

Receiving the Eternal

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My friends, I commend each of you for taking time in your busy lives to consider the things of eternity. May the Lord bless you for it.

I was originally scheduled to speak at a devotional in March, but two weeks before that day, I had a heart attack. While having three titanium stents put in my heart, I went into cardiac arrest and experienced what doctors call “clinical death.”

Alas, I did not see a tunnel of light, nor was I asked about whether I wanted to stay on earth. If asked, I think I would have said, “I do miss my parents and grandparents, but my children and grandchildren still need me. And I really need my wife, Mary. May I please stay?”

Well, the doctors got my heart beating again, and I am *very* happy to be here with you today—especially with Mary!

My purpose today is to speak about the blessings found in receiving the eternal into our lives and also to speak a little on the related need to resist the ephemeral. *Ephemeral* means fleeting, transitory, and momentary. Most things in this life are ephemeral. It is easy to forget that we are actually eternal beings in the midst of a temporary mortal journey.

In Lehi’s dream of the tree of life,¹ there were various ephemeral things that posed challenges for those making their way to the tree, including great mists of darkness and a great and spacious building with finely dressed people pointing

fingers of scorn.² The things that helped people get to the tree included a strait and narrow path, an iron rod, and the examples of people pressing forward to the tree, whose fruit was “sweet above all that is sweet.”³

A central purpose of the Book of Mormon is to convince “the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.”⁴ I was brought to Christ through the Book of Mormon when entirely undeserving of this blessing. Thus I embrace a sacred obligation to stand as a witness of God’s love and mercy “at all times . . . and in all places”—including this one.⁵ The best way I know how to do this is to tell you about my journey to Christ.

Conversion to Christ and the Restored Gospel

I was born and raised in Marin County, California—at that time the fifth-wealthiest county in the nation. Living just north of San Francisco, I grew up literally surrounded by great mists, since on most days a heavy, dark fog rolled in off the Pacific Ocean.

My parents raised me in the Episcopal Church. I was baptized by Father Ewald, my dad’s adoptive father. My godmother was my mom’s best friend, a wonderful Jewish woman named Ann, and my

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godfather was my Uncle Gene, who became an Episcopal priest. From age nine to twelve I served as an altar boy.

However, I stopped attending church at age twelve and spent my youth playing sports. I cared nothing for books or schooling, only for baseball, basketball, tennis—and girls. I lived the superficial and worldly life typical of teens in that time and place.

My dad was a police officer and my mom an office manager, so we had only moderate means. But I spent my youth surrounded by spacious designer homes, expensive cars, exclusive tennis clubs, and well-dressed wealthy people living the so-called good life of parties, vacations, and the partaking of substances that brought ephemeral pleasures. I aspired to have all this. My goals were to play professional tennis and teach at a fancy tennis club. In other words, I wanted to live in the great and spacious building.

Meanwhile, one of my mother's coworkers, Mrs. LoDonna Leininger, shared a copy of the Book of Mormon with Mom. Mom did not read the book but put it on the top shelf of her bookcase in the living room.

One day, at the end of November 1977, when I was nearly nineteen and was a freshman at the local junior college, I was at home relaxing and watching TV. Then I had what was—for me—a most unusual thought: since I was now a college student, I should perhaps try to become an “educated person” and actually read a book not assigned by a teacher. I went over to Mom's bookcase. My eyes were drawn to a blue paperback book in the left-hand corner of the top shelf. I had a strong feeling that I should read *that* book.

So I reached up and took the Book of Mormon down and began to read. From the first verse I experienced a strange, powerful, and wonderful feeling, kind of like shivers up and down my spine. I thought a window must be open, so I checked the windows for a draft. After about twenty minutes of reading, I had to leave for work.

When I got home that night, I had that same strong feeling to read the Book of Mormon. So

I brought it up to my room, sat at my desk, and read. I read through the night until about six in the morning, repeatedly experiencing this strange, strong feeling. The next day I read for a few more hours.

That evening when I came home from work, I was very tired and looking forward to sleep. But again I had the strong feeling that I should read the Book of Mormon. So I sat at my desk and again read through the night. I had many questions: Could these things really be true? Could God really exist? I came to 3 Nephi 11 and was deeply impressed with all that Jesus said and did.

At about 5 a.m. I was out of energy, sore all over, and nodding off to sleep. At about twenty pages from the end of the book, I decided that I would get some sleep and finish the book later. Then I had an overwhelming feeling and a very clear thought to *finish the book now*.

