

B-Y-You Matter to Him

KEITH J. WILSON

Six years ago President Dieter F. Uchtdorf gave a profound conference talk entitled “You Matter to Him.”¹ In his talk he explained that God is the Creator of all things and yet is concerned about each one of us individually. Today I would like to build upon President Uchtdorf’s topic and title my remarks “BYU Matters to Him.” However, I would like to redefine the acronym for Brigham Young University as B-Y-You, as in *you* (y-o-u). Thus the title of my address is “B-Y-You Matter to Him.”

This past semester one of my students submitted the following account. With her permission, I share her tender feelings about when she first arrived at BYU:

Leaving everything you have known for the entirety of your life to attend a university that is 547 miles away is difficult. You can no longer lean on the support of your family and friends; you can no longer enjoy the safety and security of your home; you can no longer simply follow your parents. Your life is in your own hands, and it is terrifying. I distinctly remember the hurricane of emotions I experienced as I bid farewell to my dad as he drove away, leaving me standing outside my dorm with five people I had never met. I had to make my own food, and I felt sorely unprepared. Actually, I felt more than unprepared—I felt absolutely and entirely lost.

My student then went on to describe her feelings that day as those of “ultimate vulnerability.”²

As I pondered my student’s feelings of vulnerability and isolation, I felt a personal surge of déjà vu from when I first arrived at BYU some forty-seven years ago. My student’s account stirred within me some tender and painful emotions from decades past. I suspect that many of you here today can also recall the daunting memories of when you first arrived on this campus. As I address you today, perhaps some of you find yourself in the throes of similar feelings of trepidation or of being lost.

The Greatness of BYU

I do not mean to minimize these feelings of loneliness or intimidation, but they present a marked contrast to the feelings we first had when we were accepted to BYU. Consider the following glossy accolades and advantages of attending Brigham Young University.

BYU consistently ranks in the top 25 percent of national universities.³ BYU is in the top five of the best value universities⁴ and costs around \$30,000 less per year than other private schools.⁵

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Consequently, BYU students graduate with substantially less debt.⁶ BYU is the number-one stone-cold sober university,⁷ and students will never have to tolerate drunk classmates or professors. Also, BYU has launched more of its students into PhD programs than Harvard, Yale, or Stanford.⁸ Upon arrival, every student here has a church unit waiting to receive and support them. Additionally, more than 60 percent of the students at BYU are returned missionaries.⁹ And please don't forget that BYU has been rated number one in the nation for students who are both "hot and smart."¹⁰

The list goes on and on. In some respects, if you were a student named Charlie in search of a golden coupon in a winning chocolate bar, you might have danced around in your pajamas singing, "I've got a golden ticket! I'm going to BYU!" when you received your BYU acceptance letter.

Feelings of Discouragement

So why then does this winning chocolate bar sometimes begin to melt in our hands after we start here at the Y? Was our impression to come here misguided? What causes this reversal to occur so quickly?

Almost five decades of experience with and observation of this campus have sensitized me to some of the reasons for this BYU "deflation syndrome." Do any of these sound familiar?

First, the size of BYU's student body is a reminder that this Church is growing and dynamic, yet we often feel very alone in a sea of 30,000 unknown students.

Second, the bureaucracy of a large university like ours can seem very impersonal and cold.

Third, the high level of academics here—which we are proud to acknowledge—can absolutely intimidate many of you, especially when you realize that you will be graded on a curve. How about this number for evidence of these high academics: this past year, more than fifty freshmen entered BYU with perfect ACT scores!¹¹

Fourth, even though BYU is the world's best bargain in higher education, \$15,000 to \$18,000 per year is still a chunk of change, and many of

us struggle to know which bank to rob in order to pay rent or tuition on time.

Fifth, and not to be overlooked, BYU is the LDS mecca for marriage prospects, and yet the bulk of you may not even have a date this weekend!

