

Christ's Peace in Perilous Times

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My Love for BYU

It is impossible for me to express how much I love this university. Part of that love is tied to how I experienced BYU even before I arrived on campus. I was raised in a great community, but one in which I was often seen as a religious minority. By a show of hands, how many of you grew up where your beliefs were sometimes challenged by others around you? BYU can serve as a refuge and a source of strength for a season in what will certainly be a lifetime of standing up for your beliefs and values.

I had so much fun in high school participating in dances, student government, and athletics. But I sometimes found my beliefs belittled, even in environments that claimed to be inclusive.

At one student assembly, I was invited to participate in a dating game in front of the entire school. It soon became clear that every question I was asked was designed to make fun of me for my choices in media, beverages, and dating. I was being mocked for what I held most dear.

Now admittedly, when they asked for my favorite song, I thought, “Well, I can play along with this,” and I answered jokingly, “I Am a Child of God.”¹

Everyone in the auditorium laughed, and I thought I was quite clever—right until they asked me to sing it. So, at age seventeen, I performed “I Am a Child of God” in front of my entire high school!

Long before I came to BYU, the idea of attending a university where people shared my values inspired a hope in me to hang on through high school. Arriving at BYU was so exciting. I met friends who became examples to me for the rest of my life. And while there was a fun spark to those early friendships, their lasting impact was tied to the gospel itself. No one was perfect, but most of us were trying to do our best to become something more in Christ, and we were grateful for BYU's impact in that effort. Of course I also met my wife, Christine, at BYU. She won my heart with her kindness, her depth of character, her

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ability to nurture, and her love for the gospel. We were married during our last semester, and our wedding reception was held here on this campus.

At BYU, I also met faculty who understood the school's unique spiritual mission. I sat in the Maeser Building auditorium riveted by John S. Tanner, a future BYU academic vice president and eventual BYU–Hawaii president. He taught us how great literature from Milton, Dante, Dostoevsky, and others could be illuminated by the gospel and, in turn, add insight to our own belief. I studied international theory in BYU's Kennedy Center under a young Jeffrey F. Ringer, who is now an associate international vice president at BYU. I marveled as he articulately explained how the diversity of scholarship in higher education was strengthened by communities of faith such as BYU.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was the president of BYU during my freshman year. One day as I was running toward the Jesse Knight Building, President Holland was walking down the steps from the Administration Building. As any exuberant freshman might, I yelled, "Hello, President Holland!" to which he replied, "Hello, Clark Gilbert from Phoenix, Arizona!"

I about fell over! He seemed to know *all* of us. As president, Elder Holland spoke with such spiritual clarity on the university's destiny that you *knew* you were in a special place.² Rex E. Lee was the BYU president after my mission. During his time as the U.S. solicitor general, President Lee had argued nearly sixty cases before the Supreme Court. His ability to craft a well-reasoned defense pushed me to deepen my own thinking and learning. He also inspired us to replenish what we had been given at BYU.³

All of these leaders—from university presidents to faculty and even to my peers—taught me that at BYU we can perform at the highest levels, engage with the world, and never compromise our values or beliefs. In fact, BYU taught me that we can do this not in spite of our faith but *because* of it.

A Unique University

These reflections are not meant to be overly nostalgic; they are meant to communicate what a sacred seat you sit in. Elder Holland said:

*The real successes at BYU are the personal experiences that thousands here have had—personal experiences difficult to document or categorize or list. Nevertheless, these are so powerful in their impact on the heart and mind that they have changed us forever.*⁴

You carry the hopes of so many across the Church. I saw this when I served as the president of BYU–Pathway Worldwide, a literal "school in Zion."⁵ With more than 60,000 enrolled students, BYU–Pathway has sites located everywhere the Church is organized. Students in areas such as Africa, Brazil, and the Philippines look to you as examples. They would do anything to receive the opportunities you have to be on this campus, to live in this community, and to be at this devotional.

I am grateful for the way President Kevin J. Worthen has continued to teach and elevate the unique mission of BYU.⁶ BYU's spiritual emphasis can be seen in its mission statement:

*The mission of Brigham Young University—founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life.*⁷

BYU is not simply a university where members of the Church happen to attend in large numbers. Rather, this is a religious university with a religious purpose. The governance structure of BYU is also unique. In his book *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, James Tunstead Burtchaell identified three primary factors that pull many religious universities away from their spiritual moorings: (1) faculty promotion is outsourced to secular disciplines, (2) funding moves from the sponsoring religion to outside sources, and (3) university leadership is decoupled from the sponsoring institution.⁸

Let me explain why this will not happen at BYU. First, prophets have foretold the significant role this university will play in the kingdom of God.⁹ Moreover, we have remarkable faculty and staff who have come to BYU precisely because they believe in the unique spiritual mission of the university. But perhaps the most anchoring reason

