

IN THE STRENGTH OF THE LORD

Elder David A. Bednar
BYU Devotional, October 23, 2001

1- Good morning, brothers and sisters. It is for me a blessing and a remarkable responsibility to stand before you today. I appreciate the invitation from Elder Bateman to speak with you.

2- As I entered the Marriott Center this morning, my mind was flooded with wonderful memories. I have been in this arena many, many times. I was a freshman at BYU in 1970 when the construction work on this building was started. I vividly remember sitting way up there on September 11, 1973, and listening to the teachings and testimony of President Harold B. Lee. I had returned from my mission to southern Germany just three weeks earlier, and the message he presented that day was entitled "Be Loyal to the Royal Within You." I hope I shall never forget what I felt and heard and learned that day. His teachings have positively influenced me for the last 28 years.

3- I remember sitting right over there in 1973 when President Spencer W. Kimball, as president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, delivered a powerful and extremely direct message about the importance of eternal marriage ("Marriage Is Honorable," 30 September 1973). I also remember how squirmy I and the young woman with whom I attended that fireside were—on our first date. (For those of you who may be wondering, the young woman with whom I attended that fireside then is not Sister Bednar now.) And I remember sitting right over there in 1977 as a married student walking and wrestling with a young son. I sat right up there in 2000 when that same son graduated from BYU with his baccalaureate degree. I recall with great fondness numerous other occasions in this building when I have listened to inspired leaders and learned from great teachers.

4- It frankly never occurred to me that someday I might be invited to stand at this pulpit and speak to a group like you. It is clear to me that I likely will never be asked to do so again. Thus I have been most prayerful and serious about preparing my presentation for today. Assuming that I would never again stand at this pulpit to teach and testify, I have considered what might be the most important message I could share with you. My objective this morning is to describe and discuss both the *redeeming* and *enabling* powers of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. And I hope to place particular emphasis upon the enabling power of the Atonement. I yearn and invite and pray for the companionship of the Holy Ghost to be with me and with you as we visit together for these few minutes about this sacred subject.

The Journey of Life

5- The framework for my message today is a statement by President David O. McKay. He summarized the overarching purpose of the gospel of the Savior in these terms: "The purpose of the gospel is . . . to make bad men good and good men better, and to change human nature" (from the film *Every Member a Missionary*, as acknowledged by Franklin D. Richards, CR, October 1965, 136–37; see also Brigham Young, *JD* 8:130 [22 July 1860]).

6- Thus the journey of a lifetime is to progress from bad to good to better and to experience the mighty change of heart—and to have our fallen natures changed.

7- May I suggest that the Book of Mormon is our handbook of instructions as we travel the pathway from bad to good to better and to have our hearts changed. If you have your scriptures with you this morning, please turn with me to Mosiah 3:19. In this verse King Benjamin teaches about the journey of mortality and about the role of the Atonement in successfully navigating that journey: "For the natural man is an enemy to God, and has been from the fall of Adam, and will be, forever and ever, unless he yields to the enticings of the Holy Spirit, *and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint* through the atonement of Christ the Lord" (emphasis added).

8- I want to stop at this point and draw our attention to two specific phrases. First, consider "and putteth off the natural man." Let me suggest to you that President McKay was fundamentally talking about putting off the natural man when he said, "The purpose of the gospel is . . . to make bad men good." Now I do not believe the word *bad* in this statement by President McKay connotes only *wicked, awful, horrible, or inherently evil*. Rather, I think he was suggesting that the journey from bad to good is the process of putting off the natural man or the natural woman in each of us. In mortality we all are tempted by the flesh. The very elements out of which our bodies were created are by nature fallen and ever subject to the pull of sin, corruption, and death. And we can increase our capacity to overcome the desires of the flesh and temptations, as described in this verse, "through the atonement of Christ." When we make mistakes—as we transgress and sin—we are able to overcome such weakness through the redeeming and cleansing power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. As we frequently sing in preparation to partake of the emblems of the sacrament, "His precious blood he freely spilt; His life he freely gave, A sinless sacrifice for guilt, A dying world to save" ("How Great the Wisdom and the Love," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 195).

