

Brigham Young, Prophet of God

L. TOM PERRY

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. [Isaiah 2:2–3]

Each year as we celebrate the twenty-fourth of July, I reflect on this scripture and marvel at the accomplishments of the Mormon pioneers who settled here in the tops of the mountains. I have a special respect and admiration for President Brigham Young as he led the colonization of the pioneers here in the West. As we meet tonight on the campus that bears his name, it seems appropriate to remind ourselves of some of the teachings, philosophy, and vision of this great leader.

Brigham Young first saw the light of day in a rough-hewn log cabin in Whitingham, Vermont, on 1 June 1801. His arrival swelled to nine the number of John and Abigail Howe Young's children, divided unevenly with five girls and four boys. Shortly before Brigham

Young was born, the family moved in the middle of winter from Hopkinton, Massachusetts, to Vermont. So Brigham Young really had his beginning in Massachusetts, but was born in Vermont, not many miles from the birthplace of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

In those days the people were surprisingly mobile. When they found farming not very productive in one place, they would migrate to another, almost on impulse. This had prompted the Young family to move from Massachusetts to Vermont to see if they could open up a greater farming potential. Survival under these conditions depended entirely on one's industry and on the weather.

The farmer is usually more susceptible to the ideas of God than are those in most other occupations—mostly because farmers are so dependent on God, and especially as they witness the recurring miracle of life and growth in the planting, nurturing, and maturing of crops. So John Young had a religious upbringing, as did his wife. By the time he left Whitingham in 1804, he was impelled to move west to find

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more fertile land and more congenial surroundings.

The next stop for the Young family was Sherbourne, New York, a rural village in the Cherry Valley. The Youngs stayed here for nine years, and in this place the family was increased by the birth of the tenth and eleventh children. However, it was diminished by the death of their second child, a fourteen-year-old daughter.

From Sherbourne they migrated to Cayuga County, New York, in 1813. This was the last home that the wife of John Young would occupy. Careworn after bearing eleven children in twenty-one years and mothering them under harsh conditions, she finally gave up her life for her family.

Brigham Young was only fourteen years of age at the time of his mother's death. It was a difficult time, and he mourned her passing as any teenage child would at a time like that. The passing of his mother brought about many changes in the Young family. Marriages that occurred would have a tremendous impact on his life in future years. Rhoda, a sister, married John P. Green, and his brother John married Theodosia Kimball, a union that brought the family to the gospel of Jesus Christ. John Young, his father, later married Hannah Brown.

When Brigham was a robust sixteen-year-old, he was already learning the skills of a carpenter, joiner, painter, and glazier that gave him such a good foundation for the rest of his life. About this time there was an economic boom in the construction of the Erie Canal. Young Brigham left to work for a while in Auburn. There he applied his carpentry skills in the construction of a prison. Then he moved to Port Byron, a few miles north on the route of the Erie Canal, where he used his skill chiefly as a painter.

Here it was noticed that young Brigham was emerging into a powerful character. He was intelligent, energetic, and tough-minded,

standing 5'10" tall and weighing 190 lbs. He was an imposing physical specimen with broad shoulders—a powerful man, his body developed over years of toil on his father's farm. His hair had a reddish tint and framed a high forehead. His blue eyes looked out on a world with a steady gaze that, to some, had a definite quality of strength. He had a determined jaw. On seeing Brigham for the first time, one knew instinctively that he was a man not to be trifled with. Yet he had a tender side, almost a poetic quality about him that was evidence of the loving relationship he had had with his mother.

He searched for cultural development and loved the finer things of life. In Port Byron he joined a debating society, which helped him develop his skills as a speaker. Also during this period, Brigham's first formal affiliation with a church occurred, and at twenty-two years of age he joined a church, following a pattern set by his parents and older brother. It was also about this time he began to court Miriam Works, who would soon become his bride. Miriam, like Brigham, traced her ancestry back to Hopkinton, Massachusetts.

