

Count Your Blessings

JACOB DE JAGER

Because I am giving my talk this morning in a, for me, foreign language, I frequently, in the preparation of it, had to look up in the dictionary the true meaning or even the right pronunciation of English words.

Devotional

I understand that this meeting is customarily called a “devotional.” Brother Bruce Olsen, assistant to the president for University Relations, wrote in his invitational letter about a Devotional Assembly (with a capital D and a capital A, probably to stress the great importance of this meeting). So I asked myself as a linguist: “What is the true meaning of *devotional*?” Well, Webster’s dictionary gives the following explanation: *Devotional*—characterized by devotion! That, of course, did not bring me much further in my understanding of the true meaning. So my search continued, and I looked up the word *devotion*. Here I found that Mr. Webster and his associates listed two quite different interpretations: *Devotion*, definition number one, ardent love and affection! Since I am certainly not here this morning to teach you how to become ardent lovers, I quickly disregarded this first meaning.

Devotion, in the second meaning, is a religious exercise or practice other than the regular

worship of a congregation. This meaning is much more satisfying to me under the circumstances. But what is the purpose of a devotional? My search continued, and I found just what I was looking for because I consider this meeting a great teaching opportunity. The purpose of a devotional is to make people more *devout*, which is defined as *a mental attitude* that leads to frequent prayer and worship, manifesting itself in the faithful performance of religious duties and adherence to a way of life in keeping with the faith.

I think that’s a beautiful definition for all of us. We all relate to this. I now clearly understand that I am here this morning to develop in you a positive mental attitude and to gently lead you on the straight and narrow path, that you may continue to live in keeping with the faith. Therefore, in all seriousness, I’d like to share with you at this moment some personal feelings and ideas.

Jacob de Jager was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 19 January 1982.

Education a Blessing

As a convert to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have, right from the start of my conversion, always been greatly impressed with the importance and emphasis given to the ongoing process of teaching, training, instructing, educating, enlightening, and edifying all of our Heavenly Father's children in his kingdom.

Maybe these strong sympathetic feelings can be explained through the fact that my native country, Holland, was from 1940 until 1945 occupied by Nazi Germany. When I finished my high school education in July 1942, it so happened that at that time a new rule was established that someone could from then on only register for classes in the Dutch universities if willing to sign a so-called "declaration of loyalty" to the occupying German forces.

This rule was initiated to oppress the ever-growing underground student activities against the Germans in Holland as part of the struggle for world peace by the Allied forces. Needless to say, the majority of Dutch students simply refused to sign such a humiliating political document and stayed away from the campuses, whether freshmen or graduate students.

In everyday life there remained only two alternatives for all young men between 18 and 30 years of age: to leave home, change names, use a faked I.D. card, and go "underground" somewhere in the country or to run the very real risk to be arrested anywhere at any moment and to be deported to Germany for slave labor in the war industry with the hundreds of thousands already there from other European nations.

How lucky I was that I managed to stay in Holland from November 1942 until V.E. Day—which is the Victory in Europe Day of the Allied forces—in May 1945 because I was able to obtain false identification papers! Most of my time during those years was used studying foreign languages through self-study and in small peer groups living under similar circumstances in the same location.

The reason that I mention these facts to you who are assembled here today as students is mainly to make you aware of your blessing to be able to receive a higher education in this great land of freedom and your personal fortune to be able to attend a university that is founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Five Blessings

I have asked to sing together as part of this program one verse of the hymn 202, "When upon Life's Billows You Are Tempest Tossed" with the chorus "Count your many blessings, name them one by one" for a very good reason. I want, at this time, to count for you five of your blessings, and I will name them one by one. That I restrict myself to only five is merely a matter of the time that is allotted to me rather than a personal mathematical deficiency. So let me count for you the five blessings that I have in mind.

