

# LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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September 2023

## Ninety and Nine

President Nelson turns ninety-nine this week: 99 on 9/9. Such a milestone prompts gratitude for his ministry and reflection on his teachings. During his presidential tenure, I have seen the prophetic mantle descend on President Nelson in an indelible and undeniable way. When he speaks in his prophetic office, the world around me seems to fade, and his words sail straight to my soul.

If there is one scripture I associate most powerfully with President Nelson's ministry, it is the Book of Mormon prophecy that in the latter days "the power of the Lamb of God" would "descend[] . . . upon the covenant people of the Lord," who would thus be "armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory" (1 Ne. 14:14).

In sermon after sermon, President Nelson has urged us to become the Savior's covenant people<sup>1</sup> and to access His consummate power<sup>2</sup>—including by honoring the Sabbath,<sup>3</sup> cultivating joy,<sup>4</sup> feasting on the Book of Mormon,<sup>5</sup> seeking personal revelation,<sup>6</sup> using the correct name of the Church,<sup>7</sup> repenting,<sup>8</sup> exercising faith,<sup>9</sup> making time for the Lord,<sup>10</sup> worshiping in the temple,<sup>11</sup> overcoming the world,<sup>12</sup> becoming peacemakers,<sup>13</sup> and letting God prevail.<sup>14</sup> In messages directly relevant to our work at BYU, he has highlighted the link between God's laws and God's love,<sup>15</sup> and he has underscored our students' primary identities,<sup>16</sup> as well as their stature among heaven's "most noble spirits."<sup>17</sup>

In all of this, I hear President Nelson speaking to our time from the vantage of eternity—and doing so with a surgeon's precision and a prophet's power.

Our mission statement affirms that "[t]o succeed in [its] mission, [BYU] must provide an

environment enlightened by living prophets."<sup>18</sup> How grateful we are for the illumination that comes to this campus from a living prophet who chairs our Board of Trustees, and who now strides buoyantly and indomitably into his one hundredth year.

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President Nelson's ninety-ninth birthday also stirs thoughts about scriptural references to "the ninety and nine" (Luke 15:4)—perhaps because of our prophet's loving, lifelong ministry to the one.<sup>19</sup>

We all remember the Savior's parable: a shepherd caring for a hundred sheep "leave[s] the ninety and nine" to "go after [the one] which is lost, until he find it" (Luke 15:4).

We also remember the lesson: "joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

I used to struggle with the logic of this lesson. How, I wondered, can "badness followed by goodness" possibly be better than "goodness times ninety-nine"? The math just didn't work: If "x" represents goodness, and "y" represents badness, then "x - y" can exceed "99x" only if "x" is negative—and how can goodness be negative?<sup>20</sup>

This reading, of course, is badly mistaken. The point of the parable is not that heaven favors the repentant one over the righteous ninety and nine. It is that the ninety and nine do not really exist. "All have sinned," Paul writes, "and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). There are no "just persons, which need no repentance." If we think we belong to that heady group, we are committing the sin of pride. It turns out that "just persons, which need no repentance" need to repent after all.

The lesson for me is twofold. First, I will never escape my need to repent, nor outgrow my reliance on the Savior of the world. Second, humanity is not divided between the “ones” who are lost and the “ninety and nine” who need no rescue. “All are fallen and are lost” (Alma 34:9). We all need the Savior’s Atonement; we all need one another’s help.

When the Good Shepherd leaves the ninety and nine to go after the one, He is not leaving a select supermajority of the sanctified to go in search of a fallen few. He is leaving heaven itself to rescue humankind—and not just humankind at large, but every member of the human family.

A character in one of C.S. Lewis’s science fiction novels makes this point memorably:

*In His city all things are made for each. When He died in the Wounded World He died not for men, but for each man. If each man had been the only man made, He would have done no less.*<sup>21</sup>

As we start a new school year, may we minister not just to “our students” but to *each student*. May we similarly minister to one another. May we advance our prophetic mission and fulfill our inspired aims—not just for all but for each.

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<sup>1</sup> See Russell M. Nelson, “The Everlasting Covenant,” *Liahona*, October 2022.

<sup>2</sup> See Russell M. Nelson, “Drawing the Power of Jesus Christ into Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Sabbath is a Delight,” *Ensign*, May 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like Without It?,” *Ensign*, November 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” *Ensign*, May 2018; Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Using the Correct Name of the Church,” *Ensign*, October 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “We Can Do Better and Be Better,” *Ensign*, May 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Christ is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains,” *Liahona*, May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Make Time for the Lord,” *Liahona*, November 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation,” *Liahona*, November 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Overcome the World and Find Rest,” *Liahona*, November 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” *Liahona*, May 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Let God Prevail,” *Ensign*, November 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God,” BYU Devotional, September 17, 2019, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/russell-m-nelson/love-laws-god/>.

<sup>16</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Choices for Eternity,” Worldwide Devotional for Young Adults, May 15, 2022, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson?lang=eng>.

<sup>17</sup> Russell M. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” Worldwide Youth Devotional, June 3, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2018/06/hope-of-israel?lang=eng>.

<sup>18</sup> “The Mission of Brigham Young University,” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams* (Brigham Young University, 2022) 65.

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Russell M. Nelson, “Ministering with the Power and Authority of God,” *Ensign*, May 2018.

<sup>20</sup> I suppose it could also work if “y” were sufficiently negative, and badness certainly is negative. It’s an interesting thought, but my youthful brain never went that far.

<sup>21</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Perelandra* (Scribner 1986 [1944]) 186.