

“But We Heeded Them Not”

L. ALDIN PORTER

Thank you, President Lee. I am a friend of BYU. I love BYU. Sister Porter and I were here more years ago than I would like to say, other than to tell you that we have grandchildren who are now seeking to enter BYU, so that will give you some impression of how much time has passed. Our love for this institution has never wavered.

One reason for that came to mind as I sat here watching you arrive today. There is a goodness about you that can be felt as one sits here and looks into your faces and listens to the marvelous music we’ve just heard. I like to return to this campus.

You can tell a great deal about a community, a nation, or a civilization by noting on whom they shower fame, wealth, and influence. Have you ever thought about that?

In a letter to John Adams on October 28, 1813, Thomas Jefferson said:

There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . There is also an artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents. [Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 579]

President David O. McKay, speaking in the October general conference of 1949, said there would come a time “when nobility of character [would] be recognized as being greater than intellect” (“The Sunday School Looks Forward,” *Improvement Era*, December 1949, p. 863). My hope is that even sooner, nobility of character will be recognized as being greater than outstanding athletic or musical or acting ability. Please do not misunderstand. It is to be devoutly wished that you leave here highly skilled in music, business, science, drama, the law, athletics, history, or in whatever your chosen field may be. But, I ask you, what of virtue? I use that term this morning in its broadest meaning, “a moral excellence in all aspects of one’s life.” Consider for a moment: Who is it in your heart of hearts that you honor? Who is permitted a place in that sacred sanctuary that is your personal hall of fame?

For many years I have engaged in a series of educational experiments. I have asked friends and associates, even casual seat partners on air-

L. Aldin Porter was a member of the Presidency of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 14 February 1995.

planes, “Who is the greatest person you have ever met?” Some have answered quickly, and others have pondered for a considerable time. When they have named someone, I have always followed with another question. “What is there about this person that has caused you to feel this way?”

As they begin to describe attributes, I have been able to learn much that is important about the person speaking. It has helped me to understand what characteristics the speaker feels deeply about. And, as you can appreciate, these conversations have often led to discussions about the Lord’s plan of happiness.

It is my suggestion that you try it on yourself some Sunday afternoon when you have uninterrupted time to think and ponder. Just ask yourself what it is about the person you admire most that causes you to admire him or her. As you ponder these qualities, you will learn some things about yourself.

There is a companion question that should be asked: Who is it that has influenced you the most, but whom you have never met? That broadens the horizon considerably.

Samuel the Lamanite, in speaking to the Nephites, asked a question: “Yea, how long will ye suffer yourselves to be led by foolish and blind guides?” (Helaman 13:29). I wonder how many of us today permit ourselves to be led by foolish and blind guides?

Is there some way to test the guides in our lives? The answer is obviously yes. There is a test, and it has many names. In the scriptures it is called the plan of happiness, the plan of redemption, the plan of salvation, the great plan of the Eternal God. Each of these names has been taken from the scriptures, and there are at least that many more names in the scriptures, all referring to one plan that exists for the eternal happiness of men and women. Our lives need order, and order requires a plan. The Father of us all has given us one. The plan says, among other things, that there was a premortal existence, *and each if us was there*. Agency is part

of that eternal plan, as is the fall of man and the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The plan tells us that the individual survives the grave and there is a spirit world, a judgment, and a resurrection. There is a concept involving the plan that Alma teaches, which I sincerely wish Sister Porter and I had understood as we left this institution so many years ago. It would have been so much easier to raise our children.

Those of you who are parents, and all of you who are going to be parents, take note. I read from the words of Alma:

Therefore God gave unto them commandments, after having made known unto them the plan of redemption, that they should not do evil, the penalty thereof being a second death, which was an everlasting death as to things pertaining unto righteousness. [Alma 12:32]

Why do I wish we had known it? I suppose in a sense we did, but it would have been helpful if we’d had a better concept. Let me suggest to you that when the day comes that you tell your teenagers they cannot stay out at night as late as they wish with whomsoever they wish, stop and explain the plan of happiness. Tell them that parents must do their duty, and give them commandments after explaining the plan. Teach them that a very important part of the plan is the law of chastity, the violation of which has eternal consequences, including “an everlasting death as to things pertaining unto righteousness.” Of course, there is also a law of repentance that is part of the plan of happiness. Help your children understand that the cost of sin is enormous to the offender and to the Savior. Further, it is my deep conviction that there are few, if any, in this group today who totally understand the mortal and eternal consequences of the violation of God’s commands in relation to the law of chastity. It is very difficult because Satan has largely convinced this world that its violation is of no serious consequence.

