

A Robe, a Ring, and a Fatted Calf

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Recently I was invited by President Bishop of the Missionary Training Center to address the nearly two thousand missionaries in residence there. I accepted because I always assume it is impossible to give a poor talk at the MTC. They will take notes and make scriptural cross-references if you read them the telephone directory. Plus I love to hear them sing. So I went.

The Missionary

Following prayers, hymns, announcements and introductions, I gave them a rousing forty-minute reading of the telephone directory, proving that indeed one *can* give a poor talk to these missionaries. But, generous Christians that they are, several came up following my remarks to visit briefly and discuss my message. (Actually most of them either wanted tickets to a basketball game or to complain about the parking ticket “hold” that Financial Services had put on their temple recommends.) I visited with many of them and the minutes stretched into many minutes and then finally into nearly an hour. During that time I noticed one young elder hanging around the outer rim of the circle as all the other missionaries came and went.

Finally the traffic thinned out, and he stepped forward. “Do you remember me?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “I’m sorry I don’t. Tell me your name.”

He replied, “My name is Elder _____.” His eyes searched mine for recognition, but I just didn’t know who this young man was.

Summoning his courage for the ultimate revelation he said, “Hinckley Hall—A Faithful Friend Is a Strong Defense.” Then I knew who he was. That little coded phrase may not ring any bells for you, but it meant something to him and he knew it meant something to me.

On September 7, 1982, I stood in this exact spot and gave the only angry public spanking I have ever given a group of BYU students. The title of my remarks for that back-to-school message was “A Faithful Friend Is a Strong Defense.” I spoke of an offense, a felony—falsifying government documents—which had been committed in Hinckley Hall the April before and which had been widely covered by

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the press. Five months had passed but I was still hurting. Time had not soothed me.

I spoke of that incident publicly—without mentioning the names of the participants—because I care about matters of morality and honor and personal virtue at BYU. I wanted it clear then (and now, if anyone is still wondering) that the behavior of every student at Brigham Young University matters very much to me and to what this school stands for. So I said my piece and, for all intents and purposes, forgot about it.

But, as you might guess, it was not easy for the students involved. Not only were there the burdens of university and Church actions, but the civil laws made an indelible stroke across the record of some of these young lives. There were tears and courts and sentences and probations. Legally it had been about as much of a nightmare as a college freshman could have foreseen. Obviously it was *more* of a nightmare than they could have foreseen because the sorrow and remorse over their “prank”—I put the word in quotation marks—was deep and rending.

I recall that very unsavory experience for you this morning simply to put a happy ending on one young man’s very difficult experience. His father wrote me later and said how much courage it had taken for him to come up and talk with me at the MTC, but he said his son wanted me to know of his effort to make things right. It had not been easy for him to get a mission call. Not only were there all the court-imposed sanctions and Church restrictions, but there was the terrible personal burden of guilt. But he wanted to serve a mission both because it was the right thing to do and because it was a way for him to say to the Church, the government, the university and all who cared about him, “I’m back. I made a serious mistake but I’m back. I am making up lost ground. I’ve still got a chance.”

The Prayer in My Heart

As you know, there are other painful stories about transgressions and heartache on this

campus, stories involving very serious but usually less public mistakes. The prayer in my heart this morning is to help some of you, any of you, even one of you, have a similarly happy ending to your story, a story which you may feel is pocked and blemished beyond repair for some past mistake you have made. In short, I wish to speak to you of the redeeming love of Christ and why His gospel is indeed the “good news.” Because of Him we can rise above past problems, blot them out, watch them die if we are willing to have it so.

I am not sure what your most painful memories might be. I’m certain there are lots of problems we could all list. Some may be sins among the most serious God Himself has listed. Others may be less serious disappointments, including a poor start in school, or a difficult relationship with your family, or personal pain with a friend. Whatever the list, it’s bound to be long when we add up all the dumb things we’ve done. And my greatest fear is that you will not believe in other chances, that you will not understand repentance, that on some days you will not believe in any future at all.

Macbeth’s Guilt

In what may well be literature’s most extreme and chilling observation of such debilitating, unassuaged guilt, we watch Macbeth—cousin of the king, masterful, strong, honored, and honorable—descend through a horrible series of bloody deeds by which his very soul is increasingly “tortured by an agony which [knows no] . . . repose” (A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, [New York: Fawcett, 1967], p. 276). Shapes of terror appear before his eyes, and the sounds of hell clamor in his ears.