Blessing number 1: Brigham Young University, as I have mentioned before, is founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Board of Trustees, consisting of experienced, inspired, wise Church leaders, is headed by a living prophet who repeatedly admonishes all of us to develop the moral values which characterize the life and teachings of the Son of God. This guarantees that, besides secular learning, you will here be taught rules and principles of behavior that will build your personality, that will increase your spirituality, preparing you to go the eleventh mile when asked to serve in the kingdom. On purpose I did not say "to go the *extra* mile" because I know there will be much more expected of you, and that's why I threw in another 10 miles for you.

Also, the great American statesman and founding father of the Constitution, Benjamin Franklin, recognized the tremendous

importance of education in general and of good teachers in particular when he said:

I think . . . that general virtue is more probably to be expected and obtained from the education of youth than from the exhortation of adult persons; bad habits and vices of the mind being, like diseases of the body, more easily prevented [in youth] than cured [in adults].

And he continued:

*I think, moreover, that talents for the education of youth are the gift of God; and that he on whom they are bestowed, whenever a way is opened for the use of them, is as strongly called as if he heard a voice from heaven. [Letter to Samuel Johnson, Philadelphia, August 23, 1750. Quoted in Adrienne Koch (ed.), *The American Enlightenment* (New York: George Braziller, 1965), p. 77; emphasis added]*

I know this to be true with all my heart.

Blessing number 2: Yours is the privilege in an era of limited enrollment at BYU to have that golden opportunity for intensive learning in a place where full commitment is expected at all times, where you really can work on the realization of your potential and make a contribution to academic excellence.

Who will *not* see this as a great blessing when it is realized that this year, because of the “no-growth” policy of BYU, 4,500 students had to be denied admission? And even more so if we think of a country like mainland China, where more than 1,000 million people live, where 34 percent of the population is between 1 and 14 years old. This means there are 340 million children younger than 14, of whom, by the beginning of the 1980 school year, only 146,180,000 were actually registered in some form of primitive village school system. When we look at the Chinese youth in the next age group, we see that 20 percent of the population, or 200 million, are between 15 and 24

years old. For them were available at the end of 1980 only 41,500 secondary schools and 462 universities, at which almost a generation of teachers and college professors were lost because of the “Cultural Revolution” from 1966 until 1976. Let us all daily be mindful of these facts and therefore perform the very, very best we can.

The words of the late Elder Richard L. Evans almost become prophetic in this respect:

*Sooner or later in life there comes a time when it is performance that counts—not promises, not possibilities, not potentialities—but performance. [From *the Crossroads* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), p. 158]*

And President Holland in a recent interview phrased it well by saying: “We cannot do everything, but what we choose to do we will do superbly well.”

Blessing number 3: Your stay on campus will not only prepare each and every one of you to meet personal challenges and change but will also bring strength to others in your future family relations and Church service. For these reasons there is simply no room for nonperformance and incorrect behavior.

Blessing number 4: Now I get a little personal. You have a loving, compassionate, understanding university president who is unceasingly trying in speech and in writing to make all of us understand that this place here, so beautifully situated in the mountains, and of which we are so proud, is a university, or by definition an institution of higher learning. Therefore, it is more than a location for an ongoing missionary reunion and more than a well-run, computer-equipped dating bureau where the female candidates start the day by singing hymn 206 out of the hymnbook. (You don’t know what hymn 206 is, but you will look it up later.) Because this is an institution of higher learning, students who come to BYU and who stay at BYU will be those who

love learning, who love Christian living, and who want to make a constructive contribution to their world as responsible, self-directing individuals.

I say “Responsible, self-directing individuals” because you as students can take these responsibilities upon you and direct your lives toward certain goals of your own making. Each and every one of us can make some contribution to improve the system. I often hear, “The American educational system is in trouble. Schools are running out of money. Teachers can’t spell.”

I answer, “How come?” Why do children refuse to take their studies seriously? Why do they say to their teachers: “This stuff won’t do me any good because I’ll never need to use it”?

