

“Choose You This Day Whom Ye Will Serve”

JAMES B. MARTINO

Brothers and sisters, it is a privilege for my wife, Jennie, and me to be here with you today. We owe much to this great university. We both attended BYU, and our experiences here had a significant influence on the happiness we now enjoy.

Our lives could have taken a very different path if not for some key decisions we made along the way. One came during my senior year in high school, when I chose to be baptized and confirmed a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Jennie and I had been dating for a few years, and she was—how should I say this?—less than enthusiastic about my decision to join the Church. Even so, she did not cast me off forever, and we kept dating through our senior year. After graduation, I went off to the University of Texas, and Jennie attended the University of North Texas, in our hometown. We continued to communicate almost every day, and we saw each other as often as we could.

That summer I informed Jennie of another decision I had made: I was going to serve as a missionary in the Guatemala–El Salvador Mission. Again, she was not thrilled with my decision and, in fact, was quick to say “adios,” but we continued to write during my mission. To make a long story short, Jennie eventually gained her own testimony of the restored gospel, and I baptized her the week I came home. Then, about a week after that, we moved to Provo, where both of us had been accepted to attend Brigham Young University.

Now we had another key decision to make. We had been dating for many years, and we desperately wanted to get married. We could be married civilly right away or we could wait until Jennie had been a member for a year so we could be married in the temple. We decided to wait and be married in the temple. Of course that choice implied the decision to live worthy of a temple marriage. May I just say how grateful we are for

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the spiritual environment at BYU that made that decision much easier.

I am sharing all of this with you to make a simple point: the happiness that Jennie and I have found in our lives has come because of our choices to follow Jesus Christ.

Perhaps Joshua had this principle in mind when he said to the children of Israel, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve . . . : but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”¹

Joshua had courageously led the Israelites into a new land—the promised land. The trials and afflictions of their forty years in the wilderness were behind them. New challenges now lay ahead, including the challenge of staying true to the Lord in a land in which people worshipped other gods. So Joshua, who was nearing the end of his life, drew a line in the sand.

“I want you to make your choice,” he essentially said. “My family and I have made ours. We will serve the Lord. What about you? You’re either all in or you’re not.” Joshua realized he needed to put the responsibility on the people. He knew their choice must be based on their true beliefs, not on obligation. Their success and prosperity in the promised land depended on the choice they made “this day” and in the days to come.

We call this agency our ability—in fact, our responsibility—to choose for ourselves, and it is essential to our Heavenly Father’s plan for His children. Why is agency so important? Because Heavenly Father’s greatest desire is “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.”² He wants to help us become “joint-heirs with Christ,”³ to receive all that He has. These high aspirations require not only a change in our behavior but, more than that, a change in our nature. They require that we do the right thing but also that we do it for the right reasons. We *choose* the right because we *love* the right. God does not manipulate us with instant rewards and punishments.⁴ No, ultimately we must desire to choose what is right because it is right, above all other reasons.

Sometimes we confuse God with Santa Claus. We picture Him dishing out coal or candy depending on whether we have been naughty or nice. We need to see God as He truly is—a loving Father who is teaching us and, as we turn

to Him, making “all things work together for [our] good.”⁵

When we make a choice, we are indicating what we value, what we desire, and, ultimately, what we are. And what we are—more than how we act—is what prepares us for eternal life.

Consider the example of Lehi’s sons Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi. You remember that after the family had fled into the wilderness, Lehi asked his sons to return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates from a man named Laban. Not all of them were thrilled with this assignment, but they all went. As they approached Jerusalem, the brothers cast lots, and the lot fell upon Laman to request the plates. Laban not only denied the request, but he also accused Laman of being a robber and threatened to slay him.

The four brothers decided upon a second way to accomplish what their father had asked. They returned to their home and gathered all their gold, silver, and precious things to buy the plates from Laban. Now think about it: this choice involved a serious commitment. It meant that they were never going to return to Jerusalem and have any of their wealth. Yes, there was some murmuring, but they did it. And yet again Laban would not give them the records; in fact, he sent his servants to slay the brothers, forcing them to leave their precious possessions behind.

Now put yourself in the place of these brothers for a minute. Wouldn’t now seem like a good time to go home? Hadn’t they given a valiant effort? They had sacrificed all their wealth and even risked their lives. No, they had not obtained the plates, but that outcome seemed beyond their control. Had they not done everything they could?

When we read the Book of Mormon, we like to think that we are more like Nephi and Sam than like Laman and Lemuel, but are we? This difficult task presented the brothers with choices—with opportunities to show the depth of their commitment. Life is full of such opportunities for all of us. Sometimes choosing to serve the Lord requires patience, persistence, and other godly attributes. Sometimes the outcomes are not at all what we anticipated or even wanted. But we choose how we will react. We choose whether to give up or continue faithful.

