

Seeking “Thick” Things

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I would like to express my appreciation for this occasion and for being here at the same time that this large and very impressively young and healthy group of MIA athletes is with us.

I think perhaps my two distinctions as a General Authority are, first, my age, about which I have yet been able to do little except be patient, and, second, the fact that I once played on an M-Men championship ball team. That was an important and delightful and now happily remembered experience.

I want to pay proper obeisance to the faculty in front of me. Usually they are less available for sight. They are an awesome—I was going to say awful—sight.

I think while we settle down for just a moment I'll mention something a wonderful young Methodist minister said when he and I were participants in a Religious Emphasis Week in another state. He was a wonderful fellow; I learned to love him quickly and very much. He told the students a story one morning about a man who had gone to a psychiatrist with a case, he thought, of inferiority complex. After lengthy treatment the patient was informed that at the next meeting his now-diagnosed ailment would be discussed. He returned eagerly, expecting to hear his own

diagnosis confirmed, and said, “Doc, I am sure you have discovered that I do have a severe inferiority complex, haven't you?” The doctor said, “No, son, that isn't your trouble. You don't have an inferior complex at all. You *are* inferior.” This story really has nothing to do with the faculty, of course, but there is another one that perhaps does.

One day a lion, king of the jungle, went hurrying along the jungle paths, stopping before each animal and asking each in turn who was the king of the jungle. Each in turn said, “You are, sir.” The hyena got his ears boxed a little bit for being too frivolous, and others were rebuked, but each gave the same answer. When, however, the lion got to the elephant and said, “Who is the king of the jungle?” the elephant picked him up in his trunk, whirled him around his head, and threw him against a tree. The lion got up, looking abused, and began to walk away. The elephant repeated the treatment, whereupon the lion, bedraggled and deeply hurt, looked back rebukingly over his shoulder as he staggered

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away and said to the elephant, “You didn’t need to get mad just because you didn’t know the answer.”

Now I am not here this morning to suggest that I know all the answers. I want to tell you that I am deeply and earnestly appreciative of the importance of spending 20 or 30 minutes of time with so many busy and potentially fruitful, participating citizens in the kingdom.

To these basketball players—who will not be the special target of what I have to say—and to you I express a hope that their experience on this campus will be meaningful and delightful and memorable, that is, memorable in the finest sense. They are here because they have excelled in competition. Some of them have done it under very difficult circumstances. They have something to offer and something to gain from this great university, and I would hope that they will take time to learn it and that you will take time to bless them with whatever you can do to contribute to their experience.

This morning I think of what can be given and what can be received through this relationship, and I think of it in terms of that which really matters most about the great tournament that brings us together. I am not going to suggest that activities are unimportant, and I think I will not even say what it might be expected that I might say about the relative importance of activities in the Church to the fundamental significance of the message of the Church.

Brother Stohl has, in his brief and well-chosen words, given his understanding (and it is mine) of the proper relationship of basketball or any other activity to the real mission of the Church. But in a broader sense, and about the same theme, I would like to make a few remarks. Someone—I think one of Columbia’s fine professors—said this, or about this, recently: “The things that matter most [should not] be at the mercy of the things that matter least” (William Pepperell Montague, *Belief Unbound: A Promethean Religion for the*

Modern World [New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1930], 7). And the novelist Edith Wharton has said about the same thing a little different way. She said, “A lot of people get themselves into the thick of thin things.” And I can commend this next quotation:

*We are producing Christian activities faster than we are producing Christian experience and Christian faith; . . . the discipline of our souls and the deepening of our acquaintance with God are not proving sufficiently thorough to enable us to meet the unprecedented expansion of opportunity and responsibility of our generation. [John R. Mott in the introduction for Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer* (New York: Association Press, 1916), vii–viii]*

“We are producing Christian activities faster than we are producing Christian experience and Christian faith.” This is not true of the Church; it is not true, I am sure, of its leaders; it is not true of those who represent it in its offices and programs. It certainly is not true of the MIA, whose officers to my certain knowledge understand that Christian activities are simply an avenue, a way to achieve the goal, which is Christian faith and real Christian experience. But my honest suggestion this morning is that in the lives of many of us individuals it may well be that there is an abundance of Christian activity as such, sometimes at the expense of or sometimes at least in the absence of real Christian faith and real Christian experience. Now it is not necessarily so. I think the principles of the gospel can be applied to a basketball game. I am tempted to make that application but will avoid the temptation. I believe that in athletic contests and other activities there is ample field for the demonstration of those attributes and aspects of the Christian faith that are real and worthwhile and desirable.

