

# *A Peculiar Treasure*

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On this beautiful September day, the first day of the new school year, we welcome back 21,000 students from summer vacation and almost 6,000 new freshmen and transfer students. It is wonderful to see your bright countenances and the gospel light that enervates your souls. I am reminded of the Israelites' experience when Moses returned from Mount Sinai after spending 40 days and nights with the Lord. During his time on the mount, Moses fasted, neither eating bread nor drinking water as he recorded the Lord's instructions on the tables of stone (see Exodus 34:28). As he descended the mountain and approached the camp, the scriptures record that "the skin of his face shone" and "Aaron and all the children of Israel . . . were afraid to come nigh him" (Exodus 34:29–30). As I look into your faces today, the brightness and freshness reflects your association with the Holy Spirit and the principles by which you live.

The light emanating from you is reminiscent of the experiences Sister Bateman and I had in Japan and Korea during 1993–94. Shortly after our arrival in Japan, we attended a district conference in northern Honshu. Arrangements were made before the trip for a member of the district presidency, a brother we did not know, to meet us at the train station. As

the bullet train sped from Tokyo to Morioka, I wondered how we would recognize the Japanese brother. The train station would be a beehive of activity. It would be easier for him to recognize us than the reverse, but there would be hundreds of people exiting the train. Stepping from the train car onto the platform, I looked into a sea of Japanese faces wondering which one was there to greet us. As we gazed along the platform, I could see an individual at the far end whose countenance radiated the light of the gospel. He was checking each car as he passed along the platform. As we moved toward him, he recognized us, and a peaceful feeling entered our souls. That experience was repeated almost weekly as we met unknown Japanese and Korean brothers and sisters in busy airport terminals and train stations from Sapporo to Fukuoka to Seoul to Pusan. The warmth of the gospel light radiating from these brothers and sisters was the identifying characteristic that brought us together.

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*Merrill J. Bateman was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 3 September 1996.*

### Members of a Covenant Family

We welcome you as members of a special family—the 2-0 BYU Cougars, also the home of the 19th-ranked women’s volleyball team in America! We are grateful for the standards they set. But more important, you are part of another elect family—the Lord’s covenant people. You have been blessed with the opportunity to study at this great university. We only wish many others could join us in the intellectual and spiritual renewal that is available here. That day will come as the Lord continues to make the world smaller through improved communications.

Each person gathered in the Marriott Center today is a rightful heir to the blessings of Abraham, the Old Testament prophet. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him and said:

*I am the Almighty God; walk before me. . . .*

*And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee . . . for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. [Genesis 17:1, 7]*

In exchange for Abraham’s righteousness, the Lord promised him the blessings of the gospel, a land, and a large posterity (see Genesis 12–13, Abraham 1:16–19). In order to fulfill the covenant, the Lord gave Abraham a son through Sarah and a righteous posterity through Isaac’s lineage. Abraham received the fullness of the gospel and was told that gospel covenants and blessings would be offered to his children and his children’s children (see D&C 132:29–50, Abraham 2:6–11).

During the course of history there have been a number of occasions when righteous Abrahamic descendants have enjoyed living under the gospel covenant. Whenever the Lord has had a covenant people on earth, a special term has been applied to them. They are called “a peculiar treasure” (Exodus 19:5; see also 1 Peter 2:9). In what ways are righteous people

peculiar? There are at least three differentiating characteristics.

First, they believe in and have a greater knowledge of God and his Son. They not only believe in a supreme being but come to know and trust him.

Second, the trust in deity helps them live differently from others as they abide gospel principles. Obedience to God’s ways produces a clean, happy people. This in turn leads to a special bonding among them. Students on this campus come from more than 100 nations. As you meet, we hope you will find that gospel beliefs shared are stronger than cultural differences that may divide.

Third, almost everyone in this audience has received a special gift as a result of promises made. A covenant people not only believe in God but are sensitive to spiritual things through the power of the Holy Ghost. I sensed this peculiarity last Thursday when 5,000 freshmen gathered in this hall. One moment they were singing loudly “Rise and Shout” with the Pep Band. The next moment they were listening quietly and intently, feeling the power of the Spirit as Professor Paul Cox explained “The Aims of a BYU Education.” One could feel the spiritual depth and commitment of the entering class.

