

Jesus Christ—Gifts and Expectations

EZRA TAFT BENSON

My beloved brothers and sisters, humbly and gratefully I stand before you this morning, humbled by your presence, grateful for the gospel that makes this great University possible. I hope I'll be given the strength today to say what I know the Lord wants me to say.

As we enter this Christmas season, a season of getting and giving, I would like to talk to you about a few of the many gifts we have received from our Lord, Jesus Christ, and what we in turn might give to him.

Christ Gave Us His Life as a Model

First, he gave us the perfect model—himself—after which we are to pattern our lives. He said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Not only did he lay down before us the perfect example for earthly living, but for our sake he willingly gave us his life. He went through an agony both in body and spirit, of which we cannot comprehend, to bring to us the glorious blessing of the Atonement and the Resurrection (see D&C 19:15–19).

Some men are willing to die for their faith but will not fully live for it. Christ both lived and died for us. By walking in his steps and through his atonement we can gain the greatest

gift of all—eternal life—which is that kind of life of the great Eternal One, our Father in heaven.

Christ asked the question as to what manner of men ought we to be. He answered by saying we ought to be even as he is (see 3 Nephi 27:27). That man is greatest and most blessed and joyful whose life most closely fits the pattern of the Christ. This has nothing to do with earthly wealth, power, or prestige. The only true test of greatness, blessedness, joyfulness is how close a life can come to being like the Master, Jesus Christ. He is the right way, the full truth, and the abundant life.

The constant and most recurring question in our minds, touching every thought and deed of our lives, should be “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). The answer to that question can come through the Light of Christ and the Holy Ghost. Fortunate are those who so live that their beings are filled with both of them.

We have a work to do, to follow him.

Ezra Taft Benson was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 10 December 1974.

*Who does God's work will get God's pay,
However long may seem the day,
However weary be the way,
He does not pay as others pay,
In merely gold or raiments gay.
In only goods that will decay,
But His high wisdom knows a way,
And this is sure, let come what may,
Who does God's work will get God's pay.*

I testify to you that his pay for his work is the best pay that you can get in this world or any other.

Christ Gave Us a Prophet

Secondly, in addition to Christ providing us the gift of his life as a model, he has provided us the gift of a prophet. Of all mortal men, we should keep our eyes most firmly fixed on the captain, the prophet, seer, and revelator, and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This is the man who stands closest to the fountain of living waters. There are some heavenly instructions for us that we can only receive through the prophet. A good way to measure your standing with the Lord is to see how you feel about, and act upon, the inspired words of his earthly representative, the Prophet-President. The inspired words of the President are not to be trifled with. All men are entitled to inspiration, and various men are entitled to revelation for their particular assignments. But only one man stands as the Lord's spokesman to the Church and the world, and he is the President of the Church. The words of all other men should be weighed against his inspired words.

Although his prophet is mortal, God will not let him lead his Church astray. God knows all things, the end from the beginning, and no man becomes President of the church of Jesus Christ by accident, nor remains there by chance, nor is called home by happenstance (*The Discourses of Wilford Woodruff*, ed. G.

Homer Durham [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1946], pp. 212–13).

The most important prophet, so far as we are concerned, is the one who is living in our day and age. This is the prophet who has today's instructions from God to us. God's revelation to Adam did not instruct Noah how to build the ark. Every generation has the need of the ancient scripture, plus the current scripture from the living prophet. Therefore, the most crucial reading and pondering which you should do is the latest inspired words from the Lord's mouthpiece. That is why it is essential that you have access to and carefully read his words in Church periodicals.

Yes, we thank thee, O God, for a prophet to guide us in these latter days.

Christ Gave Us His Church

Thirdly, in addition to the gifts of the life of Christ and his prophet is the gift of his church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, "the only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth" (D&C 1:30). There is no salvation nor exaltation for us outside of the Church. Through it we receive baptism, priesthood, celestial marriage, and other sealing powers. It is the organized means which God is using to establish and expand his work. We must work with it and in it, build it up and move it forward. We should be willing to give generously of our time, talents, and means for the Church. No matter what happens to the world, the Church will grow in strength and will be intact when the Lord comes again.

