

The Promised Land

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President Samuelson, members of the faculty, family members, guests, and graduates: my wife, Kathy, and I are honored to celebrate this day and all the accomplishments that have led to it with each of you. We rejoice in the accomplishments and achievements recognized by these proceedings and in the privilege of being with you.

We feel profound respect for Brigham Young University and for the Church that supports it. With you we recognize that heaven's hand rests upon this school. It is an honor to be invited to study here and a rare, even remarkable, blessing to graduate from a university that bears the Lord's imprimatur.

Four of our seven children are BYU graduates. Our youngest son is enrolled here now and continues with his undergraduate studies. When he finishes his course work, he'll be the fifth of our children to graduate from BYU. One of our daughters is a member of the faculty. We are greatly indebted to BYU and to all whose contributions to the school have made possible these great blessings to our family.

We are delighted to congratulate all who this day receive a degree from BYU. We salute you, your spouses, children, family, and any others, including future family members, who

have contributed to your success. You know and we know that this culminating day in your scholastic careers would not have been possible without the loving and generous support of others. You have immediate benefactors, as has been mentioned: your parents, spouses, children, family, and friends, as well as BYU faculty and staff—all have contributed immeasurably to your experience here.

There are other unseen but very real benefactors, as President Samuelson observed. Their faith and actions have blessed you. If we think for a moment, we will recognize and feel to honor Latter-day Saints across the world whose faithful contributions, whether measured in multiple millions of dollars or in priceless pennies, have paid for the floors you've walked on, the air conditioning you've enjoyed on a hot summer's day, the scientific instruments you've utilized, and the books you've checked out from the library. For many hundreds of thousands of your brothers and sisters, the opportunity to know what you

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have known here, and may have even taken for granted, is completely out of reach, even unimaginable. The standard of living and abundance commonplace at BYU vastly exceed what most of our brothers and sisters will ever experience. The cumulative power of faith and tithing are demonstrated by everything we see at BYU.

Like you, I have been reading the Old Testament this year as the assigned course of study for Sunday School. I have been intrigued by something I've read. You will remember that Moses and the children of Israel sojourned 40 years in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt. Near the end of his life, having been told that he wouldn't be allowed to cross the River Jordan into Israel, the promised land, Moses did everything he knew to prepare the children of Israel to enter that promised land. The book of Deuteronomy records Moses' preaching and encouragement and warnings to try to help the children of Israel become and remain worthy. They had proven themselves wearily difficult to lead, not just across the Sinai wilderness but, more important, along the paths of righteousness. Theirs wasn't just a journey toward a geographic destination, although they still had to cover the mileage—their journey was also a pathway toward the level of obedience required to live in their promised land flowing with milk and honey. The text from the books of Exodus through Joshua tells the story of the wandering hearts and the frequent unfaithfulness of the children of Israel. Moses was able to take the Israelites out of Egypt comparatively quickly, but it took 40 years to take Egypt out of the Israelites.

After those 40 years, Moses and the children of Israel stood on the bank of the River Jordan and on the edge of their future, looking toward the promised land. That land was inhabited by the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. The Lord promised to fight the Israelites' battles with those nations, but as a condition to His doing so, He required

that the children of Israel be righteous. And so, just before they crossed the river, Moses reminded them what God required of them in the promised land. He set before them the bounteous blessings on the one hand and the curses on the other hand that awaited them, depending on whether they kept the commandments.

In the Book of Mormon we see something similar. Both before and after they crossed the great sea, Lehi and Nephi tried to prepare their family for their promised land with repeated admonitions from God: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land; but inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall be cut off from my presence" (2 Nephi 1:20). Those words or their close cousins appear in the Book of Mormon multiple times. Yet we see repeated instances of the Nephites fluctuating between righteousness and degradation. As the centuries passed, their spiritual yo-yoing became more exaggerated, and it occurred "in the space of not many years" (Helaman 4:26, 6:32, 7:6, 11:26).

