

A Message at Christmas

D. TODD CHRISTOFFERSON

Christmas is coming. But so are final exams. So, while Christmas is coming, stress is already here. Years ago, when my wife, Kathy, and I were in your place, the schedule was a bit different. The fall semester ended in January, and finals came after the Christmas holiday. We would all dutifully take a suitcase or box of books home with us or wherever we were going for the Christmas break. We had every intention of devoting hours to studying for finals in addition to celebrating Christmas. Of course we never cracked a book. Rather, we just felt guilty the whole time, and it ruined the holiday. So if you are looking for sympathy from me because you have final exams right before Christmas, forget it.

In all seriousness, I do wish you the best on your finals. May your preparations be fully rewarded, with perhaps a little divine aid added in for good measure. And may this particular Christmas season be for you a season of renewal. May you be blessed with a deep sense of gratitude.

It is interesting to read some of the accounts of Christmas from our pioneer forebears. Elizabeth Huffaker wrote of the very first Christmas in the Salt Lake Valley in December 1847:

I remember our first Christmas in the valley. We all worked as usual. The men gathered sage-brush, and

some even ploughed, for, though it had snowed, the ground was still soft, and the ploughs were used nearly the entire day. Christmas came on Saturday.

We celebrated the day on the Sabbath, when all gathered around the flagpole in the centre of the fort, and there we held meeting. And what a meeting it was. We sang praise to God; we all joined in the opening prayer, and the speaking that day has always been remembered. There were words of thanksgiving and cheer. The people were hopeful and buoyant, because of their faith in the great work they were undertaking. After the meeting, there was handshaking all around. Some wept for joy, the children played in the enclosure, and around a sage-brush fire that night we gathered and sang:

*“Come, come, ye Saints,
No toil nor labor fear,
But with joy wend your way!”*

That day we had boiled rabbit and a little bread for our dinner. Father had shot some rabbits, and it was a feast we had. All had enough to eat. In the sense of perfect peace and good-will, I never had a happier Christmas in all my life.¹

D. Todd Christofferson, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, delivered this devotional address on December 12, 2017.

It is difficult for most of us to appreciate what a blessing it was for them simply to have peace—to have very little of the necessities of life but, at last, to have peace.

Susan Wells remembered Christmas two years later in Salt Lake in December 1849, when there was a more formal party:

I well remember Brother Brigham's [Christmas] party [of 1849]. Like the girls of today, on receiving my invitation the first thought was "nothing to wear." This was literally true, as all our clothing was shabby and patched. Necessity is the mother of invention, so, after careful consideration, the wagon cover, that had done such faithful service in our journey across the plains, was brought out. We couldn't afford canvas [for our wagon cover, so] our cover consisted of several thicknesses of unbleached factory [cloth]. This was carefully dyed and as good luck would have it, it turned out a very pretty brown. We made this into dresses for myself and sister, trimmed with silk from an old cape of mother's. This cape, black, lined with light brown, not only furnished trimming for our dresses, but I made poke bonnets from the black with quilled lining of the light brown. I had embroidered buckskin moccasins . . . , but I believe for this occasion father, who was a shoe-maker, made me a pair of slippers from his old boot legs. I tell you my first ball dress was stunning.²

On a light note, we have this undated remembrance from James William Nielsen in Sanpete, Utah:

There were three big boys on the farm: Jim, Tom and Wayne. I used to sleep with them in the loft over the house. We spent one Christmas Eve at their house and we all hung up our stockings. The stockings were all full the next morning. The boys gave me some of their candy and it tasted like their feet smelled, but I ate it anyway.³

Hannah Dalton had this tender memory of her 1862 Christmas in Parowan, Utah:

All of us children hung up our stockings [on Christmas Eve]. We jumped up early in the morning to see what

Santa had brought but there was not a thing in them. Mother wept bitterly. She went to her box and got a little apple and cut it in little tiny pieces and that was our Christmas, but I have never forgotten . . . how I loved her dear little hands as she was cutting that apple.⁴

Let us be especially thankful for family and friends and for the necessities and comforts of life.

