these five blessings will help you to persistently experience it.

I am so grateful for these blessings and for the countless others that come through Jesus Christ! Our Savior's Atonement is our path to lasting personal peace!

I will conclude with a *simple reminder* and a *single invitation*.

First, the reminder: We are literal sons and daughters of Heavenly Father. This primary,

divine identity gives us access to the Atonement of Jesus Christ. *But that divine access comes by action, not by accident.*

With this in mind, how do we ensure that our daily actions thus align with our desires to experience lasting personal peace? While the answer to this question may vary based on personal reflection and circumstance, perhaps there is one answer that stands on its own in importance.

To me, that answer is represented in my single invitation: *Completely commit to keep all your covenants.*

We were beautifully taught about the importance of making and keeping all our covenants just last week by Elder Dale G. Renlund.²³ In fact, covenantal commitment has been emphasized by our modern prophets for decades. How grateful I am to our current prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, for helping us to further focus on our sacred covenants. Here is just one of the many quotes I could share from him as he has made covenants one of his key prophetic priorities:

*Everything taught in the temple, through instruction and through the Spirit, increases our understanding of Jesus Christ. His essential ordinances bind us to Him through sacred priesthood covenants. Then, as we keep our covenants, He endows us with His healing, strengthening power. And oh, how we will need His power in the days ahead.*²⁴

Most of us here today have made sacred covenants with our Heavenly Father. But the door that opens as we make covenants will begin to close if our covenants become dormant. Perhaps we should ask ourselves if we are passive covenant makers or active covenant keepers. Heavenly Father cannot completely bless us with peace unless we use Christ's Atonement to completely keep all our covenants—a beautiful balance of justice and mercy rooted in holy love. If you really want to pursue your path to lasting peace, commit now, commit every day, to *completely keep all your covenants*. Remember, our covenants provide us with a direct, divine connection to Jesus Christ! And our collective clarion call is to strive to secure that connection.

Brothers and sisters, I testify that as we follow the counsel of our prophet and completely commit to keeping all our covenants, we will unleash the transformative power of our Savior's Atonement—which purifies, enables, assures, comforts, and exalts! I bear witness that our loving Heavenly Father and His Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, want us to feel lasting personal peace in this life as we prepare to live again with Them in exalted eternal peace. May we all further turn to our Savior Jesus Christ and progress on our path to lasting personal peace is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. C. Shane Reese, "Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response," address delivered at his inauguration as BYU president, 19 September 2023.
2. See Henry B. Eyring, "Finding Personal Peace," *Liahona*, May 2023.
3. Bruce R. McConkie, MD, s.v. "Atonement of Christ," 60.
4. Tad R. Callister, *The Infinite Atonement* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000), 2.
5. Russell M. Nelson, "Overcome the World and Find Rest," *Liahona*, November 2022.
6. Nelson, "Overcome the World"; emphasis in original.
7. John 14:27.
8. Philippians 4:7.
9. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Peace Within," *Ensign*, May 1991.
10. Marvin J. Ashton, "Peace—a Triumph of Principles," *Ensign*, November 1985.
11. John 16:33.
12. Mosiah 3:19.
13. Russell M. Nelson, "We Can Do Better and Be Better," *Ensign*, May 2019.
14. David A. Bednar, "The Message: Strength Beyond Our Own," *New Era*, March 2015; emphasis added.
15. Kevin W. Pearson, "Stay by the Tree," *Ensign*, May 2015; emphasis added.
16. Isaiah 32:17; emphasis added.
17. Russell M. Nelson, "The Power of Spiritual Momentum," *Liahona*, May 2022; emphasis in original; also emphasis added. See Moroni 4:3; 5:2; Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79.

18. Ricardo P. Giménez, "Finding Refuge from the Storms of Life," *Ensign*, May 2020; emphasis added.

19. John 14:15–16, 18.

20. Linda S. Reeves, "Claim the Blessings of Your Covenants," *Ensign*, November 2013; emphasis added.

21. Richard G. Scott, "The Atonement Can Secure Your Peace and Happiness," *Ensign*, November 2006; emphasis added.

22. See 1 Nephi 8.

23. See Dale G. Renlund, "Stronger and Closer Connection to God Through Multiple Covenants," BYU devotional address, 5 March 2024.

24. Russell M. Nelson, "The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation," *Liahona*, November 2021; emphasis in original. See Doctrine and Covenants 109:15, 22.