Our latter-day pioneers stood at the edge of the Mississippi River in February 1845 and looked across that river toward Iowa. They doubtless wondered what awaited them once they crossed those freezing waters. It could have been neither comfortable nor comforting to walk away from houses and farms or to contemplate camping in the snow and trudging west. But they were confident that they would "find the place which God for [them] prepared, Far away in the West"—their own promised land ("Come, Come, Ye Saints," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 30). Their strength and courage as they faced their uncertain futures now inspire countless Church members worldwide.

You who graduate today stand on your own riverbank or your own ocean shore, on the edge of your futures. You look off into the distant years before you, searching the horizon for your own promised land that flows with milk and honey. In a sense, we all do, every day.

As you try to discern the future, you likely see some challenges ahead that are the modern equivalents of Amorites, Canaanites, and Jebusites. As mentioned, unemployment is higher than it has been in many years. Unresolved wars and stifling deficits obscure our view of tomorrow. Cultural enemies stalk the horizon, trying to conform the world to their own dangerous views of morality. One could lose heart, seeing a future that awaits but doesn't entice. It could look like a land of promise without much promise. But the Lord *always* offers each of us a promised land. You can be sure of that. The promised land—your promised land—really is there. If you follow the admonition of the Lord, you really will inhabit that rich land and harvest its blessings—milk, honey, and all. Everything you have learned at BYU points toward a land laden with promise, luxuriant in opportunity, and waiting with wonder. May I offer you some thoughts about the promised land?

First, the promised land today is not likely to be a *place* like it was in Old Testament times or even for the pioneers. Instead, the promised land is a way of life. It is found in living life in a manner that qualifies for the fulfillment of divine promises. This is achieved when we follow the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ. He said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). King Benjamin taught, "Moreover, I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual" (Mosiah 2:41). "Blessed in all things" usually does not mean blessed *with* all things. The promised land means that we will have sufficient resources for our needs and even some of our desires. But, more important, it means that as a result of our sincere striving and our earnest efforts, we will be blessed with freedom from contention, from envying, and from strife in our homes (see 4 Nephi 1:18) and

sustained with forgiveness of sins, peace of conscience, charity, meekness, joy and rejoicing in our posterity, and peace with our neighbors.

Second, since today the promised land usually isn't a place, we can find it wherever we are. While we naturally look out to the horizon and plan for and work toward a future day, the promised land is here and now. It is found in the way we live each day, confront each challenge, and move forward with faith. There is no such thing as finally arriving anywhere in life, for life extends ahead of us with a constantly receding horizon, offering both new opportunities and new trials. Thus we should seek to make every day and every hour count. It is too easy to hang our hopes on some future event or some new situation and forget what life offers us now.

When the Church was barely a year old, new members (they were *all* new members) moved from some of the eastern states to Ohio. The Lord consecrated land in Ohio to them "for a *little* season, until [He would] provide for them otherwise, and command them to go hence" (D&C 51:16; emphasis added). To these Saints He said, "Let them act upon *this* land as for years, and *this* shall turn unto them for their good" (D&C 51:17; emphasis added).

A few years ago I saw an example of this principle in nature. We have a large pot filled with flowers on the walkway leading to our front door. The pot sits under a scrub oak tree. One fall a few acorns fell from the scrub oak tree into the pot. The next year the oak sprouts became visible by early summer, when I started to pull them out so the flowers in the pot could look their best. Just a leaf or two of each acorn's new tiny scrub oak seedling had become visible. As I pulled the little seedlings from the pot, the roots kept coming and coming. The seedlings had long, skinny roots that were thrusting themselves ever deeper into the soil. The roots *in* the soil were much longer than the seedlings *above* the soil.

