

Stay Connected: Making It Safely Home

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Brothers and sisters, Carol and I are thrilled to join you today for this devotional, just two years from when I had the privilege of addressing you in early November 2019.

Since that time, as you are all keenly aware, the world has been turned upside down by the impact of COVID-19. Every aspect of life, individually and as a society, has been affected by the pandemic, as you well know.

My intent today is not to politicize the pandemic—which we have seen from both sides of the political spectrum—but rather to learn from a specific issue that became much more visible due to the pandemic and see how it can apply from an eternal perspective: that would be the importance of “staying connected.”

On a personal basis, my desire to stay connected with Carol while we were long-distance dating—she at BYU and I at San Diego State—led to many letters and expensive long-distance phone calls. Those are some things that now you only read about in history books.

What happened is that just prior to dating Carol, I had what I thought was a brilliant idea for a poor college student to earn some extra money. In the early 1980s, interest rates on very conservative investments were actually higher than the interest rates you would pay for a student loan. I obtained the loan and placed the money in a savings account, with the plan to make money on the difference between what I would earn and what I would pay. What I had not counted on was the cost of long-distance phone calls to Carol, which over several months used up the entire student loan. So instead of interest being earned to offset interest on the student loan, I now owed the entire amount of the loan, plus interest.

However, there was a significant upside. Those long-distance phone calls and bills, which don't exist today, allowed me to stay connected with Carol and resulted in my marrying my eternal companion in 1984. Not a bad investment after all! You can tell [from this photo] that I thought I had just scored. And I absolutely did.

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Apollo 13: “Houston, We’ve Had a Problem”

There are other ways of staying connected that have more serious consequences than paying for a loan, including one that took place a little more than fifty years ago.

In April 1970, following the highly successful Apollo 11 and Apollo 12 trips to the moon and back, including the occasion of having astronaut Neil Armstrong become the first man to step on the moon, Apollo 13 blasted off with equally great expectations.

Despite the success of previous Apollo missions, this type of event also carried with it potential dangers and challenges. As with previous launches, the three astronauts left loved ones behind who eagerly awaited their safe return, which clearly was the astronauts’ number one objective: to make it home safely.

The Apollo 13 liftoff went well, with everything working as planned as they traveled toward the moon. However, a little over two days into the mission, and more than two hundred thousand miles from home, one of the three crew members was asked to perform a routine check on the oxygen levels of their spacecraft. As the check took place, the crew heard a loud bang from outside their spacecraft. They immediately called down to Houston with these famous words: “Houston, we’ve had a problem.”¹

During the oxygen check, a circuit breaker had malfunctioned, causing an explosion that compromised the oxygen the crew would need—not only to reach the moon but to accomplish their primary purpose of returning home safely.

Over the next few days, the crew maintained constant communication with Mission Control in Houston, which provided needed support and guidance. It was only by carefully following instructions on the steps and procedures they received that the astronauts were able to make the necessary adjustments that allowed them to safely splash down in the Pacific Ocean approximately six days after their launch.²

The crew may not have accomplished everything they had planned to achieve when they blasted off with so much hope and expectation, and they may have been a bit disappointed that they missed out on certain aspects of their

mission, but more than anything else on their epic adventure, of all the possibilities and plans, returning home to their loved ones was their most important objective, which they successfully accomplished.

From their experience, let me point out two of the “keys” to their success:

1. The crew stayed connected to *the only* source that could guide them safely home.
2. They trusted and carefully applied the counsel and instructions they received.

Sisters and brothers, I realize that no analogy is perfect, but I see great similarities between our journey through life and the experience of the crew of Apollo 13. Just as with the Apollo space mission, ours is a journey of great potential—full of excitement as well as unexpected occurrences along the way. We also left home with ideas and plans and every intention of returning home safely, whatever experience or challenge we would find along the way.