Soon they were married, and Miriam gave birth to their first child, whom they named Elizabeth. When Elizabeth was four, Brigham and Miriam decided to move to Mendon, New York—a decision that had far-reaching consequences for their future lives. It was during this move to Mendon that Brigham came in contact with the Church. His conversion was really brought about by one of his brothers, who was an itinerant preacher. This brother had come in contact with Samuel H. Smith, who was carrying in his backpack several copies of the Book of Mormon. He was impressed with Samuel's sincerity, but he could not exercise much zeal for the story about the coming forth of the book. He decided to purchase a copy out of curiosity and intended to spend some time finding flaws and exposing it. He studied and cataloged the book, looking for

errors, but soon became convinced of its truthfulness.

His father, John Young, also read the book. Then Brigham's sister Fanny, and then the Greens, the Kimbells—all had an opportunity to read it. This is a classic story of the Book of Mormon bringing to a family the light of the gospel. They soon came in contact with Solomon Chamberlin, another itinerant preacher who had been converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Brigham's brother, after meeting this man who believed that a man must have authority from Jesus Christ in order to baptize another into the true church, lost all of his enthusiasm for preaching and became completely converted to the message of the Book of Mormon.

Five elders showed up in Mendon and preached the gospel. Heber C. Kimball wrote:

As soon as I heard them, I was convinced that they taught the truth, and that I had only received a part of the ordinances in the church in which I belonged. I also saw and heard the gifts and spirits manifested by the elders.

Brigham Young himself also became thoroughly convinced of the message of these five elders. He said this five years after they arrived in the Salt Lake Valley;

When I saw a man without eloquence or talents for public speaking, who could only say, "I know by the power of the Holy Ghost that the Book of Mormon is true, and that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of the Lord," the Holy Ghost proceeded from that individual, illuminated my understanding, and light, glory, and immortality were before me. I was encircled by them, filled with them, and I knew for myself the testimony was true.

Brigham's brother had a powerful influence on his conversion. This brother's name was John.

Brigham Young (*coming forth to the stand*): No, no, no, it was not John! It was my brother Phineas. Let *me* tell his conversion story. In January of 1832, several months after these elders had visited Mendon, myself, Phineas, and Heber C. Kimball had thoroughly digested the spiritual fare we had received in abundance, and we decided to make a perilous midwinter trip to confirm our conclusions. We traveled through ice and snow, crossing rivers until we were almost discouraged; still, our faith was to learn more of the principles of Mormonism.

We remained with our new friend about a week, assimilating all they had to offer until we had such a conviction of the gospel of Jesus Christ that we wanted to learn more about the Prophet Joseph Smith and his ministry.

After my father, John Young, and my brothers, Phineas and Joseph, were baptized on 5 April 1832, they made the 120-mile trip to Mendon accompanied by one of the elders and their teacher, Eleazer Miller. There they found me waiting expectantly for the gospel. On April fourteenth, 1832, I was baptized into the Church by Elder Miller. It was a glorious celebration on this day of baptism. (Extracted from *Brigham Young, Modern Moses, Prophet of God* by Francis M. Gibbons [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981], pp. 7–20.)

Elder Perry: Yours is a remarkable conversion story of how the Lord guides the footsteps of his servants and brings the leadership required to further his purposes here on earth. How often we see the powerful witness of the Book of Mormon in conversions with whole family units embracing the gospel of our Lord and Savior. President Young, thank you for sharing your conversion story with us. This is such a rare opportunity to have you with us this evening.

Would you allow us to take advantage of this situation by having you share with us some of the observations and instructions you would like to give these great young people

who have gathered here tonight in this eighteen-stake fireside? Are there two or three special instructions you would like to leave with them?

Brigham Young: The messages I would give you now have not changed a great deal through the generations from the time I was here. The first lesson I would like to leave with you tonight is to be obedient to the will of God.