I know that you want to be more like Nephi and Sam than like Laman and Lemuel. I know that you want your choices to reflect your love for what is right. But I also know that it is not easy. Today I would like to share three suggestions that can help you make choices that align with your desires for righteousness:

1. Keep an eternal perspective.
2. Do not underestimate the enemy.
3. Repent when you make mistakes.

Keep an Eternal Perspective

First, let's talk about eternal perspective. You remember Albus Dumbledore, the wise wizard from J. K. Rowling's series of Harry Potter books. Albus Dumbledore understood agency. Harry Potter asked Dumbledore why the Sorting Hat put him in the house of Gryffindor, the house he preferred, even though he showed some signs of fitting in the loathsome house of Slytherin. Dumbledore explained, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."⁶

Harry Potter was a Gryffindor because he chose it, and that choice shaped his experiences and, ultimately, who he became. His desires were actually a deeper and more accurate reflection of his true identity than anything else about him.

Sometimes we wish we had a sorting hat to make choices for us, to decide what our destiny will be. But this would eliminate agency, the single strongest factor in determining our destiny. It is our choices that make us who we are—not our birth, not our nationality, not even our parental upbringing. We can and must decide for ourselves.

Keeping an eternal perspective means not allowing a sorting hat or chance or luck or circumstances to set our destiny. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ gives us a high and holy aspiration, planted in us long before we were born and revealed in our desires for righteousness and godliness. That goal ought to determine who we want to become.

It is easier to make good choices when we think about them in light of our eternal destiny. Of course, some choices are not eternally important. Do I buy a red shirt or a blue shirt? It does

not really matter, though you might go with the blue shirt on this campus. But other choices have significant consequences. Will I stay on the covenant path? Will I let something that I do not understand cast doubt on my testimony? Will trials cause me to "become hardened," or will they help me to become "softened . . . in the depth of humility"?⁷ And then there are those difficult decisions between two things that both seem good. Often Heavenly Father does not give specific direction but leaves the decision to us.

In all such decisions, you can keep an eternal perspective by asking yourself:

- Will this decision help me and others draw closer to God?
- Will it help me and others find greater happiness?
- Will it help me and others become a better son or daughter of God?

I have spoken to several individuals who have left the Church. I always like to ask them this question: "Are you closer to Christ now than you were before you left the Church?" Almost without exception they say no. Oh, they might say that they are happier, but that happiness is often based on worldly pleasures like boating or sports on Sunday or finding some temporary pleasure in breaking the Word of Wisdom or the law of chastity. But almost never has anyone told me that they feel closer to the Savior.

President Russell M. Nelson has said, "We choose every day where we want to live eternally by how we think, feel, speak, and act."⁸

Please remember the promised blessings that are yours. You are a child of a loving Heavenly Father, and He wants you to become like He is.

Years ago, Sister Wendy L. Watson, now the wife of President Russell M. Nelson, spoke at a BYU devotional. She told a story about a caterpillar named Yellow who was trying to figure out what to do with her life. One day Yellow discovered another caterpillar who seemed to be caught in a mess of thin, hairy fibers. When Yellow asked if she could help, the caterpillar explained that he was making a cocoon so he could become a butterfly.

Yellow had never heard the word *butterfly* before, but it made something inside her leap. “What is a butterfly?” she asked.

The other caterpillar described the beauty and majesty of a butterfly and explained, “It’s what you are meant to become.”

Yellow was skeptical. “How can I believe there’s a butterfly inside you or me when all I see is a fuzzy worm?” But she could not leave the thought alone. “How does one become a butterfly?” she finally asked.

The other caterpillar answered, “You must want to fly so much that you are willing to give up being a caterpillar.”⁹

With that kind of eternal perspective, you will make choices that help you become who you are meant to become.

Do Not Underestimate the Enemy

My second suggestion to help us to make the right choices is to understand that the enemy is real and should not be underestimated. This is almost as important as knowing that God is real. The difference is that while God wants us to know Him, Satan would rather stay unknown. He disguises himself in so many ways. He is sly and cunning, and he will do all he can to blind us to our eternal goals.

One of the most important battles in World War II is known as the Battle of the Bulge. It came about six months after the famous Normandy invasion, and it was the last major offensive campaign by the Nazis on the Western front. Hitler pulled in his best officers and soldiers from the Eastern front with the hope of reversing the advancement of the Allied forces. The German attack caught the Allies unaware, and casualties, particularly among American troops, were high. But Hitler underestimated the Allied forces, and after about six weeks, the Nazis were defeated and never gained the upper hand again. As a result, the Allies were able to begin a constant drive to Berlin, and because German troops had been diverted from the Eastern front, Russia was able to quickly move toward Berlin also.

