

An Invitation to Become: Vision, Work, and Covenants

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W elcome back to a new school year! I love the feeling of new beginnings that fall semester brings on this campus! I love the smells, the sounds, and the sense of excitement. I love the tremendous expectation for perfect grades, national championships, and, yes, even eternal companionships! At the beginning of fall semester, hope literally springs eternal!

Most of all, I love that you are here. I love that you have gathered here this morning for a devotional in our storied Marriott Center to hear my wife preach about the power of positivity.

I love that you are here at BYU in this exciting season of our history when we are flourishing in a big, fancy, new athletic conference, excelling in our academic disciplines, laying the groundwork for a prophetically announced medical school, and leaning even more deeply into our unique mission, which insists that “belief enhances inquiry, study amplifies faith, and revelation leads to deeper understanding”!¹ In 2025 we will celebrate

our sesquicentennial and begin the second half of our second century as a university. We have work to do to become the BYU that President Spencer W. Kimball spoke about in his astonishing vision for this place.²

I love that you are here on this earth in this amazing time when we get to witness the unfolding Restoration of Jesus Christ’s gospel and be led and taught by prophets, seers, and revelators.

I love that you’re *here*. And today I want to talk about the process of going from being *here* to getting *there*. I want to invite you to embrace the process of going from here to there—the process of “becoming.”³

In my friend’s office is a nondescript glass jar. Inside the jar are some bits of used chalk. These small shards of chalk aren’t from grade school but were once used by my friend’s grandfather to write his employee number on crates containing fruit he picked with his own hands in the farm fields of California as a migrant worker.

C. Shane Reese, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on September 10, 2024.

My friend recently told me, “I can still see the withered hands of my grandfather—worn out from years of working the fields—scrawling his employee number in chalk on the sides of those wooden crates.”

When my friend was fourteen years old, his dad unexpectedly invited two missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints into their home. “The restored gospel of Jesus Christ deeply resonated with me,” my friend told me. At age fourteen—the same age as the Prophet Joseph Smith when he saw the First Vision—my friend entered the waters of baptism.

His journey of becoming was only beginning. Spiritual mentors came into his life, along with opportunities for service and education. While he was serving a two-year mission in Paraguay, a sister missionary who happened to have attended BYU invited him to consider pursuing his education at BYU after he finished his full-time service as a missionary. Others extended similar invitations.

With very little money but a lot of hope, he traveled to Provo, Utah, with a good bishop who was willing to drive him from California. He studied hard and met Christy Covington in a psychology class. They were eventually sealed in the Salt Lake Temple and together pursued graduate studies in law and public administration.

As a BYU law student, my friend was mentored by former BYU president Kevin J Worthen. My friend then returned to California to serve the communities from where he had come. My friend now works for BYU, and his name is Carl Hernandez. He is currently serving as Brigham Young University’s inaugural vice president of belonging. Carl, please stand and be recognized for all you have given and continue to give to this university.

Carl’s story, like our journeys, is one of becoming.

President Dallin H. Oaks has taught beautifully about the centrality of becoming to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our educational pursuits, he suggested, are necessary to the process of becoming but not sufficient to complete it. He said:

The Apostle Paul taught that the Lord’s teachings and teachers were given that we may all attain “the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” . . . This

*process requires far more than acquiring knowledge. It is not even enough for us to be **convinced** of the gospel; we must act and think so that we are **converted** by it. In contrast to the institutions of the world, which teach us to **know** something, the gospel of Jesus Christ challenges us to **become** something.⁴*

As we begin this new semester, I boldly echo that invitation—the invitation to *become*. As “the flagship”⁵ university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, this university invites all who enter BYU to become what God wants you to become.

Necessary Components to Becoming

Much like the related process of conversion, the process of becoming involves our thoughts and actions. Let me suggest three ideas that I hope will provide a solid foundation for our ability to become:

1. A crisp vision for what we want to become
2. Persistent and consistent effort
3. Making and honoring covenants with God

A Crisp Vision of What We Want to Become

Becoming implies the need for development and growth. As we recognize our incompleteness and realize that we are meant to become something more, something better, and something holier, we are “in a preparation” (Alma 32:6) to accept the gospel’s challenge to become. Answering that challenge requires a vision of exactly *what* we want to become. We won’t know *how* to become if we don’t first know *what* we want to become or, perhaps more importantly, *who* we may become. Having eyes to see ourselves as something more, something better, and something holier is a gift worth seeking. All too often we find ourselves mired in the adversary’s web of deception about our divine identity as children of God and our divine potential and destiny.⁶

How can we see clearly through these deceptions?