9- Now, please notice the next line in Mosiah 3:19: "and becometh a saint." May I suggest this phrase describes the continuation and second phase of life's journey as outlined by President McKay. "The purpose of the gospel is . . . to make bad men good"—or, in other words, put off the natural man—"and good men better"—or, in other words, become more like a saint. Brothers and sisters, I believe this second part of the journey—this process of going from good to better—is a topic about which we do not study or teach frequently enough nor understand adequately.

10- If I were to emphasize one overarching point this morning, it would be this: I suspect that you and I are much more familiar with the nature of the redeeming power of the Atonement than we are with the enabling power of the Atonement. It is one thing to know that Jesus Christ came to earth to *die* for us. That is fundamental and foundational to the doctrine of Christ. But we also need to appreciate that the Lord desires, through His Atonement and by the power of

the Holy Ghost, to live in us—not only to direct us but also to empower us. I think most of us know that when we do things wrong, when we need help to overcome the effects of sin in our lives, the Savior has paid the price and made it possible for us to be made clean through His redeeming power. Most of us clearly understand that the Atonement is for sinners. I am not so sure, however, that we know and understand that the Atonement is also for saints—for good men and women who are obedient and worthy and conscientious and who are striving to become better and serve more faithfully. I frankly do not think many of us “get it” concerning this enabling and strengthening aspect of the Atonement, and I wonder if we mistakenly believe we must make the journey from good to better and become a saint all by ourselves through sheer grit, willpower, and discipline, and with our obviously limited capacities.

11- Brothers and sisters, the gospel of the Savior is not simply about avoiding bad in our lives; it also is essentially about doing and becoming good. And the Atonement provides help for us to overcome and avoid bad and to do and become good. There is help from the Savior for the entire journey of life—from bad to good to better and to change our very nature.

12- I am not trying to suggest that the redeeming and enabling powers of the Atonement are separate and discrete. Rather, these two dimensions of the Atonement are connected and complementary; they both need to be operational during all phases of the journey of life. And it is eternally important for all of us to recognize that both of these essential elements of the journey of life—both putting off the natural man and becoming a saint, both overcoming bad and becoming good—are accomplished through the power of the Atonement. Individual willpower, personal determination and motivation, and effective planning and goal setting are necessary but ultimately insufficient to triumphantly complete this mortal journey. Truly we must come to rely upon “the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah” (2 Nephi 2:8).

Grace and the Enabling Power of the Atonement

13- I now want to describe in greater detail the enabling power of the Atonement. Brothers and sisters, please notice the use of the word *grace* in the verse from 2 Nephi to which we just referred. In the Bible Dictionary in our scriptures we learn that the word *grace* frequently is used in the scriptures to connote *enabling power*. On page 697, under the word *grace*, we read:

14- “A word that occurs frequently in the New Testament, especially in the writings of Paul. The main idea of the word is *divine means of help or strength*, given through the bounteous mercy and love of Jesus Christ (emphasis added).

15- “It is through the grace of the Lord Jesus, made possible by his atoning sacrifice, that mankind will be raised in immortality, every person receiving his body from the grave in a condition of everlasting life.”

16- Please note these next sentences:

17- “It is likewise through the grace of the Lord that individuals, through faith in the atonement of Jesus Christ and

repentance of their sins, receive strength and assistance to do good works that they otherwise would not be able to maintain if left to their own means. This grace is an enabling power that allows men and women to lay hold on eternal life and exaltation after they have expended their own best efforts” (emphasis added).

18- That is, grace represents that divine assistance or heavenly help each of us will desperately need to qualify for the celestial kingdom. Thus the enabling power of the Atonement strengthens us to do and be good and serve beyond our own individual desire and natural capacity.

19- In my personal scripture study I often insert the term *enabling power* whenever I encounter the word *grace*. Consider, for example, this verse with which we are all familiar: “For we know that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do” (2 Nephi 25:23).

20- Let’s review this verse one more time: “For we know that it is by grace [the enabling and strengthening power of the Atonement of Christ] that we are saved, after all we can do.”

