

Free to Choose

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Good morning, dear faculty and students of BYU. You honor the Lord Jesus Christ by being here at this devotional this morning. I have been sitting here looking at all of you and thinking how grateful we are to you and for all the good you can do throughout the world.

Brothers and sisters, I am honored to be here today and grateful to have Sister Rasband here, as well as many members of my family. I appreciate the support of President Worthen and his colleagues, who are on the stand and in the audience, and I am grateful for you and for the Spirit of the Lord you have all brought to this devotional today.

Our coming together reminds me of King Benjamin speaking to the people at the temple site:

*Hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view.*¹

In these words we hear the Lord asking us to exercise our agency, to choose to listen, to choose to feel, and to choose to grasp the doctrines of the gospel as they apply to our individual lives. He is speaking of agency in the most personal sense.

My message today is of the fundamental doctrine of agency—the opportunity to choose between good and evil.

Choose to Feel Joy

In the Grand Council in Heaven we chose to accept our Heavenly Father's plan. It hinges on agency—the freedom to choose. Lehi taught his son Jacob, "For it must needs be, that there is an opposition in all things."² We "are free to choose liberty and eternal life" or "to choose captivity and death."³ Our everlasting welfare is dependent on living the laws of God. His commandments are fixed; they do not change except as directed by revelation.

We chose to come to earth and receive a body. We committed to live the commandments that we

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might be worthy of eternal life, the greatest of all God's blessings. Central to our Father's plan was the mission of Jesus Christ and His Atonement, which makes it possible for us to repent, be forgiven, and recommit to the covenant path. The very name of Jesus Christ speaks of salvation for all mankind. He is "the Son of the most high,"⁴ our "Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,"⁵ and "the Saviour of the world."⁶ Yet His work and His ministry were never about Him. He sought only "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."⁷ That is you and me.

Satan, on the other hand, presented his own plan that would have compelled us to live by his rules. His intent was to have us circle about him for his glory. Everyone in this room and everyone who has lived or yet will live on this earth chose not to follow him. Satan has already lost more than we have right now. He does not have a body, he can never progress beyond where he is today, and he can never be exalted. But still he continues to fight the war that he waged in heaven because he wants more than he has. He wants us to join him in his misery.

By divine design we can become like Heavenly Father and receive all He has.⁸ That promise means something on those days when things aren't going right and we ask ourselves—and we have all done it—"This is it?" Well, it isn't. This is mortality, a stage of progression that guarantees for those who are righteous exaltation in the kingdom of God. Forever.

You probably feel like forever is too abstract, too far away. You may not feel you can even deal with today, and you may be dragging around your mistakes from yesterday as well. Perhaps you are thinking, "Let me tell you, Elder Rasband, about this monster of a class I have, and the lab requirements, and my girlfriend who just dumped me, and my car that isn't running well in the cold, and how I cannot figure out what I am going to do or what I am going to major in"—and so it goes. Who is thinking about forever?

Well, brothers and sisters, you have the agency to look farther than that. You have the capacity to become gods and goddesses in a realm that knows

no sorrow and no defeat, that feels no pain and no rejection, and that promises light and goodness and peace everlasting. You are "the children of light,"⁹ and you must never let the darkness of today get in the way of your desire to be with God and become like Him.

With such uprightness comes joy. President Russell M. Nelson has said:

The joy we feel has little to do with the circumstances of our lives and everything to do with the focus of our lives.

*When the focus of our lives is on God's plan of salvation . . . and Jesus Christ and His gospel, we can feel joy regardless of what is happening—or not happening—in our lives. Joy comes from and because of Him.*¹⁰

So choose to feel joy, because your Savior, Jesus Christ, has atoned for your sins. For Him, the Atonement was a choice. He pled, "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt."¹¹ At that crucial moment He submitted His will, His precious agency, to the Father so that the plan of happiness might go forward.

Choose to feel joy in your very existence as a child of God. That is not just a catchphrase in the Church or a song sung in Primary. Being a child of God means being connected to the heavens while we journey in mortality. Being a child of God means there are expectations for us to make a difference in the Lord's kingdom—right now. Again, you have to look farther than today's pleasures, disappointments, worldly accomplishments, or current trends to receive the needed revelation we all need from God. Do not be fooled: you are not of the world; you are divine.

