

THE TEMPLE AND THE COLLEGE ON THE HILL

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Editor's note: President Eyring gave this devotional address at BYU–Idaho on 9 June 2009.

Thank you for that wonderful music. Thank you for the choice of the scripture. Thank you for singing songs we used to sing in this place some years ago. It has been a joy for Sister Eyring and me to return to this campus. You have been kind and gracious. We have felt welcomed home, but to a home changed for the better. The two-year college has become a great university. Beautiful buildings now cover slopes which, when we first arrived, were so far above the campus that I toured them on skis with my young sons. The student trailers where we lived in our first months have gone. I doubt that I could find now where that trailer park was, amongst the beauties of this campus.

Of all the improvements, what touched my heart most as we arrived Friday was the sight of the sacred temple on the hill, so close to the university that it seemed a part of it. When we came here in 1972, people spoke fondly of the “college on the hill.” The two original pioneer buildings and even the ones built later seemed to stand only a few feet higher than the surrounding land. But to those who loved it and saw it as the Lord’s school it appeared elevated. They felt they were going up, up to the college on the hill.

The scriptures speak of attending a temple as going up to the mountain of the Lord’s house. When searching for temple sites, the Lord’s prophets look for places where those who approach could have the feeling of going up. In my days serving in the Presiding Bishopric, I was charged at times with bringing back, from trips across the world, information about possible temple sites. The questions, when I returned, from the Lord’s prophets always included how the site would appear to the people coming up to it; they wanted those people to feel a sense of elevation. For the same reason, a temple’s interior is designed to give patrons the experience of rising.

The early Saints, as they created pioneer settlements in the American West, watched for elevated places for the future temples they dreamed would rise. They often referred to those places as “Temple Hill.” That was true here. When we arrived I was told that the small hospital, where our fourth son was born in our first year, was on Temple Hill. The early settlers had their dream fulfilled but not on the hill they expected. The hospital has now been replaced by one much larger and better. And a living prophet has placed a beautiful temple of the Lord high above yet

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integrally linked to His new university, which was born out of the little college on the hill.

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The miracle has at least three parts: first, that the temple and the university are side-by-side on one Rexburg hill; second, that the two were created together at this time; and third, that the few but significant differences between the university and the temple should combine so well to accomplish the Lord's purposes.

First, there is the miracle of location. This is the restored Church of Jesus Christ. The prophecy for the latter days is being fulfilled. The gospel is being taken to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. Yet, even with the generous spread of temples across the earth, only the tiniest fraction of the members can reach a temple of God without great sacrifice in time and means. And there are more millions in the spirit world who feel that pain and frustration that their faithful descendants feel that temple ordinances are not being made available to them. In the time I was in the Presiding Bishopric, I provided to the Lord's prophets the information they requested to make the agonizing choice about places where people could have the blessing of a temple within their reach and which of them would have to wait.

The prophets make similarly difficult decisions about church universities. The chance to learn in such a faith-filled community as this is out of the reach—but not out of the hope—of thousands. Their missionary experiences and the blessings of the Perpetual Education Fund fuel their desires for learning in the powerful way possible here. In the time I was the Commissioner of Education for the Church I helped the prophets respond to people begging for campuses like this. In many cases, they offered land and donations. Some offered already established schools if only we would take them over. Time after time I had to write kindly responses on behalf of the prophet to help faithful people accept his judgment that the Church could not responsibly invest and spend more in higher education.

Before serving in the Presiding Bishopric and as Commissioner of Education, I presided over what was then called Ricks College. In those days there were those who dreamed that the college would become a university. As the president of Ricks College, I explained countless times the reasons why it would remain, perhaps forever, a two-year school. I told them traditional universities, the kind with graduate programs and competitive athletic programs, are terribly expensive. They seemed to never understand. Temples are also expensive, not only to build but

also to operate. With a large temple just down the road in Idaho Falls, it was hard to imagine a temple in Rexburg. In fact, my later experience in the Presiding Bishopric seemed to confirm that conclusion: none of the lists of places needing and deserving a temple that I prepared for the presidents of the Church had Rexburg on them.