At the same time, I felt renewed energy, and the soreness disappeared. So I stayed in the chair and continued reading. I came to some verses that Mrs. Leininger had marked. She had underlined the verses in red pen, highlighted them with a yellow highlighter, and written in the margin in all caps, “Very important verses. Read these carefully!”

So I carefully read these marked verses—yes, they were Moroni 10:3–5—that included the invitation “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true.”⁶ I had never prayed from my heart before, although as a kid in church I had knelt and recited written prayers from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. So I knelt at the side of my bed and, with faith in the Jesus Christ I had read about in the Book of Mormon, I asked God to forgive my sins and asked if the Book of Mormon was true.

It is not possible for me to adequately express what then happened, but I will try. I felt the same type of wonderful spiritual feelings I had felt since I first began reading the Book of Mormon but at an incredibly intensified level of power and depth. It

was as if a river of pure water rushed through me, washing away all my sins. It was also like a raging fire purged away my old self. I felt completely clean and like an entirely new person.

Not only was there great power, but the depth of love I felt surpasses my ability to express it. I felt that although I did not know God, God knew me *perfectly*. And although God knew me perfectly—with all my sinfulness, pride, vanity, and selfishness—He still loved me perfectly. Likewise, the sure knowledge that the Book of Mormon was the word of God was seared into my soul.

I was changed in a profound way. I no longer wanted to be what I was and do what I was doing. I wanted only to do what God wanted me to do. I wanted only to love and serve others and tell them about Jesus Christ and the Book of Mormon. In my mind's eye I saw glimpses of myself teaching various people and groups about Jesus Christ and the Book of Mormon. I somehow knew that *this* would be my future.

I climbed into bed but felt more wide awake and filled with enthusiasm than I ever had in my life. As I lay in my bed thinking about what had just happened, I heard Mom downstairs getting ready for work. I went down and told her I had read the Book of Mormon that her coworker Mrs. Leininger had given her. I asked if she would ask Mrs. Leininger to call me and answer some questions that I had about the book.

Mrs. Leininger called that evening, and we spoke for about three hours. She invited me to come to a “special church meeting” the next day, and I accepted.

Ways of Receiving the Eternal

As I look back after nearly thirty-nine years on those life-changing two nights reading the Book of Mormon for the first time and on my first prayer that early morning, I marvel at the tender mercy of my Heavenly Father in guiding me toward the restored gospel. From this and other experiences, I know for myself that the veil between heaven and earth is thin and that the

Lord orchestrates actions on both sides of that veil to bless His children.

Despite the fact that I had done *nothing* to merit this gift, I had been invited to receive eternal truth, love, and forgiveness. The answer to that one prayer has eternally impacted everything for me. Neither I nor my life has ever been the same. I had tasted of the love of God, which, indeed, “was most sweet, above all that I [had] ever before tasted.”⁷

Lehi's dream is filled with universal themes that apply across time and culture. All of us can learn from careful study of that dream. On the other hand, my journey to the joy of God's eternal love is personal and unique. My hope is that the ways the Lord has worked with me will remind each of you how God has blessed you. I also hope my story provides you with another witness of God's infinite and eternal love for each one of us.

Sadly, many of the people I grew up with have suffered the full range of troubles and sorrows that often befall those without the blessings and protections of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have suffered the dark and dreary bondage of a life without eternal meaning that so often results in addiction, abuse, adultery, divorce, and suicide. I have no doubt that I would have suffered many of these things and more had I not chosen to accept the eternal gift of divine love and forgiveness. If you, or someone you know, think it is hard to be a Mormon, imagine life without the light and power of Christ's gospel.

Of course a person can taste something of the eternal and yet not fully receive it into his or her life. The Lord honors our moral agency. We must choose to repeatedly receive the eternal and to resist the ephemeral at crucial crossroads in life as well as in daily habits. The word *receive* suggests receptivity, even hospitality. *To receive* implies to open up to, accept into, and be willing to accommodate that person or thing. It is about opening and enlarging our heart, our mind, our will—indeed, our entire life—to the eternal.