My friends, you do not have to do this alone. The Holy Ghost, who is a member of the Godhead, will be your constant companion—guiding and directing you in quiet, yet perfect, ways. Take advantage of that counsel that reaches far beyond good ideas and worldly wisdom. Gain a testimony by the choices you make that the Holy Ghost "knoweth all things"¹² and shows "all things what ye should do."¹³

Our Freedom of Religion

Not everyone in the world has choices like we do. I have visited 138 countries, some in my business career and many more in my Church assignments all around the world. I have seen societies in which individuals have little choice and little personal growth and opportunities to worship are few. There are countries in which religion is limited by government edict and in which personal choices in worship are nonexistent.

Agency—the freedom to choose—depends on robust religious freedom. Satan sought to destroy religious freedom in the premortal life, and he is still at it. We, as members of the Church, must recognize that the erosion of religious freedom will significantly impact our opportunities to grow in strength and gospel knowledge, to be blessed by sacred ordinances, and to rely on the Lord to direct His Church.

Let's think of the eleventh Article of Faith—you have not been out of Primary that long:

*We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may.*¹⁴

The Prophet Joseph Smith faced intense persecution for his worship of God the Father and Jesus Christ. But in 1843 he said:

*If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a Mormon, I am bold to declare before heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves. It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul, civil and religious liberty to the whole of the human race.*¹⁵

To stand for religious freedom is not new to those who worship Almighty God.

In the Book of Mormon we read repeatedly of the Nephites fighting not “for monarchy nor

power but . . . for their homes and their liberties, their wives and their children, and their all, yea, for their rites of worship and their church.”¹⁶

In the 1600s, pilgrims began leaving their homes and countries for what was called the New World, hoping to make a better life and wanting to worship freely and in peace.

In the early days of the Church, pioneers fled their persecutors in Kirtland, Far West, and Nauvoo—finally settling in the Salt Lake Valley, a place that God had prepared “far away in the West.”¹⁷ It was a place where they built what they termed Zion, a place “of one heart and one mind”¹⁸ devoted to Jesus Christ.

In every case these people chose to seek the Lord and live His ways. For us, the opportunity to choose, to live the tenets of the restored gospel, is the essence of our freedom of religion. It is not an academic exercise held at arm's length. It is an every day, every hour experience.

Consider three keys to the freedom of religion:

1. The freedom to believe.
2. The freedom to live our religion, worshipping as we desire.
3. The freedom to share our faith in Jesus Christ and our knowledge of His gospel with others.

Let's look at these three points one at a time.

First, the freedom to believe. No one should be forced to compromise what they believe because others may think another way. Nor should they be required to live according to another's beliefs. Because of religious freedom, I can stand here today and tell you what I believe.

I believe in Jesus Christ, and I have complete faith in Him. Because of the Savior's Atonement, it is possible for you and me to repent and move forward on the covenant path—clean and pure, with our hearts fixed on eternal life.

What do you believe? How are you exercising your agency to further the work of the Lord? Do you take to heart the Lord's example when He said, “I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me”?¹⁹

Second, the freedom to live our religion. We chose to make covenants—and we choose to make

covenants when we enter the waters of baptism and we choose to renew those covenants every Sunday by partaking of the emblems of the Lord’s sacrament. We choose to take the Lord’s name upon us. His name is not simply another reference to a great leader. This is Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, who atoned for the sins of all. His name has singular and eternal power. When we choose to take His name upon us, we commit to join His legion of valiant, righteous servants focused on God’s plan. Joseph Smith called it “the cause of Christ.”²⁰

We have an honor code at BYU that reflects your freedoms and your accountability. Freedom of religion allows you to attend this school, unique in all the world for its balance of secular and spiritual knowledge. Freedom of religion means you can attend the temple, be sealed as a family, teach gospel principles as outlined by the Lord, even in your homes, and pray to your Father in Heaven and receive personal revelation.

The question then is how are you exercising your freedom to worship the Lord in these latter days?