It is written that God knows all things and has all power. He has the rule and command of this earth, and is the Father of all the human beings that have lived, do live and will live upon it. If any of his children become heirs to all things, they in their turn can say, by-and-by, that they know all things, and they will be called Supreme, Almighty, King of kings, Lord of lords. All this and more that cannot enter into our hearts to conceive is promised to the faithful, and are but so many stages in that ceaseless progression of eternal lives. This will not detract anything from the glory and might of our Heavenly Father. For he will still remain our Father, and we shall still be subject to him, and as we progress in glory and power, the more it enhances the glory and power of our Heavenly Father. This principle holds good in either state, whether mortal or immortal.

All that the Lord requires of us is a perfect submission in our hearts to his will. [DBY, p. 20]

Obedience is one of the plainest, most everyday and home principles that you ever thought or know anything about. . . .

I cannot save you. I can tell you how to save yourselves, but you must do the will of God.

How shall we know what to do? By being obedient to every requirement of the Gospel

Do you think that people will obey the truth because it is true, unless they love it? No, they will not. Truth is obeyed when it is loved. Strict obedience to the truth will alone enable people to dwell in the presence of the Almighty.

The Lord has sent forth his laws, commandments, and ordinances to the children of men, and requires them to be strictly obeyed, and we do not

wish to transgress those laws, but to keep them. We do not wish to change his ordinances, but to observe them; we do not wish to break the everlasting covenant, but to keep that with our fathers, with Jesus, with our Father in Heaven, with holy angels, and to live according to them. [DBY, p. 220]

Great peace have they who love the law of the Lord and abide in his commandments.

If you wish to receive and enjoy the favor of our Heavenly Father, do his will. [DBY, p. 223]

Elder Perry: Your first counsel then to these great young people would be to be obedient to the will of our Eternal Father, not for reasons of constraint or compulsion, but because it brings the only true joy to be found as we progress through mortality. There is great safety in staying as far away from being disobedient as possible. We should not try to devise ways to satisfy our appetites, to see how close we can come to the line that separates obedience from disobedience. We should decide here and now to stay as far away from even the so-called gray areas between the two and be completely obedient to the will of the Lord.

What would be your second instruction to these great young people, President Young?

Brigham Young: I am concerned with the trend I see in the social order in this great land in which we live. Suppose we had the power to take the poor and ignorant, the low and the degraded, all those who are trodden under foot by the great and powerful among earth's inhabitants, and bring them together, purify them, fill them with knowledge and understanding, and make a nation of them worthy of admiration? What would you say to this? My greatest hope in my day was to transform these people into being ambitious and to be exemplary in their communities, where dedication, cooperation, unity, and pioneer-building were sacramental rituals.

As for the women—in my day I used to say that I wished for them more than relief from

domestic labor. Certainly their utility extended beyond the need to sweep houses, wash dishes, make beds, and raise babies. After breakfast they might go to work making bonnets and hats and clothing. Even though I think manual labor for women is unfitting, let the professions be opened to them. They could stand behind business counters, study law or physics, or become good bookkeepers and be able to do their business in counting houses—and all of this to enlarge their sphere of usefulness for the benefit of society at large.

I encouraged the men in my day to use the sinew of their bodies in labor, to plow fields, to harvest, to organize. I wasn't very fond of those frontier bone surgeons; I thought they generally did more harm than good. Lawyers were even a greater bane to me. I had very little use for them. They simply tried to make white black, and black white. To be sure, lawyers had their place, but I could not find it. Merchants to me in those days scored no higher. I never could, in the poorest day I ever saw in my life, descend to low as to stand behind a counter. Taking that class of man as a whole, I think that they are of extremely small caliber. The problem was several fold. Commercial profits drained Zion's precious capital resources and often placed wealth at the disposal of enemies. Moreover, merchants were always seeking a chance to buy a widow's cow for ten cents on the dollar rather than the real cash value. Then, after having made the purchase, they thanked the Lord that he had so blessed them.

The fundamental reason for my dislike for doctors, lawyers, and merchants in an ideal society in those days was that they were not producers of real wealth. I always believed that the labor of bone, sinew, nerve, and muscle was to be used to transform the natural resources into usable products—a contrast to those who live by their wits and only earn the scorn of mankind. Such a man never did a good thing to produce a morsel of bread. He

never took pains to raise a goose, a duck, a lamb, or a sheep. No, he never did anything useful, but still he eats, drinks, wears, and lives in luxury. In the name of common sense, what use is such a man? My policy is to see that every man, woman, and child is busily employed, that there is no idle time for hatching mischief in the night or making plans to accomplish their own ruin. I do not believe in giving to the idler, for it is as wicked as anything else.