But this morning I would ask and hope to be able to partially answer these questions. Which

things are they—these that really matter most? What are the “thick things” as contrasted with “thin things”? How do you arrive at “discipline” of the soul and “deepening” one’s acquaintance with God?

The gospel cannot be read in any one verse of scripture, because the records are numerous and there is no one verse in which the fulness of it may be found. But there is one verse of scripture about which my thoughts have revolved in the past weeks. I offer it this morning not as a formula but as the Lord’s suggestion as to how we might, in Christian activity—which is good or should be—develop real Christian experience, enjoy real Christian faith. This verse is from the 90th section of the Doctrine and Covenants. Many of you are familiar with it. It was given to the Church in 1833, through the Prophet in Kirtland. The Lord said:

Search diligently, pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for your good, if ye walk uprightly and remember the covenant wherewith ye have covenanted one with another.
[D&C 90:24]

It would seem to me that a young man or woman or qualified adult who really wanted to enjoy the deepening acquaintance of his Heavenly Father and enjoy the blessing of a disciplined soul might proceed at least partially along the line the Lord suggested His people in that day should proceed: that in searching diligently, praying always, and believing, and in upright walk and in humble remembrance of sacred covenants one might find in fact the path to the goal that is or should be the objective of each of us.

How do you develop what we are seeking? Well, there is, I am sure, a multitude of answers, but this certainly is an essential of any answer: We must search diligently for a knowledge of the truth. As I read the sacred records, again and again emphasis is given to the

responsibility that I have to search diligently. I am told to ask, to knock, to seek if I would enjoy the blessing. I am encouraged by the Lord to store my mind before I seek to teach, to acquire a fundamental understanding of the concepts of the gospel. So I suggest to you this morning that basic in any program that would lead us to increasing faith and relationship with the Lord is the consistent, regular, organized, systematic search that is required of those who would know the truth.

I just returned from touring a mission. I discovered what I have long known—it came to me through my own experience, it is corroborated at every turn—that many of us waste many hours, that many of us do not employ profitably the hours we do use, because we do not know how to study or have not acquired the dedicated interest that real searching of truth requires.

I will not forget the night when a fine, mature, successful, affluent man stood in a large congregation and bore his witness. It was a witness that testified to me what the 32nd chapter of Alma also testifies and what my own experience has testified: that testimony and conviction and assurance and confidence about the truth can come with earnest search and the living of the life at whatever age.

The man told of his little boy who at age eight came to his bedside with a message. The man had been for 17 years a cynical, critical, quite heartless critic of his wife and children, who were members of the Church. His business partner was a Latter-day Saint bishop who found his life somewhat difficult because of this man’s attitude. The man went on in his criticism through the years while his wife, in spite of his problem behavior, dedicated herself and her children to the Church. But the time came when this man, having suffered a broken back in an automobile accident, lay in bed for months. His little boy came and announced that he was going to be baptized and said, “Daddy, I wish you could be with me.” The

man had mellowed a little under the circumstances of his recent experience. He said, "I wish I could too, son, but you come and tell me about it when you get home."

The little boy came back. He said, "Daddy, I have been wanting to talk to you for a long time, and I'm going to do it now. I have just been baptized into the Church. You are a wonderful daddy, and I love you very much, but this is what I want to say to you: I have only been on this earth eight years, and I have a testimony of the gospel. You've been here 45 years, and you don't know that it is true yet, and the reason is that you don't really want to. You won't read the books Mother has tried to get you to read; you won't listen to the missionaries or the teachers. You could know, but you just don't want to." The little boy went on his way, and this mature, successful, influential citizen lay and wept and, according to his own account, acknowledged the charge. When he got on his feet again he continued to do what he had started to do while in bed, to pay the price of learning. He "searched diligently," and he stood before us as an active stake missionary with some very successful adventures in service to testify through tears and great emotion that he did now know the gospel was true.