Soon after we have come into the Church by baptism, someone with priesthood authority lays

hands on our head and directs us to “receive the Holy Ghost” and thus partake of a marvelous eternal gift. Throughout our lives as members of Christ’s Church, we are invited to receive an abundance of eternal blessings, including receiving the sacrament, receiving a patriarchal blessing, receiving the priesthood, receiving our own endowment, receiving a mission call, receiving another person as our eternal companion, and then, together, receiving all the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Despite the ever-present mists of mortal temptations, the sneering taunts of those in spacious towers, the strange roads and forbidden paths that beckon away from the eternal, and the veil that separates us from the eternal beings and powers all around us,⁸ an important part of earth life is learning how to fully receive the sweet fruits of the eternal.

Eternal—what a wonderful word! When the evocative word *eternal* is paired with certain sublime words, each phrase becomes a kind of short, sacred poem: Eternal Father, eternal salvation, eternal life, eternal progression, eternal family, eternal marriage, eternal companion.

Nephi taught, “To be spiritually-minded is life eternal.”⁹ The Savior said, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”¹⁰ What a marvelous blessing it is to know God, our Eternal Father, and His Eternal Son.

Throughout our mortal lives all of us are given opportunities to receive greater knowledge about our Eternal Father and how He communes with us. Often this comes through the inspired and loving actions of others.

First LDS Meeting and Meeting the Missionaries

The day after I talked with Mrs. Leininger, I attended my first LDS meeting. I woke up on Saturday, November 26, 1977, and drove thirty minutes to the San Rafael stake center. I parked, got out of my car, and walked up to a side door of the church, where I saw Mrs. Leininger waiting for me.

As we walked into the building, I expected to see crucifixes, candles, statues, and all the other things I associated with a religious building. Mrs. Leininger brought me into a large basketball gym that she called the “cultural hall.” Rows of folding chairs were facing a stage, where several people sat behind a podium.

Mrs. Leininger led me to a seat near center court. This was familiar to me, since I had played many games on basketball courts attached to churches with my friends in the Catholic Youth Organization. As I looked around, I saw no crosses, no altars, no candles, no statues, and no pews with kneelers. I saw no stained-glass windows, but I did see two nice and clean glass basketball backboards with brand-new nets. I thought, “This is a *great* church!”

The church I grew up in mostly included elderly women, so when I saw that most of those in attendance were teenagers and included a number of attractive young women, I again thought, “This is a *great* church!”

As an Episcopal altar boy, I had worn robes and a crucifix and had carried a large wood and gold cross at the front of the procession into church services. So I was waiting for the organ to begin playing and the acolytes, priest, deacon, and choir to parade into the meeting dressed in robes.

Instead a man in a suit simply stood up and began conducting the meeting. We sang, someone prayed, and then someone introduced Brother Brenton Yorgason from Utah as the special youth conference speaker. He spoke for about an hour and told a number of wonderful stories, and there was a lot of laughing. This surprised me, since the church I was raised in included a lot of incense but not much laughter. Again I thought, “This is a *great* church!”

I was feeling really good about my experience in church until suddenly I realized that I had forgotten to bring money for the offering or collection. I assumed that after the sermon they would pass a collection plate to receive the monetary offering. As a kid, if I had forgotten to bring

money, I felt awkward when the plate was passed to me and I had to just pass it on.

So I turned to Mrs. Leininger and whispered, "I'm sorry. I feel really bad, but I forgot to bring money for the offering."

She said, "For the what?"

I said, "For the offering. You know, when they pass the plate around."

She said, "Oh, we don't do that."

I thought, "Wow, you get to sit in a gym with people your own age and listen to funny stories, and you don't have to pay *anything*. This is a *great* church!"

After Brother Yorgason finished speaking, nearly all the young men and women there stood, one by one, and "bore their testimony" of what they believed. I experienced the same feelings I had had while reading the Book of Mormon and while praying.

At the end of the meeting we all stood, and Mrs. Leininger asked me what I thought. I said it was incredible and asked how I could join her church. She smiled very widely and, while nodding, waved over a couple of young guys in suits with name tags. It seemed like they were expecting this signal.

To me these guys with their short hair and dark suits looked quite strange (this was the 1970s California of long hair and short shorts), but their enthusiastic smiles and vigorous handshakes were warm and welcoming. Elders Hawkes and Christensen asked if they could teach me about the gospel. I said that would be great. After a luncheon, where I was seated across from Brother and Sister Yorgason, we went to the Leiningers' home.

I sat on the sofa surrounded by Brother and Sister Leininger, a few of their adult children, and Elders Hawkes and Christensen, all of whom seemed *really* excited to teach me about their faith. These Idaho farm boys looked, spoke, and acted unlike anyone I had ever met. Yet because of what I had experienced during my prayer, I wanted to be like these missionaries and do what they were doing.