As covenant children of the Lord and as his peculiar treasure, we must strengthen continually our faith in him and in his atonement. Alma’s discourse on faith clearly teaches that it is not enough to turn the seed into a small seedling. That is the first step, but one must continue the nurturing process until the word has become the tree of life within one’s soul (see Alma 32:40–43). Also, if covenant children are to take advantage of the educational opportunities provided by this university, they must follow the Lord’s counsel to Joseph Smith regarding the learning process. May I discuss these two topics in reverse order—the learning process first, followed by my witness of the Savior’s atonement.

### Diligence and Obedience

The students at this university have broader objectives than most students elsewhere. Many are seeking sacred as well as secular truth. You have chosen Brigham Young University knowing the dual nature of the institution. A few months ago I received a letter from a young woman who expressed her feelings in this regard. She said:

*I especially am grateful for the emphasis . . . placed on BYU being a religious institution. I'm from central California and was the valedictorian of my high school class. I felt a lot of pressure from teachers and peers to attend an Ivy League school, Stanford, or one of the more prestigious University of California schools. They could not understand why I would even consider BYU—let alone choose it above the others! But in my mind, I knew the importance of educating my spirit as well as my brain. I wanted a religious education as well as a secular one. I knew that BYU was a place that could provide this type of experience. Since entering here [last] fall, this hope has been confirmed, and I have grown in so many ways that would never have been possible at another university. [Personal correspondence, February 1996]*

Whether sacred or secular, the process of acquiring truth follows the same basic pattern. The Lord said, “All things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law [truth] which was temporal” (D&C 29:34). Whether one attempts to learn by faith or by study, the learning process is similar in at least two respects. First, learning is based on diligence—the energetic application of one’s mental powers. Second, the acquisition of knowledge and intelligence is based on one’s obedience to basic truths. The scriptures state:

*Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.*

*And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and*

*obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come. [D&C 130:18–19]*

Oliver Cowdery learned this lesson when he was given the opportunity to assist Joseph in translating the plates. He was unable to do so, and the Lord explained why.

*Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me.*

*But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. [D&C 9:7–8]*

Whether it is called diligence, hard work, or effort, consistent application of one’s energy is required to learn. As an undergraduate student, good grades came easily for me. My diligence was generally confined to class time plus the night before the exam. There were only a few classes that caused me to stretch. Looking back, I now realize how I squandered a major opportunity.

In contrast, graduate school was a different experience. When I arrived at MIT, I realized that I was not prepared and had shortchanged myself as an undergraduate. I was three years behind in mathematics and not well prepared in my major. It took 18 hours a day, six days a week, of study and class time to compete with the better students. While taking courses in my chosen field, I also studied calculus and difference and differential equations, plus linear algebra—tools required to pass the major exams. During the first year in graduate school I came to understand the meaning of the word *diligence*. I vowed then to apply my energies in whatever pursuit I was engaged and not waste opportunities.

Students, take advantage of the BYU educational opportunity by going the extra mile in your homework. In addition to the required

materials, read the papers on the suggested list. Ask questions! Take time to become acquainted with your instructors. Establish study groups and use the library.

Just as the secular learning process requires diligence, so does the search for sacred truths. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated: “When a man works by faith he works by mental exertion instead of physical force” (*Lectures on Faith*, comp. N. B. Lundwall [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, n.d.], p. 61 [7:3]). In other words, sacred knowledge or a witness of the Spirit comes only after the expenditure of significant mental energy.

A few years ago, a returned missionary who served in one of the Mexican missions shared with me a classic experience that illustrates the “diligence” principle in the acquisition of faith and sacred knowledge. I had conducted the stake president’s interview before his mission and sent his papers to Church headquarters. I remember that interview with him. He was 6 foot 5 inches tall and 255 pounds. He was one of the first two young men recruited from my children’s high school to play football at Brigham Young University. He was a fine young man, clean-cut and worthy in every way. I remember being impressed with his potential. I could tell from the answers he gave to the questions I asked that he was honest, but there was one crack in his armor. I knew that his testimony was based on the faith of others rather than on his own witness. However, he related the following story to me during his release interview at the end of his mission.