As President Boyd K. Packer taught, no matter who we are or where we are from, “life is a home-ward journey *for all of us*, back to the presence of God in his celestial kingdom.”³

“All of us” is a key phrase. In other words, we are *not* defined by our gender, our nationality, our sexual orientation, the color of our skin, the language we speak, our political philosophy, our marital status, or any of the many categories the world uses to define us and too often divide us. We *are* defined by our eternal parentage. We are brothers and sisters, children of a loving God, all with a common purpose.

We were sent from the presence of God with a specific objective: to return home to His presence. In the process, we would be tried and tested. We would have physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges that would help us grow and progress. We would be given agency and the right to choose, but with the caveat that our choices have associated consequences. We cannot separate choice and accountability, much as we might try or wish—choosing one path and hoping it will lead to the destination of another. We can’t get on a plane to New York and hope to land in Hawaii.

Stay Connected to the One True Source

We may not be trapped in a small spacecraft, trying to figure out how to return to earth, but in this mortal experience we deal with our own set of challenges and choices, with no promise that everything we've desired or hoped to achieve will work out just as we have planned.

In addition, on *our* journey home, unlike the crew of Apollo 13, we have *multiple* sources of information of varying levels of trustworthiness all competing for our attention. These sources do their best to tell us how to live, how to think, and what to believe: CNN, Fox News, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Tumblr, TikTok, Reddit, Snapchat, and, by the time this devotional ends, probably a few dozen more.

With so many different voices, it can be difficult and confusing to sift through so much material. Fortunately, there is *one* source that will guide us safely through life, providing a filter that allows us to separate fact from fiction and truth from error on those issues of greatest importance. It is *the* source that we can always trust, that will never let us down, that will always be on our side, and that will love and respect us enough to always tell us what we need to hear—not necessarily what we want to hear.

Brothers and sisters, our key to a successful mortal journey back to the presence of God in the celestial kingdom is to *stay connected* to that source.

At least three latter-day apostles that I'm aware of—President James E. Faust and Elders Bruce R. McConkie and Neal A. Maxwell—have quoted William Law, an eighteenth-century clergyman, who said, "If you have not chosen the Kingdom of God, it will make in the end no difference what you have chosen instead."⁴

I would suggest that to choose the kingdom of God requires us to choose the king of that kingdom: Jesus Christ. There are not sufficient words to describe our Savior and what He means to us. Faith in Jesus Christ was, is, and always will be the first principle of the gospel. He knows us in ways that no one else ever can or will. Not only does He sympathize, but He can empathize with every one of us because He has been burdened by every sin, felt every pain and

disappointment, rejoiced with every triumph, and walked every path we will ever take in mortality. He descended below all things as He atoned for us, and He rose above all things as He triumphed over spiritual and physical death. There is nothing we can experience that He has not experienced. He is our primary confidant, our most avid fan and supporter, and the perfect example for us to follow in all things. He is the foundation upon which if we will build, we cannot fall, because He has the solutions to life's challenges on life's journey.

Jesus Christ alone is *the* source to whom we *must* stay connected in order to arrive safely home, back to the presence of God, and thus fulfill the objective of mortality.

In John 15, the Savior reminded us, "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that *abideth* in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing."⁵

Speaking of this verse, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught:

*I testify that that is God's truth. Christ is everything to us and we are to "abide" in Him permanently, unyieldingly, steadfastly, forever. For the fruit of the gospel to blossom and bless our lives, we must be firmly attached to Him, the Savior of us all. . . . He is the vine that is our true source of strength and the only source of eternal life. In Him we not only will endure but also will prevail and triumph in this holy cause that will never fail us.*⁶

There is great hope in the Savior's declaration "Therefore, continue your journey and let your hearts rejoice; for behold, and lo, *I am with you even unto the end.*"⁷

For us—for you and for me—the key is not *finding* the source; we *know* the source. The challenge is *staying connected* to the source!

For the crew of Apollo 13, it was equipment in their spacecraft and at Mission Control in Houston that allowed them to communicate and receive the guidance they desperately needed as they made their way home. For us, knowing what is at stake in mortality, our Father in Heaven has provided a variety of resources to assist us in our effort to stay connected to the Savior.

