

# *Mortality and Our Eternal Journey*

MERRILL J. AND MARILYN S. BATEMAN

Sister Bateman and I are pleased to welcome you to the first devotional of the new year. We are pleased that all of you experienced safe holiday travel but are saddened that three members of our BYU family are not with us today. Two accidents in southern Utah claimed the lives of two students, and a third was seriously injured. With the large number of students traveling during the holidays, the probabilities are high that accidents will occur, but injury and death bring sorrow to their families, dampen our spirits, and remind us of the Apostle James' words: "For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4:14).

James' words remind us that the span between birth and death is short, whether we live to be 20 or 100. On the other hand, in spite of its brevity, life's purposes and consequences are profound in the span of eternity. Today Sister Bateman and I have elected to speak about the mortal journey, its purposes and challenges, and its role in the eternal plan.

We have just concluded the Christmas season wherein we celebrate the birth of our Savior. Sometimes when I ponder and review my life, I wonder what it would have been like to have lived in the time of the Savior and to have been in His presence. Would I have recognized the

special nature of His being (see Matthew 22:42)? Would I have had sufficient faith to be healed by a touch of His garment (see Matthew 14:35–36)? Or if I had been in the synagogue in Capernaum and heard His words, would I like the others have murmured at the strictness of the way "and walked no more with him" (see John 6:51–66)? If the Pharisees and Sadducees had threatened me, would I have denied knowing Him out of fear for my own safety? These questions generally leave me a little unsettled.

Recently I have been thinking about another question and its answer: a question Pilate asked Jesus and the answer given by the Savior. After the chief priests and leaders of Jerusalem had taken counsel to put Jesus to death, they took Him to Pontius Pilate with the hope that the governor would approve and implement the sentence, since the Jews did not have the authority to execute capital punishment (see John 18:28–31). During the interview, Pilate asked Jesus:

*Art thou the King of the Jews? . . .*

*Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then*

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*BYU President Merrill J. Bateman and his wife, Marilyn S. Bateman, gave this devotional address on 14 January 2003.*

*would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: . . .*

[Not fully understanding the response, Pilate restated the question:] *Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.* [John 18:33, 36–37]

As I have pondered Pilate’s question and the Savior’s answer, I have come to realize their importance. They are classic. “Who am I? To what end was I born? For what purpose came I into the world?”

For a few minutes Sister Bateman and I hope to explore these questions with you. Who are we? Why are we here? What are the purposes of this mortal sphere and what are the challenges of the mortal journey? We hope we will add to your knowledge and provide incentive for each to try a little harder and, in President Hinckley’s words, “stand a little taller” (Gordon B. Hinckley, *Stand a Little Taller* [Salt Lake City: Eagle Gate, 2001]).

Excluding the Atonement, our purpose in coming to earth is the same as the Savior’s. He was born to be a king. If faithful, we also are promised thrones, kingdoms, and principalities (see D&C 132:19). Jesus’ kingdom was not of this world; neither is ours. In the Savior’s response to Pilate, He stated that He was born to “bear witness unto the truth.” We, too, were born and are reborn through the baptismal covenant to be a witness for the Truth, the Way, and the Life (see Mosiah 18:8–10).

Sister Bateman will discuss the premortal world, foreordination, and the context it establishes for mortality. I am grateful for the special woman she is. She has helped me understand why I was born and for what cause I came into the world.

### **Premortality and Foreordination**

**Sister Bateman:** Brothers and sisters, I am so grateful to stand by my husband and share

a few moments with you. We love and honor you. I also testify that through marriage and the family one obtains a clearer understanding of life’s purposes.

Also, a knowledge of the premortal life provides a framework for better understanding mortality. Prior to birth we were spirit children of a Heavenly Father. We had intellect, personality, talents, and agency. As personages of spirit it was possible for us to think and act independently. The scriptures indicate that the faithful spirits, those who accepted and lived the Father’s plan, were chosen to be “added upon”; that is, to receive a physical body and to have experiences in a new earthly laboratory. The Lord told Abraham that those “who keep their first estate shall be added upon; . . . and they who keep their second estate [that is, mortality] shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abraham 3:26).

Not only did we exist as spirits before birth on this earth, but our faith and activities in premortality foreshadowed our opportunities and responsibilities here. As Elder Russell M. Nelson noted in the April 2002 general conference, women were promised special gifts “before the foundation of the world” so they could play a critical role in mortality. Quoting from the Doctrine and Covenants, Elder Nelson said:

*Sisters received special gifts [before the foundation of the world]. They, according to the Lord, were empowered “to multiply and replenish the earth, according to my commandment, and to fulfil the promise which was given by my Father before the foundation of the world, . . . for their exaltation in the eternal worlds, that they may bear the souls of men; . . . herein is the work of my Father continued, that he may be glorified” [D&C 132:63]. Think of it: When a mother bears and cares for a child, she not only helps the earth answer the end of its creation [D&C 49:16–17], but she glorifies God! [Russell M. Nelson, “How Firm Our Foundation,” *Ensign*, May 2002, 75–76]*

May I add that she also glorifies herself.

