

The Seasons of His Mercy

SCOTT W. CAMERON

I would like to congratulate you on attending spring term. May is one of the best months at Brigham Young University, and I do not think any of us should feel guilty that we are sharing it with only one-third of the entire student body. Have you noticed how much easier it is to get around? The seasons are important because we can be taught by them and because our own lives parallel the seasons of the year. Recently I read section 46 of the Doctrine and Covenants, and my heart and mind were struck by a phrase from verse 15, which states that Heavenly Father suits “his mercies according to the conditions of the children of men.” After some pondering on this verse, I wrote a poem:

The Seasons of His Mercy
D&C 46:15

*How many times in eighty years
Will He suit his mercies to my condition?
And are they mine to save or spend
To prevent separation?*

*For I sought Him in spring
When the sap was rising
In fits and starts
All uncontrollable.*

*And I knew Him in summer
When all was right
Except the thunderstorms
Which shook with temporary violence.*

*And I await Him in autumn
With its first chill
Begging reassurance that
The end is not the end.*

*But in winter,
Presage of death,
Will I find myself spendthrift,
A squanderer of mercies needed most?*

*Shortsighted,
I will but bond my heart to His,
Not saving or spending—just accepting
The seasons of His mercy.*

*Knowing His love is constant, kind,
Well-suited to my need;
In patience I await the day
When vision is restored*

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*And those mercies which seemed five or ten
Are seen in their infinitude
Each day, each hour, each breath
A whole life long.*

I believe that it is important to see God’s mercies each day, each hour, each breath, a whole life long. If we can learn to see them more clearly, it will surely make spring term better, and—we hope—it will affect eternity.

In the final chapter of the Book of Mormon, Moroni instructed us on how to discover truth through the guidance of the Holy Ghost. In verse 3 he stated:

Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall read these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall receive these things, and ponder it in your hearts. [Moroni 10:3; emphasis added]

Moroni suggested that a knowledge of God’s merciful dealings with all of his children is prerequisite to asking for assistance:

First, we are instructed to ponder his mercy.

Second, we are encouraged to

ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things [in the Book of Mormon] are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost. [Moroni 10:4]

Third, we are told that it is “by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5).

I believe that Moroni gave us a key to discovering truth. Prior to asking, we must first recognize God’s tender mercies to his children and ponder them in our hearts and minds. Then we will be ready to correctly frame the questions we are to ask, and our hearts will be

ready to receive the answers. Once we do this, the truth will be revealed to us through the power of the Holy Ghost.

An example of his children not remembering and the consequences of their not remembering is recorded in the Joseph Smith Translation of Psalm 106:7. David said the children of Israel “understood not [God’s] wonders in Egypt; they remembered not the multitude of [his] mercies; but provoked him at the sea, at the Red sea.” His children’s inability to remember the multitude of his mercies saddened the One whom we as children most want to please.

In retrospect, it seems almost inconceivable that the children of Israel could forget what God had done for them after he had protected them from the plagues that had devastated Egypt. But I believe that you and I are more like the children of Israel than we would care to admit. When we get into a trying situation, we have trouble remembering our prior blessings because we are so focused on our present need. In our anxiety, don’t we say something like, “Well, what are you going to do for me now?”

Jehovah instituted the celebration of the Passover among the children of Israel lest they forget what he had done for their fathers. The incidents surrounding the Exodus are part of the collective history of people of faith, and we must not forget them. We also need to remember what God has done in our individual lives.

The Jaredites provide a good example. After 344 days upon the water, they reached the promised land:

And when they had set their feet upon the shores of the promised land they bowed themselves down upon the face of the land, and did humble themselves before the Lord, and did shed tears of joy before the Lord, because of the multitude of his tender mercies over them. [Ether 6:12]

Recently you may have driven from your family home to Provo for spring term. Prior to your departure, did you petition the Lord for

safety while driving on the highway? I am quite certain that you did. When you arrived safely, did you immediately thank the Lord for protecting you? If you are like me, you probably remembered that night when you knelt down for prayer, if at all. Our prayers for safety need to be more fervent before we leave and our prayers of thanksgiving more sincere upon arrival. In light of recent happenings in this country, a prayer for safety before school in the morning and a prayer of thanksgiving after returning home safely seem particularly appropriate.

