

# *Eternal Belonging and Becoming*

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**T**hank you for giving me some of your precious time today. I hope that my message—aided by the strength of the Spirit—can touch your hearts and give you encouragement on your personal journeys.

When I received my patriarchal blessing, one of the key messages I received was that as I share my testimony with others, my testimony will grow. I could never have imagined that would mean I would be in front of the BYU students, faculty, employees, and families who are here today. I am humbled by this opportunity. Thank you.

## **Finding Belonging at BYU**

I may be different from many—but possibly similar to some of you—who are here at BYU today. I am a woman who grew up loving computers, math, and sports. You probably would not be surprised that (revealing my age) thirty-five years ago, I found myself as the lone woman among many men in my pursuit of those interests. I didn't know much about higher education and

was the first in my family to go to college. I knew I wanted to go somewhere to elevate my education, and through an athletic scholarship and the support of my family, I was blessed with the means and direction to be able to further my education.

Growing up with the interests I mentioned, I found that studying information technology was a perfect preparation for my profession, which has spanned the last thirty years. I would encourage everyone, including women, to study technology. You may be wondering if there are a lot of women in technology. Happily, I can say there are more than there used to be, but we are still far from the majority.

I came to BYU after working in the technology industry for seventeen years. I applied for a job at BYU because I felt that this was where I needed to be. At the time it didn't make a lot of sense for my career since I would be starting over in many aspects. I hadn't worked in the higher education industry. My studies had been at another university, and I wasn't sure why I was pulled in this

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*Michelle H. Bennett, BYU assistant vice president of information technology, delivered this devotional address on May 14, 2024.*

direction. I came from the corporate world, where religious discussions were not encouraged and were even frowned upon. My home is where most of my spiritual growth came from.

After being hired at BYU, I recall coming in on a Monday morning and sitting in a meeting that was full of employees. To begin the meeting, one person stood up and prayed. After they were seated, another person shared a spiritual thought with everyone. I sat there looking around the room in total amazement. I left that day knowing that I had joined a different world of business that was completely foreign to me. I continued to observe that in meeting after meeting: prayers were frequently offered before business was conducted. This was a place where the Spirit was invited every day and sometimes every hour. Was it unusual? From a business perspective, *yes*. Was it uncomfortable? At first, *yes*. Was it wonderful? *Yes!*

As wonderful as it was, the question that came to my mind was did I belong? Did I fit in? Did I measure up to the high standards and expectations that existed here? BYU is a place of high expectations. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ also has high expectations, and there may be times in your life when you question if you belong.

Elder D. Todd Christofferson shared this important message about the doctrine of belonging:

*A sense of belonging is important to our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Yet it is quite possible that at times each of us might feel that we don't fit in. In discouraging moments, we may feel that we will never measure up to the Lord's high standards or the expectations of others. We may unwittingly impose expectations on others—or even ourselves—that are not the Lord's expectations. We may communicate in subtle ways that the worth of a soul is based on certain achievements or callings, but these are not the measure of our standing in the Lord's eyes. "The Lord looketh on the heart." He cares about our desires and longings and what we are becoming.<sup>1</sup>*

I finally transformed my question to “Why would I *not* belong?” I love my Savior and His gospel. I am determined enough to grow, humble

enough to learn, and eager enough to make a difference, so why would I *not* belong? Changing the question changed my perspective and let me move forward.

Life is full of ups and downs. We make mistakes. We are lonely and at times can feel as if we don't belong. We may ask the question “Do I belong in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?” Let's change that question and ponder “Why would I *not* belong? Why would God *not* be interested in me?”

Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf summarized God's and Jesus Christ's perspective in his message “Come and Belong”:

*Jesus the Christ . . . does care deeply about each and every one of God's children. . . . During His mortal life, the Savior ministered to all: to the happy and accomplished, to the broken and lost, and to those without hope. . . .*

*If Jesus spent His mortal life ministering to “the least of these,” would He not love them today? Is there not a place in His Church for all of God's children? Even for those who feel unworthy, forgotten, or alone? . . .*

*In truth, God does not show favoritism—the things the world values mean nothing to Him. He knows your heart, and He loves you regardless of your title, financial net worth, or number of Instagram followers.*

*As we incline our hearts to our Heavenly Father and draw near to Him, we will feel Him draw near to us.<sup>2</sup>*

Remember that you are God's child and that you *do* belong regardless of the rank of your secular achievements. He loves you enough that He gave His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for your sins so you can return to Him. Speaking as a parent, I can tell you that a Father who is willing to do that is willing to go the distance and is fully consecrated in His efforts. There is no obstacle so high or gulf so great as could impede His efforts to reach you. You are *also* one of His children.

