

Companions from the Scriptures

RONALD E. POELMAN

Seriously, this is a fireside? As I commence this assignment, I do not see the fire, but I feel the heat. I am grateful to be here; I am thankful to be one of you, a fellow student with you. I regard myself as a lifetime student and have a very fond affection for this campus and this school although I was never a student here.

Many years ago there was a beautiful, talented, brown-eyed brunette freshman girl here on this campus, and I fell in love with her. Even though I was a student at another institution of higher learning, which is a few miles north of here, I managed to find my way down regularly. In fact, during my sophomore year, although I was a class officer at the University of Utah, I was accused of attending more social functions at the Y than I did at the U. And the accusation was accurate. That beautiful girl eventually became my wife, after I had served a mission. She always said that she waited for me; and I observed that she was still single when I came home, which was fortunate for me because there was a lot of competition.

I know that many of you are married students, and I feel a sense of identification with you because I was in school for five years after we were married. By the time I had completed undergraduate work and three years of graduate

school we had two children, so I have a little understanding of what that kind of life is like. Now two of our children are married and in school, and so I am sharing that experience again with them.

I have always had a great interest in academia. Even though I had completed seven years of college, I was reluctant to leave, and as a matter of fact thought it would be enjoyable to become a professional student. I suspect that there are some among you who could almost qualify for that, but I do not know you individually.

As I look into the faces of you in this large congregation, I have the impractical desire to know each of you personally and individually, because I know that each of you is unique, an individual divinely created. I feel what seems an unrealistic but is nevertheless a real desire to be able to call you my friends and to be able to feel that each of you is my friend. I reflect upon the possibilities that in the antemortal

Ronald E. Poelman was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 5 August 1979.

existence we may well have been companions and associates; and I am confident that in the years to come, both here in mortality and hereafter, we will share personal, individual companionships and friendships. That is a great thing to anticipate. And so, as I speak to you tonight, I am not so concerned with what I might say and what you might hear as I am hopeful that our spirits might touch and that the Holy Spirit will enable us to communicate in a way that words might not permit.

I was thinking as I drove here this evening about the similarities between becoming a General Authority and going to college. As Ed has already told you, I was called a year ago last April—and so I guess that I am about a sophomore. Both becoming a General Authority and going to college involve a major transition, a relocation. I came back to Utah after living nearly a quarter of a century in California. Both you new students and I, a new General Authority, are faced with the unknown and the unfamiliar. We have greater responsibility. There is increased pressure upon us to perform. There is expanded opportunity, but also increased expectations; and we are aware of our dependence upon others and our indebtedness to those who make it possible for us to have the kind of experiences coming to us. We feel a certain urgency to make correct decisions and an intensified desire to be accepted and liked and loved. And there is a great opportunity in both instances to make many new friends.

As I review my life and think about the things that are important to me, I am aware of the stimulation of ideas—which is very significant to me—the beauties of art and of nature, and the satisfaction of creature comforts; but, without any doubt, the most important of all are people, individuals, and personal relationships. A number of years ago, a member of the Church wrote a book and dedicated that work to President David O. McKay with these lines:

*'Tis human fortune's happiest height to be
A spirit melodious, lucid, poised, and whole;
Second in order of felicity
To walk with such a soul.*

[Obert C. Tanner, *Christ's Ideals for Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1955), p. v]

To have good friends and good companions is an outstanding blessing, but there are requirements that we must fulfill to merit it. It takes time. There is a certain amount of selectivity necessary if we are to find good companions and good friends. And there is a responsibility on our part to be a good companion, to be concerned about personal development and growth, and to be conscious of the needs of others and responsive to those needs. One of the great things about good friends and companions is that they help us learn more about ourselves.

There are some neglected sources of friendship; sometimes they are close by. One of these neglected areas is our own family. I am grateful to know that among the members of my own family are also some of my very closest friends. In fact, I have thought often of my own children and said to them, "If you weren't my child and I weren't your father, I'd want you to be my friend." But that also takes some effort and cultivation on our part, and sometimes we family members take each other for granted and do not take the time or make the effort to cultivate the kind of relationship we might have with a non-family member.

Also, there comes to most of us at some time an opportunity for association with the noble and great ones of the earth. Among the great opportunities in my present association are the companionships and indeed personal friendships that I enjoy with the other General Authorities. I sat down the other day to lunch with Elder LeGrand Richards and thought as we did so what a tremendous opportunity it was to sit and visit with this man while we ate

lunch together. It reminded me of an experience that I had over a year ago, shortly after I was called to my present responsibility, when I was assigned to go with Elder Richards to a conference. We traveled by car and therefore had some time to visit together, and I was using the opportunity to question him about some of his recollections. I asked him about his grandfather, Elder Franklin D. Richards, who was also a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, and Elder LeGrand Richards said, "Well, I know a great deal about my grandfather. I've heard about him and I've read about him, but I only remember seeing him once. I was only seven years old and it was at the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple."