Brother Rodney Turner wrote with great insight about our times when he said:

*Our moral environment is far more polluted than our physical environment. It seems as though good and evil are being homogenized out of existence by a generation largely led by “foolish and blind guides” (Hel. 13:29). What was once whispered in shame is now electronically shouted from the housetops as the famous and the foolish appear on television to parade their sins, like so many medals, before laughing, applauding audiences. Every aspect of modern communication seems to have been appropriated by Satan to legitimize the everlastingly illegitimate. It is imperative that Latter-day Saints view these times from a gospel perspective and follow the counsel of our prophet by taking warning from the teachings—and the fate—of an earlier generation of Americans, the Nephites. [Rodney Turner, “Morality and Marriage in the Book of Mormon,” *The Book of Mormon: Jacob Through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy*, Papers from the Fourth Annual Book of Mormon Symposium (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990), p. 272]*

Should not a warning voice be raised about whom you permit to enter that sacred place in your personal hall of fame? If you desire to cultivate virtue in your life, should you not choose carefully whom you permit in that personal sanctuary? Should they be more than talented in the arts or in athletics or in the professions?

Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof* taught a marvelous principle. You’ll recall he sang a song entitled “If I Were a Rich Man.” He expressed the thought that he would like to be rich so people would come to him for advice. Then Tevye says, “It won’t make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong. When you’re rich, they think you really know.” It is important to understand that everything said, written, sung, or insinuated by the wealthy or famous is not necessarily so. Surely all of us here are on a

quest for virtue in our lives. I ask the question again: Should we not choose carefully whom we will open our hearts and minds to?

Brother Truman Madsen opened a door of enlightenment as he concluded his excellent work on the life of President B. H. Roberts. You’ll recall the book is entitled *Defender of the Faith*. In that book, he quoted President Roberts as he described

*the quality that linked him [Brigham Young] to God; that added in large measure the strength and wisdom of God to his own strength and wisdom. . . . The man [or woman] who so walks in the light and wisdom and power of God, will at the last, by the very force of association, make the light and wisdom and power of God his own—weaving those bright rays into a chain divine, linking himself forever to God and God to him. . . . Beyond this human greatness cannot achieve. [Truman Madsen, ed., *Defender of the Faith: The B. H. Roberts Story* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1980), p. 390]*

Is it not clear that he who walks in the wickedness and depravity of Lucifer, even if only in the mind, also weaves those dark rays into a chain that will bind him? One whose mind is saturated, even intermittently, with wicked or pornographic thoughts will find when he seeks to escape that he has forged a formidable chain indeed.

We, here on this campus and as members of the Church, hear the prophets speak, and we come away determined to do what we already knew was right, the correctness of which has been brought to our attention one more time by the prophets. This is truly life’s struggle. There are a few who will help us, but there seem to be many who will make light of our efforts and seek to shame us for simply trying to do the right thing.

There are ways to protect ourselves. Bruce Hafen asked the following question:

*Have we really comprehended how the devil operates? Lehi's vision of the great and spacious building, for example, tells us graphically that the one main weapon used by the wicked is mocking and derision. . . . When you know your opponent's play book, it's a lot easier to plan your defense. [Bruce Hafen, "J. Reuben Clark," *BYU Today*, September 1988, p. 22]*

President Ezra Taft Benson gave us great insight on Satan's playbook and on the Savior's playbook when he told us that "the Book of Mormon was written for us today" (*CR*, April 1975, p. 94). Referring to the Nephites, he said those people never had the book. "God, who knows the end from the beginning, told him [Mormon] what to [put in the book] that we would need for our day" (*ibid.*). Each time you read the Book of Mormon, why don't you say to yourself, "Why did the Lord have Mormon put that particular information in the book?"