I use the word “miracle” in describing the location of this university next to a temple on one hill because I know that only God could have done it. Human judgment would have kept Ricks College at two-year status and allocated the Church’s resources for higher education someplace else. Human judgment would have placed the temple somewhere else. But human judgment could have foreseen neither smaller temples operated primarily by volunteers nor a university capable of serving many students at high quality and low cost. That this university and this temple are on a hill in Rexburg is a miracle because God, not man, revealed new designs for each and placed them here together.

God performed these miracles by revelation to His prophets, not through the people who advise them. I say that from personal experiences in providing advice on both universities and temples, and then watching God speak to His prophets, sometimes taking my help and sometimes (more often) not.

Just like Rexburg, Bountiful was never on the list of recommended or even possible temple sites during the time I was doing the work for the prophet of God. In the late 1980s, in fact, a brilliant man working for the Presiding Bishopric and for me prepared a list, using careful statistical analysis, of one hundred places deserving temples. I delivered it to the president. Based on the criteria we used to make that list, Bountiful, which is where my family and I then lived, would not have appeared in the second or third hundred possibilities.

Not many weeks after I sent the list of one hundred sites to the president, our son John, the one born in the old Madison Memorial Hospital, came home from the Bountiful Seminary. He announced with some enthusiasm, “Dad, in seminary today they told me that the Church has purchased a site for a temple on Bountiful Boulevard.” I said to him with great emphasis, and some annoyance, “John, I am in charge of evaluating and buying sites for temples. If you look as if you even think that unfounded story might be true, people will believe it.”

Within a day or two, my wife said that she had heard in Relief Society that the Church had purchased a future temple site in Bountiful. I told her, “Kathy, I am in charge. That is an unfounded rumor, and you mustn’t even appear to believe it.”

The next day in the media, the Church announced the purchase of a temple site in Bountiful. I called Clair Bankhead, who worked with me buying temple properties and sites. I asked, “Clair, why didn’t you

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tell me?” He said, “President Benson told me to buy it and not to tell anyone. So I did what the prophet asked.”

When John came home that day after hearing the news, he said with a smile, “Now I know what it means for you to be in charge.” So did I. And now so do you. The prophet, who holds all the keys of the kingdom, including the keys of the sealing power, is directly accountable to the Lord for temples. Others may help, but the Lord decides and tells His prophet. It was a miracle that Bountiful, twenty minutes from Salt Lake and twenty-five from Ogden, received a temple. Likewise, it is a gracious gift of God that Rexburg has a temple so close to Idaho Falls, when people across Asia and Africa and South America still sacrifice so much time and means to reach a temple of God. The miracle is that the Lord inspired, and the prophet obeyed. And now this hill has a temple on it next to a university.

As with the Rexburg Temple, I know from personal experience that this university’s being on this hill is a miracle granted directly by God through a living prophet. One day in early 2000, President Hinckley asked me to follow him to his office after a Board of Education meeting. I was the Commissioner of Education at the time. I wondered why he had invited me there. After I sat down in his office, his first words were, “Hal, don’t you think it’s about time that Ricks College became a four-year school?”

After hearing my brief reply, which was one of support but some wonder, I got a great surprise. I saw, as I gave him the advantages and the disadvantages which he asked for, it was clear that he had already decided that Ricks College would become BYU–Idaho. He said that I was the first person he told of his decision. He had never asked me or my staff for any information to help him consider such a decision. He simply knew.

And so I know that the decision to place on this hill a university next to a temple was made by the Lord directly through His prophet. In such matters of importance it is the Lord’s way. Through the miracle of revelation the Lord conveys His will to His living prophet. And that is a miracle for which we must be forever grateful.

The timing of placing the university and the temple together on this hill is yet another miracle of the Lord’s hand working on people. A remarkable group of teachers and leaders have been gathered at this university. They are finding ways to accelerate the rise in the quality of teaching and learning by increasing the influence of the Holy Ghost. Despite demographic declines in college-age Church members, the number seeking to come here has increased. The faculty and the leaders at the university have found a way not only to deal with the larger numbers but to do it frugally. Frugality and a spirit of sacrifice were put in place here long

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ago by a God who saw our time and the future before us. That frugality, among other important spiritual qualities, helped qualify Ricks College to become BYU–Idaho.