BYU will remain grounded in its religious purposes is that its oversight and governance remain squarely tied to the Church itself. By design, the chairman of the Church Board of Education and the Brigham Young University Board of Trustees is the prophet of the Church, President Russell M. Nelson. The vice chairs are his two counselors, President Dallin H. Oaks and President Henry B. Eyring. The executive committee of the board is currently chaired by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, who is paired with another apostle. They are joined by a member of the Presidency of the Seventy and the general Relief Society president. Others on the board include the general Young Men and Young Women presidents, the Presiding Bishop, and other General Authorities as assigned. Think about the background, experience, and capabilities of the board of trustees for BYU. The board is chaired by a former medical school professor, three former university presidents, the head of one of the largest women's organizations in the world, and other leaders with robust educational and administrative experience. By any external standard, this is a remarkable board. But more importantly, these are spiritual, even prophetic leaders. They pray over you. They counsel about your needs. They receive revelation for this institution. They love BYU, and they love you.

And they invest in you. The Church Board of Education and its executive committee meet with all the presidents of each of the institutions of the Church Educational System twice a month—once with the executive committee and once with the full board. Those meetings are coordinated by the commissioner of Church education, who is assigned as the liaison between the board and the universities. Every major expenditure, all faculty appointments, key curriculum decisions, and the selection of university presidents are reviewed and approved by the Church Board of Education.

So, when BYU's mission statement declares that the university is "founded, supported, and guided by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," know that this is part of the very design of the university. BYU is designed for a distinct spiritual purpose. As Elder Holland has taught:

BYU will become an "educational Mt. Everest" only to the degree it embraces its uniqueness, its singularity. We could mimic every other university in the world until we got a bloody nose in the effort, and the world would still say, "BYU who?" No, we must have the will to be different and to stand alone, if necessary, being a university second to none in its role primarily as an undergraduate teaching institution that is unequivocally true to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰

This has been a long preamble to confirm at least three things about this school in Zion:

1. BYU can change your life if you will let it.
2. BYU students carry the hopes of so many across the entire Church.
3. BYU is prophetically led and will remain a spiritual beacon to the world.

My assignment today, both as a General Authority and also as the commissioner of Church education, is to focus on the spiritual and moral purposes of this flagship university in the Church Educational System. Our faith in BYU remains high, and as Justin Collings recently declared from this very stage, "I don't know where to keep that faith if not in the hearts of you students."¹¹

Perilous Times

Let me next share a story of the perilous times we live in. Christine and I have five daughters at home. Our youngest is eight-year-old Claire. Several months ago, the older girls picked a Star Wars show for our family movie night, and Claire was not happy.

She said, "I don't want to watch this movie; it's scary."

Begrudgingly, she nestled against me and said, "Dad, the good guys win in the end, right?"

To which I replied, "That's right, Claire. The good guys do win in the end, but sometimes it takes a little patience and even some faith."

We live in scary times. As I listen to students across the Church Educational System, I hear young people tell me that they are worried about getting married or having children, in part

because the world is in such commotion. As Elder Neil L. Andersen has stated, “My young friends, the world will not glide calmly toward the Second Coming of the Savior.”¹²

David Brooks’s recent *New York Times* column is telling:

As Americans’ hostility toward one another seems to be growing, their care for one another seems to be falling. . . .

Some of our poisons must be sociological—the fraying of the social fabric. Last year, Gallup had a report titled, “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time.” In 2019, the Pew Research Center had a report, “U.S. Has World’s Highest Rate of Children Living in Single-Parent Households.”

And some of the poisons must be cultural. . . .

*But there must also be some spiritual or moral problem at the core of this.*¹³

Our challenges are not just sociological. Even David Brooks is pointing to some spiritual unraveling at the core of our society. Rod Dreher puts this in a longer historical context:

*The long journey from a medieval world wracked with suffering but pregnant with meaning has delivered us to a place of once unimaginable comfort but emptied of significance and connection. The West has lost the golden thread that binds us to God, Creation, and each other. Unless we find it again, there is no hope of halting our dissolution. . . . We have been loosed, but we do not know how to bind.*¹⁴

President Nelson has taught, “During these perilous times of which the Apostle Paul prophesied, Satan is no longer even *trying* to hide his attacks on God’s plan.”¹⁵

Pointing to these same challenges in the last days, Nephi described three ways the adversary will try to deceive us:

First, he will “stir [us] up to anger against” each other and against “that which is good.”¹⁶

Second, he will “pacify”¹⁷ us into not caring.

And third, he will try to convince us that there is no right or wrong—an argument for moral relativism.¹⁸

Peace in Perilous Times

No wonder so many students worry about their future. My message today is that we *can* find peace, even in the commotion. President Nelson explained:

*The Lord has declared that despite today’s unprecedented challenges, those who build their foundations upon Jesus Christ, and have learned how to draw upon His power, need not succumb to the unique anxieties of this era.*¹⁹

I would like to play a short clip of President Nelson talking about these times when men’s and women’s hearts are failing. [The video was shown.]