As his mission began, Elder Stone worked energetically with his companion. Frequently he was called upon to give the first lesson. In the lesson it was necessary for him to tell the investigators about the appearance of the Father and the Son to the boy Joseph in the Sacred Grove and then bear witness of its truthfulness. After bearing testimony a number of times, his conscience began to bother him. Although he believed the story, he did not

know that it actually happened. He had not been there, nor had he received his own witness. How could he tell others that the First Vision really happened? As doubts began to multiply and replace his belief and as the pains of conscience increased, he told his companion that he could no longer be a missionary. He was going home. He could not serve as a witness to something he did not know. His companion responded, “Elder Stone, why don’t you follow the counsel given the investigators? You need to study and pray more diligently. Put Moroni’s promise to the test. Exercise your faith, and you will receive an answer. Stay with me for a few more weeks.”

Elder Stone agreed to stay and put Moroni’s promise to the test. A few weeks passed, the missionary worked harder, prayed more often, was more attentive in his reading, but no witness came. Finally, during an interview with the mission president, Elder Stone expressed his frustrations and indicated his desire to return home. He could not continue. A wise mission president counseled, “Elder, do not give up! You have a desire to believe. If you continue faithful in your calling for a few more weeks, the Lord will answer your prayers. I promise you!”

Elder Stone agreed to return to his proselyting area for a few more weeks. Again, days and then weeks passed with no change in his feelings. It was difficult. One morning as they were knocking on doors, a woman answered and invited them to return when her husband and children would be home. As they left the small house, Elder Stone said to his companion, “I’m not giving the lesson!”

His companion responded, “Elder, I’ll give the first portion of the discussion, but I want you to tell the Joseph Smith story.”

Finally Elder Stone agreed, even though that was the part that bothered him. From the time they left the woman’s house until they returned a day or two later, the missionary used every spare minute to read and pray. He

wanted a witness before entering the home. But when the appointed hour came, he still had not received a witness. He had read diligently, he had prayed almost continuously, but there were no special feelings. How could he bear witness when he did not know?

The father answered the door and ushered the missionaries inside. There on a dirt floor sat nine children, and the father and mother took their places behind them. Elder Stone reported that the size of the home was not much larger than his bedroom in Utah. The humble circumstances only added to his discomfort. The senior companion began the lesson, telling the family that there is a God, that we are his children, and that he loves us. He then explained the mission of the Savior, how God sent his Son to earth to atone for our sins and to make possible our return to our heavenly home. He explained the role of prophets and bore witness that God works through prophets today. He then turned the lesson over to Elder Stone.

My missionary friend began the story of the 14-year-old Joseph. He told the family about the religious confusion that existed in Palmyra in the 1820s, how Joseph listened to the various ministers proclaiming different versions of Christianity. He told them about Joseph's experience in reading James 1:5, where James states unequivocally: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him."

The missionary related the impact that the passage had on Joseph—that it struck him with more power than had any other scripture, and that this caused him to reflect on it again and again. Finally, Joseph decided to put James to the test. He selected a grove of trees near his father's farm and went there on a beautiful spring day to pray. Being alone, he knelt down and offered up the feelings of his heart. The elder told the family how a dark power came over Joseph, almost choking the life out of the young boy. Exerting all of his powers, Joseph continued to pray, and then, suddenly, a pillar

of light descended out of the heavens directly above him. The darkness was dispelled, and in the midst of the light were two personages. One called Joseph by name and, pointing to the other, said: "This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!" (See JS—H 1:1–17.)