We have been given the scriptures, the sacrament, the temple, prayer, repentance, prophets, families, and more to help us stay connected to Jesus Christ. Due to time constraints, it won't be possible to discuss each resource in detail, so this morning I will focus on just three: the scriptures, the sacrament, and the prophets.

Resource 1: The Scriptures

First, the scriptures. Elder Ulisses Soares taught:

*We need to abide in Him, immersing ourselves in the scriptures, rejoicing in them, learning His doctrine, and striving to live the way He lived. Only then will we come to know Him, Jesus Christ, and recognize His voice.*⁸

Just as the crew of Apollo 13 heard the voice that brought them home, we have the same opportunity as we intentionally and regularly study the scriptures, feasting upon the words of Christ. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Savior reminded us:

For it is my voice which speaketh them unto you; for they are given by my Spirit unto you. . . .

*Wherefore, you can testify that you have heard my voice, and know my words.*⁹

In April 2017, President Thomas S. Monson spoke for the last time in a general conference. After more than fifty years as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, of all the topics he could have chosen, President Monson's final testimony and message to the world was to remind us of the importance of the Book of Mormon in our lives.

Listen to the words of this remarkable prophet of God, who said:

This morning I speak about the power of the Book of Mormon and the critical need we have as members of this Church to study, ponder, and apply its teachings in our lives. The importance of having a firm and sure testimony of the Book of Mormon cannot be overstated. . . .

. . . It is essential for you to have your own testimony in these difficult times, for the testimonies of others will carry you only so far. . . .

*. . . I implore each of us to prayerfully study and ponder the Book of Mormon each day. As we do so, we will be in a position to hear the voice of the Spirit, to resist temptation, to overcome doubt and fear, and to receive heaven's help in our lives.*¹⁰

Brothers and sisters, we are taught in *Preach My Gospel* that a testimony of the Book of Mormon is an essential part of conversion and that a central purpose of the Book of Mormon is to convince all people that Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God and the Savior of the world. Our daily study of the Book of Mormon will keep us connected to Jesus Christ as we are reminded on page after page "that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that all who will come unto Him and obey the laws and ordinances of His gospel may be saved."¹¹ It is where we are frequently reminded "that there shall be no other name given nor any other way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent."¹² In a recent training meeting for General Authorities prior to general conference, we were reminded that "the Book of Mormon is a survival handbook for our day." *Stay connected with the Savior through your study of the Book of Mormon.*

Resource 2: The Sacrament

Second, the sacrament. In 3 Nephi we learn of another resource that helps keep us connected to Jesus Christ, and we read the words of the Savior, who taught:

And this shall ye always observe to do, even as I have done, even as I have broken bread and blessed it and given it unto you.

*And this shall ye do in remembrance of my body, which I have shown unto you.*¹³

You will notice that the emphasis in this passage is not on the amount of time that we spend at church but rather on the essential element of our worship: the partaking of the emblems of Christ's sacrifice. Participating in this sacred ordinance allows us to renew our covenants and to be cleansed and sanctified by the Spirit, and it helps

us to “always remember him,”¹⁴ making it possible therefore to always stay connected to Him.

Elder David A. Bednar taught:

*We are connected securely to and with the Savior as we worthily receive ordinances and enter into covenants, faithfully remember and honor those sacred commitments, and do our best to live in accordance with the obligations we have accepted.*¹⁵

In the Book of Mormon we read of a group of Lamanites who had been “converted unto the Lord.”¹⁶ They were so converted that they were willing to lay down their lives rather than shed the blood of their enemy and risk breaking a covenant they had made with the Lord. We read:

Yea, and they did keep the law of Moses. . . . But notwithstanding the law of Moses, they did look forward to the coming of Christ, considering that the law of Moses was a type of his coming. . . .

