

“Flecks of Gold”

PATRICK KEARON

I am so happy to be here today with my wife, Jennifer, and with all of you and with family members and loved ones. To say that I’m surprised to be here is an understatement, and I’m constantly apologizing for the fact that you haven’t got, as I would say, a *real* apostle here with you today.

There was, in fact, a seasoned apostle lined up for today. Elder Gary E. Stevenson had originally been scheduled to speak today. But he’ll be here in a few months, and he’ll explain why he is not here and why my wife and I are. I love the idea of surprising God because He has really surprised me lately. I’m going to think about that and practice it.

Let’s say this: it really is a joy to be here with you. I have a particular sensitivity to the freshmen among you, as I am one—feeling at least as raw and somehow homesick as you might be. I welcome you to this beautiful place, this extraordinary setting, and this glorious institution where you can grow in light, in knowledge, in

love, in kindness, and certainly in joy and in an understanding of who you really are.

For those of you who were here—or perhaps not here—last week when President C. Shane Reese and Sister Wendy W. Reese were speaking, I went back and looked at their remarks. [President Reese stood up and handed Elder Kearon a paper.] This is the list of those of you who weren’t here. The Reeses are still smarting over your absence.

But you can imagine over the weekend how my wife and I thought about what we might talk about today with you. These devotional talks are normally highly prepared and highly polished. And that’s what you have just had from my wife, Jennifer Kearon.¹ What you will have from Patrick Kearon will be something less polished.

What Sister Reese addressed was being positive and trying to look for the good.² It was beautiful. I can’t think of a better way for you to start your academic year than with that invitation, that admonition.

Patrick Kearon, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on September 17, 2024.

And President Reese spoke about having your own vision and then applying yourselves with the effort you need to bring that to pass and to make and keep covenants with God.³ What a winning combination those talks were for you and for me—for all of us. I’m grateful that most of you were here last week and that you have reflected on those thoughts. And if you haven’t, you can either read them or go back and review them.

A Beautiful, Stretching, Glorious BYU Experience

As I listened to what the Reeses said last week, I thought about my first experience with BYU. I actually came here in my mid-twenties as a visitor to the campus. This was before I was a member of the Church, and it really struck me. It was part of my journey, part of my preparation in my conversion process. My conversion took place with stops and starts over about two years. I came here to the campus, and I was stunned in the most wonderful way—first, with the physical setting of the campus, with the mountain backdrop and the valley where this university was planted. It was literally breathtaking to me. And I loved it.

I hope that you never become immune to the backdrop, to the setting. Today, with the first dusting of snow on Mount Timpanogos and on its neighboring mountains, it is beautiful. I think the sun will be out a little later on, hopefully, and then all that will be cast in bright sunlight. I hope that can be a symbol of the stretching that you were invited to do by President Reese last week. You are reaching for the higher and the holier, even as you fight through to discern what your vision should be and what kind of efforts you will apply as you reach for it.

So the physical setting was the first thing that I noticed. The second thing I was struck with was the students themselves. It was unlike anything I’d seen anywhere before. They were extraordinary. They were happy. They were positive. They were, as we say in Church language—unfamiliar to me then—“anxiously engaged.”⁴ (I’m afraid that “anxiously” has become too much of the equation in recent times. We are all working on ways to try and reduce the wrong kind of anxious.) But the students were *eagerly* engaged. They were *positively* engaged as they moved around the campus.

It just dawned on me that I came actually to a Beach Boys concert, and I sat probably somewhere way up there in the nosebleed section. There were these massive inflatable beach balls being bounced around. And right here where I am standing were the Beach Boys! That was one of my first experiences here.

But the extraordinary thing was the students. And dear friends, you still are extraordinary. For many of you, it has been quite a reach to get here. And now you are here, and you are in the midst of this beautiful, stretching, glorious experience that you will have for a few years in this beautiful place.

This Test Isn’t “Just to Give Us a Grade”

To those who have just arrived, welcome—and a reminder: you are not meant to be like everybody else as you come here. You are just not meant to be like every other student at every other university around the world. This is meant to be special. It is meant to be higher. It is meant to be holier. And goodness knows, it is meant to be much more joyful. I pray that it will be that for you. This institution is not meant to be like any other institution around the world. It has been blessed. It has been consecrated so that you can come here and become ambassadors to take what you learn—in terms of your studies but also in terms of the development of your character and your nature—around the world.

As I think about those surprises that my wife, Jennifer, just talked about, and as I think about your journey, I want to turn to 1 Peter 4:12–13. Think of those surprises and think of the shocks we are dealt:

Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you:

But rejoice [what a word to use in that context], inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.

Think of this wonderful idea of surprises that Sister Kearon shared: that we can have these shocks, we can have these surprises, and we may

receive rocks, but we can turn them to our good. And you can. I'm certainly a second witness of that—these grueling, even excruciating experiences, as they may be in the moment for all of us.