It is often a matter of the wrong attitude based on an unwillingness to take the time and effort to study seriously. It is also a common misconception that if a person is “gifted” or “bright” or “talented,” wonderful ideas will flash spontaneously into his mind. Unfortunately the intellect does not work that way. Even Albert Einstein had to study hard and think for months before he announced his theory of relativity to the world.

And so, those of us who are less intelligent than Einstein find it a struggle to conceive even a moderately good idea, let alone a brilliant one. But it is worth the effort. If we are to survive as free people in the free world, we have to take some course of action that will lead to ideas from which all will benefit in the long run, because, regardless of what some advertisers have led us to believe, this country does not run on oil. It runs on ideas—ideas coming from the minds of well-trained thinkers of which we desire to have 26,000-plus on this campus today.

Blessing number 5: To know through divine revelation that “the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth” (D&C 93:36). President Hugh B. Brown, then a counselor in the First Presidency of the Church, in

a conference address in October 1962 gave the following explanation of this great and often quoted line in the Doctrine and Covenants:

Man’s standing before God will depend upon his knowledge, his education, his understanding of the gospel of Christ—in short, his intelligence, . . . for, as God’s glory is intelligence, only to the degree that we achieve intelligence will we be able to stand His glory. [CR, October 1962, p. 84]

Can you as students find a better place to receive this knowledge, education, and understanding than right here on campus, where all our doings can and should be focused on light and truth, with the best available equipment, manpower, expertise, and continuous revelation?

I plead with you not to be like Bill, the overweight mountain climber who had trained himself so well and so long to develop arm muscles that would support his obese body while trying to make it to the top. When the great day came to bring all his skills into practice, he climbed a steep granite mountain; but halfway up he saw at a certain moment, much to his consternation, that the rope on which he was hanging was fraying and in a short while certainly would break. He looked down and saw there was no ledge or bush to break his fall. He made, however, a quick decision: he decided to use a heavier rope next time! Bill’s decision was right; only his timing was wrong. I think there is a great lesson in this for all of us. Bill had indeed practiced and prepared for the climb but had overlooked his most important need.

Therefore, on this campus, we must see to it that students weave their own enduring ropes that will support them in their ascent, even long after they have left school and have come to the realization that the most important need that was fulfilled in this great university was the Spirit of God to support them in their ascent through life.

Through personal observation in various parts of the world, I have seen BYU alumni reach heights in their careers, in their communities, and in their family life that can only be explained through their exemplary life as Latter-day Saints and their work ethics. For this reason I count also this blessing today.

Much Can Be Said about BYU

But besides counting the blessings of attending, much can be said and has been said about this great university. Five big volumes of documentation on the first one hundred years of its existence have been written by very knowledgeable and competent people. So I asked myself, while preparing this talk, what contribution I could make. The answer came strongly: First, testify of the seal of approval of our Father in Heaven on what is performed in righteousness on this campus to make young people grow in all aspects of life. Second, make a personal statement based on your observations during the ten-year period that you have been regularly coming to this campus. May I, therefore, phrase my feelings as follows:

Loyalty, hard work, and dedication of BYU's faculty, staff, students, and administrators during its 107 years of existence have made Brigham Young University a respected name all over the world.

I recognize that quality has been, is, and always will be the key to the success and the honorable mentions of BYU—quality of education, quality of committee work, quality of campus activities, quality of athletic teams, quality of performing groups, quality of all people on campus, and quality of all alumni off campus. I feel we have to continue to think and act constructively to improve this quality whenever and wherever possible. In so doing we will build to the fullest extent toward academic excellence and the continuity thereof.

I have witnessed repeatedly that BYU promotes self-respect and gives maximum opportunity to each man and woman to develop to

his or her fullest potential; also, that people at all levels are enabled to win proper recognition for work well done.