The same pattern of foreordination holds true for men. The prophet Alma taught that men who receive the holy priesthood were “called and prepared” in premortality. In Alma’s words, righteous men were

*called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God, on account of their exceeding faith and good works; in the first place [that is, in premortality] being left to choose good or evil; therefore they having chosen good, and exercising exceedingly great faith, are called with a holy calling.* [Alma 13:3]

I believe that men were not only foreordained to be priesthood holders but also were blessed to be husbands, fathers, and providers for their families.

Brothers and sisters, you were in those councils and were assigned responsibilities commensurate with your faith. President Hinckley has repeatedly stated that this is “the finest [and strongest] generation of young people ever in the history of this Church” (*TGBH*, 714). You were reserved for the last days when the earth would be in turmoil and confusion. I believe the Lord knew He could count on you to be an example, to live a righteous life, to stand as a witness for Him and His work.

It is important to understand that the principle of agency is eternal. It operated in premortality, it was preserved in the Fall of Adam, and it will operate after death. Agency is a key to spiritual development. Righteous choices enhance our potential, whereas unwise choices lower the trajectory of our eternal path. The earth was created to be a learning laboratory for the body and the spirit. A veil drawn over our minds helps create this new laboratory (see 1 Corinthians 13:12). The veil separates us from the Lord, blanks our memory of the spirit world, and causes us to depend more on our own strength in making decisions. Spiritual

development occurs when prayer draws us close to God and we choose to be obedient. Part of the earthly challenge is to pierce the veil, even in part, so that we may receive the Lord’s guidance.

### **The Mortal Journey and Its Challenges**

As noted earlier, knowledge of the premortal world provides a context for mortality. This life is the second act of a three-act play. (It is possible to divide the eternal journey into more than three parts; however, for the purposes of this presentation, three have been chosen.) We lived before birth and we continue to live after death. Although mortality is short, it is a very important portal through which we pass. It sets the compass for the path into the eternities.

There are three major purposes for the earth’s creation and the mortal experience. The first is to obtain a physical body (see Abraham 3:26). The second is to grow spiritually by keeping the Lord’s commandments (see Abraham 3:25). The third is to initiate an eternal family (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:19). Thus the physical body, spiritual growth, and family are the grand prizes of mortality.

### **The Physical Body and Its Challenges**

From birth to adulthood the body grows in strength and capability. For most people physical development peaks between 20 and 30 years of age, and then a long, slow period of deterioration follows. As you know, it matters whether we neglect our physical health or take care of and attend to the needs of the body. Most of you here today are now at the peak of your physical powers. It is difficult to imagine anything other than a strong body. However, at some point, earlier for those who neglect their health and later for those who are attentive, the period of decline will commence. You may not believe it, but wait and see. Within a decade a few gray hairs will appear, there will be a wrinkle or two crease your brow, and extra pounds will begin to change your shape. The

quality and length of your life is in your hands. You stand at a critical juncture. With proper care, a 20-year-old can expect to reach 80 years of age or more. (U.S. statistics indicate that a 20-year-old female's life expectancy is 80 years, whereas a male's is 75. Life expectancy for the LDS population exceeds the nation's because of lifestyle. See "United States Life Tables, 1999," *National Vital Statistics Reports* 50, no. 6 [21 March 2002]: 4; [www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr50/nvsr50\\_06.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr50/nvsr50_06.pdf).)

**President Bateman:** The body is so important in the Lord's plan that He has given commandments and counsel in three areas. The first commandment describes what is appropriate and what is not with respect to substances taken into the body. In every dispensation, from Adam to the present day, the Lord has revealed a health code. In this dispensation we call it the Word of Wisdom. In addition to outlining proper foods for the body, the Lord commands that we abstain from alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful substances. These forbidden elements harm the body, reduce its capacity to perform, and shorten life. For example, research shows that smoking reduces life expectancy by 13 to 14 years (see National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion report in "Annual Smoking—Attributable Mortality, Years of Potential Life Lost, and Economic Costs—United States, 1995–1999," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report [MMWR]* 51, no. 14 [12 April 2002]: 300–303; [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5114a2.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5114a2.htm)). The pattern of physical health associated with the consumption of alcohol, tobacco, and harmful drugs is the path of "neglect."