21- I believe we can learn much about this vital aspect of the Atonement if we will insert *enabling and strengthening* power each time we find the word *grace* in the scriptures.

Illustrations and Implications

22- The journey of a lifetime, as described by President McKay, is to go from bad to good to better and to have our very natures changed. And the Book of Mormon is replete with examples of disciples and prophets who knew and understood and were transformed by the enabling power of the Atonement in making that journey. May I suggest, brothers and sisters, that as we come to better understand this sacred power, our gospel perspective will be greatly enlarged and enriched. Such a perspective will change us in remarkable ways.

23- Nephi is an example of one who knew and understood and relied upon the enabling power of the Savior. In 1 Nephi 7 we recall that the sons of Lehi had returned to Jerusalem to enlist Ishmael and his household in their cause. Laman and others in the party traveling with Nephi from Jerusalem back to the wilderness rebelled, and Nephi exhorted his brethren to have faith in the Lord. It was at this point in their trip that Nephi’s brothers bound him with cords and planned his destruction. Now please note Nephi’s prayer in verse 17: “O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even give me strength that I may burst these bands with which I am bound” (emphasis added).

24- Brothers and sisters, do you know what I likely would have prayed for if I had been tied up by my brothers? My prayer would have included a request for something bad to happen to my brothers and ended with the phrase “wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren” or, in other words, “Please get me out of this mess, now!” It is especially interesting to me that Nephi did not pray, as I probably would have prayed, to have his circumstances changed. Rather, he prayed for the strength to change his circumstances. And may I suggest that he prayed in this manner precisely because he knew and

understood and had experienced the enabling power of the Atonement of the Savior.

25- I personally do not believe the bands with which Nephi was bound just magically fell from his hands and wrists. Rather, I suspect that he was blessed with both persistence and personal strength beyond his natural capacity, that he then "in the strength of the Lord" (Mosiah 9:17) worked and twisted and tugged on the cords and ultimately and literally was enabled to break the bands.

26- Brothers and sisters, the implication of this episode for each of us is quite straightforward. As you and I come to understand and employ the enabling power of the Atonement in our personal lives, we will pray and seek for strength to change our circumstances rather than praying for our circumstances to be changed. We will become agents who "act" rather than objects that are "acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:14).

27- Consider the example in Mosiah 24 as Alma and his people are being persecuted by Amulon. As recorded in verse 14, the voice of the Lord came to these good people in their affliction and indicated: "And I will also ease the burdens which are put upon your shoulders, that even you cannot feel them upon your backs."

28- Now if I had been one of Alma's people and received that particular assurance, my response likely would have been, "I thank thee, and please hurry!" But notice in verse 15 the process the Lord used to lighten the burden: "And now it came to pass that the burdens which were laid upon Alma and his brethren were made light; yea, *the Lord did strengthen them* that they could bear up their burdens with ease, and they did submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord" (emphasis added).

29- Brothers and sisters, what was changed in this episode? It was not the burden that changed; the challenges and difficulties of persecution were not immediately removed from the people. But Alma and his followers were strengthened, and their increased capacity and strength made the burdens they bore lighter. These good people were empowered through the Atonement to *act* as agents and *impact* their circumstances—"in the strength of the Lord." Alma and his people were then directed to safety in the land of Zarahemla.

30- Now some of you may legitimately be wondering, "Brother Bednar, what makes you think the episode with Alma and his people is an example of the enabling power of the Atonement?" I believe the answer to your question is found in a comparison of Mosiah 3:19 and Mosiah 24:15. Let's resume reading in Mosiah 3:19 where we previously had stopped: "and putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint through the atonement of Christ the Lord, and becometh as a child, *submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father*" (emphasis added).

31- As we progress in the journey of mortality from bad to good to better, as we put off the natural man or woman in each of us, and as we strive to become saints and have our very natures changed, then the attributes detailed in this

verse increasingly should describe the type of person you and I are becoming. We will become more childlike, more submissive, more patient, and more willing to submit. Now compare these characteristics in Mosiah 3:19 with those used to describe Alma and his people in the latter part of verse 15 in Mosiah 24: "and they did *submit cheerfully and with patience to all the will of the Lord*" (emphasis added).