His guilty heart and tormented conscience rend his days and terrify his nights so incessantly that he says to his physician:

*Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,*

*Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?*

The doctor shakes his head over such diseases of the soul, and says:

*Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.*
[5.3.40–47]

But the anguish continues unabated until Macbeth says on the day he will die:

*Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.* [5.5.23–28]

Macbeth's murders are sins too strong for the kind of transgression you and I might discuss at BYU. But I believe the despair of his final hopelessness can be applied at least in part to our own circumstances. Unless we believe in repentance and restoration, unless we believe there can be a way back from our mistakes—whether those sins be sexual or social or civil or academic, whether they be great or small—unless we believe we can start over on solid ground with our past put behind us and genuine hope for the future—in short, if we cannot believe in the compassion of Christ and His redemptive love, then I think we in our own way are as hopeless as Macbeth and our view of life just as depressing. We do become shadows, feeble players on a perverse stage, in a tale told by an idiot. And unfortunately, in such a burdened state, we are the idiots.

The Miracle of Forgiveness

As he began to write of what he would call the “miracle of forgiveness,” President Kimball said:

I had made up my mind that I would never write a book [but] . . . when I come in contact almost daily with broken homes, delinquent children, corrupt governments, and apostate groups, and realize that all these problems are the result of sin, I want to shout with Alma: “O . . . that I might go forth . . . with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people.” (Alma 29:1.)

Hence this book indicates the seriousness of breaking God's commandments; shows that sin can bring only sorrow, remorse, disappointment, and anguish; and warns that the small indiscretions evolve into larger ones and finally into major transgressions which bring heavy penalties . . .

[But] having come to recognize their deep sin, many have tended to surrender hope, not having a clear knowledge of the scriptures and of the redeeming power of Christ.

[So I also] *write to make the joyous affirmation that man can be literally transformed by his own repentance and by God's forgiveness. . . .*

It is my humble hope that . . . [those] who are suffering the baleful effects of sin may be helped to find the way from darkness to light, from suffering to peace, from misery to hope, and from spiritual death to eternal life. [Spencer W. Kimball, Preface, *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, p. x–xii; emphasis added]

That is what I want for you this year, this new year and new semester, at BYU. Without ever minimizing the seriousness of some of our mistakes, I want to give to you today the message that we can be washed and pronounced clean if we will but honor the Lamb of God. From relatively innocent mistakes or disadvantages in life to the most serious of spiritual sins, the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a way back. We must believe in movement “from darkness

to light, from suffering to peace, from misery to hope.”

Alma’s Return

What if Alma had not come back? He had made serious mistakes, more serious perhaps than we know. He is described as “a very wicked and an idolatrous man,” one who sought to “destroy the church” and who delighted in “rebell[ing] against God” (Mosiah 27:8, 10, 11). He was, in short, “the very vilest of sinners” (Mosiah 28:4). The strongest denunciation comes from his own lips when he said to his son Helaman,

I had rebelled against my God

. . . I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction So great had been my iniquities, that the very thought of coming into the presence of my God did rack my soul with inexpressible horror. [Alma 36:13–14]

He may not have been Macbeth, but that is a frightening description of a man’s standing before God. But he came back. Not without anguish and suffering and fear, not without “wandering through much tribulation, repenting nigh unto death.” But he paid the full price and came back on the strength of Christ’s love. And every life thereafter, both in the Book of Mormon itself and in our generation, has been enriched because of the life Alma then lived.

What if he had not had the courage to make amends, however severe, and had remained at the far end of a road he should never have taken? What if, having found himself in such a mess he had despairingly thrown his hands in the air and said, “Out, brief candle. I am a poor player upon a stage. My life is a tale told by an idiot. It has been full of sound and fury, and now it signifies nothing”?

Peter’s Strength

Or what if a mistake or two had so crippled Peter that he had not come back, stronger than

ever, after the crucifixion and resurrection of the Master? A few years ago President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke of Peter’s struggle. After recounting the events of Jesus’ ordeal in accusations, mock trials, and imprisonment, and Peter’s remorseful acquiescence to it, he said:

As I have read this account my heart goes out to Peter. So many of us are so much like him. We pledge our loyalty; we affirm our determination to be of good courage; we declare, sometimes even publicly, that come what may we will do the right thing, that we will stand for the right cause, that we will be true to ourselves and to others.

Then the pressures begin to build. Sometimes these are social pressures. Sometimes they are personal appetites. Sometimes they are false ambitions. There is a weakening of the will. There is a softening of discipline. There is capitulation. And then there is remorse, self-accusation, and bitter tears of regret.

Well, if Peter’s story were to have ended there, with him cursing and swearing and saying, “I know not the man,” surely his would be among the most pathetic in all scripture.

But Peter came back.

