

Of Starfish and Destinies

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. Thank you for participating in the devotional today. I know it is a busy time of year, with papers, projects, and finals pending. I promise to do my best to reward your time investment with something helpful to you now and throughout your life.

According to a very fun website¹ that I found, it was thirty-six years, one month, and ten days ago that, as a freshman student at BYU, I sat where you are sitting today. I listened carefully as President Ezra Taft Benson, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, gave a talk titled “Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet.”² He shared how we could more faithfully follow the living prophets and better keep the commandments of God.

The Spirit was strong that day, and I was motivated by President Benson’s remarks. I thought to myself, “I am going to follow his counsel to be a better follower of the prophets and to be more faithful in keeping the commandments of God. But I can do better than that. From this point on, I’m not even going to make any mistakes!”

Now, I know all of you are a lot smarter than I was as a freshman. You can see the impossibility, and perhaps the silliness, of my well-intentioned commitment.

As I was exiting the devotional, I paused to use the restroom. I was concentrating so intently on my new commitment—to not make any mistakes—that I didn’t notice the cute little stick figure wearing a triangular dress on the restroom door. It wasn’t until I had turned the corner that I realized where I was. There, standing in front of a large mirror, was a young woman brushing her long, black hair. I hadn’t even made it out of this very building before I had failed at my new commitment!

Now, as an aside, I am still grateful to this day to that young woman for not calling for security. Can you imagine the look on the security officers’ faces as I tried to explain that I was concentrating so hard on never making another mistake that had I made a mistake?

In my mind’s eye I can see and hear the security officers as they would have looked at each other and said, “Yeah, right! Book ‘em, Danno!”

Today I come to you hopefully a little wiser to share some counsel on something I have worked on ever since that day.

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The Starfish Story and Our Thoughts

We are told in Proverbs 23:7 that “as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” Related to that is this old saying:

*Sow a thought, and you reap an act;
Sow an act, and you reap a habit;
Sow a habit, and you reap a character;
Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.*³

As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, our destiny is to live eternally with our Savior in the presence of our Heavenly Father. Because of the very real covenants we make at baptism and in the temple, our destiny also includes living eternally with a spouse, children, and extended family. Truly, families can be forever. The scriptures teach us that the Lord Himself says that His work and glory is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”⁴

As members of Christ’s restored Church, we should try to understand the actuality of eternal life and the reality of our personal destiny. Our destiny, as grandiose and incomprehensible as it is to fully understand, begins with the tiniest of individual thoughts.

These little things we call thoughts accompany us throughout almost every moment of every day of our entire lives. They can be small but immensely and intensely powerful. They will ultimately determine our character and our destiny. Thoughts must be consciously and carefully monitored and directed so that the acts, habits, and character that surely follow them are consistent with the commandments of God and lead to the destiny that is inherently ours.

You may have heard of the starfish story. It has been adapted numerous times by numerous people from Loren Eiseley’s essay titled “The Star Thrower.”⁵ Based on these adaptations, the story goes something like this:

There was an old man walking along the seashore. In the distance he saw a young person

doing something near the water’s edge. As the old man approached, he saw that it was a boy surrounded by numerous starfish that had washed ashore and were lying on the sand. The old man watched, intrigued, as the boy picked up starfish after starfish and threw them as far as he could over the breaking surf.

After some time the old man approached the boy and said, “Son, do you realize there are thousands of starfish on this shore? Certainly what you are doing can make no real difference.”

After respectfully listening, the boy reached down and picked up another starfish and hurled it into the ocean. Then, looking thoughtfully at the old man, the boy said, “It made a difference to that one.” And he continued to throw more starfish back into the water.

Now, all of us can benefit from the excellent principles in this story. Doing something good against what seem like insurmountable odds does make a difference.

But today I would like for us to create a different kind of starfish story. This story has a very special purpose with an eternal application. In this story you are the young man or woman at the ocean’s edge. The shore represents your mind and, ultimately, your life, which comprises thoughts, acts, habits, and character. The starfish in this story represent unwanted or inappropriate thoughts that sometimes come as you try to transition from a “carnal, sensual, and devilish”⁶ nature to a state in which you possess the same character as your Savior Jesus Christ.