For instance, let's review part of Lehi's dream and see if we cannot find where the Lord has given us an answer to one of life's severe challenges.

And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood.

And I also beheld a strait and narrow path, which came along by the rod of iron, even to the tree by which I stood; and it also led by the head of the fountain, unto a large and spacious field, as if it had been a world. . . .

And I also cast my eyes round about, and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth.

And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit. . . .

And great was the multitude that did enter into that strange building. And after they did enter into that building they did point the finger of scorn at me and those that were partaking of the fruit also; but we heeded them not. [1 Nephi 8:19–20, 26–27, 33]

There, tucked away as a tiny comment, was the answer—simple, clear, and enormously effective: "but we heeded them not." Difficult to do? Yes. Clear to understand? Yes!

Elder James E. Faust, who spoke at this podium a few months ago, said, in referring to Lucifer: "He is really a coward, and if we stand firm, he will retreat" ("Trying to Serve the Lord Without Offending the Devil," *BYU 1994–95 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: Brigham Young University, 1995], p. 64).

Let us continue with another portion of Lehi's dream.

And it came to pass that I saw and bear record, that the great and spacious building was the pride of the world; and it fell, and the fall thereof was exceedingly great. And the angel of the Lord spake unto me again, saying: Thus shall be the destruction of all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that shall fight against the twelve apostles of the Lamb. [1 Nephi 11:36]

Brother Hafen was right—when we know our enemy's playbook, we really can plan our defense.

I ask you to consider with me the response when Lucifer used this very weapon against the boy prophet, who received so much scorn when he simply told the truth about his experience in the Sacred Grove. I quote from the Prophet Joseph:

However, it was nevertheless a fact that I had beheld a vision. I have thought since, that I felt much like Paul, when he made his defense before King Agrippa, and related the account of the vision he had when he saw a light, and heard a voice; but

still there were but few who believed him; some said he was dishonest, others said he was mad; and he was ridiculed and reviled. But all this did not destroy the reality of his vision. He had seen a vision, he knew he had, and all the persecution under heaven could not make it otherwise. . . .

So it was with me. I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me falsely for so saying, I was led to say in my heart: Why persecute me for telling the truth? I have actually seen a vision; and who am I that I can withstand God, or why does the world think to make me deny what I have actually seen? For I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it, neither dared I do it; at least I knew that by so doing I would offend God, and come under condemnation. [JS—H 1:24–25]

Did it bring the Prophet pain? Of course it did. What did he do? He continued with the work of the Restoration. Though the scorn was very painful, he “heeded them not” (1 Nephi 8:33).

Now, I have to point out to you something you know very well. There is fear in each human heart. Satan plays upon our feelings of inadequacy. We are all vulnerable, and when scorn comes, we feel it deeply. Even Moroni shares his concern over this very human malady when he says:

Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words; and I fear lest the Gentiles shall mock at our words.

And when I had said this, the Lord spake unto me, saying: Fools mock, but they shall mourn; and my grace is sufficient for the meek. [Ether 12:25–27; emphasis added]

Do the Gentiles—and do some of us who consider ourselves other than Gentiles—mock the words of Moroni? I fear we do, on occasion. I’d ask those faithful missionaries who have stood as witnesses across the earth about the reaction of the world, generally, to the words of Moroni.

The wicked heap scorn when they have no other weapons to use—and too often the righteous run for cover—especially if the mocker can run fast or jump high or sing well or has high-profile degrees or a great deal of money, even if each or all have nothing to do with the subject at hand.

For instance, we voted here in Utah some months ago on whether we wanted to permit gambling at our horse-racing events. During that time a well-known actor, and one for whom I have deep respect as an actor, came on the TV screen deriding those of us who were going to let some “church” tell us what to do. He suggested that those who voted against permitting the gambling were simply following Church leaders without thinking. It was not mature of us to let prophets suggest how we should vote, but if we were convinced by the actor’s viewpoint, we were obviously thinking for ourselves.

I ask you, what are the rewards of standing fast in our own virtue—even against the scorn of the world? They are far more monumental than one might think. Let us share together the experience of Nephi, the son of Helaman and the brother of Lehi. Nephi was suffering depression and discouragement in the building of the kingdom. The Lord spoke to him and said:

Blessed art thou, Nephi, for those things which thou hast done; for I have beheld how thou hast with unweariness declared the word, which I have given unto thee, unto this people. And thou hast not feared them, and hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments.

