

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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Living Prophet 101

In describing the duties of a neophyte First Presidency in 1833, the Lord declared that, in addition to “the keys of this last kingdom,” the prophet and his counselors were to hold “the keys of the school of the prophets” (D&C 90:6, 8). With those keys firmly in hand, the Church’s “three Presiding High Priests” (D&C 107:22) were to “preside over the affairs of the church and [of] the school” (D&C 90:13).

The keys of the school. I don’t pretend to know all that this redolent phrase entails. But as I read these verses recently, I was grateful anew for the blessing of a First Presidency that presides over the affairs of both the church and the school—*our* school, as well as the entire Church Educational System.

At our university conference a year ago, Elder Ronald A. Rasband observed: “our prophetic governance is more than a boundary constraint that lists things we can and cannot do at Brigham Young University. In fact, when properly understood, our prophetic governance is a strategic asset that should allow us to do things unique in all of higher education.” At the conclusion of his message, Elder Rasband reiterated and strengthened this point: “Let me say this strongly: the prophetic governance of BYU is its comparative advantage in the whole world.”¹

In recent years we have been repeatedly urged to lean into our uniqueness at BYU.² I understand Elder Rasband to be suggesting that *the* principal source of that uniqueness is our prophetic governance. Elder Gilbert and President Reese both underscored this point again last week. As our mission statement proclaims (and as I stress in every interview with prospective faculty members): “To succeed in [its] mission, the

university must provide an environment enlightened by living prophets.”³

Tomorrow is President Nelson’s 101st birthday. Perhaps because I’ve just begun teaching UNIV 101 for the third time, that figure strikes me as instructive as well as impressive. In university life, the “101” tag suggests all that is basic, essential, and foundational. And for us at BYU, nothing is more fundamental than continued guidance from the Lord’s living prophet.

Fittingly, the first two assigned readings in UNIV 101 this semester both come from President Nelson: “The Love and the Laws of God,” his 2019 devotional message on this campus, and “Choices for Eternity,” his 2022 fireside message to all the young adults in the Church. Elder Rasband urged us to study these two messages at university conference last year, and Elder Gilbert invited us to revisit them at university conference last month. These are the clearest messages we have from the Lord’s living prophet to the rising generation for whom we have a special care.

In addition to studying what the prophet has said to our students’ generation, we should be consistently immersed in what he has said to all the Saints. We clearly cannot “provide an environment enlightened by living prophets” if our own hearts and minds are not so illuminated. In a recent, early-morning temple session I felt cautioned to “be careful not to allow any other voice to eclipse that of the Lord’s living prophet.” I love listening to audio books while I drive or shave or iron my shirts, but this prompting led me also to listen again to every major general

conference message that President Nelson has given since becoming President of the Church.

I love the prophet's words. They feed my heart and fortify my soul. President Nelson preaches pure doctrine with precision and power. In a variety of ways over the course of years, he has taught the Saints how to summon the powers of heaven and pursue the covenant path. Often the titles of his talks alone provide declarations and injunctions that are as inspiring as they are instructive:

- “We Can Do Better and Be Better”
- “Hear Him”
- “Go Forward in Faith”
- “Embrace the Future with Faith”
- “Let God Prevail”
- “Christ is Risen; Faith in Him Will Move Mountains”
- “Make Time for the Lord”
- “Focus on the Temple”
- “Peacemakers Needed”
- “The Answer Is Always Jesus Christ”
- “Think Celestial!”

¹ Ronald A. Rasband, “A Prophetically Directed University,” BYU Annual University Conference, 26 August 2024.

² See David A. Bednar, “Look Unto Me in Every Thought; Doubt Not, Fear Not,” President’s Leadership Summit, 16 April 2021; Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Second Half of the Second Century,” BYU Annual University Conference, 23 August 2021; D. Todd Christofferson, “The Aims of a BYU Education,” BYU Annual University

- “Rejoice in the Gift of Priesthood Keys”
- “The Lord Jesus Christ Will Come Again”

Most recently, President Nelson has urged us to increase our confidence in the presence of God by cultivating charity and virtue.⁴ “As the world grows more wicked,” he said, “we need to grow increasingly pure. Our thoughts, words, and actions need to be unfailingly virtuous and filled with the pure love of Jesus Christ towards all men I invite you to take intentional steps to grow in *your* confidence before the Lord,” he continued. “Then, as we go to our Heavenly Father with increasing confidence, we will be filled with more joy, and your faith in Jesus Christ will increase.”⁵

How grateful I am to learn and labor at a school whose board of trustees is chaired by the Lord’s living prophet—the man who holds, for our time and season, “the keys of the school.” As we begin a new school year, perhaps we could all enroll ourselves anew in the most foundational of all self-guided courses: Living Prophet 101.

Conference, 22 August 2022; Quentin L. Cook, “Preparing Students for Eternity,” BYU Annual University Conference, 28 August 2023; Rasband, “A Prophetically Directed University.”

³ “The Mission of Brigham Young University.”

⁴ Russell M. Nelson, “Confidence in the Presence of God,” *Liahona*, May 2025.

⁵ *Ibid.*