I was in a small airplane, and all of a sudden the engine on the wing caught fire. It exploded, and burning oil was poured all over the right side of the airplane. And we started to dive toward the earth. We were spinning down to our death.

Oh, this woman across the aisle—I just was so sorry for her. She was just absolutely, uncontrollably hysterical. And I was calm. I was totally calm, even though I knew I was going down to my death. I was ready to meet my Maker.

We didn’t crash. We didn’t die. The spiral dive extinguished the flame. The pilot got control and started the other engine up. We made an emergency landing out in a field. But I thought, through that experience, if you’ve got faith, you can handle difficulties, knowing that with an eternal perspective all will be well.

In Luke 21 [it says], the earth shall be in distress, nations with perplexity, the seas and the waves roaring, “men’s hearts failing them for fear.” What we’re seeing is a prediction that in these latter days, people will be afraid. Men’s hearts are failing, and that includes women, because they forget their identity and their purpose.

The heartaches will come. I’ve lived through the death of a wife and the death of a daughter. I’ve seen the troubles that divorce brings. Children or grandchildren go astray. Disability. Illness. Injuries.

For the individual who is weak in the heart—fearful in the heart—be patient with yourself. Perfection comes not in this life but in the next life. Don’t demand things that are unreasonable but demand of yourself

*improvement. As you let the Lord help you through that, He will make the difference.*²⁰

Four Ways Jesus Christ Brings Peace in Perilous Times

I love President Nelson's quiet calmness. In general conference, he explained why we can remain confident even in tumultuous times:

*My dear brothers and sisters, these **are** the latter days. If you and I are to withstand the forthcoming perils and pressures, it is imperative that we each have a **firm** spiritual foundation built upon the rock of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.*²¹

For any who are worried or suffering, let me close with four attributes of Jesus Christ that can bring peace and comfort in these perilous times:

First, Christ takes us where we are—you don't have to be perfect. I would like to introduce you to the Vargas family. Christine and I met them on a mission tour in San Antonio, Texas, last fall. Andrea was serving as a Primary president. Luis was not a member. The missionaries scheduled an exterior tour of the temple, and the mission president shared with me that one of the factors holding Brother Vargas back was his fear of trying to be perfect.

At the start of the tour, I said, "Brother Vargas, can I first make it clear that *no one* in this Church is perfect save Jesus Christ? We all are just trying to do our best to become something more in Christ."

The missionaries gave a great tour, and at the end of the evening, they said, "Brother Vargas, how are you feeling?"

Brother Vargas turned to his wife and said, "Honey, I've been coming with you to Church for five years. I want to join this Church so that I can become a better father and a better husband."

Sister Vargas jumped into his arms. Their daughter wasn't sure what was happening, but she rushed in and began hugging them as well.

Brothers and sisters, you don't need to be perfect to be in this Church. You just need to do your best—which includes repentance—as you strive to become something more in Christ.

Second, Christ loves us even when we do not reciprocate that love. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), there is an allegorical story of Christ with the Grand Inquisitor. Christ has returned to the earth, but rather than rejoicing, the Grand Inquisitor has Him locked up and berates Him for giving men agency and allowing mankind to make so many poor choices. After being forced to listen to repeated vitriol from the Grand Inquisitor, the reader is poised for a bold response from the Savior. Instead, Christ simply leans in and kisses his accuser. In this season of polarizing public discourse, I am grateful for Christ's model of charity and love. Even when we feel attacked for our most cherished beliefs, He inspires us to respond with empathy and kindness.

Third, Christ repairs the breaches in our lives. Last Christmas, as we were settling in for the evening, one of our children announced that her shower nozzle had broken and water was spraying everywhere. As I ran to investigate, all I could do was start emptying buckets of water into the sink. Reaching a plumber on Christmas night was not going to happen. We were desperate. Fortunately a friend came to our rescue and helped us do what we couldn't do ourselves: he turned off the master water line and fixed the breach.

Recently I visited with an individual who had made terrible mistakes that cost him his marriage and other blessings. He had worked through the process of repentance but still felt insufficient.

He reflected, "I've repented to the Lord. I've apologized to my family. But there are countless others who my decisions have impacted, and I won't ever be able to track them down."

My assigned companion listened and then replied: "You can't. Those mistakes are like leaves in the wind. Only the Savior can heal those wounds. Isaiah foretold the role of the Savior when he said, '[He shall] be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.'"²²

In these troubled times, Christ is the repairer of the breaches in our lives.

Fourth, Christ succors us in our infirmities. As a young missionary in Japan, I received a knock

on our apartment door just before bedtime. I was surprised to see our mission president standing in the rain at the apartment’s threshold.