If we know that as mortals our feelings of gratitude have a short “half-life,” and if we understand that recognizing and remembering God’s mercy is an appropriate prerequisite to gaining truth through the power of the Holy Ghost, how do we deepen our feelings of gratitude daily? How do we remember the Lord, not only in times of great trial and times of great rejoicing but also on ordinary days like today?

These ordinary days are aptly described as “the most trying time of all” in W. H. Auden’s poem *For the Time Being, a Christmas Oratorio*:

In the meantime

*There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:
When the Spirit must practise his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience. [For the Time
Being, a Christmas Oratorio, “The Flight into
Egypt” (1945)]*

So how do we practice our “scales of rejoicing” during spring term? I offer nine ways to assist us. Why nine? Well, the number seven has already been preempted, and top-ten lists have been given a bad name. Nine may seem like a shotgun approach. It is. However, if I use enough examples, perhaps each of you will find at least one suggestion that fits.

1. Discover the Early Morning

Now, I know that many of you wish that verse 124 of section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants did not say this, but it does: “Cease to sleep longer than is needful; retire to thy bed early, that ye may not be weary; arise early, that your bodies and your minds may be invigorated.”

This is probably not the norm in the dorm, but it is a gracious suggestion, perhaps even a commandment. When I quote this to my children, they claim that section 88 was written before electricity was invented. They are convinced that it had something to do with candlelight straining 19th-century eyes. I hope to convince them and I hope to convince you that morning is a sacred time of day.

We need to get up and get moving. Physical exercise can be one of the best things to help us feel alive, and early in the morning, when the campus is virtually deserted, we will see beautiful sights that will gladden our hearts. You may also decide to walk around the Provo Temple, where you may be greeted by Professor Reed Benson, who walks there most mornings. Best of all, while you are walking, you can remember the blessings you have received from a loving Heavenly Father and count them.

Morning is also the time for sacred conversations. Although thanksgiving may play a larger role in evening prayers, planning may play a larger role in morning prayers. In your prayers, in addition to remembering your loved ones, you may wish to pray about your schoolwork. For a student, his or her studies are equivalent to the “crops” and “flocks” over which Amulek advised the Zoramites to pray in Alma 34:24–25. As you pray about your studies, you may wish to pray for your professors individually and by name, asking that they will be blessed to present ideas and concepts clearly and that you and their other students will be given the gift of understanding.

2. Review the Promises That Have Been Made to You

In his autobiography, Parley P. Pratt related the following conversation with his brother William. In 1830 Parley decided to leave his prosperous farm in Ohio in search of the true gospel. William thought this unwise and questioned Parley about his decision. He specifically wanted to know how Parley intended to support himself and his family. To William's inquiry, Parley replied:

"Why, sir, I have bank bills enough, on the very best institutions in the world, to sustain myself and family while we live."

"Indeed," said he, "well, I should like to see some of them; I hope they are genuine." "Certainly," I replied, "there is no doubt of that. They are true bills and founded on capital that will never fail, though heaven and earth should pass away. . . ."

[Parley then explained:] *I then unlocked my treasury and drew from thence a large pocket book, full of promissory notes like the following: . . . "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will in my name and I will give it you." "All things are possible to him that believeth."*

"Now, William," said I, "are these the words of Jesus Christ, or are they not?" "They certainly are," said he. . . .

"Then you admit they are genuine bills?"

"I do."

"Is the signer able to meet his engagements?"

"He certainly is."

"Is he willing?"

"He is."

"Well, then, I am going to fulfil the conditions to the letter on my part. . . . And I will do it, placing both feet firm on these promises with nothing else to rely upon." [PPP, 1985, p. 17; emphasis in original]

That very year Parley P. Pratt found the Book of Mormon and was baptized.

I like Elder Pratt's image of unlocking his treasury and drawing from it a large pocket-book full of promissory notes. I like the thought that scriptural promises are made by the most reliable source in the universe. It makes those promises not just words on a page but something tangible to be trusted and relied upon. "All things are possible to him that believeth"; "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will in my name and I will give it you." These are powerful promissory notes for which we should be most grateful.

Our patriarchal blessings are also promissory notes to be relied upon. A patriarch whom I admire called them "iffy" blessings. They *will* be granted *if* we are faithful and obedient. What a great thing to be able to join with Elder Pratt in saying: "I am going to fulfil the conditions to the letter on my part."