There are all around us examples of excellence to indicate that going to Sunday School once a week, attending a class in MIA—even going to a religion class at this great institution—these efforts alone are not adequate. If you would know your Heavenly Father, if you would understand His will for you, you must search diligently on your own and get some personal convictions. I commend that suggestion as being the Lord's direction to every one of us.

As to "praying always," this is a subject of frequent discussion among us. We should pray always, according to divine direction. We should pray over our flocks, our herds, our children, our homes, our books, our examinations, and our ball games. We should pray over

our problems, our joys, our gratuities, and our great experiences. We should be prayerful in attitude and in fact. I believe I have learned how to pray. The prayers that I have learned to offer are not literarily noteworthy nor greatly involved nor very long. I'll give you an example.

A man came to Temple Square one day and stood outside the office door, wanting to come in. I knew as I saw him that he had a desperate need, and I'll confess, to my sorrow, that my first thought was that the need probably was economic. We have many occasions there to be blessed with such opportunities. Well, I looked at him just a little bit suspiciously, and then, going to the door, I invited him in and saw immediately in his face that the need he had had little to do with economics. He had a kind of glaze over his eyes that comes with a deep, shattering shock.

He was a nonmember of the Church married to a fine Primary president. This lady and he were the parents of a beautiful daughter aged 11. This man's parents lived in the eastern part of the country, and the family had decided in a little council a sweet and fine thing, as he discussed it, that the best Christmas present they could give his parents was to send Daddy to see them, because it had been so long, and, it being Christmastime, the best gift they could receive was a visit from their only son. So he had, although reluctantly, accepted this commission and had gone to see his parents. While there he had received word from people at home that his wife had been in an automobile accident. The little girl had been killed. Through fire that followed, her body had been destroyed.

This was, of course, a terrible shock to him. He was on his way home and had several hours layover in Salt Lake and had come to Temple Square trying to find peace. He sat across the desk from me, and I tried to teach him. I have seldom been more frustrated, because I didn't get by that shock at all. I

talked of eternity; I talked of resurrection; I talked of the faith we need, of the strength and sustaining influence of the Lord; and nothing registered—nothing at all. I began to get desperate. He sat ill at ease and getting ready to move, and I began to pray. My prayer (and I have repeated it so many times under similar circumstances) was, “Lord, help me now. Lord, help me now.” For a reason I am sure of, and you will accept, I suppose, I opened this book—perhaps I should have done it much sooner without the stimulus of the inspiration, but I hadn’t—to these words out of the 11th chapter of the book of Alma:

The spirit and the body shall be reunited again in its perfect form; both limb and joint shall be restored to its proper frame. [Alma 11:43]

I turned to Alma 40 and read a little more of the Resurrection, that “even a hair of the head shall not be lost” (Alma 40:23). For the first time I saw the break come. I found as we talked that the thing that disturbed him most was about this beautiful little girl. I have little girls; I know about how a father would feel—at least I think I can imagine. The thing that bothered him most was that he could not even see her again, that the beauty and perfection of her little life was gone, and he had no real hope for anything more. But he sat and listened, and the simple therapy was repeated. We read it as the word of the Lord. He accepted it as such. He sat in one of those little alcoves near the door and read it over and over for a long time. When I took him to the airport, the glaze in his eyes was gone. He had wept, perhaps for the first time. He had talked and seemed reachable, and we had discussed the principles I had tried to talk of before.

A few months later I heard his voice at the counter. I hadn’t heard a thing from him since our first meeting. He was standing there with two rather rough-looking men. They turned out to be his wife’s brothers, born in the

Church. He had a copy of the Book of Mormon opened to Alma 11 and was reading to them those wonderful words, testifying of their truth, telling them that in his search through the record he had found it to be the word of God. He bought a book for them and sent them home to read—these men who had been born into the faith.

