

Identity, Priority, and Blessings

RUSSELL M. NELSON

Thank you, President Robert L. Millet, for your introduction. We appreciate you and all who faithfully serve as leaders among the wonderful youth of Zion. We acknowledge the presence of Elder Henry B. Eyring of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Elder Merrill J. Bateman of the Seventy, and each of you wonderful young adults. Thousands are attending here tonight, and thousands more will participate via satellite broadcast or taped delay in North, South, and Central America; Europe; Africa; Asia; and the isles of the sea. I am told that about a quarter of a million youth will be participating with us on this occasion.

Sister Nelson and I express our admiration for each of you. We bring greetings from President Gordon B. Hinckley, President Thomas S. Monson, President James E. Faust, and our brethren of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. And we most sincerely thank Brother Stanley A. Peterson for his message and his ministry in the Church Educational System.

Sister Nelson and I appreciate your beautiful songs of faith and devotion. Although the world is experiencing a spiritual drift, you young people stand as living proof that Latter-day Saints can be different! Like a giant rock centered in a raging river, you are steadfast. We admire you! We wish we could meet each of

you personally. Not knowing how to do that, we hope you can know of our love for you and of our prayers for your success and happiness.

My message tonight is about identity, priority, and blessings. An understanding of their interrelationship can help you deal better with life's challenges. It is important for you to know who you are and who you may become. It is more important than what you do, even as vital as your work is and will be. You pursue an education to prepare for life's work. But I want you also to prepare for life—eternal life. I emphasize this because some people on life's journey forget who they really are and what is really important. Without sure identity and priority, blessings that matter most are at the mercy of things that matter least.

May I illustrate by reading from a letter written by a young mother:

*Dear Elder and Sister Nelson,
My husband . . . just started his internship. . . .
We have four children, ages twenty months to seven*

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years (and would like to have more). My problem is that I don't see how he can give time to our family as the prophets have directed us to do. . . . My seven-year-old and five-year-old have already asked me, "Why doesn't Daddy come home anymore?" They seem to be comfortable with my answer that Daddy is busy helping many sick people, but what should I tell them when they are old enough to understand that Daddy could have chosen a less time-consuming specialty? . . . Please help me understand. I have been praying for peace and understanding.

Signed,

With much respect and admiration.

Now, why do I trouble you with their problems? Simply because in a few years many of you will be where they are now—very busy and very frustrated. They should solve their own problems, and I'm confident they will. Perhaps we can use their quandary as a springboard for our discussion. It is best we prepare today for the challenges of tomorrow.

Such concerns are not limited to those in the medical profession. The wife of a doctor, like the wife of a truck driver, soldier, or airline pilot, must know that her husband's important work will take him away from home. That places the burden of fidelity, identity, and priority squarely on the shoulders of each individual and every married couple as they strive to merit the blessings of the Lord. It was never easy to be a committed Latter-day Saint, and it isn't now. But the rewards are well worth it.

Identity

If the Lord were speaking to you tonight, He would urge you to understand your identity—to know who you really are. He did so when He spoke to the people of ancient America. After identifying Himself, He informed His listeners of their identity:

And behold, ye are the children of the prophets; and ye are of the house of Israel; and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers,

saying unto Abraham: And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. [3 Nephi 20:25; emphasis added]

You young adults share that same identity, which means even more when you are sealed to your companion in the temple. Some of you are already married. Most of you are still searching for the right one. I wish you well! Keep searching! Don't forget: "Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11). Isn't that a nice scripture? I love it!

Whether married or single, you will all have work to do. I hope it will be enjoyable. It's nice to bounce out of bed each morning eager to enjoy a day's work, and it is especially gratifying when we can bless the lives of others. But please remember: You work to sustain life; you don't live to sustain work.

Your life will be a blessed and balanced experience if you first honor your identity and priority. Keep a good long-range view, knowing that the days of retirement from your work will come. There will also be an end to your mortal life. For hale and hearty young adults, those realities seem pretty remote—about the last things you worry about. But the day of your demise is coming, and eventually you will stand before the Lord in judgment.

Contemplation of life after retirement and life after death can help you deal with contemporary challenges. In our discussion, I hope you will pardon reference to my personal experience. Hopefully, lessons from my life may be relevant to you and to the busy intern husband and his wife who wrote the letter.

