

# *The Light of Forgiving*

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Last December, a few weeks before Christmas, I saw an image by Latter-day Saint artist J. Kirk Richards titled *A Gift of Forgiveness*. I love the combination of this image and its title, and my prayer today is that the Holy Ghost will convey to your hearts and minds the beautiful, personal doctrine of forgiving and the eternal source of that truth and light—our Savior, Jesus Christ.

The scriptures distinguish between two types of forgiving: God forgiving us of our sins and each of us forgiving each other. I want to focus today mostly on that second type of forgiving, the forgiving that we, as flawed, imperfect human beings, can do. Let me start with two examples of people who chose to forgive someone who drastically affected their lives.

## **Victoria Ruvolo and Chris Williams**

Victoria Ruvolo was driving home in November 2004 from a concert in which her niece had performed. As she neared her house, her windshield was suddenly smashed in by a twenty-pound

frozen turkey, which had been thrown from a car traveling in the opposite direction on the two-lane road. The turkey shattered the glass in the windshield and bent the steering wheel before “crushing the bones in her cheeks and jaw, fracturing the socket of her left eye, causing her esophagus to cave in and leaving her with brain trauma.”<sup>1</sup> Her friend in the passenger seat managed to stop the car and cradled her head until the ambulance arrived. Victoria didn’t wake up until weeks later in a rehabilitation hospital.

She learned that “her attacker was Ryan Cushing, an 18-year-old college freshman.”<sup>2</sup> With Ryan facing a potential sentence of twenty-five years in prison,<sup>3</sup> Victoria decided to reach out to Ryan’s lawyer to figure out a way for a more lenient sentence. Victoria said:

*On the day we went to court, . . . [Ryan] walked in with his head hung down and looked so upset with himself. When I saw him there, my heart went out to him. To me he looked like a lost soul.*

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*Steven M. Sandberg, BYU general counsel and assistant to the president, delivered this devotional address on March 10, 2020.*

Once the case was over and it was time for him to walk out, he started veering over towards where I was sitting, and every court officer was ready to jump on him. They had no idea why he was coming towards me, but as he walked over to where I was sitting and stood in front of me, I saw that all he was doing was crying, crying profusely. He looked at me and said, “I never meant this to happen to you. I prayed for you every day. I’m so glad you’re doing well.” . . . All I could do was take him and cuddle him like a child and tell him, “Just do something good with your life. Take this experience and do something good with your life.”<sup>4</sup>

After Ryan’s release from serving six months in prison, he taught schoolchildren about empathy and forgiveness. Aunt Vicky—as Victoria was known to her family—extended her love to Ryan, her attacker, in a similar way that she shared her love with her own nieces and nephews.<sup>5</sup> I see in Kirk Richards’s image the light of Aunt Vicky’s forgiveness just beginning to penetrate the distraught haze around Ryan.

Victoria later said, “Some people couldn’t understand why I’d done this, but I felt God had given me a second chance, and I wanted to pass it on.”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, another connection was being made. In October 2005, President Gordon B. Hinckley gave a masterful sermon on forgiveness. He recounted the experience of Victoria Ruvolo.<sup>7</sup> One of the people listening that day was Chris Williams. Chris later said:

*I sat there in that conference and I asked myself the question, “Could I do that? . . .” And I didn’t know. . . . That was an incredibly powerful exercise to go through, to “fore-give” people, to walk through life with that kind of attitude.*<sup>8</sup>

That is fore—*f-o-r-e*, as in before—givenness. Asking ourselves, “Is that something I could do?” and deciding that it is something we want to be able to do prepares us to be better able to forgive other people.

Not even a year and a half later, an intoxicated seventeen-year-old driver crashed into the car Chris was driving, killing Chris’s wife, Michelle, their unborn child she was carrying, and two of

their other children, Ben and Anna. Yet somehow, in his extreme grief and shock, Chris, as he was still sitting in his crushed car, knew he had to let go and forgive this unknown driver of the other car.

Chris later learned that the driver was Cameron White. Chris met with Cameron at a juvenile detention facility, and Chris and Cameron talked about how the deaths of Chris’s family members had affected Chris and the rest of his family.

*Cameron . . . looked directly into [Chris’s] eyes and asked, “After all that I’ve done to your family, how is it that you were able to forgive me?”*

*[Chris] leaned forward and said, “If there is anything you have seen me do, or heard me say, or have read about me regarding forgiveness, you should know that it was merely the Savior working through me.”*<sup>9</sup>

Chris Williams also offered to Cameron White this divine gift of forgiving, and he identified the true source of its light, Jesus Christ. Christ’s light helped heal both Chris and Cameron.