God has assured us that the Church will never again be taken from the earth because of apostasy. He has said that he is pleased with the Church, speaking collectively and not individually (D&C 1:30). This means that certain individuals within the Church may go astray and even fall away. This may happen even to a person in the Church who is in a position of some influence and authority. It has happened in the past. It will happen in the future. If our

faith is in Jesus Christ and not in the arm of flesh, then we will know that we are members of the church of Jesus Christ and not the church of men.

If you see some individual in the Church doing things which disturb you, or you feel the Church is not doing things the way you think they could or should be done, the following principles might be helpful.

God has to work through mortals of varying degrees of spiritual progress. Sometimes he temporarily grants to men their unwise requests in order that they might learn from their own sad experiences. Some refer to this as the "Samuel principle." The children of Israel wanted a king, like all the nations. The prophet Samuel was displeased and prayed to the Lord about it. The Lord responded by saying to Samuel, "They have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them." The Lord told Samuel to warn the people of the consequences if they had a king. Samuel gave them the warning, but they still insisted on their king. So God gave them a king and let them suffer. They learned the hard way. God wanted it to be otherwise, but within certain bounds he grants unto men according to their desires. Bad experiences are an expensive school that only fools keep going to (see 1 Samuel 8).

Sometimes in our attempts to mimic the world, contrary to the prophet's counsel, we run after the world's false educational, political, musical, and dress ideas. New worldly standards take over, a gradual breakdown occurs, and finally, after much suffering, a humble people are ready to be taught once again a higher law.

Now, during all this gradual lowering of standards, the righteous should be living up to the highest personal standards they can—not forcing those standards on others but preparing for and awaiting a better day which surely must come. This leads me to another principle: that a leader cannot lead without followers. If

better standards are to be observed, there must be a better people to do it.

The Book of Mormon talks about "clearing" away the branches

which bring forth bitter fruit, according to the strength of the good and the size thereof; and ye shall not clear away the bad thereof all at once, lest the roots thereof should be too strong for the graft, and the graft thereof shall perish. . . .

. . . wherefore ye shall clear away the bad according as the good shall grow, that the root and the top may be equal in strength until the good shall overcome the bad. [Jacob 5:65, 66]

Only a Zion people can bring in a Zion society. And as the Zion people increase, so we will be able to incorporate more of the principles of Zion until we have a people prepared to receive the Lord.

This means that on this campus, in due time, there will be an increasing number of textbooks written by inspired men of the Church. There will be less and less a tendency to subscribe to the false teachings of men. There will be more and more a tendency first to lay the groundwork of the gospel truth in every subject and then, if necessary, to show where the world may fall short of that standard. In due time there will be increased teaching by the Spirit of God, but that can take place only if there is a decreased promotion of the precepts of men.

We seek that which is praiseworthy, lovely, virtuous, and of good report; and we salute Beethoven, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, and Michelangelo. In due time, we will also have more of our own giants—particularly great father-patriarchs and noble companions and mothers of men. There is certain music heard and art seen and clothes worn on this campus that must pass away—not because the styles change but because our standards will be improved.

When individual actions of some Church members disturb you, here's another principle to consider. This is the principle of stewardship. As the kingdom grows larger, more and more responsibilities have to be delegated and stewardships handed out. Men respond in different degrees of valiancy to their stewardships. God is very patient and long-suffering as he waits for some of us to rise to our responsibilities. He usually gives a man a long enough rope and a long enough time either to pull himself up to the presence of God or to drop off somewhere below. But while God is patient, no puny arm of man in his stewardship can long impede or pervert the work of the Lord. The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind ever so finely.

Because God has given men their agency, there will always be those who will misuse it. The gospel net draws in the good and the bad, the best and the worst—the worst because the devil, before the final cleansing, puts some of his followers within the kingdom in order to try and destroy it. We have some of them within the kingdom today, and in due course their number shall be known. Time has a way of taking care of all things, of elevating the good and bringing down the bad. If we see things going on within the kingdom that disturb us, we might first resolve if the matter falls within our stewardship. We then might go to the person or people involved. If it is of such a nature that we think it should be called to the attention of higher authority, then we can, in a kindly and quiet manner, take the necessary steps at the proper level.

To publish differences we may think we have with the leaders of the Church, to create strife and division, is a sure road to apostasy. Our task is to stick with the kingdom, not to let anything or anybody disaffect or sour us toward that great gift which Christ has given us—his church.