I thought then and have thought since many times of the statement that one who will not read is no better off than one who cannot. And when day after day I open mail or listen to experiences testifying of the change of life, the change of heart, the great dedicated knowledge of God that comes with knowing the Book of Mormon is true, I think how sad it is that so many Latter-day Saints live and die and sometimes consider themselves disenchanting or emancipated without ever knowing the blessed words of Nephi and Mosiah and Alma. We must “pray always” if we would have what we seek.

Quickly, to pass on, the Lord said we must “walk uprightly,” that we must “be believing” and “remember our covenants.” On this “believing” I would like to spend a moment.

A friend of mine from a nearby city—with whom, incidentally, I played ball on this all-Church team—once sent me a little card with a picture of two birds on the front and lines of conversation between them. These were the words I read:

*Said the Robin to the Sparrow:
“I should really like to know
Why these anxious human beings
Rush about and worry so.”*

*Said the Sparrow to the Robin:
“Friend, I think that it must be
That they have no heavenly Father
Such as cares for you and me.”*

[Elizabeth Cheney, “Overheard in an Orchard,” in *Masterpieces of Religious Verse* (New York: Harper, 1948), 86]

Do you know there are among us now many who are unsettled, at odds with themselves and the world, who find no personal peace, who have, because of sin or ignorance or indifference, put themselves into a condition of such desperation that they are not willing or able to accept the promises of God to forgive them and bless them?

There are other classes I would think to speak of, but there is no time. May I say to you here under these circumstances and with recognition of my limitations that are clear to me, being many, that there is no particular virtue in the capacity to ask hard questions that can't be answered. There is no particular virtue or value in artfulness or cynicism or the type of superiority that assumes it knows better than those who have faith. There is no virtue or value in the feeling that there is emancipation from thralldom if that means that they have learned better than to have humble faith in God and to have the discipline of soul that the writer we quoted talked about.

I testify that there is great virtue and value and strength in time of need in humble faith in God, acceptance of His Son's divine Saviorhood, and, in the end, understanding and accepting God's purposes for man and His program for our eternal joy.

There have been so many wonderful examples that have come to me about people who, through standing uprightly, have been influential in affecting other lives that I wish there were occasion to repeat them. But many of you know many of them and hear them repeatedly.

Let me ask you to look at the virtue and value of walking uprightly in terms of your own blessing. Would you really like to know? Would you really? The Lord said, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17). In searching diligently, praying always, being believing, and walking uprightly, there is the path, I believe, to that which we would seek.

Finally we mention, as the Lord said, that we must remember our covenants. Have you read what one who is baptized owes in the way of promise to God and his fellowman? To mourn with those that mourn, comfort those that stand in need of comfort, to stand as witnesses for God at all times in all places under all circumstances, even to death? (See Mosiah 18:8-9.) These are covenants you made implicitly or otherwise. Do you remember the covenants you take on the Sabbath day when you partake of the sacrament? You wonderful young men—and older—recall the covenant in the 84th section of the Doctrine and Covenants that talks of the oath and covenant of the priesthood, that you will magnify it. A covenant is an agreement—an agreement in this case between God and man. You remember, you who have been there, the covenant you have made in the temple. And you who are married, you remember the covenant you made then under those sacred conditions.

I testify to you, out of the brief experience of my life, that while there are difficulties and problems, while there are hypocrisies and questionable performances among us, that all of those may be heaped on one side of the scale and will be outweighed immeasurably by this observable truth: that one who learns the gospel (that is, seeks earnestly and diligently to learn it), one who is prayerful and humble, who approaches affirmatively the problems that exist, who walks uprightly and seeks to remember his covenants—such a person is immeasurably happier than he otherwise has been or could be. The testimony is so repeated and so patent that it scarcely needs attention called to it.

And I conclude with one other suggestion. In that most beautiful and impressive revelation, the Lord said through the Prophet (you've heard it many times; have you thought of it in terms of you?): "Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God" (D&C 121:45).

If you would discipline your soul, if you would deepen your acquaintance with your Heavenly Father, if you would seek things that matter most—"thick things"—if you would enjoy that which is most worthwhile in life, you must personally accept the challenge to do that which the Lord has directed we do. This is our course if we would enjoy the blessings.

I honor you for your possibilities. I am truly awed as I consider you, and I pray God for you most earnestly that you may realize your possibilities through His program and your faith. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.