I want to share this with you from President Henry B. Eyring in relation to the nature of mortality. He said, "The Lord doesn't put us through this test just to give us a grade; he does it because the process will change us."⁵ That's very interesting, particularly in your setting where you are dependent upon grades. You are aiming for grades, and you must achieve certain grades to have particular outcomes. But this is a wonderful balance in terms of the plan of salvation, the plan of happiness, and our purpose here in our mortal moment.

Once again, "The Lord doesn't put us through this test just to give us a grade; he does it because the process will change us." We are all involved in that. We are all being changed, and it takes the rough and the smooth to achieve that.

"Small and Simple Acts of Kindness and Service"

I'm going to share with you a video clip featuring a story told by President M. Russell Ballard, whom we miss. President Ballard talked about a young man who sold everything to go and be a gold prospector in California.⁶ Let's follow the journey of this young man in his search for gold. He doesn't instantly find what he is looking for. That is part of the message for you. And I'm going to develop this message just a little bit as we talk together today. [A video clip was shown dramatizing the following story from President Ballard's April 2011 general conference address.⁷]

Oftentimes we are like the young merchant from Boston, who in 1849, as the story goes, was caught up in the fervor of the California gold rush. He sold all of his possessions to seek his fortune in the California rivers, which he was told were filled with gold nuggets so big that one could hardly carry them.

Day after endless day, the young man dipped his pan into the river and came up empty. His only reward was a growing pile of rocks. Discouraged and broke, he was ready to quit until one day an old, experienced prospector said to him, "That's quite a pile of rocks you are getting there, my boy."

The young man replied, "There's no gold here. I'm going back home."

Walking over to the pile of rocks, the old prospector said, "Oh, there is gold all right. You just have to know where to find it." He picked two rocks up in his hands and crashed them together. One of the rocks split open, revealing several flecks of gold sparkling in the sunlight.

Noticing a bulging leather pouch fastened to the prospector's waist, the young man said, "I'm looking for nuggets like the ones in your pouch, not just tiny flecks."

The old prospector extended his pouch toward the young man, who looked inside, expecting to see several large nuggets. He was stunned to see that the pouch was filled with thousands of flecks of gold.

The old prospector said, "Son, it seems to me you are so busy looking for large nuggets that you're missing filling your pouch with these precious flecks of gold. The patient accumulation of these little flecks has brought me great wealth."

This story illustrates the spiritual truth that Alma taught his son Helaman:

"By small and simple things are great things brought to pass." . . .

Brothers and sisters, the gospel of Jesus Christ is simple. . . .

. . . Like the small flecks of gold that accumulate over time into a large treasure, our small and simple acts of kindness and service will accumulate into a life filled with love for Heavenly Father, devotion to the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a sense of peace and joy each time we reach out to one another.⁸

I love this. The last clinching paragraph is just packed with goodness from President Ballard as he defined what those flecks mean for you and for me. I am going to read that last part again. I would like you to take it in, because the truth of this can quickly pass us by if we're not careful.

President Ballard concluded, "Like the small flecks of gold that accumulate over time into a large treasure, *our small and simple acts of kindness and service* [this is the action for us] will accumulate into a life filled with love for Heavenly Father, devotion to the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a sense of peace and joy each time we reach out to one another."

Think about that for a minute. For me, what this amounts to is an invitation to look outward and

to look upward. And it's a condensation, in a way, of what happens to those who serve missions, because they're put in this extraordinary setting where they are forced really to look outward and to look upward. They come to love their missions largely because they are, for the first time in their lives, to any real extent, looking outward and looking upward. It's a beautiful thing. And it's one of the things that causes a trial for many returning missionaries when they come home, because what happens is they look inward again—as they had done before their missions—and to some extent downward by some degree as well.

I heard President Ballard and I have heard the Brethren teach this many times and in many ways: that these “small and simple acts of kindness and service” do “accumulate into a life filled with love for Heavenly Father, devotion to the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and a sense of peace and joy.” And goodness knows, that's what we're all looking for. So please think about this. Please pray about this. Pray how you can apply this simple invitation every day to bless you as you bless others and as you turn upward to our Father in Heaven and our Savior Jesus Christ.

We Are All Children of God

Now, I want to turn to the foundational truth that I hope, as I remind you of it, will bless you in this quest. It's so obvious, but so easily overlooked.

First of all, you are children of God. You are spirit daughters and sons of our Father in Heaven. I realized as a convert in my mid-twenties that you who were raised in the Church had been raised singing songs that reminded you of this. You were taught this every day—almost day in and day out any time you came to church. And that's a beautiful strength. But does there ever come a time when there's a risk if we become complacent in our relationship to that knowledge? When it has been heard so often, when it has been sung so frequently, and when we have said it so much, does it risk being devalued in our heads and in our hearts?