32- I find the parallels between the attributes described in these verses striking and an indication that Alma's good people were becoming a better people through the enabling power of the Atonement of Christ the Lord.

33- We are all familiar with the story of Alma and Amulek contained in Alma 14. In this episode many faithful Saints had been put to death by fire, and these two servants of the Lord had been imprisoned and beaten. Please consider this petition contained in verse 26 offered by Alma as he prayed in prison: "O Lord, *give us strength* according to our faith which is in Christ, even unto deliverance" (emphasis added).

34- Here again we see reflected in his request Alma's understanding of and confidence in the enabling power of the Atonement. Now note the result of this prayer, as described in the latter part of verse 26 and in verse 28:

35- "And they [Alma and Amulek] broke the cords with which they were bound; and when the people saw this, they began to flee, for the fear of destruction had come upon them. . . .

36- "And Alma and Amulek came forth out of the prison, and they were not hurt; for *the Lord had granted unto them power, according to their faith which was in Christ*" (emphasis added).

37- Once again the enabling power is evident as good people struggle against evil and strive to become even better and serve more effectively "in the strength of the Lord" (Mosiah 9:17).

38- Let me present one final example from the Book of Mormon. In Alma 31, Alma is directing a mission to reclaim the apostate Zoramites. You will recall that in this chapter we learn about Rameumptom and the prescribed and prideful prayer offered by the Zoramites. Please notice the plea for strength in Alma's personal prayer, as described in verse 31: "O Lord, wilt thou grant unto me *that I may have strength*, that I may suffer with patience these afflictions which shall come upon me, because of the iniquity of this people" (emphasis added).

39- In verse 33 Alma also prays that his missionary companions will receive a similar blessing: "Wilt thou grant unto them *that they may have strength*, that they may bear their afflictions which shall come upon them because of the iniquities of this people" (emphasis added).

40- Again we observe that Alma did not pray to have his afflictions removed. He knew he was an agent of the Lord, and he prayed for the power to act and affect his situation.

41- The key point of this example is contained in the final verse, Alma 31:38: "Yea, and he also gave them *strength*, that they should suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ. Now this was

according to the prayer of Alma; and this because he prayed in faith" (emphasis added).

42- No, the afflictions were not removed. But Alma and his companions were strengthened and blessed through the enabling power of the Atonement to "suffer no manner of afflictions, save it were swallowed up in the joy of Christ." What a marvelous blessing. And what a lesson each of us should learn.

43- Examples of the enabling power are not found only in the scriptures. Daniel W. Jones was born in 1830 in Missouri, and he joined the Church in California in 1851. In 1856 he participated in the rescue of handcart companies that were stranded in Wyoming by severe storms. After the rescue party found the suffering Saints, provided what immediate comfort they could, and made arrangements for the sick and the feeble to be transported to Salt Lake City, Daniel and several other young men volunteered to remain with and safeguard the company's possessions. The food and supplies left with Daniel and his colleagues were, to say the least, meager and were rapidly expended. I will now quote from Daniel Jones' personal journal and his description of the events that followed:

44- "Game soon became so scarce that we could kill nothing. We ate all the poor meat; one would get hungry eating it. Finally that was all gone, nothing now but hides were left. We made a trial of them. A lot was cooked and eaten without any seasoning and it made the whole company sick. Many were so turned against the stuff that it made them sick to think of it. . . .

45- "Things looked dark, for nothing remained but the poor raw hides taken from starved cattle. We asked the Lord to direct us what to do. The brethren did not murmur, but felt to trust in God. We had cooked the hide, after soaking and scraping the hair off until it was soft and then ate it, glue and all. This made it rather inclined to stay with us longer than we desired. Finally I was impressed how to fix the stuff and gave the company advice, telling them how to cook it; for them to scorch and scrape the hair off; this had a tendency to kill and purify the bad taste that scalding gave it. After scraping, boil one hour in plenty of water, throwing the water away which had extracted all the glue, then wash and scrape the hide thoroughly, washing in cold water, then boil to a jelly and let it get cold, and then eat with a little sugar sprinkled on it. This was considerable trouble, but we had little else to do and it was better than starving" (Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years Among the Indians*[Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1890], 81).