The first way we might see our divine potential is through the people God sends into our lives who see more in us than we see in ourselves. As President Thomas S. Monson taught:

*We have the responsibility to look at our friends, our associates, our neighbors [and I would add our classmates] this way. Again, we have the responsibility to see individuals not as they are but rather as they can become. I would plead with you to think of them in this way.*⁷

I will forever be grateful for a person who had the eyes to see a young, somewhat immature, recently returned missionary sophomore as something more than just a struggling first-generation college student. Having recently returned from my service in the Taiwan Taipei Mission in 1992 and while taking my first real statistics and mathematics classes, I found myself inside the office of our unofficial department advisor, Shauna Kuykendall. Shauna had an abundance of the gift to see the best in each individual with whom she came in contact. I remember talking with Shauna about classes in which I struggled, tests that went badly, and doubts about my abilities. Shauna kept telling me that she could see me someday becoming a faculty member at BYU. I remember thinking that was impossible! Faculty members were smart—and that wasn't me. Despite my protests, Shauna confidently reiterated what she saw in me. And I could tell that she meant it.

All of us sometimes need someone with a bolder vision for our future than we have for ourselves. And we also all need to reciprocate that blessing—to cultivate the gift about which President Monson spoke of seeing in others and helping others see what they might yet become!

We can see our divine potential as God gives us glimpses of our future promise through promptings of the Holy Ghost. This is a spiritual gift worthy of our humble and sincere pursuit. One of the most compelling reminders of what we might become is contained in our patriarchal blessings. Read them.

Having a crisp vision of what we might become is the starting point of our process of becoming because it shapes our work and effort in productive ways. In Proverbs 29:18 we learn that “where there is no vision, the people perish.” May I suggest that the inverse is also true: where there is vision, the people flourish and become what God wants them to become.

Having a vision of what we can become empowers us with faith and confidence (two attributes of becoming) that can help replace our doubts and fears (two deterrents to becoming). Faith and confidence fuel additional steps in becoming—namely, persistence, perspiration, and effort.

Persistent and Consistent Effort

Our efforts to become will not come without—yup, you guessed it—effort!

President Gordon B. Hinckley once paid this memorial tribute to President Ezra Taft Benson:

As has been noted, [Ezra Taft Benson] was a farm boy, literally and truly, an overall-clad, sunburned boy who at a very early age came to know the law of the harvest: “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.” . . .

*He came to know in those lean days that without hard work, nothing grows but weeds. There must be labor, incessant and constant, if there is to be a harvest.*⁸

President Hinckley understood the value of hard work. As we begin a new semester, many of you will feel a divine stirring to become something more. As you survey these possibilities, embrace hard work. It is easy to envision the harvest—to dream of our figurative orchards and fields teeming with bounteous fruits and vegetables. Today I invite you to embrace the hard work—the “labor, incessant and constant”—that must precede and produce that harvest. As President Hinckley put it, “Without hard work, nothing grows but weeds.”

As you begin your journey toward becoming something more, my hope for you is that you will cultivate your legacy as the greatest generation by working toward a full and bounteous harvest complete with delicious fruit and free of encumbering weeds.

While in graduate school at Texas A&M, I kept a quote on my desk to help me stay motivated while writing my dissertation. It read: “The highest reward that God gives us for doing good work is the ability to do better work.”⁹

Yesterday we celebrated President Russell M. Nelson's one hundredth birthday. His life is a literal blueprint for working as though everything

depends on us and praying as if everything depends on God! I love what President Nelson said about the effort required to become:

Resolve to be resolute. The Lord loves effort. The Lord loves consistency. The Lord loves steadfastness. While we surely will come up short from time to time, our persistent efforts to hear Him and follow the inspiration He gives us will help us to “wax strong in the Spirit” (Mosiah 18:26).¹⁰

None of us can avoid falling short, but we can all choose to give our best effort.