Another law pertaining to the physical body is the moral code that prohibits sexual relations with anyone other than one's legally and lawfully married spouse. In our day the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have stated:

*Physical intimacy between husband and wife is beautiful and sacred. It is ordained of God for the*

*creation of children and for the expression of love between husband and wife. . . .*

*When you obey God's commandment to be sexually pure, . . . you protect yourself from the emotional damage that always comes from sharing physical intimacies with someone outside of marriage.*

*. . . Satan may tempt you to rationalize that sexual intimacy before marriage is acceptable when two people are in love. That is not true. In God's sight, sexual sins are extremely serious. . . . The prophet Alma taught that sexual sins are more serious than any other sins except murder or denying the Holy Ghost (see Alma 39:5).*

*Before marriage, do not do anything to arouse the powerful emotions that must be expressed only in marriage. . . .*

*. . . Always treat your date with respect, never as an object to be used for your lustful desires. [For the Strength of Youth (Salt Lake City: Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2001), 26–27]*

Satan lost the opportunity to have a body. As a consequence, he lost the opportunity to marry and have children. But he has the spirit power to provide opposition and test our choices in this area. Is it any wonder that the physical body and its sacred powers are his prime targets? In his unhappiness, he will do anything to upset the plan of happiness, which includes marriage and family.

Brothers and sisters, the students on this campus are extraordinary in that the vast majority understand and follow the Lord's command to be morally clean. A key visitor to campus during the past semester was stunned when he interviewed a number of students and learned that you do not drink, smoke, use harmful drugs, or engage in sex outside of marriage. He was a police chief on another campus who had come to review our security operations. He could not believe what he saw here. Two major problems he sees on his campus daily are binge drinking and sexual abuse. He left wondering how he could take you with him.

Another area of counsel in caring for the physical body concerns dress and grooming standards. Again, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve have been very explicit in this area. I quote their words:

*Your body is God's sacred creation. . . . Through your dress and appearance, you can show the Lord that you know how precious your body is. . . .*

*. . . The way you dress is a reflection of what you are on the inside. . . .*

*Never lower your dress standards for any occasion. . . .*

*Immodest clothing includes short shorts and skirts, tight clothing, shirts that do not cover the stomach, and other revealing attire. Young women should wear clothing that covers the shoulder and avoid clothing that is low-cut in the front or the back or revealing in any other manner. Young men should also maintain modesty in their appearance. All should avoid extremes in clothing, appearance, and hairstyle. [For the Strength of Youth, 14–16]*

There is a connection between how one dresses and one's appreciation of the physical body. I will return to this subject shortly.

### **Spiritual Progress and Its Challenges**

Let us next consider the different trajectory that spiritual development may take. Again, the period from birth to adulthood can be a time of rapid growth. This is especially true for children born of goodly parents. Many of you, like Nephi and Enos, were raised in homes where parents set a good example, taught you to pray, and nurtured you in the admonition of the Lord. Some of you, on the other hand, are recent converts. You were contacted by the missionaries or had a friend introduce you to the gospel. Your spiritual understanding and growth may have come a few years later, but still early in life. And then there are many who do not find the gospel until late in life or even in the Millennium.

Spiritual development differs from the growth pattern for the physical body. It is not as time dependent. As long as one is obedient to eternal principles, the path has an upward slope. The height and steepness of the path are determined by the degree to which one adheres to God's laws.

There are many paths of spiritual development. It is possible to move from one path to another. Sin causes a shift to a lower trajectory, whereas an increase in faith and participation in covenants and ordinances allows one to move to a higher path.

All of us desire to be on the road leading to the celestial kingdom and eternal life. All of us experience challenges along the way. I will address three briefly. Meeting these challenges will help us prepare for eternal life.

The first challenge is to be fully committed. It is so easy to drift through life understanding what is important but only having a loose grasp on the iron rod. This is the "eat, drink, and be merry" syndrome. This is a satanic trap. In contrast, consider the commitment of a young marine in Vietnam in 1969 during the war. Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, then a member of the Twelve, visited Southeast Asia, where he met and interviewed a large number of LDS servicemen. He recalled:

*[There I met] a handsome boy, tall, clean-faced, wholesome in his look. I said . . . , "What are you going to do when you go home? Have you ever thought of it?" . . .*

*. . . "Have I ever thought of it? I think of little else, sir. We're moving north again tomorrow, and if I can last another two months I know exactly what I'm going to do when I go home. I'm going to do three things. First, I'm going back to school and finish my education. . . .*

*"I'm also going to work in the Church and try to do some good. I've seen how desperately the world needs what the Church has to offer.*

*"And then I'm going to find me a beautiful girl and marry her forever."*

Elder Hinckley countered with a question:

*“Are you worthy of that kind of a girl?”*

*“I hope so, sir,” he said. “It hasn’t been easy to walk through this filth. It’s been pretty lonely at times. But you know, I couldn’t let my folks down. I know what my mother expects. I know what she’s saying in her prayers. She’d rather have me come home dead than unclean.” . . .*

*I don’t know whether he lived or died. . . . We met and talked with so many and our schedule was so heavy that I do not recall his name or where he was from, but I have not forgotten him. [TGBH, 710]*

Brothers and sisters, the last days are not a time for casual commitments. The Lord needs young people firm in the faith to light the way. There are many in the world who would like what you have if they only knew where to find it. Don’t miss the incredible opportunity to grasp the rod tightly and build a firm foundation that will bring happiness now and forever. The most important time in your life is now. Be fully committed.