Retirement looks a long way off for this couple. Even a year of internship seems unbearable. And it will probably be followed by a residency that lasts even longer. Those terms *intern* and *resident* mean just what they say. An intern is "confined to" and a resident "resides in" a hospital. That portends double trouble for a family.

I remember when I was a resident in a large hospital in Boston. I was off duty every other night and every other weekend. On nights off, I arrived home to my wife and our four children after the babies' bedtime. I departed in the morning before they were all awake. In order for me to attend sacrament meeting, I had to trade hours of duty with some of my Jewish or Seventh-Day Adventist colleagues. They were willing to cover for me temporarily on my Sabbath as I covered for them on theirs. Incidentally, I enjoyed some of my very most successful home teaching experiences on those highly prized nights off.

My years of training were followed by a surgical career that was wonderful and filled with challenge and reward. But now it is behind me. Thankfully, my dear wife is still with me. Ten days ago we celebrated our fifty-fifth wedding anniversary. Our family is most precious to us. She has blessed us with ten children. The time that elapsed between my graduation from medical school and my entering private practice was about twelve years. Seven of those ten children arrived before we could really "afford" them. Now all ten have been married in the temple and have families of their own. They have brought us fifty-two grandchildren. We are so grateful for temple endowments and sealings that bind us together forever!

Priority

My background in medicine may be relevant, even though most of you will not become doctors of medicine. Eternal principles that govern happiness apply equally to all. I doubt that the Lord cares much which honorable vocation you choose. But He does care if you love one another and serve one another (see Mosiah 4:15). And He cares that you have the obedience and self-discipline needed to maintain your identity and honor your highest priorities.

When we were the age of most of you, Sister Nelson and I were married. Through thick and thin, we have merged our identity

and fixed our focus on our highest priority, our eternal marriage. Through the prolonged period of education and later medical practice, she could have complained about my schedule, but she never did. Our children did *not* feel they were deprived of their father's time, simply because Sister Nelson never murmured. Their attitudes were shaped by her attitude. Every moment we were together she seized as an opportunity to provide a little bit of heaven on earth for me and our children.

Now our children are adults with little ones of their own. We enjoy extended family home evenings once a month with all available members of our family. At that time we also celebrate family birthdays. Many names are written on each birthday cake. After those gala gatherings are over—when peace and quiet have again been restored—Sister Nelson and I lovingly embrace each other, grateful that we never allowed anything to take higher priority than our love—husband for wife, and wife for husband.

I pay tribute to Sister Nelson, this magnificent wife and mother who has always been supportive. When people have asked her how she managed with ten children with so little time available from her husband, she has responded with a twinkle in her eye, saying, "When I married him, I didn't expect much, so I was never disappointed."

Through those years of internship, residency, and all that followed, she faithfully served in Primary, Young Women, and Relief Society. In addition, she sang with the Tabernacle Choir for twenty years.

You young women can learn much from Sister Nelson's example. Sustain your husbands in their important work, and don't be selfish in your expectations. Let your husband return to a home of affection, not contention. Meanwhile, learn the doctrines and teach them to your children. The days are gone when the husband was the theologian and the wife was the Christian.

President Gordon B. Hinckley gave counsel to you sisters. He said:

I urge each of you young women to get all of the schooling you can get. You will need it for the world into which you will move. . . . No other generation in all of history has offered women so many opportunities. Your first objective should be a happy marriage, sealed in the temple of the Lord, and followed by the rearing of a good family. Education can better equip you for the realization of those ideals.¹

President Hinckley also said, “In the process of educating your minds, stir within yourselves a greater sensitivity to the beautiful, the artistic, and the cultivation of the talent you possess, be it large or small.”²

Thank you, sisters, for your faith and devotion. The Church is greatly strengthened by your service. Your responsibilities are of such import that, should you fail, the brethren would not succeed.

Brothers and sisters, be of good cheer. Take life one step at a time and do the best you can each day. Life passes so swiftly. We do not know how many years we may have together here in mortality. For Sister Nelson and me, that number is dwindling down to a precious few. We are profoundly grateful that our love endures, even in our empty nest. Real love is not measured in terms of moonlight and roses, but in terms of who will care for you when you are old.