3. Look at Your Surroundings

Allow your senses to be alive to the beauties Heavenly Father has showered upon all of his children—"on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). The rhythms of nature and its attractions can be sources of peace and hope. In a 1991 BYU Women's Conference address, Sister Elaine Jack, former general president of the Relief Society, recounted a story about a friend who had gone through a difficult divorce. Sister Jack related that the friend told her that

it was the smallest things that kept her going during those first weeks when all her world looked black. A bunch of crocuses burst through the snow, then announced their victory with purple blooms. The robins whistled from their nest in her front yard tree. The sun broke over the horizon every morning. People in her office lived their quiet routines. A person spoke kindly to her at the grocery store. . . . Each small, loving, daily detail confirmed her hope. Little details and small events showed that life still

was good. [Elaine L. Jack, “A Perfect Brightness of Hope,” *Ensign*, March 1992, p. 15]

If you are in need of a boost spiritually, look around. You may be inspired by the amazing trees on the BYU campus. Look up at Y Mountain and watch the interplay of light and shadow on its face as the day progresses. Walk in the gentle spring rain without an umbrella. As an expression of God’s love, nature can be a significant source of strength.

4. Search for the Sacred in the Mundane

Each of us can hope for flashes of inspiration—those experiences when pure knowledge is communicated. I call them “aha” experiences, others call them epiphanies. Sometimes they come when you do not expect them. For nine months I commuted each day between Provo and Salt Lake City. Some days I would arrive home after more than an hour’s drive with no independent memory of the journey—just an unsettled, worried feeling. On other occasions I used the time to meditate and to pray and to even sing hymns that I would make up spontaneously. From my journal I share the following:

Yesterday morning I had a profound experience. Driving to Provo, I thought about Adam-ondi-Ahman and the Savior’s return. I spontaneously sang a hymn of praise looking forward to that day. It was as if I could see that sacred place and feel the Spirit. I pictured a spring morning, mature trees in the valley, dew on the grass, all nature shouting praise at the triumphal return of the King. I imagined all of the dispensational prophets from Adam down to Joseph. The words of my hymn flowed, and the Spirit bore witness to my spirit that His appearance at Adam-ondi-Ahman would occur. . . . What a cherished hope—when the earth, which I love, is renewed and receives its paradisiacal glory—when war and death and hunger and hatred are no more.

5. Expect Profound Insights in the Classroom

I believe that the classroom can be a place for “aha” experiences as well. I further believe that we should expect them. When they occur, I believe they should be remembered with reverence. One such experience for me was a Renaissance literature class at Stanford during autumn quarter in 1969. Three days a week I would wake up with a smile, knowing I would have Professor Ron Rebholz’s class. I remember walking across the quad and looking at the Romanesque architecture, entering the old amphitheater with the uncomfortable chairs, lifting up the desk attached to the side of the chair, and waiting. Professor Rebholz read with power. He talked about the 16th-century English poets as if they were trusted friends. If I concentrate, stretching the bonds of memory, I can almost hear the cadence of his voice, its rise and fall as he read Ben Jonson’s poem “On My First Son.” A contemporary of Shakespeare’s, Jonson was one of my favorites. I sensed I knew this man who wrote honestly about his grief at his son’s passing. As Professor Rebholz read, I was struck by the truth that being a father would be one of the most important things in mortality. Although I do not presume for a moment that this was the response Professor Rebholz expected, it may have been the one Ben Jonson expected:

*Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy:
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O could I lose all father now! for why
Will man lament the state he should envy,
To have so soon ‘scaped world’s and flesh’s rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and asked, say, “Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.”
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such
As what he loves may never like too much.*
[Ben Jonson, “On My First Son” (1616)]

Being granted the privilege to be a husband and a father has indeed been perhaps the most important blessing in my life.

6. Trust That Professors Who Have Chosen to Teach at BYU See the Sacred in You

During my son's freshman year in a humanities class taught by Eloise Bell, he discovered he loved to write. Although Scott had always been a dedicated student, Professor Bell, a master teacher, called forth more than dedication. She assigned an open essay on Romanticism. As he wrote his paper, Scott became involved in the subject. I will read a section because it is superior to my own work and because it reveals something about true teaching. It is entitled "Dreams of Sled Dogs, Poets, Mountain Men, and Heading North":

I run behind the sled in a translucent state hovering between warmth and cold. . . . It is the fourth night of the Iditarod, and the dogs are finally moving. They have run nearly this whole race, but they have finally found their rhythm; they are unafraid to run. Surging forward in unison, every paw lifts and falls, every sinuous muscle contracts and ripples, and we are one. The dogs, the sled, the snow, the wind, and I are all one—all part of the primordial dream. . . . A frigid wind blows in from the Bering Sea and jumps over snow-corniced hills, showering us with a thousand particles of stinging, burning hail. The dogs recognize the wind, and they are glad. They echo its haunting refrain, and the running song has begun.