### Finding Sacred Meaning in the Secular

After orienting myself to my new environment, I finally accepted that I did belong at BYU, and I went to work. With technology, there is always an opportunity to learn something new and a

new challenge to overcome. When I accepted my first position at BYU, I didn't realize that the changes in my life would not just be technology-based. I have had a front-row seat as people have been inspired and spiritually guided in the work within the Office of Information Technology (OIT). Every year of the last decade has brought me more spiritual growth. My understanding has expanded as I have learned from my peers and enjoyed meaningful conversations with students and discussions with leadership in which they shared their testimonies and faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I felt my testimony begin to flourish like that small seed described by the Savior in the book of Matthew:

*The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field:*

*Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree.<sup>3</sup>*

In our lives, the opportunity to learn is not simply secular but spiritual as well. BYU is focused on a “dual heritage”<sup>4</sup> that integrates secular and spiritual learning. This approach exponentially multiplies the effects of both types of learning—each amplifies the other. Within the Church Educational System, you are not only blessed with opportunities that enhance your academic skills, knowledge, and experience but also with opportunities to be nourished spiritually and to prepare to serve, lead, or influence others in the world. Looking back on the decade that I have worked at BYU, I realize how much my life has been influenced by this focus.

Recently, employees at OIT were challenged to search the scriptures and find a scripture that related to or laid a foundation for their work. It has been amazing to hear how ancient scriptures and gospel principles apply in our everyday, modernized, technology-centric work. This focus to bring sacred meaning and divine guidance into even our most routine tasks has spiritually strengthened me and many others at OIT.

In 1985, then Elder Dallin H. Oaks shared, “What we see around us depends on what we seek in life.”<sup>5</sup> When you search for the spiritual

messages or look for miracles,<sup>6</sup> as President Russell M. Nelson has suggested, you begin to recognize and *understand the spiritual meaning of things in your daily life.*

Elder John A. Widtsoe taught:

*There is a spiritual meaning of all human acts and earthly events. . . . No man is quite so happy . . . as he who backs all his labors by such a spiritual interpretation and understanding of the acts of his life.<sup>7</sup>*

Throughout our lives we are guided to places and decisions that we don't expect or understand. At times we receive inspiration that turns out to be a precious gift that impacts our entire lives. I hope as you think about where you are in your life that you will listen to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. And when doubt arises, I hope that you will combat it with a leap of faith and the knowledge that you *do* belong. That knowledge will be a precious gift in your life that can sustain you through all kinds of trials as the world changes around you.

### **Understanding the Timeless Gospel**

Although change is constant in technology, the opposite is true with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Speaking about the Son of God, Nephi shared that His gospel is timeless, “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”<sup>8</sup>

What *does* change with the gospel of Jesus Christ is our spiritual understanding and transformation. We can increase and deepen our understanding by devoting our time and attention to acquiring knowledge about Jesus Christ's life and His ministry. Jesus Christ is our example of knowledge and humility, charity and love, obedience and diligence, and faith and hope.<sup>9</sup>

### **Building on the Rock of Our Redeemer**

We are all at different levels of understanding the gospel. However, the elevation our understanding has risen to is not an indication of our strength. Rather, it is the strength of our foundation and the rock it is built on that determines our ability to survive the harsh abuse of the elements in a telestial world. Strength does not come from the height of the building but from the base.

Helaman, a Book of Mormon prophet, taught us to

*remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; . . . which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall.*<sup>10</sup>

To build our foundation on the rock, on Christ and His gospel, we must come to know Him through frequent study. We must dedicate ourselves to searching the scriptures and the words of living prophets and attending Church services, general conferences, and devotionals. We must do His work by living as He would, by serving others, and especially by worshipping and providing service as an offering in His holy temples.