He squared his shoulders and stiffened his resolve and made up for lost ground. He took command of a frightened little band of Church members. He preached such a moving sermon on the day of Pentecost that three thousand in the audience applied for baptism. Days later five thousand heard him and were baptized. With John, he healed the lame man at the gate of the temple. Faith in Peter’s faith brought the sick into the streets on their beds of affliction “that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them” (Acts 5:15). He fearlessly spoke for his brethren when they were arraigned before the Sanhedrin and when they were cast into prison. He entertained angels and received the vision that led to carrying the gospel to the Gentiles. He became in every sense the rock Christ promised he would be. Of such a life President Hinckley said:

I pray that you may draw comfort and resolution from the example of Peter who, though he had walked daily with Jesus, in an hour of extremity denied both the Lord and the testimony which he carried in his own heart. But he rose above this, and became a mighty defender and a powerful advocate. So too, there is a way for you to turn about and . . . [build] the kingdom of God. ["And Peter Went Out and Wept Bitterly," Ensign, May 1979, pp. 65–67]

Help Is Needed

Of course, one of the added tragedies in transgression is that even if *we* make the effort to change, to try again, to come back, others often insist upon leaving the old labels with us.

I grew up in the same town with a boy who had no father and precious few of the other blessings of life. The young men in our community found it easy to tease and taunt and bully him. And in the process of it all he made some mistakes, though I cannot believe his mistakes were more serious than those of his Latter-day Saint friends who made life so miserable for him. He began to drink and smoke, and the gospel principles which had never meant much to him now meant even less. He had been cast in a role by LDS friends who should have known better and he began to play the part perfectly. Soon he drank even more, went to school even less, and went to Church not at all. Then one day he was gone. Some said that they thought he had joined the army.

That was about 1959 or so. Fifteen or sixteen years later he came home. At least he tried to come home. He had found the significance of the gospel in his life. He had married a wonderful girl, and they had a beautiful family. But he discovered something upon his return. He had changed, but some of his old friends hadn't—and they were unwilling to let him escape his past.

This was hard for him and hard for his family. They bought a little home and started a small

business, but they struggled both personally and professionally and finally moved away. For reasons that don't need to be detailed here, the story goes on to a very unhappy ending. He died a year ago at age 44. That's too young to die these days, and it's certainly too young to die away from home.

When a battered, weary swimmer tries valiantly to get back to shore, after having fought strong winds and rough waves which he should never have challenged in the first place, those of us who might have had better judgment, or perhaps just better luck, ought not to row out to his side, beat him with our oars, and shove his head back underwater. That's not what boats were made for. But some of us do that to each other.

In general conference a few years ago Elder David B. Haight told us that—

Arturo Toscanini, the late, famous conductor of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, received a brief, crumpled letter from a lonely sheepherder in the remote mountain area of Wyoming:

"Mr. Conductor: I have only two possessions — a radio and an old violin. The batteries in my radio are getting low and will soon die. My violin is so out of tune I can't use it. Please help me. Next Sunday when you begin your concert, sound a loud 'A' so I can tune my 'A' string; then I can tune the other strings. When my radio batteries are dead, I'll have my violin.

At the beginning of his next nationwide radio concert from Carnegie Hall, Toscanini announced: "For a dear friend and listener back in the mountains of Wyoming the orchestra will now sound an 'A.'" The musicians all joined together in a perfect "A."

[That] lonely sheepherder only needed one note, just a little help to get back in tune; . . . he needed someone who cared to assist him with [just] one string; [after that] the others would be easy. ["People to People," Ensign, November 1981, p. 54]

William Wines Phelps's Way Back

In the early years of the Church the Prophet Joseph Smith had no more faithful aide than William Wines Phelps. Brother Phelps, a former newspaper editor, had joined the Church in Kirtland and was of such assistance to those early leaders that they sent him as one of the first Latter-day Saints to the New Jerusalem—Jackson County, Missouri. There he was called by the Lord to the stake presidency of that “center stake of Zion.”

But then troubles developed. First they were largely ecclesiastical aberrations but later there were financial improprieties. Things became so serious that the Lord revealed to Joseph Smith that if Phelps did not repent, he would be “removed out of [his] place” (HC 2:511). He did not repent and was excommunicated on March 10, 1838.

The Prophet Joseph and others immediately tried to love Phelps back into the fold, but he would have nothing of it. Then in the fall of that violent year W. W. Phelps, along with others, signed a deadly, damaging affidavit against the Prophet and other leaders of the Church. The result was quite simply that Joseph Smith was sentenced to be publicly executed on the town square in Far West, Missouri, Friday morning, November 2, 1838. Through the monumental courage of General Alexander Doniphan, the Prophet was miraculously spared the execution Phelps and others had precipitated, but he was not spared spending five months—November through April—in several Missouri prisons, the most noted of which was the pit known ironically as Liberty Jail.