It is possible that some starfish in your new story aren’t necessarily good or bad thoughts; they can be time wasters that keep you from thinking about or doing something positive, productive, or purposeful. For some of you the starfish may represent negative thoughts about roommates, Church or family members, coworkers, or others. For some, starfish will be thoughts of revenge, resentment, or reclusiveness. Perhaps some starfish will be negative

thoughts related to self-image, self-worth, or even self-destructive behaviors. Some starfish thoughts may be motivated by the pursuit of power, fame, fortune, or sex. There may be starfish representing thoughts related to immoral behavior with someone from either the opposite or same gender.

I cannot represent all types of unwanted or sinful thoughts, but as you consider your story, I invite you to reflect on those thoughts that you know you struggle with. In all of these examples, it is possible that the starfish have already been sown into acts, habits, or even the foundation of your character—but not yet into your destiny!

You are standing on the shore of your life. The waves bring what you allow into your life. With each incoming wave there is the possibility that a new or a reoccurring starfish washes ashore. Typically, your desire is to have a clean oceanfront. It is beautiful when it is clean. And when it is clean, you feel comfortable inviting others there. It is where you want your friends and family to be. It feels good, and typically you want it to remain that way.

But there may be times when you find yourself actually inviting certain starfish onto your shore. There may be some starfish that are secretly your favorites. They are exciting and enticing when they first arrive, but you soon realize—in fact, you may have known for a long time—that they clutter your shore and quickly decay into an ugly mess.

It is both our challenge as well as our opportunity in this life to throw our starfish back into the sea. We need to fling them as far as we can over the breaking water so that they will not come back again.

Controlling Our Thoughts

Having pure, positive, and appropriate thoughts will affect all aspects of your life. It will affect who you marry, what kind of spouse you will be, and how you teach and raise

your children. It will affect what kind of job you have and how successful you are in your employment. It will affect your testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, your faithfulness in the Church and to your callings, and your commitment to covenants you have made or will make with God. In short, having pure, positive, and appropriate thoughts will determine your life and your eternities.

Perhaps you may, appropriately, ask how to do it: How do I replace negative or inappropriate thoughts with pure or positive ones that lead to good acts, good habits, and good character? It is especially challenging for us to control our thoughts when we live in a world of ever-increasing “‘in-your-face,’ carnal confrontiveness,” as termed by Elder Neal A. Maxwell.⁷

President Boyd K. Packer of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles gave some guidance on how we can accomplish this task:

Probably the greatest challenge to people of any age, particularly young people, and the most difficult thing you will face in mortal life is to learn to control your thoughts. As a man “thinketh in his heart, so is he.” (Prov. 23:7.) One who can control his thoughts has conquered himself. . . .

This is what I would teach you. Choose from among the sacred music of the Church a favorite hymn, one with words that are uplifting and music that is reverent, one that makes you feel something akin to inspiration. . . .

Now, use this hymn as the place for your thoughts to go. Make it your emergency channel. Whenever you find these shady actors have slipped from the sidelines of your thinking onto the stage of your mind, put on this record, as it were.

*As the music begins and as the words form in your thoughts, the unworthy ones will slip shamefully away. It will change the whole mood on the stage of your mind. Because it is uplifting and clean, the baser thoughts will disappear. For while virtue, by choice, **will not** associate with filth, evil **cannot** tolerate the presence of light.⁸*

There are many strategies you can use to control your thoughts. The critical thing is to consciously recognize an unwanted thought and acknowledge that it will lead to actions that lead to habits that lead to character that leads to—eventually—your destiny. Once recognized, replace the unwanted thought with something uplifting. The void created by removing an unwanted thought must be replaced by something of value.

One person shared with me that she replaces inappropriate thoughts by reflecting upon her temple covenants. She ponders on the words of the covenants and their sacred and eternal meaning. She reflects on the security these covenants personally bring to her, to her marriage, and to her young children. She also ponders on the promised and eternal blessings associated with each covenant.

A returned missionary once shared that he tries to imagine the sublime glory of the Savior. This has helped him replace undesirable thoughts with virtuous ones that elevate his mind to a holier place. He tries to imagine what it was like for Joseph Smith when he saw God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ in Their glory. He imagines what it would feel like to gaze into the Savior’s eyes and to feel of His approving love.

A young woman once shared that when she recognizes that an unwanted thought has crept onto the stage of her mind, immediate prayer provides her a safe refuge. She found that as she focuses on sincerely speaking to her Heavenly Father, the unwanted thoughts seem to melt away, and she feels peace as the Holy Spirit prompts her in her prayer.