Chris’s family and Cameron’s family are bound together in love and continue to stay in touch. Cameron married in 2012 and has two beautiful daughters. Cameron has let it go; he is forgiving himself daily and is thriving.

### Joseph Smith’s Accounts of the First Vision

Last general conference, President Russell M. Nelson concluded the sessions with this message:

*The year 2020 will be designated as a bicentennial year. General conference next April will be different from any previous conference. In the next six months, I hope that every member and every family will prepare for a unique conference that will commemorate the very foundations of the restored gospel.*

*You may wish to begin your preparation by reading afresh Joseph Smith’s account of the First Vision as recorded in the Pearl of Great Price.*<sup>10</sup>

A Joseph Smith Papers podcast about the First Vision has helped me understand better the foundations of the restored gospel. In the fifth episode, the podcast’s host shares an aspect of the 1832 account of Joseph’s theophany, the only existing

firsthand account that Joseph Smith wrote himself instead of dictating to someone else:

[In the account, Joseph] *wrote that he saw “a pillar of fire.” But he stops there for a moment, we don’t know for how long, but we know by looking at the handwriting and the ink that he stopped in that very moment. And before he continued, he crossed out the word **fire** and inserted the word **light**. The finished sentence then read, “A pillar of light above the brightness of the sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me.” He replaced **fire** with **light**. And it’s only in reading the manuscript that we can detect this moment in which Joseph struggled to know what word to use to describe the light that descended from heaven.*<sup>11</sup>

In three subsequent accounts of the First Vision, Joseph described that experience as “a pillar of fire” and a “pillar of flame.” He said:

*A pillar of fire appeared above my head. It presently rested down upon me and filled me with joy unspeakable. A personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed.*<sup>12</sup>

He also described it as “a pillar of light” (this account is probably most familiar to you):

*I saw a pillar of light exactly over my head, above the brightness of the sun, which descended gradually until it fell upon me.*<sup>13</sup>

And he described it as “a brilliant light”:

*I was enraptured in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day.*<sup>14</sup>

Two of the recurring themes of the First Vision accounts are the light Joseph saw and Joseph’s desire to be forgiven of his sins.<sup>15</sup> As a faithful gospel scholar has observed, “Joseph went into the grove not expecting to see God but hoping to learn how God saw him and to receive forgiveness.”<sup>16</sup> The light Joseph experienced was the

divine light of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. As a result of his experience with this divine light, Joseph felt—and was—forgiven of his sins. And just as Joseph struggled to describe the light from heaven, he also likely struggled to describe fully the transcendent experience of being forgiven.

### Jesus Christ Is the Light

We know from many scriptural accounts that Jesus Christ “is the light . . . of the world; . . . a light that is endless, that can never be darkened.”<sup>17</sup> The Savior also taught in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.”<sup>18</sup> He further elucidated this concept later as the resurrected Lord when He told the gathered Nephites to “hold up *your* light that it may shine unto the world. Behold I am the light which ye shall hold up—that which ye have seen me do.”<sup>19</sup> The Savior invites each of us to be a light as we hold Him up as the Light. He who made Himself “an offering for sin”<sup>20</sup> offers to each of us the opportunity to be co-healers and to extend His light to those around us.

The apostle John confirmed that Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. The context of John’s account is important. Jesus was at the temple, and the scribes and the Pharisees had brought before him a woman taken in adultery. They attempted to do two reprehensible things simultaneously: to publicly shame the vulnerable woman and to accuse Jesus by asking how the law of Moses should apply to her.

Jesus’s response turned the accusation back to them. He said, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.”<sup>21</sup>

“Convicted by their own conscience,”<sup>22</sup> they dispersed, one at a time. Then, when they had all left, Jesus asked the woman directly:

*Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee?*

*She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.*<sup>23</sup>

Jesus then proclaimed to those at the temple, “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me

shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”<sup>24</sup>

I am struck by the way the Gospel of John juxtaposes this powerful story of Christ’s forgiveness with Christ’s proclamation that He is the Light.

A couple of weeks ago, a dear friend reminded me that nothing—not death or life, not “things present [or] things to come,” not mean people or well-meaning people, not even angels—can “separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>25</sup> My friend has experienced a betrayal that cuts deeply and that still hurts, but he knows “in whom [he has] trusted.”<sup>26</sup> The way forward is to follow Jesus Christ. And often it is forgiving others that helps us and them come into the light.