Third, the freedom to share our faith in Jesus Christ and His gospel with others. We are gathering Israel. President Nelson has called for us to enlist in this great cause:

*My dear extraordinary youth, you were sent to earth at this precise time, the most crucial time in the history of the world, to help gather Israel. There is **nothing** happening on this earth right now that is more important than that. There is **nothing** of greater consequence. Absolutely **nothing**.*

*This gathering should mean **everything** to you. This is the mission for which you were sent to earth.*²¹

That is strong language.

Many of you have served missions for the Church in states and countries far from home. You have borne witness of what you believe and taught others how to believe that same belief in membership in this Church. You understand what it feels like to help others recognize the Spirit so that they, too, might “come unto Christ.”²²

Years ago I served a mission in the Eastern States Mission. I loved it. My companion and I taught a young girl named Susan Casey and her family. You can imagine how thrilled we were when Susan and her family chose to be baptized. Not long ago—nearly fifty years since my mission—a woman and her husband approached me at a Scouting event. It was Susan! Can you imagine what that reunion meant for us? The scripture when Alma met up with the sons of Mosiah came to mind, for he “did rejoice exceedingly . . . ; and what added more to his joy, they were still his brethren in the Lord.”²³ So it was with Susan and her husband.

As college students, you can be “gathering” people to the gospel in so many ways. Begin with being “an example of the believers,”²⁴ as described by Paul. Choose to exemplify what you believe “in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”²⁵ You can be a believer to roommates, spouses, neighbors, work associates—even your teachers. You can join in service with like-minded believers who are not of our faith but who honor God with their lives. You can be an example of one who follows the prophet, who loves him, and who prays for him. He is, I testify, a man of God, and, like Jesus Christ, he goes “about doing good.”²⁶ You can engage in all areas of social media. This you can do with those near and far.

Speaking of far, our son was a missionary in Kazakhstan. There he taught a young Muslim man named Dmitry Tsai. Dmitry chose to be baptized. Fifteen years later, while on assignment for the Church in Russia, I met Dmitry, who was then living in Moscow. Dmitry and I FaceTimed with our son Chris, Dmitry’s missionary—and what a reunion it was for those two.

Dmitry has been an example of the believers. More than twenty of his family and friends in Kazakhstan and Russia have chosen to join the Church because of his example. Dmitry and those he has brought to the gospel are gratefully engaged in following their Savior.

Think for just a moment: Who are you influencing and helping gather to Israel and the gospel? How can you reach out and do more?

Religious freedom is central to our worship and to our work in the kingdom of God. Yet we are seeing the secular world draw boundary lines and set religion and even morality aside.

Elder Quentin L. Cook said in an address at a conference on religious freedom held in England last October:

*The foundations which have historically supported faith, accountability to God, and the religious impulse are increasingly being marginalized in a secular world and derided and even banished from the public square.*²⁷

As the author of the news article about Elder Cook's address described it, "Liberty without morality and religious freedom is but 'window dressing.'"²⁸ He also said:

*We should be bringing our whole, authentic self to work and to our communities—that includes our religious beliefs. Leaving our deeply held beliefs at home, in the mosque, synagogue or church is to leave a portion of self behind and accept a smaller portion of the illuminating light that emanates from the soul of every man and every woman.*²⁹

We Can Make a Difference

One of my assignments as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles is to direct the Church Communication and Government Relation Committees of the Church. In that responsibility I am involved in building bridges of understanding, hoping to nurture harmony.

I recently was at the Washington DC Temple, pressing the switch to illuminate the 400,000 sparkling lights on the grounds for the Christmas holidays. In that very large crowd for that special occasion were people of many other faiths, and Her Excellency Hunaina Al Mughairy, ambassador of the Sultanate of Oman, joined me to help in this celebration. For me, it was to declare that we celebrate the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. I felt impressed, as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, to bless them with the desire to go into the world to do good, to build faith in Almighty God, and to help bring others to a happier place.

I had the freedom to give that counsel.

We are of different religions, the ambassador and I, but we are friends, sharing a common purpose to lift those around us. What each of us brings to society is important, and as we work together and as we respect and honor the ideas and beliefs of each other, we are choosing to address our differences with harmony and love.