All of these methods can help us control our thoughts. I have created a personal reminder to help myself that I call the five Rs:

1. **Recognize** when a thought is inappropriate, unworthy, or unwanted.
2. **Remove** the thought as soon as you recognize it.

3. **Replace** the thought with something pure, positive, or productive.

4. **Repent** immediately when necessary.

5. **Repeat** the process as often as required for as long as required.

The blessings associated with keeping your shoreline clean and unencumbered of starfish are many. The Doctrine and Covenants promises that if you have charity toward all and if you let virtue garnish your thoughts unceasingly,

then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God; and the doctrine of the priesthood shall distil upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever.⁹

Another way to construct these scriptural blessings is to approach the Lord in prayer, asking for whatever righteous needs or desires you have, and to expect with faith and confidence that the Lord will hear and answer your prayer. It means that your understanding of the mysteries of heaven can expand to where faith becomes knowledge. It means that the Holy Ghost will carefully lead you by constant personal revelation to truth, wisdom, and understanding. It means that you will, with legitimacy, be able to lead, teach, and inspire family, friends, and others who love, respect, and seek for your influence—forever! It ultimately sets in place your eternal destiny—and all this because you choose charity and virtuous thoughts.

In a talk during the priesthood session of the October 1983 general conference, equally applicable to all members of the Church, President Benson said:

*A priesthood holder is **virtuous**. Virtuous behavior implies that he has pure thoughts and clean*

actions. He will not lust in his heart, for to do so is to “deny the faith” and to lose the Spirit. (See D&C 42:23.)

He will not commit adultery “nor do anything like unto it.” (D&C 59:6.) This means fornication, homosexual behavior, self-abuse, child molestation, or any other sexual perversions.

Virtue is akin to holiness—an attribute of godliness.¹⁰

Cleansing Our Thoughts Through the Atonement

Like the boy in the starfish story, our shore may be covered with dozens or perhaps even hundreds or thousands of starfish. We cannot remove them all alone. Fortunately, we do not have to. We can have our shores washed clean through the cleansing power of Christ’s Atonement. As part of the repentance process we must say no to the temptation and we must say yes to Christ’s cleansing blood of Gethsemane and the cross at Calvary.

Through diligent and sincere repentance and through receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, we can have, as it were, a wave of the ocean roll onto the shores of our lives and cleanse them completely—not only of the unwanted starfish but of all debris. He who has power to calm the sea also has power to cleanse its shores. For each of us, this cleansing should be a continuous process, as rhythmic to our souls as the waves are to the sea. It is the Atonement of Christ that makes possible the ultimate tidal wave of complete redemption.

To receive complete redemption, we must consistently yield to the quiet but clearly discernible whisperings of the Holy Spirit. Failing to follow these promptings never leads to happiness.¹¹ Yielding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit provides both the path to change and the ability to change.

Baptized members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been given the gift of the Holy Ghost. To enjoy the benefits of this gift, we must both receive and “apply

unto it.”¹² As we consistently listen for and heed the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we will experience what Alma referred to as “a mighty change [of] heart.”¹³ We read in the Book of Mormon, “Behold, he changed their hearts; yea, he awakened them out of a deep sleep, and they awoke unto God.”¹⁴ Alma continued:

I ask of you, my brethren [and sisters] of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?¹⁵

Alma also explained that in order to experience this mighty change in our hearts, we must also be humble and willing to trust God.¹⁶ As we trust God, humble ourselves, and listen for and heed the promptings of the Holy Spirit with exactness, we become enabled to do all things the Lord commands, including sanctifying our thoughts.¹⁷ This sanctification helps us adhere to the solemn covenants we make at baptism and in the temple. In turn, adhering to these solemn covenants helps to change our hearts and transitions us into a Christlike character.

President Benson said:

We are to emulate the character of the Savior.

And what is His character?

. . . You are familiar with this verse in section 4 of the Doctrine and Covenants . . . :

“Remember faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, diligence.” (D&C 4:6.)

These are the virtues we are to emulate. This is the Christlike character. . . .

Never in the history of mankind has there been a greater need for men [and women] to be united in their determination and actions to be Christlike in character.