The number of things that can deflate the college bubble are as diverse as each person and can surface anytime during your years as a student. But there is one concern that seems to show up often in my students and even in my own seven children who have studied here. And that is this: "Do I really matter to BYU? Or should this university be more appropriately called 'B-Y-Many?'"

This quandary, for most, is linked with another question: "Am I, as an individual, important to God?" The reason for the overlap of these two questions is this: Prior to coming to BYU, most of us felt God's hand in directing us or bringing us here. Many of us prayed during the admissions process that we could make the cut. Some of us were actively considering other universities and had our hearts turned to the Y. And some of us were even prayed here by our righteous mothers! Regardless of the mechanism, most of us seem to trust that God wanted us here.

So this is where it gets a little confusing. If God wanted us here, then why do we become discouraged once we are here? And if our discouragement or loneliness becomes too intense, sometimes we wonder what God is doing—why is a loving Father allowing this to happen? Finally, this quandary can bottom out with "Does God even really care about me personally?"

You and I instinctively know the doctrinal answer to this age-old question. We have heard it from our first days in nursery to our most recent Relief Society or priesthood lessons. The scriptures remind us of this fundamental truth.

Consider this psalm:

*What is man, that thou art mindful of him? . . .
For thou hast made him a little lower than the
angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.¹²*

In the Hebrew text, the word for "angels" in this verse is *elohiym*. In the King James Bible,

elohiym is translated as “God” more than 2,000 times, and so it should be translated as “God” here.¹³ In reality, this verse says, “Man is just slightly below God.” Plainly, if each of us is just slightly below God, then each of us is very important individually to God.

During His life here upon the earth, Jesus openly described Himself as “the good shepherd,” and then He added, “And [I] know my sheep.”¹⁴

Another favorite verse of mine is when the Lord revealed His purpose to the Prophet Joseph Smith: “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”¹⁵ Please note here that the Lord’s job description centers on bringing *man* (as an individual) to eternal life—not even plural *men*—thus highlighting His interest in us as individuals.

Yet as clear as our doctrinal dictations about God knowing and working for each of us personally are, these same doctrines sometimes dim or may not be very convincing when we face discouragement or loneliness at BYU.

The Widow of Nain

There is one story in the scriptures that demonstrates the Savior’s interest in and love for each of us. For me, it represents the quintessential example of His acute awareness of us individually. The example comes from the Savior’s mortal life, specifically from His interactions with the widow of Nain, a woman we learn about in the Gospel of Luke. As with all miracles—but especially so with this one—the context is vital to understanding this incident. Having taught at the BYU Jerusalem Center and having been on-site in Nain, let me share with you some personal insights.

A brief synopsis of the miracle depicts Jesus intercepting a burial procession and miraculously bringing a dead young man back to life. But there is much more to understand about the setting. During Jesus’s time, Nain was a small farming village nestled up against Mount Moreh, which defined the east side of the Jezreel Valley. The town itself was off the beaten path, and access to it was limited to a single road. During Jesus’s time, this hamlet would have been small and relatively

poor, and it has remained that way ever since. At times in its history this town has encircled as few as thirty-four homes and 189 people¹⁶ (the size of some apartment complexes in Provo). Today it is home for about 1,500 inhabitants.

The account is only recorded in Luke.¹⁷ Jesus was in Capernaum the day before and had healed the centurion’s servant.¹⁸ Then we learn that “the day after,” the Savior went into a city called Nain, and a large group of disciples accompanied Him.¹⁹

This sequence of events is very important. Capernaum is situated on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee at an elevation of 600 feet below sea level. Nain is about thirty miles away from Capernaum at 700 feet above sea level, thus requiring an arduous, uphill climb of more than 1,300 feet to get to Nain. In order to walk from Capernaum to Nain, it would have taken at least one or two days. Recently it took a group of BYU Jerusalem Center students ten hours to walk this route. This means that Jesus probably had to walk during the night in order to intercept the burial procession “the day after.”