46- All that I have read thus far is a preparation for the next line from Daniel W. Jones' journal. It illustrates how those pioneer Saints may have known something about the enabling power of the Atonement that we, in our prosperity and ease, are not as quick to understand: "We asked the Lord to bless our stomachs and *adapt them to this food*" (Jones, *Forty Years*, 81; emphasis added). My dear brothers and sisters, I know what I would have prayed for in those circumstances. I would have prayed for something else to eat. "Heavenly Father, please send me a quail or a buffalo." It never would have occurred to me to pray that my stomach would be strengthened and adapted to what we already had. What did Daniel W. Jones know? He knew about the enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

He did not pray that his circumstances would be changed. He prayed that he would be strengthened to deal with his circumstances. Just as Nephi, Amulek, and Alma and his people were strengthened, Daniel W. Jones had the spiritual insight to know what to ask for in that prayer. "We hadn't the faith to ask him to bless the raw-hide, for it was 'hard stock.' On eating now all seemed to relish the feast. We were three days without eating before this second attempt was made. We enjoyed this sumptuous fare for about six weeks" (Jones, *Forty Years*, 81–82).

47- The enabling power of the Atonement of Christ strengthens us to do things we could never do on our own. Sometimes I wonder if in our latter-day world of ease—in our world of microwave ovens and cell phones and air-conditioned cars and comfortable homes—I wonder if we ever learn to acknowledge our daily dependence upon the enabling power of the Atonement.

48- The greatest lessons I have learned about the enabling power have come from the quiet example of my wife in our own home. I watched her persevere through intense and continuous morning sickness and vomiting during each of her three pregnancies. She literally was sick all day every day for eight months with each pregnancy. That challenge was never removed from her. But together we prayed that she would be strengthened, and she indeed was blessed through the enabling power of the Atonement to do physically what in her own power she could not do. Sister Bednar is a remarkably capable and competent woman, and over the years I have seen how she has been magnified to handle the mocking and scorn that come from a secular society when a Latter-day Saint woman heeds prophetic counsel and makes the family and home and the nurturing of children her highest priorities. In today's world a righteous woman and mother in Zion will need both priesthood support and the enabling power of the Atonement. I thank and pay tribute to Susan for helping me to learn such invaluable lessons.

49- In Alma 7 we learn how and why the Savior is able to provide the enabling power, beginning with verse 11: "And he shall go forth, suffering *pains* and *afflictions* and *temptations* of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the *pains* and the *sicknesses* of his people" (emphasis added).

50- Thus the Savior has suffered not just for our iniquities but also for the inequality, the unfairness, the pain, the anguish, and the emotional distress that so frequently beset us. Additional detail is described in verse 12:

51- "And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their *infirmities*, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their *infirmities*" (emphasis added).

52- There is no physical pain, no anguish of soul, no suffering of spirit, no infirmity or weakness that you or I ever experience during our mortal journey that the Savior did not experience first. You and I in a moment of weakness may cry out, "No one understands. No one knows." No human being, perhaps, knows. But the Son of God perfectly knows and understands, for He felt and bore our burdens before we ever did. And

because He paid the ultimate price and bore that burden, He has perfect empathy and can extend to us His arm of mercy in so many phases of our life. He can reach out, touch, and succor—literally run to us—and strengthen us to be more than we could ever be and help us to do that which we could never do through relying only upon our own power.

53- Perhaps now we can more fully understand and appreciate the lesson of Matthew 11:28–30:

54- Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

55- Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

56- For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

57- I express my appreciation for the infinite and eternal sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Atonement is not only for people who have done bad things and are trying to be good. It is for good people who are trying to become better and serve faithfully and who yearn for an ongoing and mighty change of heart. Indeed, "in the strength of the Lord" (Mosiah 9:17) we can do and overcome all things.

58- Brothers and sisters, I know the Savior lives. I have experienced both His redeeming and enabling power, and I witness that these powers are real and available to each of us. I know He directs the affairs of this Church. I know apostles and prophets authoritatively act for and in behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ. These things I know to be true and so testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.