I do not need to recount for you the suffering of the Saints through that period. The anguish of those not captive was in many ways more severe than those imprisoned. The persecution intensified until the Saints sought yet again to find another refuge from the storm. With Joseph in chains, praying for their safety and giving some direction by letter, they made their way toward Commerce, Illinois, a malaria

swamp on the Mississippi River where they would try once more to build the city of Zion. And much of this travail, this torment and heartache, was due to men of their own brotherhood like W. W. Phelps.

But we're speaking today of happy endings. Two very difficult years later, with great anguish and remorse of conscience, Phelps wrote to Joseph Smith in Nauvoo.

Brother Joseph: . . . I am as the prodigal son. . . . I have seen the folly of my way, and I tremble at the gulf I have passed. . . . [I] ask my old brethren to forgive me, and though they chasten me to death, yet I will die with them, for their God is my God. The least place with them is enough for me, yea, it is bigger and better than all Babylon. . . .

I know my situation, you know it, and God knows it, and I want to be saved if my friends will help me. . . . I have done wrong and I am sorry. . . . I ask forgiveness. . . . I want your fellowship; if you cannot grant that, grant me your peace and friendship, for we are brethren, and our communion used to be sweet.

In an instant the Prophet wrote back. I know of no private document or personal response in the life of Joseph Smith—or anyone else, for that matter—which so powerfully demonstrates the magnificence of his soul. There is a lesson here for every one of us who claims to be a disciple of Christ.

He wrote:

Dear Brother Phelps: . . . You may in some measure realize what my feelings . . . were when we read your letter

We have suffered much in consequence of your behavior—the cup of gall, already full enough for mortals to drink, was indeed filled to overflowing when you turned against us

However, the cup has been drunk, the will of our Father has been done, and we are yet alive, for which we thank the Lord. And having been delivered from the hands of wicked men by the mercy of

our God, we say it is your privilege to be delivered from the powers of the adversary, be brought into the liberty of God's dear children, and again take your stand among the Saints of the Most High, and by diligence, humility, and love unfeigned, commend yourself to our God, and your God, and to the Church of Jesus Christ.

Believing your confession to be real, and your repentance genuine, I shall be happy once again to give you the right hand of fellowship, and rejoice over the returning prodigal.

*"Come on, dear brother, since the war is past,
For friends at first, are friends again at last."*

Yours as ever,

Joseph Smith, Jun. [HC 4:141–42, 162–64]

It only adds to the poignance of this particular prodigal's return that exactly four years later—almost to the day—it would be W. W. Phelps selected to preach Joseph Smith's funeral sermon in that terribly tense and emotional circumstance. Furthermore it would be W. W. Phelps who would memorialize the martyred prophet with his hymn of adoration, "Praise to the Man."

Having been the foolish swimmer pulled back to safety by the very man he had sought to destroy, Phelps must have had unique appreciation for the stature of the Prophet when he penned:

*Great is his glory and endless his priesthood.
Ever and ever the keys he will hold.
Faithful and true, he will enter his kingdom,
Crowned in the midst of the prophets of old.
["Praise to the Man," Hymns, no. 147]*

I requested that we sing a verse of that hymn this morning. Next time you sing it, remember what it meant to W. W. Phelps to be given another chance.

The Prodigal Son

Perhaps the most encouraging and compassionate parable in all of Holy Writ is the story of the prodigal son. I close with Mary Lyman Henrie's poetic expression of it entitled "To Any Who Have Watched for a Son's Returning."

*He watched his son gather all the goods
that were his lot,
anxious to be gone from tending flocks,
the dullness of the fields.*

*He stood by the olive tree gate long
after the caravan disappeared
where the road climbs the hills
on the far side of the valley,
into infinity.*

*Through changing seasons he spent the light
in a great chair, facing the far country,
and that speck of road on the horizon.*

Mocking friends: "He will not come."

*Whispering servants: "The old man
has lost his senses."*

A chiding son: "You should not have let him go."

A grieving wife: "You need rest and sleep."

*She covered his drooping shoulders,
his callused knees, when east winds blew chill, until
that day . . .*

*A form familiar, even at infinity,
in shreds, alone, stumbling over pebbles.*

"When he was a great way off,

His father saw him,

and had compassion, and ran,

and fell on his neck, and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

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God bless us to help each other come back home, where we will, in the presence of our Father, find waiting a robe, a ring, and a fatted calf, I pray in the name of Him who made it possible, even Jesus Christ. Amen.