And now, because thou hast done this with such unwearyingness, behold, I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will.

Behold, thou art Nephi, and I am God.
[Helaman 10:4–6; emphasis added]

Because Nephi had stood for truth and virtue, without fear of the world, the Lord told him that he would bless him forever, that he would make him mighty in word, deeds, faith, and works. No blessing that came to Nephi will be denied anyone in this dispensation who will give the same devotion, the same commitment, to the Lord and to his work.

Now what I guess I'm leading up to is this: Among those honorable enough to be in your private hall of fame, let there be the prophets of God, particularly the living prophets of God.

The Lord has placed prophets in the land. They speak the truth. On whatever subject the prophets choose to speak, LISTEN. Listen with your ears, with your minds, and with your hearts. Do not analyze their mortal preparation to speak upon the subject. That's not where their strength comes from. It is the power of God coupled with his call to them that qualifies them to speak—on any subject. The united voice of the First Presidency and the Twelve will never, never, never lead us astray.

What is it that hinders us from absorbing into our very beings the words of the prophets? Could it be that we do not believe them? I think that for most of us here today that is not the problem. Is it that we think they are talking to someone else? Possibly.

Might it be "I wonder what others will think of me if I follow them?" After all, the prophets are not always politically correct.

Let us be honest. Is this not often the real problem?

I was fighting a personal battle one day some years ago trying to be popular with

everybody. Did you know that's dangerous—trying to be popular with everybody? Well, I was doing that. In the midst of my pain, a thought came to me. Its impact really was substantial. The thought was this: "Most people in this world do not care what you think." Speaking to myself: "They do not care what happens to you. Only YOU will remember this unhappy experience a few months or weeks or days or even hours from now. Furthermore, the people who are respected by you are, by the very nature of things, unpopular with the people who raise the finger of scorn at you." That was a big day in my life. You might want to ponder that experience. We simply must not be afraid to stand, even if it is quietly, in defense of virtue. We must understand that there really are two forces warring for mankind and that we cannot be in both camps. You cannot be popular with everybody. You can't have one foot in each camp.

Follow the prophets as they lead us in God's plan of happiness! In the process expect the scorn of the world. Decide in advance how you are going to handle it, for it most surely will come. Now, beware of those whom the world loves and showers with fame and fortune. They are often unreliable guides in your quest for virtue.

It is necessary that each of us individually obtain a witness that God the Father is real and that there is a living Savior. If it takes a little while, be patient—continue to study the scriptures, pray over your desires to know, and be obedient to the commands of God. It will come in the Lord's time by the power of the Spirit to your spirit; and when it comes, it will come with certainty, sureness, confidence, and peace.

Now we have to recognize this, that when it does come, with the receipt of that testimony comes the obligation to bear witness to the world of the Lord and his work. Part of the covenant we made in the waters of baptism is that we would "stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that

[we] may be in, even until death” (Mosiah 18:9). From what may be a passive peace in our knowledge of these things, there must eventually come an active witness if we are to be happy.

Alma spoke those marvelous words that we sing and hear often, and love: “Oh, That I Were An Angel.” Listen carefully to why Alma wanted to be an angel.

O that I were an angel, and could have the wish of mine heart, that I might go forth and speak with the trump of God, with a voice to shake the earth, and cry repentance unto every people!

Yea, I would declare unto every soul, as with the voice of thunder, repentance and the plan of redemption, that they should repent and come unto our God, that there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth. [Alma 29:1–2]

You see, we don’t proselyte in this Church just to make the Church larger. We proselyte to make the person larger—more whole, more complete, more certain in the knowledge that there are eternal things. We bring the power of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ through the ordinances so that eternal blessings can come and also that “there might not be more sorrow upon all the face of the earth.” We err when we count this Church’s progress through numbers only.