The Church is true. Keep its laws; attend its meetings; sustain its leaders; accept its callings; get its recommend; enjoy its blessings.

Christ Gave Us the Scriptures

Fourthly, in addition to the gifts of the life of Christ, his prophet, and his church is the gift of scripture, particularly the Book of Mormon.

In his dedicatory prayer for the Washington Temple, President Kimball referred to the Book of Mormon, as did the Prophet Joseph, as the most correct book. The Prophet Joseph Smith also called it the keystone of our religion. He said that “a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book” (*History of the Church*, 4:461). That book was written for our day. Mormon, who compiled it, saw us in vision and was directed to put into the book those things God felt we would especially need in our time. There was inspiration in making the Book of Mormon a required religion class on this campus. The faculty and student body should know the Book of Mormon better than any other book. Not only should we know what history and faith-promoting stories it contains, but we should also understand its teachings. If we really did our homework and approached the Book of Mormon doctrinally, we could expose the errors and find the truths to combat many of the current false theories and philosophies of men, including socialism, humanism, organic evolution, and others.

I have noted within the Church the difference in discernment, in insight, in conviction, and in spirit between those who know and love the Book of Mormon and those who do not. That book is a great sifter.

Christ Gave Us the Constitution

Fifth, in addition to the gifts of the life of Christ, his prophet, his church, and the Book of Mormon is the gift of his Constitution. The Lord said, “I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom

I raised up” (D&C 101:80). Among the opening words of his dedicatory prayer at the Washington Temple, President Kimball referred to our inspired Constitution.

The elders of this Church have a prophetic mission yet to perform so far as the Constitution is concerned. In a discourse on July 19, 1840, Joseph Smith said, “Even this nation will be on the very verge of crumbling to pieces and tumbling to the ground, and when the Constitution is upon the brink of ruin, this people will be the staff upon which the nation shall lean, and they shall bear the Constitution away from the very verge of destruction” (M8d 155, Bx4, Joseph Smith, Church Historian’s Library).

Now, how are the elders going to prepare for that mission? How are they going to know what the Constitution is, so they will know when it is on the brink of ruin? In many of the law schools of today you will hear that the Constitution is whatever the Supreme Court says it is. Could it be that the Supreme Court, which President McKay said is leading this nation down the road to atheism, is the agency to tell us what this divine document is (David O. McKay, Church News, 22 June 1963; Jerreld Newquist, comp., *Prophets, Principles, and National Survival*, pp. 187–88)? Can we learn best how to preserve it by studying what it is at the hands of some of those who are seeking to destroy it?

But President McKay had a better approach when he encouraged us to support good and conscientious candidates who are truly dedicated to *the Constitution in the tradition of our founding fathers*. They are the ones the Lord referred to as wise men. It is to them, the Lord, and his prophets that we should go to determine what the Constitution is. There must have been a tradition of our founding fathers, or President McKay would not have referred to it. (One of the best books on this subject was written by Clarence Carson, entitled *The American Tradition*, distributed by The

Foundation for Economic Education at Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. President J. Reuben Clark served on their board of trustees for some time. I now have the honor of so serving.) To the Lord, his prophets, and the founding fathers we must go to learn of this divine document so that our efforts will be to preserve and not to destroy the Constitution.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said in a great discourse in Nauvoo on February 7, 1844, “Were I the president of the United States . . . I would honor the old paths of the venerated fathers of freedom; I would walk in the tracks of the illustrious patriots who carried the ark of the Government upon their shoulders with an eye single to the glory of the people” (*History of the Church*, 6:208).

Said President George Albert Smith, “I am saying to you that to me the Constitution of the United States of America is just as much from my Heavenly Father as the Ten Commandments. When that is my feeling I am not going to go very far away from the Constitution and I am going to try to keep it where the Lord started it, and not let anti-Christ come into this country” (*Conference Report*, April 1948, p. 182).

And speaking of anti-Christ, I would like to tell you, if you want to get some idea of how we are flaunting the Constitution, see how the Constitution defines treason. Then observe what we are doing to build up the enemy in this totally anti-Christ conspiracy. If we continue on this tragic course of aid and trade to the enemy, then the Lord has warned us of the consequences which will follow in chapter eight of Ether in the Book of Mormon.

