

Thoughts at Christmastime

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I think when I received the assignment to come here I still had visions of College Hall. I don't know that I've been at an assembly at Brigham Young University since. It's quite overpowering.

I don't know whether I should say this or not, in view of the black-and-white-clothes brigade over there, but in our experience with missionaries we had the custom of assigning those who arrived newly in the field to speak at a street meeting on the evening of their first day in the mission field. Their usual reaction was to shudder with the feeling that the most fearsome thing that could happen to them while they were on their missions was about to happen. My feelings tonight are quite similar. Of all the things I've watched General Authorities do, this matter of standing to speak in public before ten thousand people has loomed as one of the most awesome and frightening. I'm sustained with the thought that, within thirty or forty minutes from now, whatever it is that's going to take place here will already have happened.

Before we came President Brown mentioned that the Lord would bless me, and I told him I felt how much I needed it. It reminded me of a day when I was yet in the Aaronic Priesthood, attending a special gathering of

this group in our stake. One of the groups stood up and sang a song about their bishop. I believe his name was Bishop Diamond, and they said, "Here is Bishop Diamond. He's with us tonight. He's with us, God bless him. God bless him, he needs it."

Tonight is the seventh of December. My thoughts come back to the feeling, whenever this day rolls around, that all of us who are old enough reflect back on what we were doing when the news burst upon us of the Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. That day the lights began to go out in our country. It was a terrible feeling. The lights had already largely gone out throughout Europe, and subsequently we all passed through a period of terrible travail before the lights came back on again. We used to sing a song in those days—"When the Lights Come on Again All over the World."

Today my generation can give some hope to yours if you are troubled by the dark and gloomy prospects that sometimes appear in our future. The preceding generation has given us

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the feeling that there really *is* light ahead. This can and ought to be an optimistic world.

The Christmas Season

Now, in spirit this season is a time of light. For us who live in this hemisphere it's the darkest time of all the year, but this is never apparent when Christmastime rolls around. Since this is your last fireside before the Christmas vacation, I'm sure—together with the great music that we've already participated in—we can usher in the Christmas season tonight.

The spirit begins to soar as the soul awakens to festivity. At BYU, classes begin to lose their interest. Other thoughts start to come into focus—going home to family, to your friends and your loved ones, engagement rings, and other things. Tradition and custom have built Christmas into a wonderful experience. And it's a great time to remember. To children throughout the world it's a time for Santa Claus. To the followers of Christ it's the greatest festival of the year, for we are told that "there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). And herein we remember the central figure of the entire universe, the promised Savior and the Redeemer.

Faith in Christ

We've been taught to say in the Church that faith is the first principle of the gospel. Then we're reminded that faith is the moving cause of all action; often we're referred to the farmer who plants his crops motivated by faith, and so on.

Let me now state that faith is *not* the first principle of the gospel. The first principle of the gospel is faith *in the Lord Jesus Christ*. There is a great difference. Any unbelieving farmer can plant in faith, but to believe in Jesus Christ is something else. There's been no witnessed or authenticated event in all history that can compare to the coming to earth of Jesus Christ. It's good for university students who engross

themselves in gathering facts to remember this point. He spoke as our God, by way of prophecy, about the nature of his coming. To Samuel the Lamanite he gave the prediction of heavenly manifestations. And then to Nephi, the contemporary of the Savior who was a prophet here in America, he said, "Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world" (3 Nephi 1:13). You really can't have a Christmas without referring to that uplifting story as recorded in Saint Luke:

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold I bring good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. [Luke 2:6–14]

Have you ever listened to that story in a sacred setting without feeling the spiritual assurance that this event actually took place? This heavenly influence of which the angels told, we all now feel right here this moment through the power of the Holy Ghost, which

witnesses again to us—as it has done for nearly two thousand years—that the birth of the Lord is real. Its significance transcends every other event in the history of the world since the Creation. In his unsurpassed oratorio, *The Messiah*, George Frideric Handel quotes from the divine announcements and the injunctions which surround the hallowed life of Jesus Christ. Of his *destiny* we sing: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Of his *mission*: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (Matthew 11:28–29). Of the *Atonement*: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Of his *glorification*: “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