As Christ approached the city after a very taxing journey, a young man in his twenties was being carried out on a burial bier.²⁰ Luke wrote that this young man was a widow’s only son, and some scholars interpret the Greek text to imply that she had no other offspring.²¹ A large group of villagers accompanied her in this most unfortunate family tragedy.

Obviously, having a son die would be a tragedy for anyone, but consider the implications for this widow. Just what would it have meant socially, spiritually, and financially to be a widow without an inheritor in ancient Israel? In Jewish culture, it was believed that when a husband died before old age, it was a sign of God’s judgment for sin. Thus, through the law of retribution, God was meting out punishment upon this surviving widow. In the Old Testament, when Naomi was widowed at an early age, she bemoaned, “After all, the Lord is against me, and the Almighty has broken me.”²²

Not only was there spiritual and emotional pain, but this widow of Nain was also facing financial ruin—even staring starvation in the face.

Upon marriage, a woman was assigned to her husband's family for financial protection. If he died, then her care was delegated to her birthright son. Now that the birthright—her only son—was dead, this widow was at the end of her rope financially. She probably was a middle-aged woman who was living in a small, secluded farm town and who then found herself spiritually, socially, and financially destitute.

Precisely at the narrow window of time when the villagers were carrying this woman's son out to be buried, Jesus happened upon the procession and "had compassion on her."²³ Actually, this might be Luke's greatest understatement. Jesus somehow sensed the utterly desperate situation of this widow. Perhaps she had spent the night sprawled on her dirt floor, begging the Lord to know why. Perhaps she had even openly questioned why the Lord was requiring her to live any longer on this earth. Or perhaps she was terrified of the pending loneliness that she was facing. We do not know. But we do know that Jesus chose to leave Capernaum immediately, which would have required Him to walk through the night in order to intercept the burial procession right before they put the body in the ground. Yes, when He saw her tear-stained face as she walked behind the funeral pallet, Jesus felt great compassion for this woman—but it came from feelings that He had experienced long before He just "happened" to intercept that burial entourage. He clearly had planned to be there in her moment of need.

Jesus then told the widow to "weep not." Unafraid of ritual uncleanness, He touched the pallet, and the procession "stood still." He then commanded, "Young man, I say unto thee, Arise."²⁴

Following this, Luke recorded, "And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And [Jesus] delivered him to his mother."²⁵

Naturally, the crowd of villagers and Jesus's followers were awestruck as their shared grief turned to shared joy. But this miracle was not just about impressing a community. It was all about rescuing one desperate soul. Jesus was aware that something was very wrong for this woman—someone who was a true "nobody" in her culture.

Her situation cried out for His immediate attention. Even if He had to skip a night's rest, He knew her desperate situation, and He came running.

President Monson spoke undeniable truth when he said, "One day, when we look back at seeming coincidences of our lives, we will realize that perhaps they weren't so coincidental after all."²⁶

I hope this woman's experience will be of great comfort to each of you here at BYU, especially when you feel rather insignificant. Jesus hurried to the widow, and He will hurry to you as well.

A second reason why I hope this account etches itself into your consciousness is that by coming to BYU, the Lord intends for you to bless others around you. Many will be discouraged. If you can tell them about "Sister Nain" and how the Lord knew precisely her discouragement and great personal crisis, I believe their hearts will change from night to day. He cares about B-Y-You.

The Story of Mary Ann

My final evidence of God's love for the individual comes from the experience of a family friend named Mary Ann.²⁷ Mary Ann was raised in a devout Latter-day Saint family in Wisconsin and lived for the day when she could attend BYU and have strong Latter-day Saint friends. The time came when she received that acceptance letter and then found herself as a freshman at BYU.