*Now they did not suppose that salvation came by the law of Moses; but the law of Moses did serve to strengthen their faith in Christ.*¹⁷

The participation of faithful Lamanites in these sacred ordinances made it possible for them to “always remember him,” which remembering served to strengthen their faith in Christ and deepen their conversion—a faith and conversion sufficient to keep covenants, even at the cost of their lives.

Our primary purpose in attending church is to worship and honor Jesus Christ and to demonstrate our love and gratitude for all that He has done for us. We attend church and reverently participate in the sacred ordinance of the sacrament because we know “that there is no other way nor means whereby man can be saved, only through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ.”¹⁸ The sacramental emblems are a weekly reminder of our total dependence upon His Atonement and of our responsibility to keep the covenants we have made with Him—not with any mortal man—so that we can “stand spotless before [Him] at the last day.”¹⁹

It is this same remembering as we worthily participate in a sacred ordinance each week that

can and will strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ, deepen our conversion, and make it possible for us to keep our covenants and maintain our connection to the source that will bring us safely home. *Stay connected with the Savior through the ordinance of the sacrament.*

Resource 3: The Prophets

Third, the prophets. To stay connected to Jesus Christ, we must choose to listen to and follow the counsel of those He has chosen and who taught us just a few short days ago: prophets, seers, and revelators.

Lehi explained to Nephi:

The Lord hath commanded me that thou and thy brothers should go unto the house of Laban, and seek the records. . . .

*And now, behold thy brothers murmur, saying it is a hard thing which I have required of them; but behold I have not required it of them, but it is a commandment of the Lord.*²⁰

Like Lehi, living prophets speak on behalf of the Lord, whether or not it is popular or controversial. Their role is not to please the world according to which way the winds of “political correctness” are blowing. Their role is to stay in line with “eternal correctness,” declaring the Lord’s will, not man’s.

Elder Neil L. Andersen reminded us of a principal role of prophets when he taught:

The most important role of the Lord’s prophet is to teach us of the Savior and lead us to Him. . . .

*A prophet does not stand between you and the Savior. Rather, he stands beside you and points the way to the Savior.*²¹

By teaching and declaring doctrine—not creating it—prophets teach us how to stay connected to the source of truth. Some might use the excuse of “agency” to ignore the counsel of prophets. Well, I would suggest to you that our use of agency, a gift from God, is not to determine whether the prophet is right but rather to choose whether or not to follow the counsel of the Lord as directed by the prophet. As the Savior taught,

“Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same.”²²

President Henry B. Eyring, while serving as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles as Elder Eyring, pointedly taught:

When a prophet speaks, those with little faith may think that they hear only a wise man giving good advice. Then if his counsel seems comfortable and reasonable, squaring with what they want to do, they take it. If it does not, they consider it either faulty advice or they see their circumstances as justifying their being an exception to the counsel. . . . They may mock and deride, as did . . . Korihor. . . .

*Korihor was arguing, as men and women have falsely argued from the beginning of time, that to take counsel from the servants of God is to surrender God-given rights of independence. But the argument is false because it misrepresents reality. When we reject the counsel which comes from God, we do not choose to be independent of outside influence. We choose another influence. We reject the protection of a perfectly loving, all-powerful, all-knowing Father in Heaven, whose whole purpose, as that of His Beloved Son, is to give us eternal life . . . , and to bring us home again in families to the arms of His love. In rejecting His counsel, we choose the influence of another power, whose purpose is to make us miserable and whose motive is hatred. We have moral agency as a gift of God. Rather than the right to choose to be free of influence, it is the inalienable right to submit ourselves to whichever of those powers we choose.*²³

Brothers and sisters, we absolutely have our agency, but choice also brings consequences. That is why choosing to stay connected to the source that can bring us safely home is essential.