The second challenge is to take care of the little things. Before becoming mayor of New York City, Rudolph Giuliani learned that if he paid attention to the little things, the big things often took care of themselves. Early in his administration he determined to eliminate graffiti throughout the city and take care of the squeegee man problem. It was “a way to establish lawful, civil behavior and a feeling of safety” (Rudolph W. Giuliani with Ken Kurson, *Leadership* [New York: Hyperion, 2002], 42). At the time “there were men who would wander up to a car stopped at a red light or in traffic, spray the windshield, and wipe it down with a dirty rag.” They were called squeegee men. If the driver refused to pay them, car doors were kicked in or windows spat upon. Generally they chose to operate near the tunnels. Thus they created the first and last impressions for someone entering or leaving the city. Initially it was thought that there were thousands of

these individuals. However, a careful survey revealed only about 180. Steps were taken, and within a few days they were gone (Giuliani, *Leadership*, 41–43; see also 47–48). With the clampdown on these two minor problems, a remarkable thing happened. The number of murders and robberies in the city also fell.

We have a squeegee-like problem on campus. It concerns dress and grooming. The world’s dress fashions for women are becoming tighter and more revealing. Some fashions for men have gone to the other extreme. A few men are beginning to wear longer hair. Again, the “body is God’s sacred creation. . . . Through your dress and appearance, you can show the Lord that you know how precious your body is.” My plea is for the entire community—faculty, staff, administration, and students—to help with this matter. The problem is small because the numbers are few, but it is important that improvement occur. Often a kind word in private is all that is needed.

### **The Family—A Prize Possession**

The third purpose of mortality is to initiate an eternal family. Salvation is a one-by-one process, whereas exaltation is accomplished two-by-two and in family groupings. I am aware that not everyone has the opportunity to marry in this life. Fortunately, adjustments will be made in the Millennium for those who do not have the opportunity here. The most important relationships in mortality—those of the family—are meant for eternity. A key witness of our belief in the eternal family is the construction of temples across the earth. A good part of temple work is associated with the family.

The creation of an eternal family requires the husband and wife to take the long view. Perfection does not come before the trial of faith. And marriage can be a trial of faith. It is important for a young man and a young woman to understand that love will deepen over time as both live the principles of the

gospel. The relationship between a man and a woman is designed to be eternal. Because the man and the woman are incomplete without each other, it is a complementary relationship. This is what Paul meant when he said, "Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11). The relationship has the potential to refine the spiritual gifts within each person. In taking the long view, family relationships through the power of the Holy Ghost can help family members put off the natural veneer and acquire the divine attributes. They become "submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love" (Mosiah 3:19).

The world, however, is moving in the opposite direction. There are two tendencies. The first is to delay marriage. The second is to not take marriage seriously. In the first case, more and more young people are waiting until their late twenties. They want to complete their education and have a good job and a home and a car. Unfortunately, they will waste a significant portion of their productive lives.

The second tendency of not taking marriage seriously is reflected in the latest fad. Have you heard of the "starter marriage"? I guess it is like a starter home. It is a marriage that lasts no more than five years and has no children. It is the antithesis of the marriage called for in the eternal

plan. It is a marriage with no faith, no hope, little meekness, and not much love. Can you imagine people finding happiness in such a circumstance? A challenge faced by society today is that people are looking for convenience and are unwilling to sacrifice. People have learned to discard everything from paper plates to spouses.

In closing, let us return to the three questions with which we began. Who are we? We are the spirit offspring of an Eternal Being who has given us the opportunity to experience mortality—a brief but critical time in an eternal journey. To what end were we born? We were born to become kings and queens with the power of life—with the power to initiate an eternal posterity. For this purpose we became stewards over a physical body and are given mortal challenges that allow us to grow. For what cause did we come? We came to be witnesses of the Truth, to be good stewards, and to serve others and help them find the Way.

I am grateful that you understand the answers to these questions. Know that you were called and foreordained to lead God's work in these last days. Appreciate the grand prizes of mortality, be fully committed, take care of the little things, and have a view into the eternities. May the Lord bless you to these ends in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.