Something about the snow and ice has crept into my soul and grabbed my heart. I am sitting in my grandma's synthetic leather recliner reading National Geographic, but the truth is, I could have sworn I felt an arctic wind chill the marrow of my bones. I have never raced sled dogs; in fact, I have never even seen a sled. But whether an Eskimo shaman has enchanted me or [not], part of me yearns to run with dogs until my lungs burn. . . . I listen to the clarion tune that is carried on the wind, and I am kin to the mountain peaks. I have clung to the few

people who share my dreams, but only recently did I learn that we were not a small band . . . but a strange breed called romantics. You see, I am a hopeless romantic, but I have not only read Rousseau—I am Rousseau; I am Whitman and Wordsworth and Tennyson. I am not suggesting that to dream is better than to experience, but to live through dreams is better than to never experience at all.

Thirty-five years ago, in my freshman classes, if I had written such an essay, my PhD writing fellow may have written in the margin: "So what." Consequently, even if I had had the talent, I would not have taken the risk. At BYU, my son *could* and *did* risk. Professor Bell encouraged Scott by asking him to read his essay to the class. To a rather shy freshman in a class of upperclassmen, she extended the hand of friendship. It is in this type of personal, caring environment that true learning becomes possible.

7. Cherish Your Religion Classes and the Scriptures You Study in Them

Last month I attended a fast and testimony meeting in a freshman ward at BYU. In bearing her testimony, a young woman said that she had come to BYU because her parents had forced her. She said that she was angry that her brother had gone on a mission because she knew she needed him far more than did the people in Thailand. She had listened to the testimonies of others in her ward at the beginning of the year with a degree of disdain. She had asked herself, "How do they know what they say they do? Why are they always so cheerful?" She, by contrast, did not know. She said she had slept through early morning seminary, and she didn't even want to know. Then, because of her BYU religion class, she started to read the Book of Mormon. She concluded her testimony by indicating that her feelings had changed. She said that she knew it was possible to have faith and hope because she now had it.

I smiled as I listened to this young woman bear her testimony. It reminded me of the

Palo Alto Institute of Religion and George Pace and Eugene England. Both Brother Pace and Brother England have taught at BYU for years. I would like to pay tribute to them for helping me. As a freshman I thought institute would be like my seminary class. I started attending it with the same chip on my shoulder—trying to think of challenging questions. Brother Pace and Brother England were always upbeat. They never lost their patience. I started listening to their stories and thinking about the gospel and, for the first time, reading the Book of Mormon. Did it help that I was intensely homesick and worried that I would fail? Yes, it did. Homesickness is often fertile soil in which the seeds of testimony may grow. Nonetheless, I am grateful for their steadiness, their knowledge, and their friendship while I progressed from unpleasant disregard to pleasant regard to complete attention. Were it not for them, I might not have chosen to go on a mission, which turned out to be the most important experience of my young life.

Sometimes we are unaware that the Spirit is creeping into the tiniest crevices in our stone-like hearts—crevices lovingly created by our Father—and slowly we are given a new heart. As Ezekiel stated so beautifully: “I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 11:19).

May I say that the study of sacred texts is effective in making crevices for the Spirit to enter—not only on first reading, but even on the tenth reading. During a previous spring term at BYU, I attended a training class for would-be Book of Mormon teachers. It was a spring as beautiful as this one, and we were expected to reread the entire Book of Mormon. During the middle of the term I had to leave for several days to attend a law school conference in Florida. I thought I would see a beautiful new place, but monsoon-like rain kept me in for three days. After my meetings adjourned each day, I spent my time alone in the hotel room reading Ether, Mormon, and Moroni. I

walked the floor reading to stay awake, as beds mean sleep to me. After completing the Book of Mormon this time, I wrote the following in my journal:

I feel to sing a song of thanksgiving for the Book of Mormon. I have spent hours reading and thrilled at the message of the brother of Jared, the prophet Ether, and the prophets Mormon and Moroni. I have thought deeply about faith, hope, and charity and how they interrelate. I have hope in Christ's appearing and in my resurrection. That hope gives birth to faith and is likewise fed by the same—that he is my Redeemer and the Redeemer of all mankind. And through that faith and hope, I will continue to pray to be filled with His pure love—even charity. I want to be a participant in the covenant of God with his children that a Savior would be provided to redeem them from their sins. I want to be a part of the proclamation of that message.