Oliver Granger, a humble disciple in the early days of the Restoration, was given the all-but-impossible task of winding up the Church’s financial affairs in Kirtland. Of Brother Granger’s work, the Lord said in the Doctrine and Covenants:

*His name shall be had in sacred remembrance from generation to generation. . . .
 . . . And when he falls he shall rise again, for his sacrifice shall be more sacred unto me than his increase.¹¹*

In the Lord’s eyes, Brother Granger’s effort was more important than his achievement. When he fell, he got up and tried again. His striving was more important than his success.

President Jeffrey R. Holland has reminded us that while we are striving to be better and to become something more, heaven is cheering us on. He said that he loves the doctrine of striving to become because

*it says again and again that we are going to be blessed for our **desire** to do good, even as we actually strive to be so. And it reminds us that to qualify for those blessings, we must make certain we do not deny them to others: we are to deal justly, never unjustly, never unfairly; we are to walk humbly, never arrogantly, never pridefully; we are to judge righteously, never self-righteously, never unrighteously.¹²*

President Holland seemed to be suggesting that the path of becoming is not pursued in a vacuum independent of others. Rather, our efforts to become what God wants us to become depend imperatively on our helping others along their path of becoming.

Our ultimate example in this is Jesus Christ, who lifted His disciples and others around Him. The scriptures say of Him that He “went about doing good” (Acts 10:38) and grew “from grace to grace” (Doctrine and Covenants 93:13). Christ taught:

Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister;

And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.¹³

The Becoming Accelerator: Making and Honoring Covenants with God

One word that helps me capture the essence of President Nelson’s ministry is *covenants*. President Nelson has taught consistently and powerfully about the centrality of covenants in our spiritual becoming. In his seminal address on covenants and their role in our discipleship, President Nelson taught:

Once we make a covenant with God, we leave neutral ground forever. God will not abandon His relationship with those who have forged such a bond with Him. In fact, all those who have made a covenant with God have access to a special kind of love and mercy. In the Hebrew language, that covenantal love is called hesed (חסד).¹⁴

The neutral ground we leave is the stagnant ground of not becoming. In other words, if we want to accelerate our ability to become, we need to make and keep covenants with God. Making and keeping covenants with God accelerates the process of becoming, thanks to the special gift of love and mercy afforded to children of the covenant. As President Nelson put it, “The reward for keeping covenants with God is heavenly power—power that strengthens us to withstand our trials, temptations, and heartaches better.”¹⁵

It is no coincidence that each member of the First Presidency emphasized the power of covenants in this past April general conference.

President Henry B. Eyring shared an incredible witness and reminder that covenants can banish fear, doubt, and uncertainty that can otherwise stifle our efforts to become what God wants us to become. While entering into sacred

temple covenants with his eternal companion, Kathy, President Eyring was taught by a prophet of God, President Spencer W. Kimball, to strive to keep his covenants in such a way that he could “walk away easily”¹⁶ from other pursuits when the call to greater consecration came. As President Eyring observed:

*The loving counsel given by President Kimball in the temple to be able to “walk away easily” became a reality. Kathy and I received a call to leave what seemed an idyllic family situation in California to serve in an assignment and in a place that I knew nothing about. However, our family was ready to leave because a prophet, in a holy temple, a place of revelation, saw a future event for which we were then prepared.*¹⁷

President Oaks then underscored the power of covenants in forging our personal integrity and accelerating our process of becoming something more. Of the worldwide explosion in temple building, President Oaks said:

*Their purpose is to bless the covenant children of God with temple worship and with the sacred responsibilities and powers and unique blessings of being bound to Christ they receive by covenant.*¹⁸

President Nelson expanded on this point with a remarkable, prophetic promise that I commend to all of you today:

*My dear brothers and sisters, here is my promise. Nothing will help you **more** to hold fast to the iron rod than worshipping in the temple as regularly as your circumstances permit. Nothing will protect you **more** as you encounter the world’s mists of darkness. Nothing will bolster your testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Atonement or help you understand God’s magnificent plan **more**. Nothing will soothe your spirit **more** during times of pain. Nothing will open the heavens **more**. Nothing!*¹⁹

Jesus Christ is our ultimate example of becoming. He had a vision of His divine role as the Savior of the world. His vision for those to whom He ministered was majestic and inspiring. He built others. He aligned His will with His Father’s

will exactly. He loved perfectly. He kept His covenants with the Father. As with all things, Jesus is the answer. His life was perfect, and it was and is the divine model for each of us.