Experts of history say that many of Hitler’s advisors cautioned him to not put everything in

this one battle, but he would not listen. He underestimated his enemy, and he paid the price.

We are all susceptible to the same mistake. That is why the Book of Mormon, which was written for our day, includes helpful warnings about the strategies and tactics of the adversary. Let us review what Nephi taught about how Satan will deceive us in these latter days: “At that day shall he rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good.”¹⁰ Do we see this today? So much public and private conversation seems to be filled with rage. Even that which ought to be widely acknowledged as good is angrily attacked as evil, while other things that God has clearly identified as evil are often called good.¹¹ Do not be deceived by the sophistry of the devil. When we attempt to correct a wrong, we should not use other wrongs to make the correction. Inappropriate actions by some should not be answered with violence. We must stand for peace and love, as taught by the Savior. We must bring people to Christ, the only true way to change hearts.

Nephi went on to say, “And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.”¹²

Do not let Satan lull you to sleep. This world needs you. We need your example of goodness. We need your active participation to bring souls to Christ. Many of you have served missions, but there is so much more to do! We need you to continue to arise and be counted. You need to be a voice on the Lord’s side for righteousness and goodness.

Nephi described another tactic of Satan’s: “Others he flattereth away, and telleth them there is no hell; and he saith unto them: I am no devil, for there is none—and thus he whispereth in their ears, until he grasps them with his awful chains, from whence there is no deliverance.”¹³

Often Satan’s whisperings are an attempt to minimize the consequences of sin. He might persuade some to say, “It is okay to look at this pornography; it is not hurting anyone else.” Or he

may justify the taking of illegal drugs, as if no one else is affected by such actions. I have lived many years in Latin America and have seen the awful consequences of Americans' appetites for illegal drugs. Oh, the violence, poverty, and corruption that this has caused! Do not be deceived: "wickedness never was happiness."¹⁴ And the wickedness of one, far too often, can bring unhappiness even to the innocent.

In other cases, the adversary's whispers suggest justifications for our sins. We might say, "I can't help myself" or "I was just born this way" or "He made me do it." In each case Satan is attempting to deny our agency—which has been his strategy since the beginning.¹⁵ Even the exclamation "That makes me so mad!" is, in a sense, a capitulation of agency. We choose to be mad. Yes, things happen that can have an influence on us, but we can overcome all of that. We are agents created to act and not to be acted upon.¹⁶

You, each one of you, is a child of our Heavenly Father. If you have habits or traditions that must be changed, you can do that. If there is something in your life that offends the Spirit of God, then change it. You can do that. The Savior Jesus Christ gave His life to provide the power to help you change.

Remember that there is one thing Christ and Satan have in common: they both want us to become like them. Satan, however, wants to trick us into it. Christ wants it to be our choice.

Repent When You Make Mistakes

This leads me to my last point: Repent when you make mistakes. I am sure you are aware that mistakes are part of mortal life; some of us are more painfully aware of this than others. But I hope you also know that repentance, too, is part of God's plan for our mortal experience. Repentance is not shameful or tragic. Sin is tragic. Repentance is the way we overcome the tragedy. It is the way we show that we want to return to God, and it is the way that we get there. The decision to repent is a commitment to access the Savior's power to change.

One of the great tragedies in our modern era was the Holocaust of the Jews during World War II. Millions of innocent Jews were tortured,

abused, and murdered. Few survived the concentration camps, but one man who did, Viktor E. Frankl, came away with a valuable perspective on life and suffering. In a book describing his experiences, Frankl concluded that regardless of our situation, even when so much of our freedom seems to be taken away, we can preserve what he called "the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."¹⁷

Frankl wrote:

*Even though conditions such as lack of sleep, insufficient food and various mental stresses may suggest that the inmates were bound to react in certain ways, in the final analysis it becomes clear that the sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone. Fundamentally, therefore, any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him—mentally and spiritually. . . . It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.*¹⁸

Is this how we see ourselves? Do we consider ourselves bound to act in certain ways, or are we free to decide what we will become?

When we sin, the Holy Ghost will help us to recognize it, as long as we are still open to His promptings. When that happens, we basically have two choices: we can repent or we can rationalize our actions in an attempt to feel better about our behavior.

One such rationalization is the old adage "The devil made me do it!" Even Satan, however, cannot make us do anything without our permission.