When mortal life is over, each of us will return to God, who gave us life. In a Judgment interview, I doubt that He will ask a surgeon, “How many operations did you perform?” or “Do you wish you had spent more time at the hospital?” But I *know* He will ask if Sister Nelson and I remained faithful to our covenants to take upon ourselves the name of Jesus Christ and always remember Him. No doubt He will carefully scrutinize my apostolic ministry, but that vital subject will probably be subordinated to His evaluation of my record as a husband and father.

I don’t fear death. In fact, a scripture describes a Saint’s death as “precious in the sight of the Lord” (Psalm 116:15). It will be precious to me, too, as I am reunited with our parents and our precious daughter, Emily, who died some five years ago. Her passing left her young and righteous husband with five children. I will eagerly meet my ancestors and preceding prophets and apostles. And one day Sister Nelson and I will dwell together in the presence of our family and the Lord forevermore. We will have been faithful to covenants made in the temple, and to the oath and covenant of the priesthood, which have assured us, in the words of the Lord, that “all that my Father hath shall be given unto [you]” (D&C 84:38).

Faithful sisters share the blessings of the priesthood. Think of those words “all that my Father hath.” That concept is beyond our mortal comprehension. It means that no earthly reward—no other success—could compensate for the bounties the Lord will bestow upon those who love Him, keep His commandments (see Moroni 4:3), and endure to the end (see D&C 14:7).

An Inward Commitment to Christ

The Apostle Paul taught that divine doctrines, such as these of identity and priority, are to be written “not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3).³ The importance of an inward commitment to the Lord is symbolized as we partake of the sacrament. Contrast it to other promises made in life, usually symbolized by an outward sign, such as a raised hand or a written signature. The Lord has invited us to symbolize our covenant with Him by a sign that is inward as well as outward. When the sacred emblems of His flesh and blood are administered to us, we are invited to take them into our bodies. As we do, His atoning sacrifice literally becomes a part of our own identity.

One day you will be asked if you took upon yourself the name of Christ and if you

were faithful to that covenant. The newest convert makes the same covenant that each of us has made, to take upon us the Lord's name. We are all allowed—even encouraged—to achieve the fulness of the stature of Christ (see Ephesians 4:13).

Tonight I come to you in my true identity as a husband, a father, and an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. My priorities are my wife, my family, and my ministry. I am to teach plain and precious things that have been restored in these latter days. As special witnesses of His name in all the world, the Apostles “talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ” (2 Nephi 25:26).

In a very real way, you bear similar responsibility. As Jesus said to His faithful followers in ancient America, He would surely say to you, “Ye are my disciples; and ye are a light unto this people, who are a remnant of the house of Joseph” (3 Nephi 15:12). You and I are to bear witness; we are to minister; we are to enlighten; we are to be an example to all who come within our sphere of influence.

This privilege is ours, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year—even on vacation. The Savior stated simply: “What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily I say unto you, even as I am” (3 Nephi 27:27). Your most sincere sign of adoration of Jesus is your emulation of Him. You know of Him. You know of His divine parentage. You know of His mission and ministry in mortality. You know of Him, not by direct visitation, but through the testimony of the Holy Ghost. “The testimony of the Holy Ghost is the strongest testimony that can be given. It is better than a personal visit.”⁴

Connecting Identity, Priority, and Blessings

The Lord has revealed our identity, inspired our proper priority, and will fulfill blessings as covenanted to the remnants of the house of Israel. The pages of scripture are replete with historical documentation of this interrelationship. In 1836, under the direction of the Lord,

“Elias appeared, and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed” (D&C 110:12). That scripture bears upon our identity.

Delve deeper into sacred history and you will find that approximately four thousand years ago the heavens were opened to Father Abraham. To him these words were spoken:

Abraham, behold, my name is Jehovah. . . .

Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, . . . and my power shall be over thee.

. . . Through thy ministry my name shall be known in the earth forever, for I am thy God.
[Abraham 1:16, 18–19]

And I will bless [my people] through thy name; for as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father; . . . I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee . . . shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal. [Abraham 2:10–11]

These passages confirm the connection between your identity, priority, and promised blessings. Your responsibility is to apply these lessons to your life.