During the first week in her Book of Mormon class, Mary Ann's professor challenged the whole class to read the Book of Mormon for thirty straight days and promised that it would make a difference. Eagerly, she accepted his challenge and diligently read every day. As the challenge was drawing to a close, she began to get discouraged because no answers had come. Even though she had good roommates, they all were absorbed in their own challenges, and her dream of great Latter-day Saint friends was not what she had hoped for. To top it off, the weather had started to change, and the days were wet and gray.

On one particularly dreary morning, as Mary Ann left her apartment to walk across campus to her first class, it seemed as if the bottom was

falling out from under her. She felt so discouraged that, as she walked among the sea of foreign faces, she began to silently pray. With tears in her eyes, she wondered if she could go on. She questioned why she had come to BYU since things were just not working out.

As she arrived at her first class, she took up her normal chair in the back of the room. It was a big general education class with at least 150 students in a theater-style room. As she prepared for the start of class, she looked up to see if the professor was already there. When she located him up front, she realized that he had been looking directly at her. Somewhat embarrassed, he looked back down at his notes and readied himself to begin speaking to the class. Then, in a spontaneous move, he left the podium platform and climbed the stairs to the aisle chair where she was seated.

The professor stopped in front of her and said, almost in a whisper, “I don’t know why, but I feel impressed to tell you that the Lord loves you deeply and that He knows you.”

He then smiled kindly and returned to the podium. It was the only time that semester that they interacted personally, but it was a game changer for this discouraged young lady from Wisconsin. The Lord was aware of her. She knew that He knew about her.

I wish that I knew the professor’s name so that I could acknowledge his identity before our university audience this morning.

President Kimball’s teachings capture Mary Ann’s experience rather succinctly. He said, “God does notice us, and he watches over us. But it is usually through another person that he meets our needs.”²⁸

This is one area in which, I believe, we all here at BYU could improve. Did you notice the similarity between my friend Mary Ann and the widow of Nain? Jesus reached out to Sister Nain. The professor took the responsibility of reaching out to Mary Ann. Here at the Y, I fear we have let the size of this school dictate our posture toward each other.

Recently my student researcher, Julia Brown, and I wondered about the casual interactions of students on campus. We walked the pathways at

BYU doing informal survey research. Fewer than 30 percent of the hundreds of students we passed even looked up at us when we walked by them.²⁹ That’s fewer than one in three.

Consider our own experiences between classes. Do we acknowledge those whom we are passing? Or do we let our cell phones, ear buds, and sunglasses protect us from having to engage in ways that might be out of our comfort zones? Listen to the prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon: “Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and *be familiar with all.*”³⁰ Granted, Jacob was speaking in terms of reaching out to others financially, but I still believe his admonition applies—especially to us at BYU. Remember, if we are to be God’s hands as He reaches out to lift other needy souls, it will start by opening our eyes and our hearts to recognize those whom we can lift.

In summary, I do know that *you* of BYU matter to the Lord. Please never let our size, our professionalism, our academic rigor, or any other aspect of Brigham Young University convince you otherwise. Forty-seven years ago I wondered if I belonged here. Now, in the sunset of my career, as I look back, I almost have to pinch myself because my stay here has been so rewarding. And while there are manifold blessings from my time here, one of the greatest joys has been to get to know more than 20,000 of you on a first-name basis. I have felt compelled to learn the names of each of my students—even in a class of 150 or 200 and with a total student load of 600 to 700 students—because of this absolute certainty: He knows your name. And if He deems it that important, then so should I.

I leave you my witness that *you* here at BYU matter to Him. Don’t ever, ever doubt that. The widow of Nain, Mary Ann, and I all bear testimony of this simple but profound truth. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “You Matter to Him,” *Ensign*, November 2011.

2. Permission for use granted by the student; letter in the possession of the author.

3. See “Best College Rankings: Brigham Young University—Provo,” *U.S. News and World Report* (2017), usnews.com/best-colleges/byu-3670/overall-rankings; also Joe Hadfield, “BYU #21 in an Academic Ranking of Colleges,” *BYU News*, 13 August 2013, news.byu.edu/news/byu-21-academic-ranking-colleges.