I recommend physical labor balanced with mental activity. Then you will enjoy health and vigor! My encouragement is to learn, learn, learn, and continue to learn, to study by observation and from all good books. Study the gospel and what it means to us in our lives. (Extracted from *Brigham Young on the Social Order* by associate professor Ronald W. Walker at Brigham Young University.)

I shall not cease learning! I did not while I lived on this earth, and I will not in the spirit world where I shall learn with greater facility. And when I again receive my body, I shall learn a thousand times more. I will never cease learning because I must continue in my research. We shall never see the time when we shall not need to be taught, or when there is not a need for an object to be gained. I never expect to see the time when there will not be a superior power or superior knowledge and, consequently, incitement for further progress and further improvement.

If I do not learn what is in this world from the first to the last, someone will be wiser than I am. I intend to know the whole of it, both the good and the bad. Shall I practice evil? No, neither have I told you to practice it, but to learn by the light of truth every principle that exists in the world. We need constant instruction, and our great Heavenly Father requires of us to be diligent pupils in school, that we may in time reach his glorified presence. If we will not lay to heart the rules of education that our Teacher gives us to study, and continue to advance

from one branch of learning to another, we can never be scholars of the first class and become endowed with the science, power, excellency, brightness, and glory of the heavenly hosts; and unless we are educated as they are, we cannot associate with them. (See *DBY*, chapter 22, Education.)

Elder Perry: Let me see if I can understand what you are saying to us of this generation. It is all right to be a doctor, lawyer, merchant, or chief, or homemaker, but do not allow our society to shift entirely into service-oriented occupations. Man cannot exist on service only. The majority of our efforts must be directed toward taking the raw materials the Lord has blessed his children with in such abundance and fashioning this material into something productive for the use of mankind.

It would be true whether it be a nation, a region, or a household. We cannot rely on the microwave and the frozen food section of the grocery store to supply all of the nourishment we need to support life. We cannot allow all of our basic industries to go to foreign shores and still remain independent and free. We must retain our ability to use our hands and our heads to fashion and produce finished goods required for our wants and our needs. Certainly as individuals we need to learn how to cook, to sew, to build, repair, plant, and harvest. We need to experience the fulfillment that comes from producing a product fashioned of the labor of our own hands. This is an essential part of our education, along with the preparation for our chosen professions. Now, President Young, are there any other words of counsel you would like to leave with us here tonight?

Brigham Young: Oh, there are many things I would like to say to this great group of young people here tonight. Perhaps I could take time to counsel you on just one more subject.

Beauty must be sought in the expression of the countenance, combined with neatness and cleanliness and graceful manners. Anything is ridiculous, more or less, that is not comely.

Create your own fashions. Make your own clothes to please yourselves, independent of outside influences. Make your hats and your bonnets to shade you. I wish you sisters would take this counsel. Place yourself in the condition of using your own hands and your own talents to create the clothing that you wear.

The Lord instructs us in a revelation to let our clothing be plain. “Let all thy garments be plain, and their beauty the beauty of the work of thine own hands” (D&C 42:40). He never said to us, “Do not make a silk or satin ribbon, or fine broadcloth.” But he has said to us, “Make the articles of clothing that you wear.” If you do not, you shall find by and by that you will not be able to get them.

If my mother and her grandmother got one silk dress, and they lived to a hundred years old, it was all that they wanted. I think my grandmother’s silk dress came down to her children. She put her silk dress on when I went to see her. It was, I think, her wedding dress, and she had been married some seventy years. That which is convenient should be beautiful.

As for fashion, it does not trouble me. My fashion is convenience and comfort. (See *DBY*, chapter 18, *Some Womanly Duties*.)