8. Find Sacred Places

In addition to sacred texts being a way to remember the mercy of the Father and the Son, it may be wise to find your own sacred places, where you can meditate and commune with God. In an article entitled “A Promised Land,” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, then chair of the Religion Department at BYU, spoke about sacred places and the need to remember what occurs there:

Some otherwise plain and rather ordinary places can become very special to us. Our homes, a hillside, the hospitals where our children were born, . . . these and many more have special meaning not so much for the soil or brick itself but because of what has happened . . . there. . . .

“The place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer.” (Mosiah 18:30.)

So sang the prophet who knew that a pool of water is no longer merely a pool of water once you

have been baptized there. [Jeffrey R. Holland, “A Promised Land,” *Ensign*, June 1976, p. 23]

Each of us needs to find a sacred place, as did Enos, where we can contemplate the words of “eternal life, and the joy of the saints, [that they may sink] deep into [our] heart[s]” (Enos 1:3). We each need to find a place that we will associate with God’s tender mercies.

Your sacred place may be located on the BYU campus, perhaps at the base of the Carillon Tower. It may be up Rock Canyon or near Aspen Grove. As stated by John Muir: “In our best times everything turns into religion, all the world seems a church and the mountains altars” (*Mountaineering Essays* [Salt Lake City: Peregrine Books, 1984], p. 19).

Or your sacred place may be the house of the Lord, where you can perform ordinances vicariously for others. Perhaps you will retreat to your bedroom in your apartment or at home in order to be alone. As Elder Holland says, it is what occurs in the ordinary, sacred place that makes the difference.

9. Find and Hold to Beloved Relationships

Another help in remembering God’s tender mercies is a friend, a brother, or a sister upon whom you can rely. One of the great examples of friendship in this dispensation is the relationship between the Prophet Joseph and his brother Hyrum. They supported one another and counseled with one another. Joseph attempted to protect Hyrum from harm, and Hyrum refused to leave Joseph in times of danger. Listen to this beautiful blessing the Prophet Joseph Smith gave to his brother Hyrum in 1833:

He shall be as a cooling spring that breaketh forth at the foot of the mountain, overshadowed with choice trees bowed down with ripe fruit, that yieldeth both nourishment to the appetite and quenqueth the thirst, thereby yielding refreshment to the weary traveller: and the goings of his feet shall ever be by streams of living water. [Teachings, p. 40]

Think of having a brother, a sister, or a friend who would be in your life “as a cooling spring that breaketh forth at the foot of the mountain, overshadowed with choice trees bowed down with ripe fruit.” A brother, a sister, or a friend can literally be an oasis in the desert of mortality—the mere sight of them can refresh and renew. This type of friendship is an example of God’s tender mercy. If you have such a person in your life, thank them. If you do not, pray that you will make one. Friendships need to be nurtured, and they will grow up to shade you when you most need it.

Perhaps even better than finding such a friend would be to become such a friend. We know from the book of Alma that the willingness “to bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light” is associated with the covenant of baptism (Mosiah 18:8). It is within sacred friendships that we begin to learn how to live this covenant.

I hope that these nine suggestions for remembering God’s tender mercies will be helpful during spring term. I also hope, after having fulfilled the prerequisite of remembering God’s mercies suggested by the prophet Moroni, that each of us will present ourselves before God with a pure heart and knowing the right questions to ask. Then we will have the courage to ask for the truths that we need, and we will have confidence that he will reveal them to us through the power of the Holy Ghost.

It is my prayer that we will discern the seasons of his mercy in our lives and bond our hearts to his, “knowing his love is constant, kind, well-suited” to our need; and that in patience we will “await the day when vision is restored and those mercies which seemed five or ten are seen in their infinitude each day, each hour, each breath” our whole life long. I offer this hope for you and for myself in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the most tangible expression of his Father’s tender mercy. Amen.