I looked over at him and asked, "Brother Richards, were you present at the dedication of the Salt Lake Temple?"

He replied, "Of course; everyone went."

In 1893, LeGrand Richards was present at the Salt Lake Temple dedication.

Association with people like that is a great blessing and an inspiration, as you might well expect. It also raises one's goals and sights in terms of what he would like to become and be able to accomplish in the service of our Father in Heaven.

Occasionally, when we know we are going to have the opportunity to be in the presence of someone special, we make particular preparation. This has happened to me in professional or civic affairs when I have known that I was going to be attending a dinner or an occasion where one of the famous or powerful or influential people of the world was to be there. I have done a little research to make sure that I maximize the opportunity in that kind of association.

Among some of the neglected and overlooked opportunities for friendship and companionship are often the books that we read, the literature that we approach. In fact I have often thought that some of my closest companions are people that I have never met person-

ally but only through the written word. There also, in order to enjoy that companionship fully, it is necessary to spend time, to be selective, and to be engaged in a process of self-improvement, so that those interactions and those companionships become increasingly significant and rewarding to us. It would be well, in light of that, to evaluate periodically our literary companions.

I personally have found that one of the greatest sources of my most treasured and valued friendships and companionships is the scriptures. The people whose lives are depicted there are real people. I expect someday to meet them, and I have been trying to prepare to do so. There are some that stand out—too many for us to consider tonight—but one of the individuals who has always had a great appeal to me is Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel. The reason for that special appeal is that Joseph lived a life much like many of the rest of us in that he was primarily concerned with temporal things. He was not basically a prophet and religious teacher, as were many of the other characters depicted in the scriptures, but was rather a man of worldly affairs; and his practical life and temporal concerns seemed, through most of my life, to be similar to my own experience.

As we all know, Joseph lived an exemplary life as a young man. I am sure that if he had lived in our modern day he would have won all of the individual Aaronic Priesthood awards and all the Duty to God awards and all else that could be offered—his was a very exemplary boyhood. And yet, at the age of seventeen years he was sold into slavery, which would not seem to be much of a reward for all of his effort. But Joseph was an unusual boy and decided that, if he was going to be a slave, he was going to be the best slave possible; and so he served his master, Potiphar, with all of the diligence and ability he had.

Very shortly he became the trusted overseer of all that Potiphar possessed. It would seem

that he was being rewarded. Then Potiphar's wife looked upon this handsome young Hebrew boy and tried to tempt him into activity that he knew was contrary to the law of God. Now imagine: he was in a strange land, totally separated from his parents and his family and his religious leaders, where the people did not believe in the kind of laws of chastity and morality that he had been taught. Still, although he was a young virile man, he would not succumb to that temptation. His faith and his confidence were great, even though he was a slave in a strange land. So he spurned that temptation until, as you know, Potiphar's wife falsely accused him and he was imprisoned.

I think that at this point most of us would begin to become discouraged. But not Joseph. It would appear that he decided that if he was going to be a prisoner, he was going to be the best prisoner in the jail. And indeed, he rose to the point where the keeper of the jail put him in charge of all the other prisoners. And so his virtue again appeared to be rewarded. Then, as you know, the Pharaoh's butler and baker had been imprisoned also and in the course of their imprisonment came under Joseph's direction in the prison. Both came to him for counsel, each of them having had a dream which he could not interpret. Joseph, because he possessed spiritual gifts and because he was living in tune with the Holy Spirit, was able to interpret those dreams, and the interpretations proved correct. The butler was restored to his position of honor, and the baker, as Joseph had prophesied, had his life taken.

Joseph had asked the butler to remember him when he was returned to favor with the Pharaoh and to say a good word for him; but the butler, having returned to his former easy life, forgot about Joseph until the Pharaoh had some dreams that the wise men of the court were unable to interpret. The butler then remembered Joseph in prison and mentioned it to the Pharaoh, and Joseph was brought forward. Again, under the inspiration of our

Father in Heaven, he interpreted the dreams and as a result of that spiritual gift and of his own skill and ability became, at thirty years of age, in effect the prime minister of all of Egypt, second only to the Pharaoh himself. This enabled him subsequently to deliver his father, Jacob, and his brothers and their families from the famine which pervaded the entire area.