He said, “Elder Gilbert, get dressed. We are going to see Elder Matsuo.”

Elder Matsuo’s father was dying of cancer. I immediately assumed what had happened, but as I got into the mission vehicle, President Matsumori turned to me and explained that the missionary’s mother had been killed in an accident.

He then said, “Pray that we will be able to empathize and understand what will comfort this missionary.”

I felt overwhelmed and inadequate. I can still remember the windshield wipers going back and forth as we drove in silence. Suddenly the Spirit brought Alma 7:12 to my heart:

And he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people.

I knew that the Atonement of Jesus Christ allows us to overcome sin. I knew that through Christ we could overcome death. But that night, on the Osaka freeway, I learned that Christ could also comfort us in our struggles—in our suffering—when life isn’t fair. I didn’t know what that young missionary was facing, but through the miracle of the Atonement, there was One who did.

For any of you who are struggling with challenges that don’t seem fair, don’t turn to the world for answers. Please turn to the covenants that bind you to Jesus Christ. He can comfort you in a way no one else can.

Conclusion

In the sacristy of Spain’s Toledo Cathedral, hangs a painting by El Greco entitled *The Disrobing of Christ*. [A picture of the painting was shown.] The artist depicted the Savior en route to His Crucifixion. You can almost hear the cacophony of the crowd pressing in on Him. Even Christ’s disciples are looking down and appear to

have lost all hope. The color in their countenances has paled. But observe the Savior. He stands with radiance in the center of the painting. He is full of hope and confidence. And unlike everyone else in the scene, He is looking heavenward to His Father.

What Christ knew is that despite the tumult we feel all around us, God will prevail in the end. C. S. Lewis made this point in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when Aslan explained to Lucy and Susan how the evil designs of the witch would not ultimately win:

“It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she . . . would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.”²³

Once again, President Nelson has declared:

*My dear brothers and sisters, these **are** the latter days. If you and I are to withstand the forthcoming perils and pressures, it is imperative that we each have a **firm** spiritual foundation built upon the rock of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.*

“Dad, the good guys win in the end, right?”

Yes, they do, Claire. But in this case, only in and through the Savior Jesus Christ.

I hope that as each of us faces the commotion of these latter days, we will remember that

- Christ will take us where we are.
- He will love us even when we do not reciprocate that love.
- He will repair the breaches in our lives.
- Christ will succor us in our infirmities.

I am so grateful for our Heavenly Father and for His Beloved Son, our Savior, and I encourage you to invite Them to bring peace to your life in these perilous times. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "I Am a Child of God," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 301.
2. See Jeffrey R. Holland, "A School in Zion," BYU annual university conference address, 22 August 1988.
3. See Rex E. Lee, "Some Thoughts About Butterflies, Replenishment, Environmentalism, and Ownership," BYU devotional address, 15 September 1992.
4. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 97:3; emphasis added.
6. See Kevin J Worthen, "BYU: A Unique Kind of Education," BYU university conference address, 28 August 2017.
7. Mission of Brigham Young University (4 November 1981); emphasis added.
8. See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 823–47.
9. See Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU devotional address, 10 October 1975.
10. Holland, "Second Half of the Second Century"; emphasis in original; quoting Spencer W. Kimball, "Installation of and Charge to the President," *Inaugural Addresses*, 14 November 1980, Brigham Young University, 9; see also Kimball, "Second Century."
11. Justin Collings, "A Certain Idea of BYU," BYU devotional address, 1 February 2022.
12. Neil L. Andersen, "Spiritual Whirlwinds," *Ensign*, May 2014.
13. David Brooks, "America Is Falling Apart at the Seams," Opinion, *New York Times*, 13 January 2022, [nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/13/opinion/america-falling-apart.html). See Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Politics, Gallup, 29 March 2021, news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx; see also Stephanie Kramer, "U.S. Has World's Highest Rate of Children Living in Single-Parent Households," Parenthood, Pew Research Center, 12 December 2019, [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent).
14. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 46–47.
15. Russell M. Nelson, "Let God Prevail," *Ensign*, November 2020; emphasis in original.
16. 2 Nephi 28:20.
17. 2 Nephi 28:21.
18. See 2 Nephi 28:22.
19. Russell M. Nelson, "The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation," *Liahona*, November 2021.
20. Russell M. Nelson, excerpt from *Men's Hearts Shall Fail Them*, video, Church of Jesus Christ, 18 November 2011, [churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2011-11-020-mens-hearts-shall-fail-them?lang=eng](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2011-11-020-mens-hearts-shall-fail-them?lang=eng); paraphrasing and quoting Luke 21:25–26.
21. Nelson, "The Temple"; emphasis in original.
22. Isaiah 58:12.
23. C. S. Lewis, "Deeper Magic from Before the Dawn of Time," *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950).