The “ding-dong” fashions of my day were a bane to me. I would rather see an Indian maiden go through the street with very little on than to see clothing piled up until it reaches, perhaps, the top of a hedge or a fence as the wearer is passing by. In my feeling, it is positively ridiculous, and these fashions are useless and unbecoming. Do you recall the fashions of my day when a woman could not walk through the street without holding her clothing two feet in front of her if her arms were long enough? I wondered if some of those skirts did not, in fact, conceal a six-horse team with a dozen dogs under the wagon. Then it changed. Then they had humps on their backs. And some of the men were just as bad—one-half of their hats covered with feathers and the other half with a cockade, and frills up and down the

sleeves of their coats and the legs of their pantaloons!

Keep your clothing so that it is comfortable, useful, and becoming to you. Follow the fashions that are appropriate for sons and daughters of the Lord. (Extracted from *Brigham Young on the Social Order* by Ronald W. Walker.)

Elder Perry: President Young, I know that our appearance has always been important to our Eternal Father. It seems to me a true statement that we act the way we dress. People are quick to form first impressions of us as a great result of our dress and grooming standards. When we came up out of the waters of baptism, we made a visible statement of the world that we are followers of our Lord and Savior. Our very appearance should carry that message. Immodest, revealing clothing is not appropriate before the Lord, whether it be for dancing, for swimming, for school, or for work. Improper grooming and dressing immediately sends forth a signal of our being cheap, careless, or slothful. A modest, well-groomed, properly dressed person sends forth a signal that commands respect, admiration, regard, and esteem.

There is really only one image we should show to the world after we become members of the Lord's church, and that is an image of modesty with proper grooming and dress. Let us have the courage to have a proper style of our own and not be persuaded to adopt worldly fashions of this day.

President Young, now I think it would be proper for you to leave your testimony with us as we conclude this meeting tonight.

Brigham Young: *My testimony is positive. I know that there are such cities as London, Paris, and New York—from my own experience or from that of others; I know that the sun shines, I know that I exist and have a being, and I testify that there is a God, and that Jesus Christ lives, and that he is the Savior of the world. Have you been to heaven and learned to the contrary? I know that Joseph*

Smith was a Prophet of God, and that he had many revelations. Who can disprove this testimony? Any one may dispute it, but there is no one in the world who can disprove it. I have had many revelations; I have seen and heard for myself, and know these things are true, and nobody on earth can disprove them. The eye, the ear, the hand, all the senses may be deceived, but the Spirit of God cannot be deceived; and when inspired with that Spirit, the whole man is filled with knowledge, he can see with a spiritual eye, and he knows that which is beyond the power of man to controvert. What I know concerning God, concerning the earth, concerning government, I have received from the heavens, not alone through my natural ability, and I give God the glory and the praise. Men talk about what has been accomplished under my direction, and attribute it to my wisdom and ability; but it is all by the power of God, and by intelligence received from him. I say to the whole world, receive the truth, no matter who presents it to you. [DBY, pp. 433–434]

Elder Perry: Thank you for that testimony, Brother Brigham.

In our mind's eye we can see Brigham Young here tonight stepping to the pulpit. His presence was always dominating. When he spoke women would arouse themselves in expectation, men stopped their noisemaking. Typically, his first words were almost inaudible, but warming to the subject he soon achieved fluency and control. His manner was effective, but impromptu, spoken rather than preached. The scene was produced hundreds, perhaps thousands of times, as the Saints gathered in the West.

Ralph Rogers, thank you for taking the part of Brigham Young for us here tonight. Your great talent has been enjoyed by the Saints in so many different places. It is good to have you back in Utah after your outstanding direction of the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii for the past few years. We are looking forward to seeing you many, many times as we have the

opportunity to have you back in our great and noble state.

Please accept my sincere appreciation for your assistance in this eighteen-stake fireside.

Now, to the testimony of Brigham Young, I humbly add mine. God lives! Jesus is the

Christ, the Savior of the world! We are engaged in his work as members of his Church. May God bless us to have the courage and the will to build his kingdom here on earth, I humbly pray in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.