Here we find an example of consistent application of spiritual principles in temporal affairs: constant faith, patient endurance, and the very wise use of power. Joseph is a man worth knowing personally, and you can know him personally as you study his life in the scriptures.

David is the classic hero—physically attractive, a courageous warrior, a poet, a musician, a skilled administrator, a philosopher, a man conscious of his dependence upon God as the source of his individual strength. All this made him a man worth knowing, but he is worth knowing also as a penitent transgressor of some of the most important commandments of our Father in Heaven, and who recognized that and began the long, difficult way back through repentance to complete acceptance again in the Kingdom and eventually in the presence of our Father in Heaven. David is indeed a man worth knowing.

Hosea is a man who appeals to me personally, though he may not appeal to some; but Hosea was a man who learned to forgive, to accept, and even to love again an unfaithful wife. In the process he learned and was able to teach the people of Israel about the love of God for his wayward children and the desire of our Heavenly Father to accept us back if we will return and repent and accept his divine gift of love. Hosea is a worthwhile friend, someone to get to know.

We all know about Paul, and there are many things about him that are intriguing. To cite one example, Paul was on one of his missionary journeys and came to Athens. He had made an appointment to meet Silas and

Timothy there, and he arrived early, so he walked around sightseeing in Athens. It was known who he was and that he was teaching this Christian doctrine, and so he was asked by some of the philosophers of Athens to tell them more about the doctrine. They went up to Mars' hill which was, I guess a kind of Hyde Park equivalent in Athens, where anyone who had anything they wanted to say could go and talk and anyone who wanted to listen would go and provide the audience.

Paul, having gathered these people around him, said in effect, "I've walked around your city, and I've seen your various shrines." (The Greeks practiced polytheism and an idolatrous form of worship of their many gods, and there were shrines to various and sundry gods throughout the city.) "I've seen them all, and I saw one shrine in particular that was inscribed, 'To the Unknown God.' Now that God whom you ignorantly worship I declare unto you." And Paul began to explain to them who is the only true and living God. Here is a man who was very clever at creating opportunities to teach the gospel.

Through Paul you can meet Priscilla and Aquila her husband. These are interesting people. You have to look carefully to get acquainted with them, but they are worth knowing. They were Jewish and had been living in Rome, but the emperor Claudius had decreed that all of the Jews should be expelled from Rome, and so they had moved to Corinth. Apparently they had become members of the new Christian church, for when Paul arrived in Corinth he went to stay with them—both because they were members of the Church and also because they were tentmakers. Paul, though he was a learned man, had also learned a craft, a skill. He was a tentmaker, and he and Priscilla and Aquila worked together as tentmakers in Corinth while at the same time filling the role of missionaries and teaching the gospel to the people of that city. At that time the church met in their homes, and apparently

they were true stalwarts. Later on it appears that they returned to Rome, because Paul in his letter to the Romans asks that special greetings be carried to Priscilla and Aquila. This is some time later. So they had remained faithful and were obviously a couple who had been stalwarts and pillars in the early church. Through them we can learn to know another very interesting man, Apollos.

Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, a seat of Jewish leaning and intellectualism. We are told that he was very eloquent, an avid scriptorian, very fervent in spirit, and a diligent teacher. He came to Ephesus—and here we find Priscilla and her husband Aquila again. We do not know how they got to Ephesus, but there they are. And they heard Apollos teaching with all the vigor and enthusiasm of a new convert. He was, they perceived, a man who understood the Old Testament scriptures and who was an intellectual giant, but he needed a little additional information; so they took him into their home and instructed him more perfectly in the principles of the gospel and the doctrines of the Church. He went on to become an outstanding missionary, effective especially among the Jewish people, and a strength to new converts because of his enthusiasm and the careful instruction and teaching he had received from Priscilla and Aquila. I would like to meet them someday; I plan to meet them someday. I regard them even now as my friends.

We all know about Timothy. Timothy is interesting to us particularly when we are younger because he was called at a very early age to be a missionary and had the privilege of being a missionary companion to Paul, the apostle. We might wonder what qualified him to be a missionary; and we learn that from Paul himself, as a matter of fact, in a letter he wrote to Timothy. As you know, Timothy was Paul's protégé, and Paul was so fond of Timothy that he referred to him as "my son," though he was not literally Paul's son but they merely had a

very close, affectionate relationship. And in the second letter that we have preserved and recorded in the New Testament, Paul comments that “the unfeigned faith that is in thee . . . dwelt first in thy Grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice” (2 Timothy 1:5). Later in that same letter to Timothy, Paul says, “From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures” (2 Timothy 3:15). I like to think about Lois, that grandmother, and her daughter Eunice, the mother of Timothy. The faith of those women and the teachings that they apparently were able to convey to this young boy enabled him to accept at a very early age in his teens a call to serve as a missionary companion to the apostle Paul. Lois and Eunice are people worth knowing. They are worth some time and effort.