#### **What It Means—and Doesn’t Mean—to Forgive**

When I was an eighteen-year-old college freshman here at BYU, I took a theater class my first semester and somehow found myself cast in a main-stage production of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

I had virtually no acting experience (one play in eighth grade doesn’t really count), and I had no business being on that stage with truly excellent actors, some of whom you have seen in TV shows and movies. In our version of *Macbeth*, we were recreating an early druidic version of the play, and we used real swords onstage. (I am sure my risk management colleagues here at BYU are wondering what sort of event approval process was in place back then!) My character was Malcolm, one of King Duncan’s two sons.

At the end of each performance, a group of us would celebrate when Macduff saved us from Macbeth. But during one of the performances, I raised my hand in the air to celebrate—my hand that was still holding my sword. Isaac Walters, who was playing Siward, was next to me, and I cut him across his face with my sword.

I watched in total panic as the cut along his cheekbone immediately turned red and began drizzling real blood. Even now I feel terrible remembering it and thinking about how much worse it could have been. I completely broke character and just started apologizing.

Isaac remembers saying to me, “You’ve got to hold on; *you’ve* got the final speech.” Isaac, still in

character as Siward counseling young Malcolm, helped me keep it together long enough to finish the play. Isaac also immediately forgave me that night, but I noticed as I watched my old video of the play that Isaac is not next to me; I am guessing this filmed performance was one of the later ones, and he knew better than to risk standing next to me again!

So often the people we hurt in our lives, unintentionally or even intentionally, are those closest to us, those who mean the most to us. The feeling of hurt is exacerbated by the closeness of our relationships as roommates, friends, and family members. It is hardest when the hurt comes from people we love and trust.

In my work as a lawyer, I have seen how the law is far more concerned with rules and justice than it is with mercy and forgiveness. One thing the law does is attempt to distinguish between doing something intentionally and doing something unintentionally, with harsher punishments attaching when people mean to cause harm. The law even has gradations for analyzing how much a person meant to do something—intentionally or knowingly or recklessly or negligently. In law school we memorized Latin and English phrases like “scienter” and “with malice aforethought.”

Now here is what the doctrine of forgiveness has to say about all those legal distinctions: it doesn’t matter with respect to our obligation to forgive. It doesn’t matter why or how the frozen turkey or the swerving vehicle or the sword affects our life. The commandment to forgive all men doesn’t contain a caveat. It doesn’t have an asterisk with a footnote saying, “Except for when it was really and intentionally cruel.”

Let me also be clear about what forgiving *doesn’t* mean. Elder Neil L. Andersen explained:

*Forgiveness is not excusing accountability or failing to protect ourselves, our families, and other innocent victims. Forgiveness is not continuing in a relationship with someone who is not trustworthy. Forgiveness is not condoning injustice. Forgiveness is not dismissing the hurt . . . we feel because of the actions of others. Forgiveness is not forgetting but remembering in peace.*<sup>27</sup>

### Forgiving Ourselves

In preparing this devotional, I asked my kids when it is hardest to forgive. They said, “When we’ve done nothing wrong” or “When it’s personal” or “In the moment” when we’re taken aback. They also said this: “It’s hardest to forgive ourselves.”

Forgiving ourselves. This is the message that I have sensed I am really supposed to share today, that you—each one of you, each and every one of you, all of us here today or watching or listening later on—are a beloved daughter or son of Heavenly Parents who has infinite and divine worth; that you are worth being and feeling forgiven; and that our Savior wants to help you forgive yourself.

My friend Deborah Farmer Kris recently published an article about how the “internal chatter” of kids “is not always kind” and that their “critical self-talk” can literally be visible on their “faces when they get a bad grade or forget their lines or miss a basket or face a social rejection.”<sup>28</sup> Our self-narrative as kids and former kids too often goes like this: “I knew I wasn’t good enough, and now this proves I don’t measure up.” Deborah suggested practicing self-compassion, part of an implicit and explicit self-narrative that acknowledges we all make mistakes; we all have rough days.

When you find that your inner critical voice is louder than your compassionate voice, imagine what you might say to a close friend in a similar situation. You would sit with them in empathy. You would offer words of hope. You would point out their strengths and remind them that they are loved. I know Christ would do this for you if He sat beside you.

Can you become that friend to yourself? When Christ asks us to act with compassion unto “the least of these,”<sup>29</sup> that includes you and how you treat yourself.