How do you discover your *identity*? First, remember that you are children of God, created in His image, sent here “for a wise and glorious purpose.”⁵ Then you need to search the scriptures. You will find that you are

children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

[You are] neither Jew nor Greek, . . . neither bond nor free, . . . neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. [Galatians 3:26–29]

This identity entitles you to “all of the privileges and blessings which the gospel affords” (Official Declaration 2).

For ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh, and have been hid from the world with Christ in God—

Therefore your life and the priesthood have remained, and must needs remain through you and your lineage until the restoration of all things spoken by the mouths of all the holy prophets since the world began.

Therefore, blessed are ye if ye continue in my goodness, a light unto the Gentiles, and through this priesthood, a savior unto my people Israel.

[D&C 86:9–11]

How do you determine your *priority*? Ask yourself: What do I really want, most of all? Compare your answer with the high standard revealed by your Creator. He said you are to “seek not the things of this world but seek ye first to build up the kingdom of God, and to establish his righteousness; and all . . . things shall be added unto you” (JST, Matthew 6:38; see also Matthew 6:33a). You build up the kingdom of God as you place your family first. A husband’s highest priesthood duty is to love and care for his wife, to bless her and their children. A wife’s highest calling is to love her husband and nurture their children. As you serve the Lord, know that your “duty is unto the church forever, and this because of [your] family” (D&C 23:3).

How do you obtain your *blessings*? How can you qualify for eternal blessings—even “all that [the] Father hath”? With your identity preserved and your priorities properly honored, our Father’s blessings will flow to you by virtue of the holy priesthood, which is without beginning or end.⁶

You can lay claim to all the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, destined to be fulfilled in these latter days (see 1 Nephi 15:18). Blessings and responsibilities once extended to other nations (see Galatians 3:7–9, 14, 27, 29) have now been given to us (see D&C 110:12). Patriarchal blessings reveal our linkage to the great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁷ *We are* the seed of Abraham through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. That identity merits our precious priority, which in turn brings to us the blessings of heaven.

These blessings include access to the Book of Mormon, which stands as another testament of Jesus Christ. It also stands as a sign that God will keep His covenants with the remnants of the house of Israel (see 3 Nephi 16:11–12; 29:3; Mormon 5:20; 8:21; 9:37).

This Church has been restored to the earth to fulfill divine prophecies and purposes. Israel is to be gathered. Families are to be sealed in holy temples (see 1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6; D&C 1:11; 138:10–37; Abraham 2:8–11).⁸ And the world is to be prepared for the Second Coming of the Savior.

Members of the Church are among the “elect of God” (Colossians 3:12; see also Titus 1:1; D&C 84:34), to whom truths of the gospel and ordinances of the priesthood have been given. Enjoy these blessings and teach them to others by precept and example.

Now my beloved associates, I would like to invoke upon you an apostolic blessing that you may know your *identity*, who you are and who you can be; that you may establish your *priority*, held high and protected from erosion; that you may qualify for *blessings* of the Lord to be with you, to bring joy to you—His faithful sons and daughters—and to your posterity. I so bless you, leaving my love and testimony with you that God lives, Jesus is the Christ, and that this is His Church, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. "Stand True and Faithful," *Ensign*, May 1996, 92.

2. "Rise to the Stature of the Divine Within You," *Ensign*, November 1989, 96.

3. Paul even told us how we can achieve that condition: "That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; [by] being rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:17). Alma taught how "a mighty change was . . . wrought in [the] hearts [of his people], and they humbled themselves and put their trust in the true and living God" (Alma 5:13). This change produced a visible transformation of their faces (see Alma 5:14).

4. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, 3 vols. (1954–56), 3:153.

5. "O My Father," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 292.

6. Adam held that priesthood. It was passed on by Methuselah to Noah. Melchizedek received it through the lineage of his fathers, and Abraham received it from Melchizedek (see D&C 84:14–17). To Abraham was specifically revealed the promise that through him and his seed—his biological and his spiritual heirs—"all the families of the earth [would] be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal" (Abraham 2:11; see also Abraham 2:8–10; Genesis 12:2–3).

7. Patriarchal blessings are conferred upon faithful members of the Church, that they might know who they are and that they might accept the responsibility of making the blessings of the priesthood available to their children and to all whom they can teach by word of mouth and by example.

8. Eventually, the families of all nations will be given the opportunity to be so blessed, whether in earth life or the spirit world.