I love the words of President Harold B. Lee, who taught:

The only safety we have as members of this church is to . . . give heed to the words and commandments that the Lord shall give through His prophet. . . . You may not like what comes from the authority of the Church. It may contradict your [personal] views. It may contradict your social views. . . . But if you listen to these things, as if from the mouth of the Lord himself, with

*patience and faith, the promise is that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against you. . . .” (D&C 21:6).*²⁴

Brothers and sisters, we choose the King of the Kingdom when we choose to follow the counsel of those He has chosen: the living prophets. Choose to stay connected. The consequences are eternal. It requires the faith to follow what *has* been revealed and the patience to wait for what has *not* been revealed. *Stay connected with the Savior through listening to and following the prophets.*

Making It Safely Home

Staying connected to the source that can bring us safely home requires intentional effort on our part. It does not happen by chance. Please prayerfully consider how you can better stay connected to the one True Source who has all power to lead you home as you spend time in the scriptures, worthily partake of the sacrament each week, and give heed to the counsel from the Lord’s anointed.

I conclude with a brief but essential truth, which is this: we will all be disconnected at times due to our choices, because none of us is perfect. However, our Savior, Jesus Christ, will always be there for us with an invitation to reconnect. There is nothing you have done or will do that is beyond the reach of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His constantly outstretched arms.

Choose to repent. Choose to reconnect with the King, Jesus Christ.

My prayer for each of you is the same desire expressed by King Benjamin on behalf of his people when he said:

*I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life, through the wisdom, and power, and justice, and mercy of him who created all things, in heaven and in earth, who is God above all.*²⁵

He is the way, He is the truth, and He is the life,²⁶ and “there is none other name given whereby man can be saved.”²⁷ Stay connected!

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. John Swigert, quoted in “Apollo 13,” National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), 8 July 2009, nasa.gov/mission_pages/apollo/missions/apollo13.html.

2. See “Apollo 13.”

3. Boyd K. Packer, “Covenants,” *Ensign*, May 1987; emphasis added.

4. William Law, as cited by C. S. Lewis, in “A Slip of the Tongue,” *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (1949); see Bruce R. McConkie, “The Caravan Moves On,” *Ensign*, November 1984. See also William Law, *An Appeal to All That Doubt, or Disbelieve the Truths of the Gospel, Whether They Be Deists, Arians, Socinians, or Nominal Christians* (1742), chapter 1; emphasis in original:

*If you are not Wheat, that is, if the heavenly Life, or the Kingdom of God, is not grown up in you, it signifies nothing what you have chosen in the stead of it, or why you have chosen it, you are not **That**, which alone can help you to a Place in the Divine Granary.*

5. John 15:5; emphasis added.

6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Abide in Me,” *Ensign*, May 2004.

7. Doctrine and Covenants 100:12; emphasis added.

8. Ulisses Soares, “How Can I Understand?” *Ensign*, May 2019.

9. Doctrine and Covenants 18:35–36.

10. Thomas S. Monson, “The Power of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, May 2017.

11. Book of Mormon, introduction; see also PMG, 8.

12. Mosiah 3:17.

13. 3 Nephi 18:6–7.

14. Doctrine and Covenants 20:77, 79; emphasis added.

15. David A. Bednar, “Therefore They Hushed Their Fears,” *Ensign*, May 2015.

16. Alma 23:13.

17. Alma 25:15–16.

18. Helaman 5:9.

19. 3 Nephi 27:20.

20. 1 Nephi 3:4–5.

21. Neil L. Andersen, “The Prophet of God,” *Ensign*, May 2018.

22. Doctrine and Covenants 1:38.

23. Henry B. Eyring, “Finding Safety in Counsel,” *Ensign*, May 1997.

24. Harold B. Lee, CR, October 1970, 152; quoted in *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee, Eleventh President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 526; quoted in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Harold B. Lee* (2000), 84–85; also quoted in Robert D. Hales, “General Conference: Strengthening Faith and Testimony,” *Ensign*, November 2013.

25. Mosiah 5:15.

26. See John 14:6.

27. Doctrine and Covenants 18:23; emphasis added. See also 2 Nephi 25:20; Acts 4:12.