In closing, I want to share my deep love and affection for each of you as you begin this new semester. I want you to know that I see in each of you, individually and collectively, magnificent divine potential. Wendy and I want to invite you to stretch this semester beyond just *knowing*. We want you to continue to *become* something special. We see in you such a bright and hopeful future. We know that you are here for a reason. We also know that God lives and loves you more deeply than you can even comprehend. He is indeed—as Elder Patrick Kearon has taught—“in relentless pursuit of you.”²⁰

I know that Jesus is the Christ, our advocate with the Father. I know that His atoning sacrifice will make it possible for you and for me to become more than we can ever become by ourselves. I know that Jesus’s infinite atoning sacrifice will make all that is infuriatingly unfair in this life right through His endless grace and His infinite mercy. I know that this university is founded, supported, and guided by prophets, seers, and revelators. I know that President Russell M. Nelson is the Lord’s mouthpiece and that he holds and is authorized to exercise all priesthood keys. I know that God has a plan for your life that includes

*becom[ing] a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becom[ing] as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [you], even as a child doth submit to his father.*²¹

I pray the Lord’s choicest blessings on each of you as you begin this semester. Great things are in store as we seek to become who God wants us to become! I so testify, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “For the Benefit of the World,” BYU Core Brand Message (10 August 2022).
2. See Spencer W. Kimball, “Education for Eternity,” address to BYU faculty and staff,

12 September 1967; see also Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.

3. See C. Shane Reese, “Becoming BYU: An Inaugural Response,” address delivered at his inauguration as BYU president, 19 September 2023.

4. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Challenge to Become,” *Ensign*, November 2000; emphasis in original; quoting Ephesians 4:13.

5. President Marion G. Romney called Brigham Young University “the flagship of our Church Educational System” (“Why the J. Reuben Clark Law School?” dedicatory address and prayer of the J. Reuben Clark Law School Building, 5 September 1975). A month later, in his BYU centennial address on October 10, 1975, President Spencer W. Kimball referred to this designation of “the flagship” (“Second Century”) and also cited his own 1967 description of BYU as a ship: “The BYU must keep its vessel seaworthy. It must take out all old planks as they decay and put in new and stronger timber in their place. It must sail on and on and on” (“Education for Eternity”).

6. See Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022.

7. Thomas S. Monson, “See Others as They May Become,” *Ensign*, November 2012.

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Farewell to a Prophet,” *Ensign*, July 1994; quoting Galatians 6:7.

9. Elbert Hubbard, “The Master Man,” *The Book of Business* (East Aurora, New York: The Roycrofters, 1913), 161.

10. Russell M. Nelson, Facebook, 1 January 2022.

11. Doctrine and Covenants 117:12–13.

12. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Tomorrow the Lord Will Do Wonders Among You,” *Ensign*, May 2016; emphasis in original.

13. Matthew 20:26–27.

14. Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.

15. Russell M. Nelson, “Overcome the World and Find Rest,” *Liahona*, November 2022.

16. Spencer W. Kimball, quoted in Henry B. Eyring, “All Will Be Well Because of Temple Covenants,” *Liahona*, May 2024; see also Eyring, “I Love to See the Temple,” *Liahona*, May 2021.

17. Eyring, “All Will Be Well”; see also Eyring, “I Love to See the Temple.”

18. Dallin H. Oaks, “Covenants and Responsibilities,” *Liahona*, May 2024.

19. Russell M. Nelson, “Rejoice in the Gift of Priesthood Keys,” *Liahona*, May 2024; emphasis in original.

20. Patrick Kearon, “God’s Intent Is to Bring You Home,” *Liahona*, May 2024.

21. Mosiah 3:19.