I am grateful that December also brings an occasion to contemplate again the life and contributions of the Prophet Joseph Smith, his birthday being on December 23. It is hard fully to appreciate what he achieved as an instrument in the Lord's hands in an environment of constant opposition, persecution, and challenge. "Yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered."⁵ I don't suppose that in this dispensation anyone has learned to fear God and not man better than the Prophet.⁶ The Lord required some very hard things of Joseph. He did them, and we are all beneficiaries.

The translation and publication of the Book of Mormon was a signal achievement—one that is foundational to the success of the Lord's cause in this last dispensation. Through the Book of Mormon and by his visions and revelations, Joseph has revealed Jesus Christ in His true character as the Only Begotten Son of God and Redeemer of mankind. In a time to come, we will see the Prophet Joseph honored as the worthy head of this great and last dispensation—the one dispensation destined to succeed even though all previous dispensations have ended in apostasy.

Especially at this season we remember the Prophet's personal relationship with the Savior and "the testimony, last of all, which [he gave] of [Christ]: That he lives!"⁷ Joseph's witness of the living Christ brings to my mind this statement by President Gordon B. Hinckley:

There would be no Christmas if there had not been Easter. The babe Jesus of Bethlehem would be but another baby without the redeeming Christ of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the triumphant fact of the Resurrection.⁸

A while ago a person who has been a member of the Church for many years asked me, “Why do I need Jesus Christ? I keep the commandments. I’m a good person. Why do I need a Savior?”

I must say that this member’s failure to understand this most fundamental part of our doctrine, this foundational element of the plan of salvation, took my breath away.

“Well, to start with,” I replied, “there is this small matter of death. I assume you don’t want your death to be your final status, and without Christ there would be no resurrection.”

I talked about other things, such as the need that even the best people have for the forgiveness and cleansing that is possible only through the Savior’s atoning grace. I am confident you could have given a thoughtful answer, perhaps better than mine.

At another level, however, the question might be, “Can’t God do whatever He wants and save us just because He loves us, without the need for a Savior?” Phrased this way, there are quite a few people in today’s world who would share that question. They believe in God and a postmortal existence but assume that because God loves us, it doesn’t matter so much what we do or don’t do; He just takes care of things. This philosophy has ancient roots. Nehor, for example,

*testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life.*⁹

You recognize in Nehor’s doctrine echoes of an approach to salvation put forth by Lucifer, a “son of the morning”¹⁰—surely the most tragic of tragic figures ever.¹¹ As God once explained:

[Lucifer] is the same which was from the beginning, and he came before me, saying—Behold, here am I, send me, I will be thy son, and I will redeem all mankind, that [not] one soul shall . . . be lost, and surely I will do it; wherefore give me thine honor.

*But, behold, my Beloved Son, which was my Beloved and Chosen from the beginning, said unto me—Father, thy will be done, and the glory be thine forever.*¹²

This was not simply a case of Jesus supporting the Father’s plan and Lucifer proposing a slight modification. Lucifer’s proposal would have destroyed the plan by eliminating our opportunity to act independently. Lucifer’s plan was founded on coercion, making all the other sons and daughters of God—all of us—essentially his puppets. As the Father summed it up:

Wherefore, because that Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man, which I, the Lord God, had given him, and also, that I should give unto him mine own power; by the power of mine Only Begotten, I caused that he should be cast down;

*And he became Satan, yea, even the devil, the father of all lies, to deceive and to blind men, and to lead them captive at his will, even as many as would not hearken unto **my** voice.*¹³

By contrast, doing things the Father’s way offers us an essential mortal experience. By “mortal experience” I mean choosing our course, “[tasting] the bitter, that [we might] know to prize the good”;¹⁴ learning, repenting, and growing; becoming beings capable of acting for ourselves rather than simply being “acted upon”;¹⁵ and ultimately overcoming evil and demonstrating our desire and ability to live a celestial law. This requires a knowledge of good and evil on our part, with the capacity and opportunity to choose between the two. And it requires accountability for choices made—otherwise they are not really choices. Choice, in turn, requires law, or predictable outcomes. We must be able by a particular action or choice to cause a particular outcome or result—and by the opposite choice create the opposite outcome. If actions don’t have fixed consequences, then one has no control over outcomes and choice is meaningless.

