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*O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways (Psalms 139:1–3).*

## **Hard Choices**

*Steve Clements*

*Steve Clements was born in Houston, Texas, and reared in Huntsville, Texas, where he had a stellar high school football career and was named to the Parade All-America team in 1989. He also became the 1989 Gatorade player of the year for Texas. Between 1986 and 1989 he set the record for the most passing yards in a high school career in Texas with 8,204 yards. He attended the University of Texas at Austin and then Brigham Young University, where he graduated with a bachelor of science degree in special education in 1995. He is married to Emily Stevens, and they have one daughter. They live in Lehi, Utah, where Mr. Clements is a resource teacher and head football coach at Lehi High School.*

Choices are made every day by people. A young child decides whether to eat a cookie after being told not to touch the cookie jar. A teenager decides whether to join a gang, smoke, or drink alcohol. A young man or woman tries to determine what the meaning of life is. This story is about the choice that I made to attend Brigham Young University and how my choice to come to Provo was instrumental in my quest to discover a whole new life.

My first experience with the city of Provo, Utah, came in the summer of 1986. As a youth, I had competed in the high jump, event of track and field and had done very well. I was invited to Provo, where the national youth finals were held for all track and field participants. As I later reflected back on that weekend, a few things struck me as different. First, I noticed few minorities. Coming from the South, this was a new scene for me. Second, while driving through town I realized that there were no large buildings. Because I lived only seventy miles from the fourth largest city in the United States (Houston), this too was different, almost weird.

As I progressed through my teenage years, my development as a high school quarterback began to attract the attention of college football recruiters across the nation. By then, I was a student at Huntsville High School in Huntsville, Texas. During my junior year I began to receive letters from various colleges expressing interest in my attending school on a football scholarship. Letters came from UCLA, the University of Alabama, the University of Miami, the University of Texas, Louisiana State University, and Brigham Young University, to name a few. My choices began to narrow during my senior year. I compiled my “top five” list, seeing that an athlete could receive only five paid recruiting trips to colleges interested in the athlete’s services. These schools were Alabama, UCLA, LSU, Texas, and BYU.

Why these schools? My early choice of Alabama stemmed from two things: a conversation between a coach and my father, who was my high school coach, and an Alabama football game that I attended. After watching me play in a game during my junior year, Homer Smith, then the offensive coordinator at Alabama, told my father that I was one of the best high school quarterbacks he had seen. The football game I attended was the 1989 Sugar Bowl, where Alabama shocked football fans by beating the highly favored Miami Hurricanes. I was impressed.

UCLA was tops on my list because of its high-profile status. Who wouldn’t want to experience summer nine months out of the year? And then there was the enticement of Hollywood and Beverly Hills, and of seeing one’s favorite movie stars, in person!

Louisiana State University caught my eye because its games were on television in my area, and I had the thrill of walking inside its stadium when I was a junior. The television announcers would always comment on the diehard character of the fans. And there seemed to be only one time when all eighty-five thousand people were not cheering for the Tigers—halftime. That made my heart beat a little bit quicker.

I was, however, pretty partial to the University of Texas, for good reason. My father had played quarterback there from 1954 to 1958. My mother was the first female head cheerleader at the University. My brother had graduated from there with a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts. My grandmother was an active member in many organizations at the University, and her husband was elected into the Hall of Honor as a baseball coach. In addition, uncles, aunts, and three cousins had attended and graduated from the University of Texas. No pressure, right?

I included Brigham Young University on this list as well, in large part because of the national championship that the team had won in 1984. Not only did that honor put the university on the football map, but it brought a lot of

attention to the quarterback position, which I was extremely interested in because I had aspirations of becoming a quarterback in the National Football League. I knew that BYU liked to pass the football. Hence, the quarterback became the most famous person on campus. I wondered what it would be like to be the next Jim McMahon or Steve Young. That was enticing to me.