Bryan Stevenson, a lawyer and the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, who spoke at a BYU campus forum in 2018, said it this way:

*We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. . . .*

*. . . Being broken is what makes us human. . . . Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.*<sup>30</sup>

Some of us may think we are more inherently broken than others or that what we have done puts us beyond the realm of forgiveness. This is what Bryan Stevenson would tell his clients:

*Whenever things got really bad, and they were questioning the value of their lives, I would remind them that each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done. I told them that if someone tells a lie, that person is not **just** a liar. If you take something that doesn’t belong to you, you are not **just** a thief. Even if you kill someone, you’re not **just** a killer. . . . There is a strength, a power even, in understanding brokenness, because embracing our brokenness creates a need and desire for mercy, and perhaps a corresponding need to show mercy.*<sup>31</sup>

Last year President Worthen reminded our BYU community of this truth:

*“Each [of us] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents . . . [with] a divine nature and destiny.” . . .*

*. . . [This] description is universal. It applies to everyone in this audience, everyone on this campus, every person who lives on this earth, and all who have lived or will ever live on this earth and on worlds without number.*<sup>32</sup>

In other words, this includes *you*, not just the people sitting beside you today or your classmates or your roommates who seem to be living charmed lives. It includes them, of course, but it also, specifically and individually, includes *you*.

We are all broken and utterly dependent on the Savior for forgiveness of our sins. And it can be our mistakes, our misfortunes, our missed opportunities, our trying times, and even our tragedies that bind us together in love and forgiveness when we choose to forgive others and ourselves. Even if we meant to do things that harmed others and ourselves in the past, we can mean now to be better and do better as we follow Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

We can then say, like Adam:

*Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God.*<sup>34</sup>

And we can also then say, like Eve:

*Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient.*<sup>35</sup>

As we forgive others *and* ourselves, we will know and feel that “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”<sup>36</sup>

Last week, President M. Russell Ballard spoke of his love for all of you.<sup>37</sup> I want to do the same and speak my love for each of you, especially those of you who feel left out or not welcome or “othered” here at BYU. I want to tell you—my international sisters and brothers, my black sisters and brothers, my LGBTQ sisters and brothers, my new-to-the-faith and my uncertain-of-their-faith sisters and brothers, my lonely sisters and brothers, all of my sisters and brothers—I love you. And I know that Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Parents love you. I know that Jesus Christ is the light that makes forgiveness possible and that as we forgive each other and ourselves, we will feel His love and experience His light in this life and even more fully in the eternal world to come. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Notes

1. Richard Sandomir, “Victoria Ruvolo, Who Forgave Her Attacker, Is Dead at 59,” *New York Times*, 28 March 2019, nytimes.com/2019/03/28/obituaries/victoria-ruvolo-dead.html?0p19G=2870.

2. “Woman Crushed by Frozen Turkey Shows Mercy,” ABC News, 6 January 2006, abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=1225516#.UW2KYspv7qI.

3. See Paul Vitello, “L.I. Teenager Is Sentenced to Six Months in Turkey Case,” *New York Times*, 18 October 2005, nytimes.com/2005/10/18/nyregion/li-teenager-is-sentenced-to-six-months-in-turkey-case.html.

4. The Forgiveness Project, “Victoria Ruvolo,” www.theforgivenessproject.com/victoria-ruvolo.

5. See Lisa Pulitzer, Victoria Ruvolo, and Robert Goldman, “No Room for Vengeance”: *In Justice and Healing* (New York: No Vengeance Publishers, 2011).

6. The Forgiveness Project, “Victoria Ruvolo.”

7. See Gordon B. Hinckley, “Forgiveness,” *Ensign*, November 2005.

8. Jessica Henrie, “Father Relies on Faith to Forgive Intoxicated Teen Driver,” *Deseret News*, 1 August 2012, deseret.com/2012/8/1/20504967/father-relies-on-faith-to-forgive-intoxicated-teen-driver#chris-williams-who-wrote-a-book-called-let-it-go-is-interviewed-in-salt-lake-city-monday-july-23-2012.

9. Chris Williams, “Just Let Go: One LDS Man’s Story of Tragedy and the Power of Forgiveness,” *LDS Living*, 5 January 2016, ldsliving.com/Let-It-Go-A-Story-of-Tragedy-and-the-Power-of-Forgiveness/s/71058; quoted in Neil L. Andersen, *The Divine Gift of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2019), 234. See also “Man Exercises a Year of Forgiveness After Drunk Teen Driver Kills Wife, Two Children,” *Deseret News*, 8 April 2013, deseret.com/2013/4/8/20061840/man-exercises-a-year-of-forgiveness-after-drunk-teen-driver-kills-wife-two-children; also Dallin H. Oaks, “Followers of Christ,” *Ensign*, May 2013.

10. Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” *Ensign*, November 2019.

11. Spencer W. McBride, in “It Caused Me Serious Reflection,” 5 January 2020, episode 5, *The First Vision: A Joseph Smith Papers Podcast*, produced by the Joseph Smith Papers Project, podcast, 25:20, josephsmithpapers.org/articles/the-first-vision-a-joseph-smith-papers-podcast; emphasis added. Quoting Joseph Smith, History ca. Summer 1832, page 3, Joseph Smith Papers Project, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/3; original spelling.