They told me about Joseph Smith's First Vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Everything I was being told was new and strange, but somehow it all made sense to me. And I was having the same feelings I had had while reading the Book of Mormon and saying my prayer and attending the youth conference meeting.

I was wondering what these feelings could be when the elder who was speaking stopped—mid-sentence—closed his flip chart of pictures, looked me in the eyes, and said, "Dave, what you are feeling *right now* is the Holy Ghost telling you that what we are teaching you is true. That is what you felt when you read the Book of Mormon and today at church."

I was astounded! This guy I had just met, who was only a little older than I was, somehow had read my mind and knew that I was feeling something—and that I had felt it before. There was no way he could have known that unless God had told him.

The elder then said, "Dave, the Lord wants you to be baptized into His Church. Will you be baptized two weeks from today?"

I said, "Yes, I will! And then can I go and do what you are doing?"

The elders looked extremely happy and very surprised. They said they were thrilled that I wanted to be baptized but that I would need to wait for a year before I could be a missionary.

I said, "I don't want to wait a year; I want to go right now!"

One elder said, "Well, you need time to learn more about the gospel and prepare to enter the temple before your mission."

I said, "Okay, what should I do to prepare to be a missionary?"

One of the elders said, "You should go to BYU and take religion classes."

I said, "Okay, what is BYU?"

He said, "It is a Mormon university in Utah."

I said, "Okay, where is Utah?"

He said, "In the Rocky Mountains."

I said, "Where are the Rocky Mountains?"

I was a dumb teenage jock from California who had never paid any attention to geography. To me there was California, then blah, blah, blah, and then New York City (where *Saturday Night Live* came from).

I said I would go to BYU and prepare to serve a two-year mission for a church I had only been to once.

How Some of Our Friends of Other Faiths Receive the Eternal

Because God loves all His children, He pours out the full measure of blessings each of us is ready and willing to receive.¹¹ All are given the opportunity to receive marvelous gifts from our Eternal Father. Happily, Latter-day Saints are joined by billions of other people of faith in a desire to receive the eternal.

As part of a scholarly research initiative called the American Families of Faith Project,¹² my colleagues and I have interviewed 201 wonderful Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families from across the United States. We have been blessed to learn about a variety of ways that our friends of other faiths make efforts to resist the ephemeral and receive the eternal in their lives. Here are just four examples.

Jewish Acts of Faith

Our Jewish friends sanctify many aspects of daily life. Jewish women light candles to welcome in the Sabbath, and Orthodox Jewish men wear a sacred, fringed, white garment—called a *tallit katan* in Hebrew—beneath their shirts to remind them of the commandments. One father we interviewed said that when faced with unwanted thoughts, he touches the fringes to remind himself to think of God.

Orthodox Christian Acts of Faith

Our Orthodox Christian friends have prayer corners in their homes that contain scriptures, holy water, incense, candles, and blessed icons—many portraying the countenance of Christ—to bring a bit of the eternal into their home and family life.

Muslim Acts of Faith

Our Muslim friends perform sacred washings—called *wudu* in Arabic—before daily prayers (*salat*). In solemnity they wash the top of their head and their eyes, ears, nose, hands, arms, legs, and feet to prepare for sacred prayers.

Evangelical Christian Acts of Faith

Our Evangelical Christian friends lift up their hands in prayer, pointing their minds and hearts heavenward in praise to the Lord Jesus.

These practices represent intentional efforts by our friends of faith to receive the eternal into their lives. They are sacredly similar to our own efforts in homes, chapels, and temples to make and keep eternal covenants through participation in priesthood ordinances.

Receiving and Resisting Opposition

Similar to many others who have converted to the restored gospel, I faced significant opposition before and after my baptism. This included many challenging conversations with family, friends, and others who strongly opposed the Church. The first of these conversations was with Mom on the evening I arrived home from my first day with my new Mormon friends. That Saturday included the youth conference, a luncheon, multiple discussions with the elders, dinner with the Leingers, and an evening fireside.

When I arrived home at 10 p.m., Mom asked where I had been.

I said, “Church!”

She said, “What do you mean, ‘church’? You have been gone all day and evening.”

After I explained all the other events, Mom sighed and asked, “So what did you think?”

I said, “It was incredible. I’m going to be baptized in two weeks!”