My decision to attend the University of Texas at Austin was not the toughest choice I have had to make in my life, but leaving was. I had come to UT on the assumption that I would have an opportunity to contribute as an underclassman. I redshirted my first year (1990–91) but played well in spring practices. It looked promising for me, or so I thought. But not only had the coaches placed me third on the depth chart, they seemed to be not keeping their promise to change the team’s offense in ways that would optimize my skills. The University of Texas was traditionally a run-oriented football team but “was going to throw the ball a lot more,” as a coach from the University had told me during the recruiting process.

After discussing with my parents my frustrations and intention to further my career at another college, I decided to transfer to Brigham Young University. I wanted to pursue my dream of becoming a quarterback in the NFL, and BYU was now the avenue to get me there. My education would be paid for, and as athletes believed, all universities allowed athletes a little more leniency in the matter of grades than the general student population. So I was not worried about that aspect of college. I wanted to play football, period.

My knowledge of BYU was actually quite shallow. Through the grapevine, I knew Mormons to be “weird.” The Honor Code was an absolute shock. Although it was discussed while I was being recruited by BYU, I did not take it seriously, nor did I believe it to be viable. Jim McMahon had somehow found a way to stay eligible and get through school. Why couldn’t someone from a small town in Texas do the same thing?

Once on campus, I sought out those with whom I had the most in common, and they became my friends. Although I had many LDS and non-LDS friends, my closest friends were non-members or members who thought the Honor Code to be a joke and did not adhere to its principles. The closer I grew to those friends, the more resentful I became toward members of the LDS Church. In away, I began to persecute the Church. For instance, my friends and I used to discuss why people, especially in poverty-stricken countries, joined the Church. We concluded that those people joined because of the Church’s welfare program. I believed that some people joined the Church for the sole purpose of being helped; it was not because of what they believed, but because they wanted things handed to them.

One day a friend and I were driving along Ninth East in Provo, which runs on the east side of campus. As we passed the playing fields east of the Harmon Building we yelled, “Hurry, run away, they’re brainwashing you! Get out while you still have a chance!” I even used to carry a Bible into the training room of the Smith Fieldhouse because I wanted to “show” people that I was not a Mormon.

Other things angered me. First, I found it difficult to believe that a university would require every student, LDS or not, to take religion classes. I believed this to be ludicrous because I felt BYU forcing me to learn a religion I did not believe in. Second, most of the students assumed that you were LDS. Of course, the odds were in their favor since 98.6 percent of the students at the time were members. This still upset me, though. Two employees at BYU, however, began to alter my way of thinking by their examples and their behavior toward me.

Brother Alan Parrish taught a religion class exclusively for non-Latter-day Saints, which introduced Mormonism and its roots. I was not at all interested in anything he had to say concerning the Church, but he taught it in a way that was not offensive to me. As I continued to go to class and listen to the things Brother Parrish had to say, I began to gain respect for him. It was not the substance but the approach. He was careful not to step on anyone’s toes. I sensed that he truly believed in what he was teaching, and his passion for it drew me to him. However, my testimony was not triggered until the second semester of my sophomore year.

I enrolled in a class on the Book of Mormon. Again, Brother Parrish was the teacher. (By this time I decided to enroll only in religion classes that he taught, if possible.) As a class we examined two people and their stories that led me to start asking questions of myself. In the class, we began with the history of the Book of Mormon and progressed into the book of Alma. As was my custom in most classes, especially religion classes, I sat in one of the desks closest to the door. This allowed me to be the first one to leave class when the bell rang. I did not want to converse with anyone and mill around after classes talking to students not of my faith. (I was Presbyterian, but inactive.)

Part of the purpose of the class was to discuss the history of the Book of Mormon, which included the story of Joseph Smith. As we studied, those in the class—excluding me—discussed this amazing story. Surprisingly, I started to think about the subject of angels and scripture translation. As Brother Parrish presented the material in his clear-cut manner, the one thought that bore down upon me and, in my opinion, defines The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was, “Either Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, or he didn’t.” The more I wondered and thought about this event, the more I believed it to be true. Of course this dawning was deeply personal, and I kept it to myself.