Just as the university is led by consecrated faculty and administrators, a gifted servant of God was called to this new temple on the hill as its president. He is, by his background and capacity, able to appreciate what great experiences the students will be having. He has called, through inspiration and with the counsel of local priesthood leaders, an army of consecrated volunteers to staff the temple. They invite members of the university community to temple service in a way that can lift them and elevate their learning experiences both in the Lord’s house and at His university.

The temple president and those who work with him know the goodness of the people in the community and the opportunities and challenges they encounter in establishing a special kind of university, a university fit for a temple hill. They are sensitive to the feelings of those who have the need for peace and generosity in the midst of great change. The president and his fellow temple workers will create an atmosphere of faith, hope, and charity which invites the Spirit, thus making the temple a place of spiritual refuge and a source of the revelation we will increasingly need on this hill.

The university will likewise encourage a thirst for learning by the Spirit. In concert with the temple, it will build students’ confidence that the Spirit can become a constant companion. The university and the temple are alike in teaching that service to others is a necessary part of inviting the Spirit. The university operates on the principle that everyone is both a teacher and a learner. The university is, like the temple, a place where success can come only if we help others succeed. Those who attend the temple to offer their departed ancestors proxy covenants do it gladly, knowing that they cannot be saved without those departed loved ones. The two places of learning fit together in their purposes almost as one. They both encourage all that would qualify for us to have eternal life. And they both require a high standard of personal worthiness for the companionship of the Spirit.

There is at least one way in which the university and the temple must differ because of their distinct purposes. The temple president is charged with seeing that the teaching and the ordinances in the temple do not change. The university president, on the other hand, is charged with continuous change which improves teaching and learning.

There are important reasons for this difference between the temple, which rarely changes, and the university, which changes continuously. A dedicated temple is the only place in the world where the sealing power of the priesthood is exercised. That power is eternal. Thus, the ordinances

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of the temple are the same across every nation and over time. Alterations, if any, are made only by the prophet, who holds the keys of the sealing power for the whole earth.

In contrast to the temple president, the university president is charged with leading continuous improvement, and that requires change. The knowledge taught in universities is, through the discoveries of inspired men and women around the world, always expanding. In science, for example, even our notions of space and time are changing. The laws of men, such as trade treaties and tax codes, also change. Not only will the faculty of a great university stay abreast of these changes, they will find, with the help of the Spirit, ever-better ways to teach and help students learn the new knowledge.

Failing to change in the university will lead to failure. But we will not fail. The constancy of the temple will supply peace and a sure, steady bearing, like a guiding star, for those navigating uncertain waters. The differences in the two places of learning complement each other.

We have been speaking of the blessings which will flow to those in this great university and to those who will come to the temple here. But blessings will also go from this university and temple on the hill into the surrounding valley and out to the world. In fact, the blessings we receive on this hill are only possible because of the goodness and sacrifices of many who are neither enrolled in nor employed by the university. They include ecclesiastical leaders drawn from surrounding stakes, leaders of government organizations, and the operators of business that serve the BYU-Idaho community.

All of the people who learn and serve here will be changed for the better. Wherever they go they will be more eager to help others, more determined to keep promises, more confident that with God's help we can accomplish hard things, and more inclined to give credit for success to others but mostly to God.

They will live in this community. They will go out to work as interns across the world. They will go to the professions and to companies and to governments. They will be admitted to other universities. And most importantly they will create families where what they have learned and taught will be passed on for generations.

I have been to a number of funerals and in homes lately where parents have done with children what we are trying to do within this university and this temple on the hill. They have taught and learned under the influence of the Holy Ghost. The atonement of Jesus Christ has changed the hearts of children and grandchildren.