It is my personal conviction that the following criteria have to continue to be the guiding force on this campus:

1. Confidence and dignity in our relationships founded on the truth of the restored gospel.
2. Capability and alertness in our work and our study through inner motivation.
3. Team spirit in our common pursuit of excellence.

Harmony with Basic Mission of the Church

As a convert to the Church, I know and testify with all my heart that our aim must be to think and act at all times in harmony with the basic mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as outlined by President Spencer W. Kimball in his April 1981 general conference address and also with the recent mission statement of Brigham Young University made by President Jeffrey R. Holland, as printed in the December 1981 issue of the alumni newspaper *BYU Today*.

This is very important to me. The basic mission of the Church and the basic mission of this university go hand in hand. Last night in preparation I looked them up again, and I'd like to quote here because it is so important that we all realize these things and how they dovetail, as you say in your language. The basic mission of the Church is threefold. First, to preach the gospel to every nation. Second, to perfect the Saints by preparing them to receive all the saving ordinances of the gospel. Third, to redeem our dead by performing these ordinances vicariously (see Spencer W. Kimball, "A Report of My Stewardship," *Ensign*, May 1981, p. 5).

Now let's compare this with the mission statement of Brigham Young University. I have the page here from the alumni newspaper *BYU Today*, in which it was printed. Here you see is

the mission statement of the university. What is the first line?

The mission of Brigham Young University . . . is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.

In your language you also have a very special saying that is kind of a fad today. When I am in a meeting I sometimes hear that expression: “What is the bottom line?” You hear that so often, “What is the bottom line?” I sometimes wonder, “What do they mean by that?” What is the bottom line of the statement of the mission of the university? Let me read out the bottom line.

We believe the earnest pursuit of this institutional mission can have a strong effect on the course of higher education and will . . . enlarge Brigham Young University’s influence in a world we wish to improve.

For all of us *this* is the bottom line!

Nephi’s Challenge

When I turn to the scriptures I see that Nephi, speaking to the people in his time, told them to follow Christ as we read it in 2 Nephi, chapter 31, verse 15, and following. Nephi’s words contain two challenges. 1. For those who are not yet members in the kingdom of God to be baptized. 2. For those who are members of the Church to press forward with steadfastness in Christ to obtain eternal life. I’d like to quote this from the Book of Mormon because it is such beautiful language and it has so much truth in it.

And I heard a voice from the Father, saying: Yea, the words of my Beloved are true and faithful. He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved.

And then in verses 17 and 18:

Wherefore, do the things which I have told you I have seen that your Lord and your Redeemer should do; for, for this cause have they been shown unto me, that ye might know the gate by which ye should enter. For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost.

And then are ye in this strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life; yea, ye have entered in by the gate; ye have done according to the commandments of the Father and the Son; and ye have received the Holy Ghost, which witnesses of the Father and the Son, unto the fulfilling of the promise which he hath made, that if ye entered in by the way ye should receive.

And then comes a very interesting statement by Nephi:

And now, my beloved brethren, after ye have gotten into this strait and narrow path, I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay.

I like that part because here Nephi starts talking Dutch. (In Holland, *no* is *nay* and *yes* is *ja!*) But he says, “Is all done now we are on the straight and narrow?” He says, “Nay,”

for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save.

Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life. [2 Nephi 31:19–20]

I could not think of a better scripture passage than what we have just discussed: to press forward, to know that this is a place where all the opportunities are given unto us, that we are really blessed today.

Testimony

In closing, I want you to know that I am grateful for the privilege of being among you today with my eternal companion, and also with my son, my daughter, and my son-in-law, who enjoy the blessings of receiving an education on this campus.

Although I am not a citizen of the United States, as a General Authority of the Church

and as a private person, I pledge my allegiance to the Church Educational System, to this great university, and to what they stand for, and I will continue to give my wholehearted support to these institutions in word, deed, and prayer.

That all who are under the sound of my voice this day may feel and act accordingly, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.