The Atonement

Throughout the years of my life I have heard how Christ died for us. This concept has always been a little abstract to me. How could I get the feeling of just what he did and how it was accomplished and its significance? The understanding came much better into focus two years ago at a Christmas gathering when one of our dear friends told of his experience during the Second World War. He was serving in the South Pacific when the commander of his unit ordered for the following day a special reconnaissance mission for John’s detachment. John said, “I shuddered at the thought of this assignment, for I knew from experience that it would be useless and foolish. There was no valuable purpose to be attained by it. It would be very dangerous, and I felt almost certainly

that, if I went, I along with others would be killed. I prayed that night with great earnestness, explaining to the Lord how I wanted to devote my life to his purposes. I didn’t want to lose my life in some useless, fruitless mission. I wanted to return home safely and fulfill my destiny in the earth—to find my wife and raise a family in the gospel. The Lord heard my prayer. In the morning I was afflicted with a fever. I wasn’t very ill but ill enough that I was relieved from the mission, with another being sent in my stead.” As he had foreseen, the mission was a disaster and his replacement, together with a number of others, was killed. Then John said, “I really began to think. This man had given his life for me. Whenever I rejoice in the blessings of my life I now remember him. The gifts of my wife, my children, my grandchildren, my whole blessed life on this earth were bought for me at the sacrifice of the life of that man who took my place. It was unavoidable, of course, in this case, but nevertheless very real.”

Of such a nature, but even more infinite, was the sacrifice of the Savior in our behalf. Were it not for him—the life he lived and the atonement he wrought—we would all be without hope of continued happiness and of the blessings of exaltation, and we would be in a way to suffer grievous penalties and disasters which make life utterly unbearable. What would this world be like without the Savior? Even the profane man would have an inadequate basis from which to launch his oath. What would life be like with Christmas? From infancy it has been the symbol of our most enthralling moments.

In recent times we have had the means to project the witness we bear beyond our own society. Especially in our general conferences we begin to hear with more emphasis the statement of the fact that the prophet of this Church is not the prophet merely to the members of the Church, but indeed he is the Lord’s prophet to the entire world. To every Latter-day Saint, of

course, this is entirely logical; for we know that through the restoration of the gospel, with the accompanying authority of the holy priesthood, the message of salvation is now made available to all nations as rapidly as we can gain access into them. This again is a fulfillment of numerous prophecies of olden times.

The knowledge of these recent works of God among his children enables us to teach again what was fully understood among the original disciples of the Savior. Even though many inhabitants of the world now disclaim the validity of the basic principles of Christianity, there was no such doubt in the minds of Peter and of early apostles. They knew, and their every word proclaimed, that Jesus was the Redeemer, not only for the Jews, but also for all men on the face of the earth.

Recently Sister Bangerter and I had the privilege of passing over Mars' Hill in Athens, where Paul set forth in clarity the doctrine that all people everywhere come under the plan of God for salvation. As it says in the Book of Acts:

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.

For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.

God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;

Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation;

That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being. . . . For we are also his offspring.

Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device.

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent:

Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead. [Acts 17:22–31]

Gospel Truths Versus Worldly Beliefs

There is quite a difference between the belief of the gospel and the belief of the world. To make a brief comparison, the gospel teaches us that he lives, that God our Father made us. The world tends to say we made God. The gospel says Christ is the literal son of God. The world says he was just a man, perhaps a great one. The gospel says he is resurrected and lives above. The world says he is dead and his resurrection is a myth. The gospel says his words are eternal truth. The world says his excellent teachings have meaning only as they relate to how we want to live. The gospel says that sin is spiritual death. The world says there is neither sin nor spirit. The gospel says love is eternal. The world says love is for convenience. The gospel says we will be judged upon principles of good and evil. The world says good and evil are relative and there is no devil. The gospel says we will live again. The world says that when you're dead, you're dead, and that God is dead. And the gospel says to serve God and your fellowman. And the world says to enjoy what comes for your own satisfaction.

I suppose it could be assumed that these worldly ideas have just recently been thought up. No greater fallacy exists. History is loaded with examples of how these same old ideas have been carried on throughout all ages, and

every generation that digs them up has eventually led itself into times of destruction. In the Doctrine and Covenants we are told that “they seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol” (D&C 1:16).