It is humbling and thrilling to see the change. I saw it in Rexburg this weekend, as children so small that they needed a higher place to stand to reach the microphone bore testimony of the Savior and His prophets. I

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was amazed and humbled to hear words and feel spiritual power I would only expect from a mature member of the Church. I saw it later in the quiet manner of a couple speaking with a smile of the passing of one of them soon through the portal of death into the next world where they are sure they will be reunited. I saw it in the face and heard it in the voice of a widow living alone and in a wheelchair, waiting with faith for that kind of reunion. And with all her own trials, she handed a cheering present of Rexburg chocolates to my wife as we left.

What I have seen in my visit here assures me that the lofty goal of creating a community of learners changed by the atonement—blessed by the Holy Ghost—is possible. It seems far above us, but it is in our reach with the Lord’s lifting hand. It is He that has set the path before us. It is He that knows our hearts and our eternal potential. He put the University and the temple on this hill. Nephi gave us the encouragement to move upward in faith with these words:

“But the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words. And thus it is. Amen” (1 Nephi 9:6).

So, I am sure that by aligning ourselves with the Lord’s purposes we will, with His power, reach the lofty goals He has given us. Yet I have the concern that many times in the past people have acted to remove themselves from His lifting power. One source of that tragedy is forgetting others and the Savior, who has atoned for their sins. It is too easy to think we can climb alone and that we move up on our own power.

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The Lord warned me about that years ago, when I was the young college president here. Ed Williams invited my oldest son to join him and other geology teachers and students to climb the South Teton. My son was ten years old. I had climbed many mountains before. I wanted to prove I could still do it, and I wanted that sense of victory for my son. Just four hundred feet from the summit, my son seemed tired. I could tell he was exhausted. All my drive to succeed urged me upwards. But there was something about the spot where we stood on a sunlit place, which made me say to the others, “You go on to the summit. I will stay here with my son.”

It is years later that I have come to understand why that wait with my son for the others to come back down was so satisfying and why I had such a feeling of success when we reached the bottom after dark. The climbs to the places God would have us go are never for us alone. If we forget that, we will not have His full power to lift us. Somehow the Lord let me feel that day in the mountains that the summit for me was on that sunlit place where I could set up our little stove and share hot soup with my son.

Losing sight of that need to climb with others could slow our progress toward dramatically improved teaching and learning. For instance, it would be easy to look for ways to help learners learn alone, using the wonders of technology. The same technology could give learners the experience of helping others they love to learn with them. Similarly, it would be tempting to increase the reported number of temple ordinances without regard to whether the patron was having the experience of lifting a loved one who died without the chance to claim the blessings of the temple. The summit of salvation, or joy in families in the Celestial Kingdom, is not reachable alone. That is what the Lord wants for us and our families. To have the help of His power, we must never forget that.

Another way to disqualify ourselves for His lifting power is to begin to act as if we have climbed on our power alone. It has been in the nature of men and women from the creation to begin to ignore what God has done and to exaggerate what they have done. That begins to happen in the good times. We can easily start to think that we created prosperity with our own labors and wisdom. We start calling attention to our accomplishments. We pray for help less often and with less fervor. And so the Lord's power lessens in our lives. In time we can be left more and more to our own power. That danger is all the greater here because you are being prospered, and you will be prospered even more.

The best prevention for that drift to forgetting others and taking undue credit is clear. You promise to do it each time you renew your baptismal covenant in taking the sacrament: "Always remember him." He is our exemplar. He did what He did for His Father and for His Father's children. He gave credit to His Father for the blessing of the harvest. Because I know that you will do the very best you can to keep your covenants, I am sure the great blessings you seek in this university and this temple will be granted. And so I am confident that you can avoid the hazards of selfishness and pride, which would decrease your access to the power of the Lord to lift you on your climb.

I testify that God the Father lives and loves you. His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, atoned for our sins and broke the bands of death. The Holy Ghost has testified to all of us of truth, of hope, and of the joy of the pure love of God. I leave you my blessing that you may by the power of the Holy Ghost see the course God has set before you and feel the confidence that you are lifted by His power and surrounded by His love on the journey.

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ☪

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