Another rationalization is that our choices are limited by circumstances beyond our control. It is true that we all face physical or mental challenges—some more severe than others. But we cannot let those difficulties define us or determine our choices, especially when it comes to our spirituality. We must see things as *they* really are, but we must also see ourselves as *we* really are. We are so much more than our mortal experiences and limitations! We are children of Heavenly Father, and because of that we have a divine nature. With His help we can overcome

“the natural man” and yield “to the enticings of the Holy Spirit” so that we become what God has created us to become.¹⁹ We are in control of our spiritual and inner destiny, and we can fulfill the purpose of our creation.

Satan does not want us to believe we can change; he wants us to think we are victims. But we can change. Do not give up the fight and allow carnal desires to shape your decisions. The mission of Jesus Christ was to make it possible for us to change. He accomplished His mission. Repentance is an act of faith in Him, of faith in His power.

President Russell M. Nelson made this statement:

*We can change our behavior. Our very desires can change. How? There is only one way. True change—permanent change—can come only through the healing, cleansing, and enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. He loves you—each of you! He allows you to access His power as you keep His commandments, eagerly, earnestly, and exactly. It is that simple and certain. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of change!*²⁰

Elder David A. Bednar, in the most recent mission leadership seminar, said this:

True faith is focused in and on the Lord Jesus Christ—in Him as the divine and Only Begotten Son of the Father and on Him and His redemptive mission. Exercising faith in Christ is trusting and placing our confidence in Him as our Savior, on His name, and in His promises. . . .

Repenting is the first and natural consequence of placing our trust and confidence in the Savior. Described most simply, repentance is turning away from evil and turning to God. As we exercise faith in and on the Lord, we turn toward, come unto, and depend upon Him. Thus, repentance is trusting in and relying upon the Redeemer to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. . . .

Recognizing and forsaking sin; feeling remorse and making restitution for sin; and confessing sins to God and, when needed, to our priesthood leaders are all necessary and important elements in the repentance process. However, these essential steps do not constitute a mere behavioral checklist we can mechanically, quickly,

*and casually complete. If we do these things and fail to recognize and depend upon the Redeemer and His atoning sacrifice, then even our best efforts are in vain.*²¹

When we turn to Christ, He can help us to change our hearts. We can begin to feel what King Benjamin’s people felt when they said, “We have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually.”²² This is one way we can know that our decisions are drawing us closer to the Savior.

When you make mistakes, be mature enough to admit them, smart enough to learn from them, strong enough to correct them, and faithful enough to trust in the Savior’s atoning power to overcome them.

Conclusion

Jennie and I loved our experiences here at BYU. We were surrounded by examples of wonderful people. We had professors and religious leaders who encouraged us. But we had to make the choices that led us to feel the happiness we feel. We have not been perfect by any means, but I do not know two people any happier than we are, and that began with choices we made here at Brigham Young University.

Brothers and sisters, make choices that will bring you eternal happiness. To do this, please remember:

1. Keep an eternal perspective.
2. Do not underestimate the enemy.
3. Repent when you make mistakes.

I bear witness that you are special sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. I know that Jesus is the Christ and has provided the means for you to return to the presence of God if you will “choose . . . this day whom ye will serve.” In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Joshua 24:15.
2. Moses 1:39.
3. Romans 8:17.
4. See Dale G. Renlund, “Choose You This Day,” *Ensign*, November 2018.

5. Romans 8:28; see also D&C 105:40.
6. Albus Dumbledore, in J. K. Rowling, "Dobby's Reward," chapter 18 of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998).
7. Alma 62:41.
8. Russell M. Nelson, in Russell M. Nelson and Wendy Watson Nelson, "RootsTech Family Discovery Day—Opening Session 2017," Church of Jesus Christ, 47:33–47:41, churchofjesuschrist.org/study/video/rootstech-presentations/2017-02-4050-rootstech-family-discovery-day-opening-session-2017?lang=eng.
9. From Trina Paulus, *Hope for the Flowers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), 68–75; quoted in Wendy L. Watson, "Change: It's Always a Possibility!" BYU devotional address, 7 April 1998.
10. 2 Nephi 28:20.
11. See 2 Nephi 15:20.
12. 2 Nephi 28:21.
13. 2 Nephi 28:22.
14. Alma 41:10.
15. See Moses 4:3.
16. See 2 Nephi 2:14, 16.
17. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 66.
18. Frankl, *Man's Search*, 66–67.
19. Mosiah 3:19.
20. Russell M. Nelson, "Decisions for Eternity," *Ensign*, November 2013; emphasis in original.
21. David A. Bednar, "Repent and Come unto Him," mission leadership seminar, 27 June 2020; see Scott Taylor, "Elder Bednar at Mission Leadership Seminar: 'Repent and Come unto Him,'" Leaders and Ministry, *Church News*, 30 June 2020, thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2020-06-30/elder-bednar-mission-leadership-seminar-repentance-real-intent-remission-188020.
22. Mosiah 5:2.