Today we are blessed with 350 temples that are dedicated, in a stage of construction, or announced this past April.<sup>11</sup> Temples are places where we can physically go to place ourselves closer to God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Temples are places where we go to do the Lord’s work for the dead and the living and places where we “can expect to receive answers to prayer, personal revelation, greater faith, strength, comfort, increased knowledge, and increased power,”<sup>12</sup> as stated by President Nelson.

My husband and I went to Sweden on a work trip years ago, and we were able to attend the Stockholm Sweden Temple. It was a beautiful experience, but what impressed me the most was the dedication of the local Church members. The Stockholm temple was the only temple for many surrounding countries. The members in this region would arrange to take a week off for necessary travel and would stay at the temple, performing the work for deceased relatives and savoring the feeling of being closer to Jesus Christ. The members’ faith and devotion were inspiring. They were gaining all the blessings of the temple and coming closer to Jesus Christ by assisting Him in His sacred and glorious work. Although it may have seemed inconsequential to these faithful members, the offering of weeks of their vacation time as a modern form of sacrifice was inspiring to me and was representative of their appreciation for the covenants we make in the temple.

## Forgiving Ourselves

Allow me to share a personal perspective about self-forgiveness and the temple.

There are times in our lives when we need to turn to the Savior and remember that through Him we can be made whole. In April 2016, while speaking about opposition, then Elder Oaks said that God has given us a way to be cleansed, healed, and forgiven through Jesus Christ, “a Savior [who] pays the price to redeem us from our sins.”<sup>13</sup>

I believe in the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and I have relied on His grace in my life. I believe in forgiving others—and that it can be an intensely liberating and healing process. During key moments in my life, I have also been required to find the will to forgive myself for mistakes of the past through fervent prayer, temple worship, and sacred conversations with my devoted and supportive husband.

On one occasion I discovered that I didn’t fully believe the assurances that I had been forgiven for past mistakes. Through divine guidance, temple attendance, and increased faith in the Savior, whose Atonement is infinitely powerful and accessible, I was able to progress to the point at which I could remove—in a single, decisive act of self-forgiveness—the shackles that held me bound. There are few moments in my life that have been as liberating. Being able to forgive myself strengthened my faith in the Savior’s infinite ability and in His compassion for us as individuals, and it strengthened my resolve and confidence that I could progress on the path to eternal life.

The temple is here to help us come closer to Christ. As Elder Dale G. Renlund said:

*Jesus Christ is our treasure. . . .*

*As you come to Him, you will be rewarded with strength to face life’s challenges, courage to do what is right, and the ability to fulfill your mission in mortality.*<sup>14</sup>

## Thinking Celestial

Think about where you are in your life’s story, where you belong, what you want to improve on, and what you want in the end. It is crucial to have a plan that guides your journey through life. Without true intention, time slips away and

life unfolds without direction. Upon entering BYU you harbored aspirations. Your aim was clear: to attain knowledge, expertise, and insight in your chosen field. With this objective driving you forward, you dedicated yourself to self-improvement. You enrolled in courses, diligently absorbed concepts and principles, structured your time to maximize productivity, and collaborated with peers to enhance your understanding. Each endeavor was a step toward mastery, toward the day when you would proudly graduate and excel in your craft, career, or profession.

Anytime that you want to improve a skill or a part of your life, it takes practice and dedicated time to achieve the results you want. The good old saying of “practice makes perfect” applies not only to academics and sports but also to our spiritual progression.

As we think about spiritual progression, President Nelson said it best: “Begin with the end in mind.”<sup>15</sup>

During the October 2023 general conference, President Nelson encouraged us all to “think celestial.”<sup>16</sup> He said:

*In my first message as President of the Church, I encouraged you to begin with the end in mind. This means making the celestial kingdom your eternal goal and then carefully considering where each of your decisions while here on earth will place you in the next world.*<sup>17</sup>

Think of the ultimate gift of eternal life and eternal families. To achieve this, we must work to improve our lives. We achieve this by learning concepts and principles, organizing our time to focus on key outcomes, and attending the house of the Lord to improve our understanding so that we are prepared to pass the requirements of this course on earth.

### Learning from Life’s Tests

Of course, learning wouldn’t be true learning if we were not tested on what we know.