Earlier I referred to the outstanding address given here last November by Elder James E. Faust at this pulpit. I’d like to quote another paragraph. He said:

I wonder how much we offend Satan if the proclamation of our faith is limited only to the great humanitarian work this Church does throughout the world, or to our beautiful buildings, or to this great university, marvelous as these activities are. When we preach the gospel of social justice, no doubt the devil is not troubled. But I believe the devil is terribly offended when we boldly declare by personal testimony that Joseph Smith was a prophet

of God and that he saw the Father and the Son; when we preach that the Book of Mormon is another witness for Christ; when we declare that there has been a restoration of the fullness of the gospel in its simplicity and power in order to fulfill the great plan of happiness.

We challenge the powers of darkness when we speak of the perfect life of the Savior and of his sublime work for all mankind through the Atonement. [Faust, “Trying to Serve,” p. 63]

Are we fence straddlers? I suppose it is one’s right to be a fence straddler, but I’d suggest that he then should not assume that he knows very much of the important nature of this work. He or she may have been born in the Church, have attended Primary and seminary and all of the other activities made available to us, yet have remained a fence straddler into adulthood. If one has chosen that course, he at least should have the courage to admit that he’s never joined the fray, has never battled as a witness that there is a God and that his Son is our Savior and the Redeemer of the world. Let him, then, not assume that he can speak with any certainty on the subject of the Sacred Grove and Moroni and the plates of Nephi. Knowledge by itself has never been conviction.

Now, we are not without support when we throw ourselves into the battle to establish the great plan of the Eternal God in our personal lives. Let me share an example of what I mean. I quote from Brigham Young:

You that have not passed through the trials, and persecutions, and drivings, with this people, from the beginning, but have only read of them, or heard some of them related, may think how awful they were to endure, and wonder that the Saints survived them at all. The thought of it makes your hearts sink within you, your brains reel, and your bodies tremble, and you are ready to exclaim, “I could not have endured it.” I have been in the heat of it, and I never felt better in all my life; I never felt the peace and power of the Almighty more copiously poured upon

me than in the keenest part of our trials. They appeared [as] nothing to me. [JD 1:313]

Well, are the days of sacrifice over? Certainly not. The missionaries who scatter across the earth have left behind school, family, occupations, friends, fiancées and fiancés, scholarships, and more. Are the blessings attached to personal sacrifice over? Most certainly not! Any devoted mother who nurtures her little ones knows something of sacrifice. Any father who struggles to support and to teach his children knows something of sacrifice. Everyone who gives diligent effort in Church service or service to his fellowman experiences the blessings that come from sacrifice. But we must recognize that there is a price, and so often the price is opposition from the world.

Fourteen days after the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, Willard Richards and John Taylor, who were with them in the jail at Carthage at the time of the attack, wrote a letter to the president of the British Mission. It is very applicable to us.

It is in this period of time that we are permitted to live. It is at the dawning of that day of days in which our heavenly Father is about to usher in that glorious period when times and seasons shall be changed and earth renewed, when after rumors and commotions, turmoils, strife, confusion, blood and slaughter, the sword shall be beaten into ploughshares, and peace and truth triumphantly prevail o'er all the footstool of Jehovah. The day of these events has

dawned, although to human view a cloud has o'er-spread the horizon. [HC 7:172; emphasis added]

That day is here. That day is now. My beloved young people, place sentinels by the entrance to your personal hall of fame. Let no one be honored there who is not worthy of your highest respect and emulation. I might suggest to you that the highest positions of honor might be given to our Father in Heaven; to his Son, our Savior and Redeemer; then to the prophets, particularly the Prophet Joseph and the living prophets—because they have given and sustained, through worthy lives, the great plan of happiness devised by our Eternal Father. Learn the plan. Live it. Testify of it, and expect the scorn of the world. When you do, you will find the “peace and power of the Almighty more copiously poured” out upon you.

I bear my personal witness to you that there is a God in Heaven. He is real. He exists. I bear witness that his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, was born in the flesh, that he literally walked forth from the tomb, inhabiting that body which hung upon the cross. I bear testimony to you that they love us and desire for us only happiness, and the process of happiness has been given to us by them in a plan. When we find ourselves in opposition to the plan, we can expect for certainty the tragedy and the sorrow to follow. I bear witness to you that the Lord Jesus Christ lives this very instant and directs his living prophets on the earth today, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.