I saw harmony and love in action recently in Phoenix, Arizona, when I met with government leaders and participated in humanitarian visits. I saw in action the scripture "thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."³⁰

In recent months, tens of thousands of asylum seekers—migrants seeking international protection—have been relocated in the Phoenix area and elsewhere. These are people with nothing—no belongings to speak of. They arrive with no money and no home, and, it appears for them, no choices.

Forty different faith community organizations—including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—came together to help rescue these people from their dire circumstances. What a privilege it was to work side by side with others who are following the Lord's admonition to care for the poor and needy. I was touched both by the desire of those who were helping and by the immense gratitude on the faces of those receiving help.

Every one of us can make a difference, showing love to God's children, whatever their circumstances and choices. Consider how you might be there for someone on a bleak winter day, and the Lord will be there for you. If you are looking for opportunities to serve, check out JustServe.org. It is a great place to start.

Now, at the conclusion of my address, a post will be published on my Facebook and Instagram pages inviting all of you, here and elsewhere, to share with me what you are doing to minister to those who need you. I check my posts regularly and would love to hear of your efforts. When we serve those around us, we fulfill the Lord's divine mandate: "As I have loved you, . . . love one another."³¹ We can do that, my dear brothers and sisters: "And what doth the Lord require of [you], but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"³²

I leave with you this apostolic blessing: May you know and feel the importance of your life in the Lord’s kingdom here on earth. I bless you with the wisdom to make good choices, to think beyond the vagaries of today to the profound and divine opportunities that await you as you choose to follow the Son of God. I bless you with charity for all, whether inside or outside of your circle, and with strength to stand for religious freedom and to live with devotion the doctrines of Almighty God.

Lastly, in this bicentennial year, as we celebrate the beginning of the restitution of all things, commencing with the First Vision with the young Prophet Joseph Smith, I add my sure and solemn witness that this is true. I know that Joseph Smith was the first Prophet of the Restoration and that President Russell M. Nelson is the Lord’s prophet as the Restoration continues in this our day. We love you, we thank you, and we need you in the cause of Christ. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Mosiah 2:9.
2. 2 Nephi 2:11.
3. 2 Nephi 2:27.
4. 1 Nephi 11:6.
5. 1 Nephi 20:17.
6. John 4:42.
7. Moses 1:39.
8. See D&C 132:19–20.
9. 1 Thessalonians 5:5.
10. Russell M. Nelson, “Joy and Spiritual Survival,” *Ensign*, November 2016.
11. Matthew 26:39.
12. D&C 35:19.
13. 2 Nephi 32:5.
14. Articles of Faith 1:11.
15. Joseph Smith, from “The Cause of the Prophet’s Success—Love for His Fellow-Man,” a discourse given by Joseph Smith on July 9, 1843, in Nauvoo, Illinois, and reported by Willard Richards; “History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844],” p. 1666, Joseph Smith Papers Project, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/36; see also *HC* 5:498.
16. Alma 43:45.
17. “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 30.
18. Moses 7:18.
19. John 5:30.
20. Joseph Smith, “Letter to William W. Phelps, 31 July 1832,” Documents (Documents, 1832), p. 3, Joseph Smith Papers Project, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-william-w-phelps-31-july-1832/3.
21. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy W. Nelson, “Hope of Israel,” worldwide youth devotional, 3 June 2018, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/new-era/2018/08-se/hope-of-israel?lang=eng; emphasis in original.
22. D&C 20:59.
23. Alma 17:2.
24. 1 Timothy 4:12.
25. 1 Timothy 4:12.
26. Acts 10:38.
27. Quentin L. Cook, “The Impact of Religious Freedom on Public Morality,” keynote address given at the Quill Project conference (Religious Freedom, the U.S. Constitution and the American Founding), 23 October 2019, Pembroke College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom; quoted in Boyd Matheson, “Liberty Without Morality and Religious Freedom Is but ‘Window Dressing,’” *Opinion*, *Deseret News*, 29 October 2019.
28. Boyd Matheson, title of his article, “Liberty Without Morality.”
29. Matheson, “Liberty Without Morality.”
30. Matthew 22:39.
31. John 13:34.
32. Micah 6:8.