Thank God for the Constitution, which made it possible for the Lord to establish his church and base of operations here in the United States for these last days. And may God bless the elders of Israel so that when, as President John Taylor said, “the people shall have torn to shreds the Constitution of the United States the Elders of Israel will be found holding it up to the nations of earth and

proclaiming liberty" (*Journal of Discourses*, 21:8).

Now, Christ's life, his prophet, his church, the Book of Mormon, the Constitution of the United States are but a few of the gifts of Christ to bless us, not only at this season, but also throughout our lives.

Our Gifts to Christ

And now, my friends—what can we possibly give to the Lord this Christmastime? In consideration of all that he has done and is doing for us, there is something that we might give him in return.

Christ's great gift to us was his life and sacrifice—should that not then be our small gift to him—our lives and sacrifices, not only now, but in the future? A few years ago, my colleague, Elder Boyd Packer, said this:

I'm not ashamed to say that . . . I want to be good. And I've found in my life that it has been critically important that this was established between me and the Lord so that I knew that He knew which way I committed my agency. I went before Him and said, "I'm not neutral, and you can do with me what you want. If you need my vote, it's there. I don't care what you do with me, and you don't have to take anything from me, because I give it to you—everything, all I own, all I am." And that makes the difference. [Seminary and Institute conference, summer 1970]

Yes, men and women who turn their lives over to God will find out that he can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. Whoever will lose his life to God will find he has eternal life.

And now as to our sacrifice to him. Yes, sacrifice is the crowning test of the gospel. Men are tried and tested in this mortal

probation to see if they will put first into their lives the things of the kingdom of God (see Matthew 6:33). To gain eternal life, they must be willing, if called upon, to sacrifice all things for the gospel. "If thou wilt be perfect," Jesus said to the rich young man, "go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me."

Hearing this injunction, Peter said, "Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?"

To this query, our Lord replied, "Every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life" (Matthew 19:16–29; see also D&C 132:55).

Joseph Smith said this about sacrifice:

For a man to lay down his all, his character and reputation, his honor and applause, his good name among men, his houses, his lands, his brothers and sisters, his wife and children, and even his life—counting all things but filth and dross for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ—requires more than mere belief or supposition that he is doing the will of God; but actual knowledge, realizing that, when these sufferings are ended he will enter into eternal rest; and be a partaker of the glory of God. . . . A religion that does not require the sacrifice of all things never has power sufficient to produce the faith necessary unto life and salvation; for, from the first existence of man, the faith necessary unto the enjoyment of life and salvation never could be obtained without the sacrifice of all earthly things. It was through this sacrifice, and this only that God has ordained that men should enjoy eternal life. [Lectures on Faith, pp. 58–60]

Elder Bruce McConkie said, "Sacrifice pertains to mortality; in the eternal sense there is none. Sacrifice involves giving up the things of this world because of the promises of blessings to be gained in a better world. In the eternal

perspective there is no sacrifice in giving up all things—even including the laying down of one's life—if eternal life is gained through such a course" (*Mormon Doctrine* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], p. 664; see also D&C 98:13–15).

But just as when one loses his life to God he really finds the abundant life; so also, when one sacrifices all to God, then God in return shares all that he has with him. Try as you may, you cannot put the Lord in your debt—for every time you try to do his will he simply pours out more blessings upon you. Sometimes the blessings may seem to you to be a little slow in coming; perhaps this tests your faith, but come they will and abundantly. And it has been said, "Cast your bread upon the waters and after a while it comes back toasted and buttered."

Said President Brigham Young:

I have heard a great many tell about what they have suffered for Christ's sake. I am happy to say I never had occasion to. I have enjoyed a great deal, but so far as suffering goes I have compared it a great many times, in my feelings and before congregations, to a man wearing an old, worn-out, tattered and dirty coat, and somebody comes along and gives him one that is new, whole and beautiful. This is the comparison I draw when I think of what I've suffered for the Gospel's sake—I have thrown away an old coat and have put on a new one. [Discourses of Brigham Young, comp. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1973), p. 348]

The saints never suffer as the sinners do, President Young explained:

As to trials, why bless your hearts, the man or woman who enjoys the spirit of our religion has no trials; but the man or woman who tries to live according to the Gospel of the Son of God, and at the same time clings to the spirit of the world, has trials and sorrows acute and keen, and that, too, continually.