I suppose that all of you have, as I have, some personal friends who did not particularly impress you when you first met them. As a matter of fact, I can think of a few in particular with whom I felt no particular interest in becoming better acquainted. But it seemed that circumstances brought us together; and we learned to know each other a little better and eventually discovered some mutual feelings, concerns, interests, and hopes. Gradually we opened up to one another, came to trust one another, and became very close friends with a great influence on each other.

I am going to confide in you that initially I was not all that taken with Nephi, the son of Lehi. He seemed just too good to be true, and I could not identify with him. I thought that his story was all very nice, but I did not see how I was ever going to be able to emulate that kind of an example until one day when I was in the midst of a successive reading of the Book of Mormon. Each time I read it something new has been added since the last time—of course, that which has been added is the fact that I am a new person, and so things stand out to me that I did not notice before. But that day, during a fairly early reading of the Book of Mormon, I came to that fourth chapter in 2 Nephi where

he talks about all of the wonderful manifestations that have come to him and all of the outstanding spiritual experiences that he has had. Then he begins to wonder why, in spite of all of those blessings and opportunities and reinforcing spiritual experiences, he still succumbs to temptation and gets discouraged and loses his temper—the usual litany of the kind of things that we all resolve never to do again and then find ourselves doing before we realize it. I read and reread that fourth chapter of 2 Nephi, and Nephi became my friend; then I read everything else that he had to say in an entirely different light, because now I could identify with him. Now he was somebody with whom I could interact, and I felt as though my spirit could touch his spirit and his mine.

There are many such examples of spiritual friendships. I suppose that at my stage of life a relationship between a parent and child is particularly poignant and touching. And can you imagine a better way to develop an insight into a man than to listen in while he, as a devoted and loving father, talks with a wayward son? We have the opportunity to do that in the book of Alma, in chapters 39 through 42, as Alma II talks to his son Corianton.

You recall the setting. Alma, often referred to as “the Younger” (but he did eventually get older, so I call him Alma II), had been a wayward youth. His youth had been characterized by unbelief and ever persecution of the Church, although his father was the head of the Church. But he had been converted and had received the witness and had devoted his life to missionary work and to sharing the message of the gospel with his fellowman. And now his son Corianton had been called on a mission.

Corianton had gone out in the mission field to teach the Zoramites; but he did not have the spirit of his calling, and he left the mission field and went to visit his girlfriend Isabel. That is a rather shocking thing in itself, and does not happen in this modern age. Not only was it a breach of the trust that had been placed in

Corianton for him to go visit his girlfriend, but Isabel was a girl of questionable moral standards. Thus, Corianton's relationship with her caused many to question the truthfulness of the teachings of Alma; his credibility was undermined because of the questionable behavior and lack of diligence of his own son in carrying out his mission. So Alma sat down with Corianton to try to help this young man understand the fundamental truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to try to share with him his own testimony, which burns so brightly.

It is a beautiful, tender, inspiring experience to listen to that father and to get to know him, to make him your friend as you listen to him counsel his son, who he loves and with whom he wants to be able to share all of those blessings that he, Alma, has learned to enjoy and knows are possible to the faithful. He teaches Corianton some of the most profound, sacred, and fundamental doctrines of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and in that context the effect on me is overwhelming, because I identify so with the son and with the father. In fact, Corianton intrigues me, because he did accept his father's counsel and he was called again as a missionary and apparently served effectively.

Much later, before Alma passed away, he turned the sacred records over to his son Helaman; and Helaman, before he died, turned them over to his brother Shiblon. As we read toward the end of the book of Alma, Shiblon, knowing that he is about to die and needs to find someone who will take the responsibility for the sacred records, makes the notation that Corianton is not available because he had sailed north on a ship to take some supplies to some adventurers who had journeyed somewhere to the north. So Corianton still exhibited this kind of adventurous spirit which, when tamed and influenced by the sweet spirit of our Father in Heaven, is a dynamic force in the world. Alma and Corianton are indeed worth knowing and worth making one's friends.