In general conference in April 2016, then Elder Oaks shared:

*The purpose of mortal life for the children of God is to provide the experiences needed “to progress toward*

*perfection and ultimately realize their divine destiny as heirs of eternal life.”*<sup>18</sup>

We came to earth to gain salvation and eternal life. Learning here on earth comes through trials and tribulations. Christ taught us that trials give us experiences that make us stronger and are for our good.<sup>19</sup> Without the bitter trials, we “could not know the sweet.”<sup>20</sup>

We are promised that these experiences will lead to spiritual growth and eternal progression. Although we received these promises, they came with expectations of us doing our part, which should include turning to the Lord. When you are in the middle of a trial or watching another go through one, it is sometimes hard to be humble and understand there is growth and progression.

### Facing Trials Alone

As I grew up loving sports and playing college basketball, I dealt with many injuries. When injuries came, they were treated, and I got back to playing. The good old saying of “rub some dirt on it” and get back out there was how I grew up.

A few years ago I was playing ball with my family and friends, and I hit the back of my head on a brick wall. I sat down for a few minutes and thought I was fine. I even went back out and stood on the court pretending that I could play. I soon realized something wasn’t right. I started to feel a little nauseated and decided I should leave. Stubborn as I was, I didn’t say anything to anyone as I thought I could drive the ten miles to my home. As I got in the car, my situation worsened. I physically had to hold my head up. I decided I needed to stop or I wasn’t going to make it home, so I stopped by my parents’ home to regain my composure. After a brief rest, I got back in the car. Once again I did not let others know the intensity of my struggle. After some prayer and difficulty driving, I made it home.

Before I relate the conclusion of this story, I want you to think about your own experiences. Have you had times in your life when you have felt that you just needed to do it on your own? That you needed to absorb the pain, the affliction, and the trial alone? But why? Physical injuries pose challenges, but emotional and spiritual wounds can be even more crippling. When we

confront personal battles, there is often a fear of appearing inadequate or weak or of having failed others. Despite our natural inclination to hide our struggles, we should remember that Jesus Christ is always there for us and that He took on additional suffering so He could more perfectly help us in our personal trials.<sup>21</sup>

Jesus Christ taught that a good shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to find the one lost sheep.<sup>22</sup> You are worth being found, being comforted, being helped. If you swallow your pride and let Him in, He will direct you, comfort you, heal you, and believe in you.

### Communicating Through Prayer

Now back to my sports accident.

The injury resulted in a severe concussion. I had never experienced anything like it before. I could not do anything. I curled up in bed in a dark room. I found myself highly dependent, and I had to accept help from others as my brain healed over the course of the following months. I sincerely prayed to Heavenly Father for guidance, strength, and assistance. Through a blessing from my husband, persistent prayers, and a continual process of trusting the Lord, I was provided a degree of comfort and assurance as I healed.

Prayer changes things. The ability to pray is always with us. Every child of God comes to this earth with the right to communicate with Him through prayer. It is the most widely available but also the most underutilized source of power in this world.

As Moroni taught, we can be filled with the pure love of Christ when we “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart.”<sup>23</sup>

And the Psalmist proclaimed:

*In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God. Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us.*<sup>24</sup>

I know that prayer changes things. Sometimes we need that steadfast rock in our lives to overcome what seems impossible at the time. I pray that as you progress on your life’s path and are tested that you will remember you are not alone

and that we were not put here to suffer alone. Remember the gift of prayer and the power and privilege it is to communicate with your Heavenly Father.

### Finding Eternal Joy

When you think about what you love, it brings you joy. I love playing with my grandchildren. I love my husband. I love being with my family. I love basketball. I love working at BYU. And while my children roll their eyes and constantly tell me I am a nerd, I love technology. All these things bring me joy. When you love something, the joy it brings will show in your countenance, your thoughts, your words, your deeds, your habits, and eventually your destiny.

Elder Uchtdorf shared during the April 2024 conference that although he loves to fly, *there is a higher joy through Christ.*<sup>25</sup>

As we strive to improve, to find how we belong, and to overcome trials and tribulations, remembering to keep Jesus Christ at the center of our lives helps us find joy. We can easily get fixated on our busy schedules, our responsibilities, and the digital world while missing out on opportunities to focus on what gives us true joy.