Using *justice* as a synonym for *law*, Alma stated, “Now the work of justice [that is, the operation of law] [cannot] be destroyed; if so, God would cease

to be God.”¹⁶ It is His perfect understanding and use of law—or, in other words, His justice—that gives God His power.¹⁷ We need the justice of God—a system of fixed and immutable laws that He Himself abides by and employs—so that we can have and exercise agency.¹⁸ This justice is the foundation of our freedom to act and is our only path to ultimate happiness.

The Lord told us, “That which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.”¹⁹ But we have to admit that none of us has always and unfailingly been “governed by law.” And we really cannot look to the law or to justice to preserve and perfect us when we have broken the law.²⁰ So being just, but also being motivated by love, our Heavenly Father created mercy. He did this by offering as propitiation for our sin His Only Begotten Son, a Being who could, with His Atonement, satisfy justice, putting us right with the law so that it is once again supporting and preserving us, not condemning us.

Alma explained:

And now, the plan of mercy could not be brought about except an atonement should be made; therefore God himself atoneth for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also. . . .

. . . There is a law given, and a punishment [or consequence] affixed, and a repentance granted; which repentance, mercy claimeth; otherwise, justice claimeth the creature and executeth the law, and the law inflicteth the punishment; if not so, the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God.

But God ceaseth not to be God, and mercy claimeth the penitent, and mercy cometh because of the atonement.²¹

The penitent, of course, are those who take responsibility and accept God’s mercy by repenting.

It is because of the Atonement of Christ that we can recover from bad choices, and it is because of the Atonement of Christ that the impact on us

of others’ sins and mistakes—and every other injustice—is redressed. To be made holy, to be made whole, we need a Savior. And God needed to include a Savior in His plan if He was to have a chance of saving and exalting any of His children. So the answer to our question is no, God cannot act any way He pleases to save a person. He must do it in a way that upholds and conforms to immutable law, and thanks be to God that He has done so by providing a Savior.

And let us remember, Satan was not volunteering to be our savior. He was not interested in suffering or dying for anyone. He wasn’t going to shed any of his blood. He wanted the glory, honor, and power of God without paying any price. What he failed to understand or to believe is that one cannot possess the power of God without being the embodiment of justice. Lucifer was seeking for power without goodness. He supposed that he could be a law unto himself,²² meaning that the law would be whatever he said it was at any given moment and that he could change his mind at any time. In that way, no one could count on anything, and no one would have the ability to be an independent actor. He would be supreme, and no one else could advance.

Jesus, on the other hand, understood that both justice and mercy would be required for His brothers and sisters to advance. With the Father, He was seeking not to coerce and dominate us but to free and lift us so that we might “be above all” and, with the Father, “have all power.”²³

How we ought to rejoice that this Firstborn Son in the spirit was willing to become the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, to suffer incomprehensibly and die ignominiously to redeem us. He perfectly unites justice and mercy. He saves us from—not *in*, but *from*—our sins.²⁴ And He also redeems us from the Fall, from spiritual and physical death. He opens the door to immortality and eternal life. It would be impossible to plumb the depths of His love.

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows. . . .