I think the answer to that is at least a small yes. To someone who comes into the Church—such as in my case, again, in my twenties—this is a glorious revelation! It is such a powerful, beautiful, fundamental truth. I want to share a very

short clip with you of President Russell M. Nelson speaking, followed by a young woman's response to his teaching. [A video clip was shown.]

President Nelson said:

My dear friends, you are literally spirit children of God. You have sung this truth since you learned the words to “I Am a Child of God.”⁹

After having heard the words of the prophet, the young woman in the video said:

If everybody knew that they were a child of God, I think everybody would look at the world differently. We would all understand that we don't have to put up this fight on our own.

This is the language from someone just beginning to understand, I think: “We don't have to put up this fight on our own.” If only the world understood this! But before the world can understand it, we have to come to a deeper understanding of this beautiful truth. We have to come to a deeper—no meaning more complex but actually meaning more simple—understanding of the plan of happiness, the plan of redemption, the plan of mercy. We have to understand that the design is one of a gift for us eternally and that we truly are children of our Father in Heaven.

I just love the young woman's smile at the end of the video. I don't know the story there, but it is as if this relationship with God was dawning on her for the first time. And I know how it felt when it dawned on me for the first time.

We Are All Being Cheered On

Here is a wonderful quotation from President Jeffrey R. Holland in which he reminded us that we are all being cheered on. Think about yourself today. If you're having a hard day, if this day or this week has started hard for you, think about this. President Holland said:

I testify that no one of us is less treasured or cherished of God than another. I testify that He loves each of us—insecurities, anxieties, self-image, and all. He doesn't measure our talents or our looks; He doesn't

measure our professions or our possessions. He cheers on *every* runner.¹⁰

“He cheers on *every* runner”—meaning you, particularly you if this is a hard day for you. Again, I want you to think about this setting, this opportunity you have, even as you feel stretched. As you look at those mountains this afternoon and every day, think about the beauty that you have been planted in as you come to learn and know of these eternal truths to a deeper—again, I would say more simple—level of the truth that we have been given.

Talking of the landscape, there is a wonderful quotation from President Dallin H. Oaks. He said, “Our Creator wants us to be happy in this life. . . . The things of the earth were created for our happiness.”¹¹ They were created for your happiness, for mine.

Rejoice in the Truth That You Have Received

Well done for getting here. Thank you for the goodness of your life. And if you need to make some changes, think of the beauty that we’ve been taught in the last few years about the gift of daily repentance.¹² The joy of it is the gift that is there for you and for me and for all of us.

From your hard-won and, yes, privileged vantage point, I have an invitation for you. It is this: that as you come to a deeper understanding of where those flecks of gold come from—as you look out, as you look up—that you *become* flecks of gold to an often troubled world; that you rejoice in *being* flecks of gold; that you *build* yourselves while you’re here; and that you *practice* these simple principles of reaching out in kindness and love each day in your apartment, in your classes, in your ward, in your branch, and in your home.

And then, as you go out into the world, you will find that the world sees you differently as you rejoice in the truth that you have received, as you come to a deeper understanding of who you truly are, and as you practice these principles that you’re learning ever more keenly. I would say to you as you move beyond here, ever more energetically, to keep it simple and to remember that “[you] are, that [you] might have joy.”¹³

I pray that you will enjoy this process, that you will receive this invitation, and that you will act upon it starting today with small acts of kindness—blessing those around you and realizing that as you look out and as you look up that you will be blessed and millions will be blessed as you go forth into the world. I leave you these thoughts in love and in gratitude for you and for all that you might do and all that you are already doing.

I testify of our loving Father in Heaven, of His Son, Jesus Christ, of a living prophet to guide us, and of the glorious fact that we will have prophets to guide us until our beloved Savior returns to the earth. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Jennifer Kearon, “Surprise!” BYU devotional address, 17 September 2024.

2. See Wendy W. Reese, “The Power of Positivity,” BYU devotional address, 10 September 2024.

3. See C. Shane Reese, “An Invitation to Become: Vision, Work, and Covenants,” BYU devotional address, 10 September 2024.

4. Doctrine and Covenants 58:27.

5. Henry B. Eyring, “Waiting Upon the Lord,” BYU fireside address, 30 September 1990.

6. See M. Russell Ballard, “Finding Joy Through Loving Service,” *Ensign*, May 2011.

7. “Flecks of Gold,” video, Church of Jesus Christ, YouTube, 9 September 2011, youtube.com/watch?v=fEfg-Z-TOc8.

8. Ballard, “Finding Joy Through Loving Service”; quoting Alma 37:6.

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022; see “I Am a Child of God,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.

10. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Other Prodigal,” *Ensign*, May 2002; emphasis in original.

11. Dallin H. Oaks, “Joy and Mercy,” *Ensign*, November 1991.

12. See Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign*, May 2019.

13. 2 Nephi 2:25.