At this point in the story, Elder Stone said that a warm feeling began to stir his soul—one he had never felt before. The warmth was deep inside and soon enveloped him. Tears welled up in his eyes. His throat became full, and he could hardly speak. He was embarrassed and ducked his head until he could regain his composure. When he looked up, he noticed tears in the eyes of the parents and the children. They were experiencing the same feelings and warmth of Spirit that he was feeling. He finished the lesson with a conviction born of a spiritual witness that Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son. Elder Stone's testimony had shifted from one of belief to a knowledge of the First Vision. As Elder Stone finished sharing his experience with me, he said: "President, I know that Joseph saw the Father and the Son. I did not have a problem in the mission field after that experience. I have my own witness."

As I listened to the story's conclusion, I thought how efficient God is: he got 12 birds with one Stone! The parents, the nine children, and a missionary were all touched by the Holy Ghost, and a desire to believe was transformed into knowledge. More than that, God is efficient in another way. If a person has a witness of the Father and Son's visit to young Joseph, he or she has a foundation for believing and accepting other gospel principles. The Word of Wisdom, tithing, the law of chastity, and all other principles revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith are true. Once one feels the good seed growing and swelling inside, one has a small amount of knowledge that forms the basis for further growth. In the words of Alma:

*And now, behold, is your knowledge perfect? Yea, your knowledge is perfect in that thing, and your faith is dormant; and this because you know, for ye know that the word hath swelled your souls, and ye also know that it hath sprouted up, that your understanding doth begin to be enlightened, and your mind doth begin to expand. [Alma 32:34]*

The important aspect of the story for us is the diligence required of Elder Stone. The answer did not come the first time he prayed or the second or the third. Weeks went by as his faith and desires were tested. As Moroni states: “Faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith” (Ether 12:6).

Brothers and sisters, do not get discouraged in your studies or with respect to your faith. Help will come, and you will master both secular and sacred truths if you are diligent and obedient in your efforts.

The principle of obedience is important at BYU. The Honor Code is the standard by which we live. The development of character is more important than the development of the intellect. We hope your commitment to the gospel will lead you naturally to abide by the principles of the Honor Code. Those who are diligent in living the behavior standards will be doubly blessed.

### **A Witness of Christ**

In closing, may I share with you my witness of the divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ. His atonement in the meridian of time is the most important event in human history. I know that in a garden Adam and Eve fell that you and I might experience mortality. I also know that in another garden and on the cross, the Lord and Creator of this earth suffered our sins so that we can return home if we will exercise faith in him and repent. There are many scriptures that have helped me understand the personal

nature of the Atonement. Two are exceptional. The first is from Alma 7:11–12.

*And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and the sicknesses of his people.*

*And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.*

Alma reveals to us the process by which the Master learned perfect empathy in the flesh. He experienced not only our sins but also our pains, sufferings, temptations of every kind, sicknesses, infirmities, and weaknesses. He also experienced death in order to loose the bands of death for his people. Consequently, if one of us has a special problem, it is not possible for him or her to say, “No one knows what I am experiencing. No one understands my pain or suffering.” The Lord knows! He not only knows the depth of your experience, he knows how to succor you because of his suffering.

The second passage comes from Mosiah, where the prophet Abinadi quotes chapter 53 of Isaiah to the wicked priests of King Noah:

*And now I say unto you, who shall declare his generation? Behold, I say unto you, that when his soul has been made an offering for sin he shall see his seed. And now what say ye? And who shall be his seed?*

*Behold I say unto you, that whosoever has heard the words of the prophets [and has] hearkened unto their words, and believed that the Lord would redeem his people . . . are his seed. [Mosiah 15:10–11]*

For many years I envisioned the Garden of Gethsemane and the cross as places where an infinite mass of sin and pain were heaped upon the Savior. Thanks to Alma and Abinadi, it is

no longer an infinite mass but an infinite stream of people with whom the Savior became intimately acquainted as he suffered our sins, pains, and afflictions. I testify that he knows each of us, is concerned about our progress, and has the infinite capacity not only to heal our wounds but also to lift us up to the Father as sanctified sons and daughters.

May this be a wonderful school year for each of you. The BYU faculty and staff are anxious to help and are the best in the world. May our Heavenly Father bless you in your strivings. I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.