12. Joseph Smith, “Sketch Book for the Use of Joseph Smith Jr.,” *Journal*, September 1835–April 1836, page 24, Joseph Smith Papers Project, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-1835-1836/25; spelling and punctuation modernized.

13. Joseph Smith, History, ca. June 1839–ca. 1841 (draft 2), page 3, Joseph Smith Papers Project, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history

-circa-june-1839-circa-1841-draft-2/3; spelling and punctuation modernized; also Joseph Smith—History 1:16. The original source shows the writer first wrote that the pillar of light descended “gracefully” but then crossed that out and wrote “gradually.”

14. Joseph Smith, “Church History,” *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 9 (1 March 1842): 706–7.

15. See *A Pillar of Light: Celebrating 200 Years of the First Vision*, an exhibit in the BYU Library, L. Tom Perry Special Collections Gallery, August 2019–June 2020, exhibits.lib.byu.edu/first-vision.

16. John S. Tanner, “20/20 Vision: Seeing Your Life Through God’s Eyes,” BYU–Hawaii devotional address, 23 January 2020, speeches.byuh.edu/20-20-vision-jst.

17. Mosiah 16:9, a teaching of Abinadi during his trial before King Noah and his priests. Mormon also recorded in 3 Nephi 18:16 Jesus’s teaching: “Behold I am the light; I have set an example for you.”

In addition to the testimony of Book of Mormon prophets, we learn that Christ is the light from several revelations through the Prophet Joseph Smith in which the Lord declared: “I am the light which shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not” (D&C 6:21) and “I am the true light that lighteth [everyone] that cometh into the world” (D&C 93:2). We learn that light and truth are inextricably connected and that His light gives us light, enlightens our eyes, and quickens our understandings (see D&C 93:9, 26–40; 88:11).

If we “walk in the light of [our own] fire, and in the sparks that [we] have kindled,” the result will be sorrow (Isaiah 50:11). Conversely, Isaiah rhetorically asked, “Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light?” (Isaiah 50:10). The answer is no one. As we “trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God” (Isaiah 50:10), the Lord will be our “everlasting light” and “the days of [our] mourning shall be ended” (Isaiah 60:19, 20).

18. Matthew 5:14; emphasis added.

19. 3 Nephi 18:24; emphasis added.

20. Isaiah 53:10.

21. John 8:7.

22. John 8:9.

23. John 8:10–11.

24. John 8:12.

25. Romans 8:38–39.

26. 2 Nephi 4:19; see also verse 34.

27. Andersen, *Divine Gift of Forgiveness*, 225; see also Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Ministry of Reconciliation,” *Ensign*, November 2018.

28. Deborah Farmer Kris, “‘What Was Your Oops Today?’: How to Help Kids Practice Self-Compassion, Even on Tough Days,” *On Parenting*, *Washington Post*, 25 February 2020, washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/02/25/what-was-your-oops-today-how-help-kids-practice-self-compassion-even-tough-days.

29. Matthew 25:40.

30. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014), 289.

31. Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 290; emphasis in original.

32. Kevin J. Worthen, “Knowing Who You Are,” BYU devotional address, 8 January 2019; quoting “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995); emphasis added.

33. See Mosiah 27:35.

34. Moses 5:10.

35. Moses 5:11.

36. Julian of Norwich, *A Revelation of Love*, revelation 13, chapter 27, lines 10–11; in *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 209; spelling modernized.

37. See M. Russell Ballard, “Children of Heavenly Father,” BYU devotional address, 3 March 2020. During my freshman year at BYU, President Howard W. Hunter gave this message at the First Presidency Christmas devotional—his last public address to members of the Church: “This Christmas, mend a quarrel. Seek out a forgotten friend. Dismiss suspicion and replace it with trust. Write a letter. Give a soft answer. Encourage youth. Manifest your loyalty in word and deed. Keep a promise. Forgo a grudge.

Forgive an enemy. Apologize. Try to understand. Examine your demands on others. Think first of someone else. Be kind. Be gentle. Laugh a little more. Express your gratitude. Welcome a stranger. Gladden the heart of a child. Take pleasure in the beauty and wonder of the earth. Speak

your love and then speak it again” (“The Gifts of Christmas,” First Presidency Christmas devotional, 4 December 1994; also “First Presidency Extols Meaning of Christmas,” *Ensign*, February 1995; and Hunter, “Gospel Classics: The Gifts of Christmas,” *Ensign*, December 2002).