Cast off the yoke of the enemy, and put on the yoke of Christ, and you will say that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. This I know by experience. [Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 348]

Do you know one reason why righteous mothers love their children so much? It's because they sacrifice so much for them. We love what we sacrifice for, and we sacrifice for what we love.

But when you give little you receive little. Said the poet:

*I bargained with life for a penny
And life would pay no more;
However I begged at evening
When I counted my scanty store.
For life is a just employer,
It pays you what you ask;
But once you have set the wages,
Why you must bear the task.
I work for a menial's hire,
Only to learn, dismayed;
That any wage I had asked of life,
Life would have willingly paid.
[Jessie Belle Rittenhouse, "My Wage"]*

Why don't we go all the way with the Lord—not part way? Why don't we sacrifice all of our sins—not some of them?

She was a young girl. She had sacrificed her worldly plans to spend long, tedious hours in work in order to provide for and raise her younger orphan brother. But now she lay on her bed, dying of a sickness. She called for her bishop, and as she talked to him in her last moments, he held her rough, hard, work-calloused hand in his. Then she asked the question "How will God know that I am his?"

Gently he raised her wrist and answered, "Show him your hands."

Someday we may see that pair of hands that sacrificed so much for us. Are our hands clean, and do they show the signs of being in

his service? Are our hearts pure and filled with his thoughts?

Each week we make a solemn covenant to be like him and take him for our leader, to always remember him in everything and keep all of his commandments. In return he promises to give us his Spirit.

A few years ago, we knew our Elder Brother and his and our Father in heaven well. We rejoiced at the upcoming opportunity for earthly life that could make it possible for us to have a fullness of joy as they had. We could hardly wait to demonstrate to our Father and our Brother, the Lord, how much we loved them and how we would be obedient to them in spite of the earthly opposition of the evil one. And now we're here—our memories are veiled—and we're showing God and ourselves what we can do. Nothing is going to startle us more when we pass through the veil to the other side than to realize how well we know our Father and how familiar his face is to us. And then, President Young said, we're going to wonder why we were so stupid in the flesh.

God loves us, he's watching us, he wants us to succeed, and we'll know someday that he has not left one thing undone for the eternal welfare of each of us. If we only knew that there are heavenly hosts pulling for us—friends in heaven, whom we can't remember now, who yearn for our victory. This is our day to show what we can do—what life and sacrifice we can daily, hourly, instantly bring to God. If we give our all, we will get his all from the greatest of all.

I close with this last true story, as it was given by Bob Richards in his book *Life's Higher Goals*. It always touches my heart and it may touch yours. Lou Little tells this story about his greatest football team. They were on their way to the conference championship—one last game. He had a boy on his squad who had not quite been able to make the team for four straight years. Just before the game—three days before—Lou was given a telegram to give

to this boy that informed him his only living relative had just died. The boy looked at the telegram and said, "Coach, I'll be back for Saturday's game." The morning of the game he came up to his coach and said, "Lou, I want you to put me in this game. I know I haven't made the first team yet, but let me in for this kickoff. I'll prove to you that I'm worthy of it." Well, Lou could see that the boy was emotionally upset, and he made all kinds of excuses, but finally he thought, "Well, he can't do much harm on the kickoff, so I'll put the boy in."

The roar of the crowd followed the kickoff. The opposing quarterback took the ball on the goal line, moved up, and on the seven-yard line there was a tremendous tackle. The boy had dropped him in his tracks. On the next play Lou left him in. He made the next tackle; he was in on the next tackle; you couldn't move him out of there. He made practically every tackle that day—terrific downfield blocking. He was the reason why Columbia won the championship. Afterwards, all the guys were pounding him on the back. When they were all done, Lou Little went up to the boy and said, "Son, I don't understand it. Today you were an all-American. I've never seen you play like this in four straight years. What happened?"

And the boy looked up at his coach and said, "Coach, you knew my dad died, didn't you?"

"Yes, I handed you the telegram."

He said, "You knew he was blind, didn't you?"

"Yes, I've seen you walk him around the campus many times."

He said, "Coach, today is the first football game my dad ever saw me play." It makes a difference, friends, when those unseen eyes are watching.

Give God your best, and his best will come back to you. May God be with you this season and always, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.