When I was a young boy I developed a friendship, which has lasted and continues to this day, with a boy whose name I shall call Doug. Doug and I were friends from the time that we were about nine or ten years old, and we worked and played together through our teenage years. When we were in about our early teens—I suppose about fourteen or fifteen—one Saturday afternoon we were playing touch football with a group of other fellows. In the course of the game I was hit rather hard in what I thought was an unfair sort of way; and in the intensity of the competition and the discomfort and pain I was experiencing I got up and, thinking that Doug was the cause of my distress, swung my fist and hit him. He hit me back, and then we stood there, toe to toe, glaring at one another. Then each of us turned and walked away and went home.

That was Saturday afternoon. Sunday morning I went to priesthood meeting, and I was able to avoid Doug until just before Sunday School. When I walked into the chapel, no one else was there except for Doug, who was at the sacrament table preparing the sacrament for Sunday School. I stopped and he looked up. I did not say anything, and I was about to turn and leave when he asked, "Would you come and help me, Ron?" That was all it took. I did, and he forgave the offense of the day before. My friendship with him is one of the most treasured relationships I have to this very day.

It reminds me very much of the correspondence of Pahoran and Captain Moroni, also recorded in the book of Alma in the Book of Mormon. There is not time to tell the whole story, but I will summarize. This is Captain Moroni, not Moroni the son of Mormon; although it is my personal belief that possibly Mormon named his son Moroni after Captain Moroni, who was such an outstanding individual and a great man. As we hear him described, he again is a man for all seasons—a man of great spirituality, great administrative skills, and outstanding military strategy, called at

the age of twenty-five years to lead the Nephite armies against the Lamanite invasion. He has some success but is short on provisions, and he writes a letter back to Zarahemla to his friend Pahoran, who is the chief judge. He receives no answer. So he writes another letter, that contained in the sixtieth chapter of Alma, and it is an interesting insight into human nature.

This great man starts out fairly calmly, but the more he writes the angrier he becomes. He accuses Pahoran of all kinds of horrible things for which there is no justification in fact; but Moroni is out there in the field—short of provisions, about to be attacked, his men suffering hunger and thirst and wounds—and he needs help. When he does not get it, he flies off the handle and writes this terrible letter to Pahoran.

As recorded in Alma, chapter sixty-one, Pahoran writes back and explains to his friend and colleague Moroni that the reason he has not responded is that there has been a political uprising. A group of monarchists have attempted to overthrow the legitimate government in Zarahemla, and he, Pahoran, and the legitimate government have been forced to flee; but he assures Moroni that as soon as possible he will send him the help for which he has asked. In effect, he says, “In your letter you censured me a little, but that doesn’t matter; I think you’re a terrific guy anyway.” He forgives him, although it would have been easy for him to have taken offense.

In his reply Pahoran talks about the importance to him of liberty and of the freedom of their people, saying that they would not resort to force if it were not necessary to protect their liberty and freedom, but that the Lord had given them the opportunity to defend themselves by force if necessary. Then, in verse fourteen he says to Moroni,

Therefore, my beloved brother, Moroni, let us resist evil, and whatsoever evil we cannot resist with our words [which is the first resort], yea, such

as rebellions and dissensions, let us resist them with our swords, that we may retain our freedom, that we may rejoice in the great privilege of our church, and in the cause of our Redeemer and our God.

Thus are Moroni and Pahoran—both worth knowing and worth having as friends.

There are many more examples. Good friends lead us to other good friends; and so it is with those whom we can come to know and who we can make our friends in the scriptures, for they lead us to companionship with our Father, the Lord God, and with Jesus Christ, our elder brother. Through the scriptures we can come to know them intimately and personally, to feel their spirit, and to know that they are aware of us personally and individually. I am so grateful to those who, with tremendous effort and sacrifice, have recorded and preserved and translated the holy scriptures to make them available for us, that we might come to know these people and through them to know the truths of the gospel. I think that most of us recognize that we tend to become like those with whom we associate; so it is also with our scriptural companions and specifically with our Father in Heaven and with the Savior. Both John in his first epistle and Mormon, as recorded by Moroni in the Book of Mormon, tell us that when we meet the Savior we will know him because we will be like him (see 1 John 3:2; Moroni 7:48). We can become like him by learning to know him through the scriptures and through the scriptural companions about which we have talked tonight and many others like them. The greatest good, the most important success, the supreme happiness, and the most complete understanding is to know God, our Father, and his son Jesus Christ; that is eternal life, which is the greatest of all the gifts of God (see John 17:3; D&C 14:7).

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A spirit melodious, lucid, poised, and whole;
Second in order of felicity*

To walk with such a soul.

That we may do so is my prayer for each of us,
as I leave you my witness that God lives, that
Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah, the

atoning Savior, the resurrected Christ. I bear
you this record in the sacred name of Jesus
Christ. Amen.