Likewise, we would be wise to sink our roots into the pot in which we are planted and not wait for a later time or a different place or a new pot. No matter how “little [our] season,” we should act upon *this*, our land, “as for years.” We sink our roots by getting involved, making friends, seeking opportunities for service, accepting and then magnifying callings, attending the temple, and joining in community efforts. Sending our roots deep will enrich our experience and bless others as well. We may be plucked up and moved to some new place when our friendships or jobs are just tiny seedlings, still with barely a leaf to be seen, but sinking our roots gives us experience and will “turn unto [us] for [our] good.” This is particularly applicable to those who are single, in graduate school, or know they will soon move and who may be tempted to hold back and let others do the heavy lifting of earnest Church work. It’s a mistake to put our baptismal covenants on hold that way. You may not think you will be in this particular pot for very long, and you probably won’t be, but your life will be richer and your opportunities enhanced if you treat this time and this place and this situation as your promised land.

Third, our promised lands may and probably will change from time to time, and occasionally very abruptly. A phone call from a close family member this very week proves the point. He and his wife have loved living where they are living and doing what they are doing. He has enjoyed an exciting professional opportunity. An event completely unforeseen by them and by many others changed their situation in a heartbeat. Their employment world was turned upside down. We need to expect changes and be prepared for reversals. People nowadays change jobs and even careers several times during their working years. Economic cycles can act like tsunamis. Accidents can rearrange our futures in just a moment, just as disease can do so slowly but inexorably. The loss of a spouse or a child or a parent or

a friend can change our circumstances and the substance of our promised land. We have never been promised that those promised lands would be trouble free; thus the need to be deeply rooted, or, as the Savior put it, to be built upon a rock:

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. [Matthew 7:24–27]

Fourth, there will always be something of the miraculous in your journeys to your promised lands. Sometimes that miracle may be just that you got there at all and you arrived sweating and weary and feeling that you pulled the handcart alone through the heat of the day across the whole of the prairie. At other times the miracle may be that there was a wall of water and you went across the seabed or the river bottom on dry ground and didn’t even get your feet muddy. Either way, we should recognize heaven’s gracious hand in seeing us through challenges as we seek our promised lands.

Fifth, and finally, Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* said it exactly right with these words: “There’s no place like home.” The geographic center of the promised land is a loving home. Some of you are married or soon will be. Some are already raising children. For others, marriage may be still in the distance, perhaps a long way off. No matter. Marriage is a promised land like no other. Its opportunities for love, growth, education, refining, and service are without compare. Still, good marriages

require real work. The most difficult adversaries ever to appear on any promised land's horizon—enemies like pride, personal weakness, and bad habits—must be vanquished for marriage to prosper. These enemies lurk in our souls and can be very difficult to discern and even harder to defeat. Subduing these foes is the challenge of a lifetime, but “there’s no place like home” to do so and no path to the promised land *without* doing so.

The Lord is gracious unto those who truly seek Him. He promises:

And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them. [Ether 12:27]

Obedience to the second commandment, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Leviticus 19:18), is a foundational principle in the promised land of a happy marriage and a happy home. Obedience to this commandment is better learned and more profitably practiced at home than anywhere else.

When Moses’ life and ministry were drawing to an end, he gave a charge to Joshua to “be strong and of a good courage” (Deuteronomy

31:23). The Lord repeated that charge three times to Joshua when he became the prophet (see Joshua 1:6, 7, 9). The Lord said, “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest” (Joshua 1:9). The promised land awaited the children of Israel. *They* crossed the River Jordan on dry ground and moved into that land. They did so in the strength of the Lord, with courage and without fear.

Today *you* cross a modern Red Sea or River Jordan as you graduate from BYU and move on. No generation has been better trained or more richly prepared for its future. As you move out and move on:

- May God bless you that you will “be strong and of a good courage” and unafraid.
- May your lives be your promised lands, worthy in every way for the promised blessings of heaven.
- With those blessings, may you find a promised land *wherever you are, wherever you go, and all the time.*

The promises of heaven are extended to you. We wish you every blessing and much happiness. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.