Among the greatest lies that we have heard are those that there was an evolution of the concept of only one god, and this is often attributed to Moses. If you go into the background of it, you find that no one who has ever studied a nickel’s worth about Moses can ever imagine that he dug up the idea of one God. Moses, when he was called by the voice out of the burning bush, stepped forward, approached that holy place, and he heard the voice. I think it may be more vivid if you recall what you have seen in the movie *The Ten Commandments*. As he approached the bush, he heard the voice which said, “Moses, Moses . . . put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground” (Exodus 3:5). Then, as Moses conversed with the Lord, he was commanded to go back into Egypt and deliver the children of Israel. He gave every excuse he could think of, but finally he said, “I don’t even know your name. When I go back, who shall I say sent me?”

And the Lord spoke again and said, “Say to the children of Israel ‘I Am’ sent you. I Am that I Am.” (see Exodus 3:14.) Have you ever thought deeply of the significance of those words? You’ll realize where the idea came from that there was one God.

As we review this film, *The Ten Commandments*, we remember much of the fictitious part. It showed how, after Moses had brought forth the various plagues upon Egypt, the son of Pharaoh was smitten in death, as were the families of all the Egyptians. In the film Pharaoh took his young son in his arms and approached his god, who stood there, an idol in the form of

a great beast. It’s still impressive to me how he pled to his god to bring his son back to life. In spite of all his prayers, his god stood and looked at him as dumb as he was in the beginning. Then Pharaoh’s wife, who in fiction had at one time been in love with Moses, said to her husband, “Go out and find these people and kill Moses.” So Pharaoh pursued with his armies who met with destruction. Finally he returned to his household.

His wife said, “Well, what happened? Did you find him? Did you kill him?”

He said, “No, I couldn’t kill him.”

She said, “Why?”

“Because his God is God.” That testimony is in the depths of the meaning of “I Am.”

Another of the great lies is that chastity is puritanical or victorian. All around us we hear excuses made for licentiousness and immorality on the basis that chastity is just a faded-out, worn-out idea. This fallacy is evident to anybody who ever read a book, because the principles of righteousness or morality were embodied in truth long before Jesus Christ came on earth. He had taught them throughout the ages of earth to the ancient prophets, and they have always been the way of the Lord.

Another false idea that comes to us more frequently now is the perversion that we’re witnessing in marriage, in the home, and in the family. There is a philosophy that these principles have no depth and meaning. to any true Latter-day Saint who bases his principles on Jesus Christ, there is no question that these are eternal values which the gospel teaches us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the narrow way: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:13–14).

Elder Packer has pointed out that because of this declaration many people in the world have lost faith in the truth. They say, “Surely

there must be other ways. This is very restrictive. It wouldn't even be fair." And so various religions and other doctrines have crept in and supposed that god didn't really mean what he said, that mankind might find a way to salvation aside from the name of Jesus Christ, that maybe there are other names and other ways to salvation. They have made adjustments in their faith, in spite of all that God has said. For all these reasons we find ourselves now as the true witnesses of Jesus Christ. We are called to live in the world but to become spiritually out of the world and "stand as witnesses," as Alma said, "of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in, even until death, that ye may be redeemed of God" (Mosiah 18:9).

Demonstrations of Faith

I had an interesting experience two or three years ago as I was assigned to the West Texas Region. The stake president there had a son who played football in high school, and I'd like to tell you that in Texas they take their football seriously. They take Texas seriously, as a matter of fact, and I learned many things there. From the stake president I actually learned that George Washington was really born in Texas. The story was that one morning his father, who had planted a nice pecan orchard, had given George a little hatchet for his birthday present. Later he went out and found that one of his trees had been chopped down. He said to George, "Did you chop down the pecan tree?"

George said, "Oh, Father, I cannot tell a lie. I chopped it down with my little hatchet." That's supposedly when they moved to Virginia because his father said that anybody who can't tell a lie has no business living in Texas.

I hope that story won't be a reflection on Texas, because I recognize it as a truly marvelous place. But they do take their football seriously. I happened to attend a game with the stake president where his son played in one of

the quarter-final games for the state championship. (They eventually won the state.) I noticed an interesting thing before the game: both teams came out on the field, knelt down, and had prayer. You have to understand that Texas is in what is sometimes called the Bible Belt. There are many Baptists and Disciples of Christ, and it's not uncommon to find towns in Texas that close entirely on Sunday and bar the sale of liquor, even though they're not Mormon communities.