She cried out, “You certainly are *not* being baptized in two weeks!”

“Yes, I am,” I said.

She said, “No, you are *not* joining that church in two weeks. You don’t know anything about that

religion or your own religion or any other religion. So here is what you will do: You will take a year and study your own religion, the Mormon religion, and other religions. And then, at the end of that year, if you still want to be baptized, then you may do so.”

I said passionately, “No, that is *not* what I’m going to do. *This* is what I’m going to do: I’m going to be baptized in two weeks, and then I’m going to go to BYU in the fall, and in a year I’m going on a two-year, full-time mission for the Church.”

To say the least, my parents were not happy. They quickly arranged what turned out to be a long, difficult, and painful conversation with my beloved Uncle Gene—my godfather and a wise and caring Episcopal priest. He spoke passionately and tried valiantly but unsuccessfully to convince me that the Mormon Church was a non-Christian cult. Many others tried to convince me that the Mormon faith was wrong. This kind of opposition—and the study and prayer on gospel matters that accompanied it—only served to strengthen my testimony of the Restoration.

Mom and Dad reluctantly accepted my decision by attending my baptism and trying to support me in my new life. I went to BYU, served a mission, returned, and married my eternal companion. And together we have shared thirty-three years of marriage, have raised seven great kids, and have three grandchildren—so far. Talk about eternal bliss! I am profoundly grateful to LoDonna and Ray Leinger for their incredible support of me along that path.

An Invitation to Receive the Eternal

I have shared a few personal experiences through which I was blessed to receive the sweet fruits of the eternal when I was the age of many of you BYU students. I have done so in order to stand as a witness of the goodness of God in my life and to offer my own testimony of the deep reality and transforming power of God’s eternal love. From these experiences I know for myself that God, our Eternal Father, lives, that He loves us with a

depth and power we cannot fathom, and that He answers our earnest prayers.

I also know that I am *not* the star of the experiences I have shared but merely a grateful recipient and witness of the love of God. My experiences have been a result of the profound love and tender mercies of God toward someone who must have needed such experiences to convert and stay faithful. All I did was be willing to receive eternal blessings when they were offered. All glory and honor and praise be to the Eternal Father and His Beloved Son.

The dramatic experiences received by the prophet Jonah, Saul of Tarsus, and Alma the Younger—not to mention Laman and Lemuel—demonstrate that God, in His mercy, sometimes provides dramatic spiritual manifestations to those—like me—who, because of pride or unbelief, really do not deserve to receive them. To the apostle Thomas, who had required a dramatic manifestation in order to believe, the Savior said, “Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed.”¹³

Personally, my spiritual heroes are not those who have experienced dramatic spiritual experiences. I most admire the many marvelous Saints I have known who continue in faithful devotion and service to God despite never having experienced an overpowering spiritual witness.

My friends, wherever you find yourself spiritually, I say to you in love and humility: I know that God lives and will answer your sincere prayers. I know that Jesus is the Christ. I know that only through faith in Christ and His atoning sacrifice can sin be washed and burned from the soul.

I hope that hearing my story has prompted you to think of times in your life when the Lord and His servants have touched your soul, enlightened your mind, sent others into your life to bless you, and helped you recognize the workings of the Holy Spirit. I invite you to record and share those sacred times when you have received the eternal into your life. Doing so will be a blessing for you, for others, and for future generations.

My intention has been to point you upward to prayerful communion with your Eternal Father; downward into deep study and pondering of the Book of Mormon and other scripture; inward into the depths of your soul, where you will find an eternal being yearning for the things of eternity; outward to sharing the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ with others; and forward to a future of faith and devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ and His restored gospel.

I invite us all to join with those in Lehi's dream who pressed forward to the tree of life by "continually holding fast to the rod of iron, until they came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree."¹⁴ In the sacred name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See 1 Nephi 11:21–23.
2. See 1 Nephi 8.
3. Alma 32:42; see also 1 Nephi 8:11.
4. Book of Mormon title page.
5. Mosiah 18:9.
6. Moroni 10:4.
7. 1 Nephi 8:11.
8. See 1 Nephi 8, 11; 2 Kings 6:16–17.
9. 2 Nephi 9:39.
10. John 17:3.
11. See John 3:16; 1 Nephi 11:17.
12. See the website of American Families of Faith, Brigham Young University, americanfamiliesoffaith.byu.edu.
13. John 20:29.
14. 1 Nephi 8:30.