To follow Him is to emulate His character.¹⁸

When living a sanctified, Christlike life, we will lose the “disposition to do evil,”¹⁹ we will have “clean hands, and a pure heart,”²⁰ and

the image of God will be “engraven upon [our] countenances.”²¹ Again, this begins by listening carefully and consistently to the Holy Spirit’s clear and discernible promptings and then by heeding them with complete exactness.

By listening to these promptings, we can recognize and replace undesirable thoughts, whether immoral, unkind, self-destructive, or simply unproductive. We can replace them with charitable thoughts consistent with the admonition of Paul:

*Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, **think on these things.***²²

I believe Paul knew that by thinking on these things, Christlike acts, habits, and character would surely follow.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie said:

*Our goal as mortals is to gain the mind of Christ, to believe what he believes, **to think what he thinks**, to say what he says, to do what he does, and to be as he is.*²³

In Alma 12:14 we are taught that if we allow inappropriate thoughts to remain in our minds, they will condemn us. However, when we think on things as Paul outlined, our thoughts will also justify us. Our thoughts will either lead us to godliness or they will destroy us.

King Benjamin ended his address to his people in the land of Zarahemla with this warning:

*If ye do not watch yourselves, **and your thoughts**, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith . . . , even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. And now, O man, remember, and perish not.*²⁴

Developing the Character of Christ

As a summary of my remarks today, remember that your acts, habits, character, and destiny will flow from even the smallest of your thoughts. Through constant effort and by the grace of Christ, you can control your thoughts by removing inappropriate or unwanted thoughts and by replacing them with thoughts that are “virtuous, lovely, or of good report.”²⁴ To do this, you must listen carefully to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and then follow those promptings with exactness.

Your heart can be changed, you can be sanctified, and you can ultimately possess the character of Christ, which is consistent for all who bear His name.

I hope you leave this devotional encouraged. I know you can do it! As I mentioned earlier in my remarks, I left a similar devotional address more than thirty-six years ago with a commitment to no longer make mistakes. I confess: I have failed miserably! But in continuing to try and by applying the Lord’s Atonement, I have also succeeded wonderfully. Perhaps today is your day to start—to change your thoughts and your life, for good and for forever.

Just like me, you may not even exit these doors before you fail. To you I say: Don’t worry and don’t give up! All that matters is the starfish lying right at your feet. Follow the five Rs. Reach down, pick the starfish up, and throw it out. Replace it with a pure and virtuous thought. Repent immediately if you need to. Then repeat these steps again and again and yet again.

Just like the starfish in the original story, these actions will make a difference to that one thought. In time, you will one day look down at the shoreline of your life and see it washed clean, purified, and sanctified, and in the water’s reflection you will see the image of Christ in your countenance.

I testify that this is real, this is doable, and, most important, this is your destiny. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See "Calculate Duration Between Two Dates with Time," Time and Date, timeanddate.com/date/timeduration.html.
2. See Ezra Taft Benson, "Fourteen Fundamentals in Following the Prophet," BYU devotional address, 26 February 1980.
3. In *The Dayspring* 10, no. 3 (March 1881): 40; quoted by Samuel Smiles in *Life and Labor* (1887).
4. Moses 1:39.
5. See Loren C. Eiseley, "The Star Thrower," in *The Unexpected Universe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969), 69–72.
6. Alma 42:10; Moses 5:13, 6:49; see also Mosiah 16:3.
7. Neal A. Maxwell, "Encircled in the Arms of His Love," *Ensign*, November 2002.
8. Boyd K. Packer, "Inspiring Music—Worthy Thoughts," *Ensign*, January 1974; emphasis in original.
9. D&C 121:45–46.
10. Ezra Taft Benson, "What Manner of Men Ought We to Be?" *Ensign*, November 1983; emphasis in original.
11. See Alma 41:10.
12. D&C 8:4.
13. Alma 5:12.
14. Alma 5:7.
15. Alma 5:14.
16. See Alma 5:13.
17. See 1 Nephi 3:7.
18. Benson, "What Manner of Men?"
19. Mosiah 5:2; see Alma 19:33.
20. Psalm 24:4.
21. Alma 5:19.
22. Philippians 4:8; emphasis added.
23. Bruce R. McConkie, "The Seven Deadly Heresies," BYU fireside address, 1 June 1980; emphasis added.
24. Mosiah 4:30; emphasis added.
25. Articles of Faith 1:13.