. . . He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.²⁵

As Christmas approaches, I realize that some may have concerns and perhaps some anxiety about the future. There may be a lot of “noise” in your life: more or less constant engagement online without downtime, without time to be quiet and reflect and think, without time to look inside and discern where you are and where you should be going. You may be influenced by unrealistic expectations such as “perfection should be immediate” or “uninterrupted happiness and success should be the norm in life.” I hope you will lay aside these misconceptions, dial down the “noise,” and take some time this Christmas season—at least an hour, if not more—to reflect “on the wonder and the majesty of . . . the Son of God.”²⁶ Let it be an hour of reassurance and renewal for you.

On a prior Christmastime I wrote this message:

When we talk about the birth of Jesus Christ, we appropriately reflect on what was to follow. His birth was infinitely significant because of the things He would experience and suffer so that He might better succor us—all culminating in His Crucifixion and Resurrection (see Alma 7:11–12). . . .

[But I also] think it’s appropriate this time of year to just think about that baby in the manger. Don’t be too overwhelmed or occupied with what is to come. . . . Take a quiet, peaceful moment to ponder the beginning of His life—the culmination of heavenly prophecy but the earthly beginning for Him.

Take time to relax, be at peace, and see this little child in your mind. Do not be too concerned or overwhelmed with what is coming in His life or in yours. Instead, take a peaceful moment to contemplate perhaps the most serene moment in the history of the world—when all of heaven rejoiced with the message “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).²⁷

With Moroni, “I would commend you to seek this Jesus of whom the prophets and apostles have written, that the grace of God the Father, and also

the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, which beareth record of them, may be and abide in you forever.”²⁸ I invoke our Heavenly Father’s peace and blessings upon you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Huffaker, quoted in Levi Edgar Young, *The Founding of Utah* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1924), 331. See also Bryant S. Hinckley, “Christmas with the Pioneers,” in Kate B. Carter, comp., *Our Pioneer Heritage*, vol. 14 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1971), 198; see also Susan Arrington Madsen, comp. and ed., *Christmas: A Joyful Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 26.

2. Susan Alley Wells, quoted in Annie Lynch, “President Brigham Young’s Christmas Party,” *Juvenile Instructor* 53, no. 12 (December 1918): 632; see also Madsen, *A Joyful Heritage*, 1–2.

3. James William Nielsen, quoted in Susan Arrington Madsen, ed., *Growing Up in Zion: True Stories of Young Pioneers Building the Kingdom* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 80.

4. Hannah Daphne Smith Dalton, “Pretty Is as Pretty Does” ([Cape Town], South Africa: [S. A. Electric, 1933]), 9; see also Madsen, *A Joyful Heritage*, 58.

5. Hebrews 5:8.

6. See D&C 3:7–8.

7. D&C 76:22.

8. Gordon B. Hinckley, “First Presidency Message: The Wondrous and True Story of Christmas,” *Ensign*, December 2000.

9. Alma 1:4.

10. Isaiah 14:12; D&C 76:26.

11. See D&C 76:25–27.

12. Moses 4:1–2.

13. Moses 4:3–4; emphasis added.

14. Moses 6:55.

15. 2 Nephi 2:13–14.

16. Alma 42:13.

17. See 2 Nephi 2:13–14.

18. “Unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions. All beings who abide not in those

conditions are not justified” (D&C 88:38–39). God abides and acts by the law of the highest kingdom. Therefore, “he comprehendeth all things, and all things are before him, and all things are round about him; and he is above all things, and in all things, and is through all things, and is round about all things; and all things are by him, and of him, even God, forever and ever” (D&C 88:41).

19. D&C 88:34.

20. See 2 Nephi 2:5.

21. Alma 42:15, 22–23.

22. Those who follow Satan are pursuing that same goal, but “that which breaketh a law, and

abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin [that is, in a state of disobedience to law], cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still” (D&C 88:35).

23. D&C 132:20.

24. See Helaman 5:10–11; see also Matthew 1:21.

25. Isaiah 53:4–5.

26. Hinckley, “The Wondrous and True Story.”

27. D. Todd Christofferson, “Be at Peace,” *Ensign*, December 2015.

28. Ether 12:41.