Well, our team won the game, and after the game the other team didn't have much to pray about. Our team again knelt down on the field and had another prayer, and before they prayed all the high school students in the stands poured out on the field and joined the team. They covered nearly a fourth of the field, and they all joined in that prayer. I thought it was an impressive example. I can't tell you how sincere they were, but I would assume that they meant what they were doing and they were grateful for their blessings.

We may not necessarily use that means to demonstrate our faith in Christ, but we ought not to be behind others in our positions as true witnesses of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why should we not become the greatest witnesses in all the world of the Lord Jesus Christ? Valiance takes effort and character. Returned missionaries who forget and become entrapped in sin have failed the trust. Married people in the Church who refuse to learn and live the gospel of loving one another have also failed. These are very true challenges; they are conditions that surround us increasingly all the time.

One night about a year ago in a hotel in Lisbon, Portugal, I was by myself and found out what it means to suffer "jet lag." (You cross part of the way around the world, and when it's time to sleep you're not sleepy.) So as I went to sleep at 10:30, being tired, I woke up at 11:30 and couldn't go back to sleep. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to do some reading, because usually when I read it puts

me to sleep. But I had the experience of reading extensively that night. Out of the eleventh chapter of 3 Nephi, the Savior in his visit to America declared:

And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me. . . .

And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God.

And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned. . . .

. . . and whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the Father bear record of me, for he will visit him with fire and with the Holy Ghost. [3 Nephi 11:32–35]

As I read those passages I felt the truth of them by the power of the Holy Ghost, which came to me and bore witness to me that this was truly the doctrine of our Father in heaven and Jesus Christ, his Son.

Testimony of the Book of Mormon

You can know of the divinity of the Savior. No doubt many of you, perhaps almost all of you, know. You have a promise. We are all, I suppose, aware of the promise in the Book of Mormon wherein it states: “And when ye shall receive these things [that are written in that book], I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moroni 10:4).

The occasion I referred to was not the first time I have felt the witness and the assuring power of the Holy Ghost about the truth of that great book, but there is a way to read that book so that you get the testimony. I remember Elder McConkie, when he was presiding over a mission in Australia, quoted this promise to a gathering that he was instructing. In the group

were two Protestant ministers. One of the men arose and said, “That promise is not true.”

Elder McConkie said, “How do you know it’s not true?”

He said, “Because I tried it. I read the book and then I asked.”

Elder McConkie said, “Well, how did you ask?”

“I said in my prayer, ‘O God, if this book be true, please strike me dead.’ It didn’t happen, so obviously the book isn’t true.”

Elder McConkie said, “I explained to him as carefully as you can, and still be a Christian gentleman, about what it says about the way you should read the book. Of course, he hadn’t complied.”

When you come to the point of needing that testimony, take the book as a sacred thing. Before you begin to read it, kneel down and ask God if he will guide you in your study and add to you the testimony and witness of the truth of what you read. Then when you put it down each time, kneel again and ask him to assure you and indicate to you if what you’ve read is true or not. I’m sure that you can’t go halfway through the book before you’ll know through the power of the Holy Ghost that it is really true. This is what the Lord refers to as the “new covenant” of the Book of Mormon. In the Doctrine and Covenants he said that the Church was under condemnation because they had not kept the new covenant, but they said to the Lord that his promises were not true (see D&C 84:55–57). If we say that the Lord doesn’t keep his promises, it’s purely because we haven’t kept his covenant, which is to read the book on the basis of what I’ve indicated and to come to an understanding of it. If we do so, then he’s obligated by covenant to give us the answer to our prayers and to give us the assurance of the divinity of this new witness for Jesus Christ which we proclaim to all the world.

I want to tell you that I have a testimony that Jesus is the Christ. At this time I do rejoice in the wonderful event that we commemorate,

in the excitement that comes to our children and the uplifting thrills that continue to return to me year after year in the realization that the Savior really was born. The camels and the angels and the manger and the animals and all the rest are vivid and vital and very clear and true to me. They're not true just because I've listened to a legend. They're true because the

Spirit of our Father in heaven through the Holy Ghost has touched me and given me the testimony of the birth of his Son Jesus Christ on the earth. To him we are obligated to give service throughout our lives as members of the Church of Jesus Christ. May we do so I pray in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.