My testimony had begun. Small, yes, but a start nonetheless.

Probably the most influential character in the Book of Mormon for me was, and continues to be, King Benjamin. He is first introduced in the book of Omni, but the record of his works is more complete in the book of Mosiah. It was during the discussions of King Benjamin's reign that I began to understand and appreciate what this man had done for others. King Benjamin taught the true importance of charity and service. This is best illustrated in Mosiah 2:17: "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God." This was and to this day still is my favorite scripture. I was fortunate to have Brother Parrish to open my eyes, so to speak. Although I tried not to hear what was said, I was subconsciously listening.

During my years at BYU, I became very fond of Sherry Nielsen, the secretary in the athletic training room of the Smith Fieldhouse. I would compare her to a den mother in that I think she was a second mother to most of the student-athletes. In my case, she was no exception. Not only did I see her on a daily basis, but I learned that she dealt with others unconditionally. She treated everyone the same. We were all on an even playing field in her eyes. Sherry was genuine to all: black, white, LDS, or not. She allowed me to vent my frustrations, and I did so often. Sherry would listen patiently and then give me sound advice. Whether it was my lack of playing time on the football team or the issue of dating, Sherry always knew the right thing to say. What impressed me most about her, and aided in my investigation of the Church my senior year, was that she never pushed the Church on me. Sherry never said, "Why don't you take the discussions from the missionaries and just see what you think?" or "Why don't you read a little bit of the Book of Mormon and form an opinion?" She never pushed, prodded, forced, or coerced. She just listened and responded with genuine interest. For those attributes and qualities I am truly grateful for Sherry Nielsen.

During my sophomore year I received firsthand knowledge of what a priesthood blessing was. I had dislocated my shoulder in a game against the University of Hawaii and was preparing to undergo surgery in a few days. Unbeknownst to me, LaVell Edwards, the head football coach, received a telephone call from my mother. Someone had told her that blessings from a priesthood member in the LDS Church could be given to those in need, and she asked Coach Edwards if he would mind giving me one. Coach Edwards did give a blessing to me with the help of Mike King, the associate to the athletic director. My shoulder surgery was a success, and I felt that my shoulder was stronger after the surgery than it had been before I was injured. This event only added to the small testimony I had.

At this point, I probably had more of a testimony than some have when they join the Church. But I was not about to act on it. There were too many influences pushing me in other directions. My friends in Texas already thought I was nuts for going to Provo, Utah, to attend college. What would they think if I was baptized? No thank you. More importantly, what would my family think? Again, I'd pass.

All this changed during the summer before my senior year. Every summer I went back home to work and be with my friends and family. This summer was an exception. I needed a few more credits if I was to graduate on time. Staying in Provo was the best decision that I had made.

While I was taking summer classes I also worked for NuSkin at a warehouse in south Provo. My title was Assembly Line Supervisor. Each supervisor was in charge of a table at which there were approximately six workers. The supervisors were to oversee the quality of products that employees produced at each table. Most employees were temporaries who wanted to work only three to six months. I noticed a young woman, Emily Stevens, and was immediately attracted to her. But one thing was wrong: she was a Mormon. It was during our third date that I realized I wanted a more serious relationship. We had begun to date one another exclusively through the summer.

After finishing the needed classes, I went home for six weeks where my biggest challenge awaited. My mother had heard plenty of negative things about the LDS Church, and she was worried about her son, who was dating a Church member. Shortly before I returned to Provo, she showed me a video entitled *The Godmakers*. This video was produced by persons attempting to discredit the beliefs, principles, and members of the Church. In short, the portrait of the Church illustrated in the video consisted of half-truths. This video had a great impact on me because it "packed a lot of punch." It raised many disturbing questions in my mind and put me in a predicament. What was I supposed to believe? This video or the good examples demonstrated by my girlfriend's family?