4. See “Money’s Best Colleges [2016–17],” *Money*, new.time.com/money/best-colleges/rankings/best-colleges/#/list.

5. See Farran Powell, “10 Most, Least Expensive Private Colleges,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 13 September 2016, usnews.com/education/best-colleges/the-short-list-college/articles/2016-09-13/10-most-least-expensive-private-colleges.

6. See Todd Hollingshead, “BYU Hits Best Mark in One U.S. News Ranking, Stays High in Others,” *BYU News*, 8 September 2015, news.byu.edu/news/byu-hits-best-mark-one-us-news-ranking-stays-high-others.

7. See “Stone-Cold Sober Schools [2017],” *Princeton Review*, princetonreview.com/college-rankings?rankings=stone-cold-sober-schools; see also Morgan Jones, “BYU Celebrates 19th ‘Stone-Cold Sober’ Designation with Special-Edition Chocolate Milk,” *Faith, Deseret News*, 29 August 2016, deseretnews.com/article/865661282/BYU-celebrates-19th-Stone-Cold-Sober-designation-with-special-edition-chocolate-milk.html.

8. See Joe Hadfield, “BYU Seventh in the Nation for Grads That Get PhDs,” *BYU News*, 14 April 2010, news.byu.edu/news/byu-seventh-nation-grads-get-phds.

9. See Tad Walch, “BYU Sees Dramatic Jump in Number of Returned Missionaries,” *Faith, Deseret News*, 4 April 2016, deseretnews.com/article/865651508/BYU-sees-dramatic-jump-in-number-of-returned-missionaries.html.

10. See Peter Jacobs, “25 Colleges Where Students Are Both Hot and Smart,” *Education, Business Insider*, 2 April 2014, businessinsider.com/colleges-students-both-hot-and-smart-2014-3.

11. See Braley Dodson, “BYU Freshman Score Good ACTs; GPAs, Devotionals Announced; UVU Students Aid with Nutty Putty Cave Movie,” *Provo Daily Herald*, 2 September 2016, heraldextra.com/news/local/education/college/byu/byu-freshman-score-good-acts-gpas-devotionals-announced-uvu-students/article_1239b06f-b0d8-51b1-be8c-a2ebc6d35b72.html.

12. Psalm 8:4–5.

13. See Psalm 8:5, s.v. “angels,” on page 65 of the Main Concordance in *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1890); see also *elohiyim* at word number 430 on page 12 of the Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary in *Strong’s Concordance*; see also “KJV Translation Count” under the lexicon for Strong’s H430, *elohiyim*, Blue Letter Bible, blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?t=kjv&strongsh=h430.

14. John 10:14.

15. Moses 1:39.

16. See E. Mills, *Census of Palestine 1931: Population of Villages, Towns and Administrative Areas* (Jerusalem: Palestine Government, 1932), 75.

17. See Luke 7:11–17.

18. See Luke 7:1–10.

19. Luke 7:11.

20. See S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke: Brigham Young University New Testament Commentary* (Provo: BYU Studies, 2015), 366.

21. See Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 365.

22. Ruth 1:21, International Standard Version. In the New English Translation of Isaiah 54:4, the Lord told the widow Israel that she would “no longer remember the disgrace of [her] abandonment.”

23. Luke 7:13.

24. Luke 7:13–14.

25. Luke 7:15.

26. Thomas S. Monson, quoted in Joseph B. Wirthlin, “Lessons Learned in the Journey of Life,” CES fireside address, 7 November 1999; also Wirthlin, “Lessons Learned in the Journey of Life,” *Ensign*, December 2000.

27. Permission for use granted by Mary Ann Hummel; recorded experience in the possession of the author.

28. Spencer W. Kimball, “First Presidency Message: Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, December 1974.

29. Survey research conducted by Keith J. Wilson and Julia Brown, May 2017.

30. Jacob 2:17; emphasis added.