President Nelson taught that

*Saints can be happy under every circumstance. . . .*

*When the focus of our lives is on God’s plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives. Joy comes from and because of Him. He is the source of all joy.*<sup>26</sup>

As you immerse yourself in this study to improve yourself temporally and spiritually, enjoy all of it. Even as you ride the roller coaster of life with its ups and downs, remember to keep Christ at the center of all you do. With that focus will come eternal joy.

### Conclusion

While we work hard at the secular things, we need to put forth equal effort on the spiritual side of our lives. Nurturing both and seeing the relationships between the two will have a multiplying effect on development. In our quest for

eternal life, we must work and study, organize our time to focus on key outcomes, and reach out to others along the way. You will find great opportunities and blessings as you embrace and explore the dual heritage of your BYU education in both spiritual and temporal endeavors.

You will obtain more liberty by forgiving yourself as well as by forgiving others. Know that God loves you. You are His child. He is consecrated in His work to save you. Don't stand in your own way. Shake off any chains that bind you. Rely on the grace of Jesus Christ to make yourself whole—and believe in that blessing. He is our Redeemer, our Teacher, and our Salvation.

*You do belong.* You matter, and you are loved. There is a place for you. You can overcome the pain, hurt, loneliness, or mistakes of life and move forward.

As the world changes around you, sometimes in great commotion, you can depend on a Savior who is constant. As you build on the rock of our Redeemer and change your perspective to think celestial, working to do all you can do within your scope of ability and understanding, you can gain an assurance that one day you will return to your Heavenly Father, receiving eternal salvation and eternal life, which will bring you eternal joy. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Doctrine of Belonging," *Liahona*, November 2022; emphasis added; quoting 1 Samuel 16:7. See also Russell M. Nelson, "Perfection Pending," *Ensign*, November 1995; Jeffrey R. Holland, "Be Ye Therefore Perfect—Eventually," *Ensign*, November 2017.

2. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come and Belong," *Ensign*, May 2020; emphasis added; quoting Matthew 25:40. See also Acts 10:34; Doctrine and Covenants 88:63.

3. Matthew 13:31–32.

4. Spencer W. Kimball, "Installation of and Charge to the President," address delivered at the inauguration of Jeffrey R. Holland as BYU president, 14 November 1980. See also "double heritage" in Kimball, "Education for Eternity," address to BYU faculty and staff, 12 September 1967, and in Kimball, "The Second Century of

Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

5. Dallin H. Oaks, "Spirituality," *Ensign*, November 1985; emphasis in original.

6. See Russell M. Nelson, "The Power of Spiritual Momentum," *Liahona*, May 2022.

7. John A. Widtsoe, in *CR*, April 1922, 96–97; emphasis added.

8. 1 Nephi 10:18.

9. See Doctrine and Covenants 4:5–6.

10. Helaman 5:12; emphasis added.

11. See Scott Taylor, "President Nelson Announces Locations of 15 New Temples at Conclusion of April 2024 General Conference," *Church News*, 7 April 2024.

12. Russell M. Nelson, "Rejoice in the Gift of Priesthood Keys," *Liahona*, May 2024.

13. Dallin H. Oaks, "Opposition in All Things," *Ensign*, May 2016.

14. Dale G. Renlund, "Jesus Christ Is the Treasure," *Liahona*, November 2023.

15. Russell M. Nelson, "A Message from the First Presidency," 16 January 2018, transcript at Camille West, "New First Presidency Speaks to Members Worldwide," *Church News*, 16 January 2018, [churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/new-first-presidency-speaks-to-members-worldwide](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/new-first-presidency-speaks-to-members-worldwide); Nelson, "First Presidency Message: As We Go Forward Together," *Ensign*, April 2018; Nelson, "Think Celestial!" *Liahona*, November 2023; Nelson, "Begin with the End in Mind," BYU devotional address, 30 September 1984.

16. Nelson, "Think Celestial!"

17. Nelson, "Think Celestial!"

18. Oaks, "Opposition in All Things"; quoting "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" (23 September 1995).

19. See Doctrine and Covenants 122:5–8.

20. Doctrine and Covenants 29:39.

21. See Alma 7:11–12.

22. See Luke 15:3–7.

23. Moroni 7:48.

24. Psalm 62:7–8.

25. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "A Higher Joy," *Liahona*, May 2024.

26. Russell M. Nelson, "Joy and Spiritual Survival," *Ensign*, November 2016.