My experience with her family was, and still is, tremendously influential. They had convinced me that a person did not need to swear to get a point across or blame someone else for one's downfalls. Prayer is vital. Communication should be the backbone of a relationship. Serving others helps not only those in need but aids in one's growth, mentally and spiritually. All these things began to dawn on me then, and this family has continued to have an impact on my life. The more I spent time with them the more I saw the fallacies created by the anti-Mormon group that produced the video. The things portrayed there were false and without merit. As we learn in 2 Nephi 2, there is opposition in all things, even to what is good and true. Through this family I had learned about the temple, baptisms for the dead, family prayer, and many other gospel principles.

I finally told Emily that after the football season I would take the discussions from the missionaries. Luckily for me, I did not say exactly how soon after the season. Apprehension began to set in, and I procrastinated. But Emily's impatience overcame both my apprehension and my procrastination, and I started taking the discussions in January of 1995.

The missionary lessons were an educational experience, but that was about it. I was in love and wanted to marry Emily soon. Nobody was going to stop me. But I had to face the reality of becoming a Latter-day Saint. It was something that seemed inevitable. I understood this from the many discussions Emily and I had during our courtship. She would not have it any other way. I was baptized on 26 February 1995.

That morning, around 6:30 A.M., I received a telephone call from a former bishop who had been excommunicated from the Church. My mother had asked him to call me. The purpose of the call was to warn me of the hardships that I would face if I was baptized. Because he woke me up, I was half asleep. I patiently listened, placed the phone down after he had finished, and went back to sleep. Closing my eyes, though, did not bring closure to the phone call. When I awakened, the message was still there, "Don't do it! You don't know what you're getting yourself into!" I began to have a little doubt as to what I was doing. Did I really know what I was getting myself into? And then I remembered what the missionaries had told me during our discussions. They had said, "There is opposition in all things that are right and true." I felt that this was the very circumstance that they had described. I was baptized.

I know I was probably baptized for the wrong reason, but what a blessing it has been! Understanding temple work, I can now be baptized for deceased family members. My wife and my children and I are sealed for all eternity. And because of honest tithe paying, I will be given that which is sufficient for my needs. Most importantly, though, I truly understand the meaning and role of the family in today's twisted society. These blessings and knowledge would not have come if I had not joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

It is hard to describe in a few words my family's feelings about my joining the Church. My mother strongly disapproved, but there is certainly no loss of love between us. I deeply respect her desire to protect her son. She will always be my mother, no matter what kind of disagreements we may have concerning my faith. My father and younger brother are fence-sitters, which means they have neither supported nor rejected my baptism. My younger sister, who sustained damage to her brain at birth, is unable to form an opinion because of her condition. My older brother, ten years my senior, has supported me in my decision from the beginning. Oddly enough, he is agnostic. I remember him telling me regarding my decision to be baptized, "Do whatever makes you happy." Being baptized has given me a new sense of hope. How can a person not be happy when he or she has hope? I am truly happy.

My dream of becoming a professional football player lasted but a short while. I played for the San Antonio Texans, then part of the Canadian Football League, for half of the 1995 season. After being released, my desire to be a professional football player also lessened considerably. Because I had not played much at BYU, no one really knew if I was any good or not. There was not much evidence of my ability on film. I came to realize that I was not supposed to play professional football. I was to do something else, and that was to teach. That profession has given me the deep, personal satisfaction that I have looked for in my life.

Am I bitter? No. Rather I feel that a person does not always get what he or she wants. In contrast, I have come to the conclusion that I should build on what I have. Because of the influence of the Church, I now know that things happen to us for a reason, and sometimes that reason is hidden for a while. In my case, I was to teach, not play football. I have accepted that without regrets.

Coming to Brigham Young University allowed me to explore my inner self, and I found what I know to be true. It began with religion classes, which candidly I objected to, and ended with meeting my beautiful wife and her family and eventually being baptized a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. BYU opened a window of opportunity and knowledge for me, as I know it has done for many others. Did I feel out of place? Yes. Do I think it was worth it? Yes. Do I have a testimony? Yes. Did I find God? Yes.