

Conquering Life's Daily Distractions

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The last time I was on this floor in the Marriott Center was in 1980. I had been selected to represent the state of Utah in a national high school basketball tournament hosted by BYU. This was a fabulous opportunity for me to play against some of the best high school competition in the country. And it was a gathering place for college scouts to come watch high school seniors play against each other.

I was excited to play, but I was also quite nervous going up against such significant competition. Our team actually did quite well. I clearly remember a pivotal game in the tournament. We were playing a team from Los Angeles named the Los Angeles Watts Magicians. Just their team name was intimidating. They were skilled offensively, and they were very intense defensively. Their defensive pressure was like nothing I had ever played against.

The player guarding me would position himself so we were face-to-face—seriously, just inches apart. He also loved to trash talk. The pressure began to get to me as I struggled to shake my opponent enough to even touch the ball. A scramble for a loose ball resulted in a jump ball. Following the call, our coach immediately called a time-out. We gathered in a huddle around our coach to receive his direction. Following the time-out, we returned to the court and lined up around the circle at the foul line for the jump ball. My teammate tipped the ball to me. I immediately made a spin move and rose for a wide-open jump shot. As I released my shot, I heard gasps and laughter coming from the crowd . . .

I had shot at the wrong basket.

I have thought about that embarrassing moment many times. What happened? Why did I shoot at the wrong basket? It happened because

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I lost focus during the time-out called by my coach, and I also became so intimidated by the defensive pressure of my opponent and his trash talking that I lost focus on more important things in the game, such as which basket was mine.

This experience has become an important lesson for me. I have learned that I must be careful and not allow myself to become distracted or to lose focus on things that matter most. If we are not careful, we can easily get distracted and divert our energies to less important things. One of Satan's favorite tactics is to distract us with seemingly good things that keep us from the best things.

A Distraction Doesn't Have to Be Evil to Be Effective

Distractions and loss of focus can occur for various reasons. Nephi desired to learn the interpretation of the vision of the tree of life shared by his father, Lehi. As Nephi shared the interpretation with his family, he was asked a question: "What meaneth the river of water which our father saw?"¹

Nephi responded, "The water which my father saw was filthiness; and so much was his mind swallowed up in other things that he beheld not the filthiness of the water."² Likewise, our minds can get so "swallowed up in other things" that we may miss important details.

The adversary attempts to distract us away from Christ and His covenant path. Elder Ronald A. Rasband taught, "The adversary's design is to distract us from spiritual witnesses, while the Lord's desire is to enlighten and engage us in His work."³

The Lord gives the following counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 30:2: "Your mind has been on the things of the earth more than on the things of me, your Maker, and the ministry whereunto you have been called."

Discouragement often leads to distraction, or a lack of focus. Various distractions may lead to a lack of diligence. In our day, there are many distractions, including Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and busy school and work schedules. Distractions can often be good things. The reality is that a distraction doesn't have to be evil to be effective.

I ask that you consider this question: What are the things that distract you from staying focused on those things that are most important?

Several years ago, I went through a period of time in which I got distracted with so many good things in life that I began to lose focus on the most important things. My wife, Terri, and I have five wonderful children. When my children were young and involved with many activities, just dealing with our family was consuming. At the time, I was also serving as a stake president—a very demanding calling that required a lot of my time. I was also working as a forensic accountant—a very intense and deadline-driven profession. I often had to work extremely long hours in order to meet deadlines. In so many ways life was wonderful and fulfilling, but it also seemed that everything was overwhelming and chaotic—family, Church calling, and occupation. One day a coworker walked into my office and took a picture. [A picture was shown.] Boxes and files were everywhere, and my desk was cluttered. It seemed that this picture was reflective of my life at the time—unorganized, overwhelming, and chaotic. I went on a quest to find a solution to bring more organization, order, and focus to my life.

I came across a theory called fractal geometry. What are fractals? A fractal is a never-ending pattern. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop. Nature is full of fractals—for instance, trees. Simply put, a tree looks like a tree because every branch looks like a tree and every twig looks like a tree. When you put twigs and branches together that individually look like trees, the ultimate compilation is a tree. Other examples are rivers, coastlines, mountains, clouds, seashells, and hurricanes. I love the visual of fractal geometry using a shape, such as a triangle. A triangle looks like a triangle because it is made up of an infinite number of triangles.

As I learned about the concept of fractal geometry, it helped me clearly see that my life felt and actually was overwhelming and chaotic because every aspect of my life—family, Church calling, and job—was overwhelming and chaotic. I always

felt overwhelmed because so many aspects of my life were overwhelming. My overall life took on the appearance and feeling of what every single day was like.

My life was an example of the concept that as our days go, so go our lives. One author described it this way:

*A day is like a whole life. You start out doing one thing, but end up doing something else, plan to run an errand, but never get there. . . . And at the end of your life, your whole existence has that same haphazard quality, too. Your whole life has the same shape as a single day.*⁴

This understanding of fractal geometry allowed me to begin adjusting and planning each aspect of my life. As I did that, my overall life changed and became more organized, more focused, and more successful, and it really became what I wanted it to be. Elder Richard G. Scott gave this powerful statement: “We become what we want to be by consistently being what we want to become each day.”⁵

I invite you to take this fractal geometry theory and apply it to an aspect of your life. Let’s start by identifying something that we want to get out of life. In Doctrine and Covenants 14:7, God teaches us that “eternal life . . . is the greatest of all [His] gifts.” God’s greatest gift is something we should all want to receive. So let’s use eternal life as our objective. I may want to receive eternal life, but if all I do is sit around and hope I will obtain it, I likely won’t. President Russell M. Nelson has taught, “We cannot wish our way into the presence of God. We are to obey the laws upon which those blessings are predicated.”⁶ I have to live my life, every day, in a way that will qualify me to receive eternal life.

So, let’s apply fractal geometry. Eternal life is my objective. But I have to start doing the things every day that will allow me to qualify for eternal life. Things such as keeping the commandments, becoming Christlike, making covenants and receiving ordinances, and enduring to the end are all attributes of one who qualifies for eternal life. These important requirements are only the beginning. I will never become Christlike if I just hope I will be Christlike. To be Christlike, I have to develop charity, patience, knowledge, and

obedience. If I begin doing the things on a daily basis that Christlike people do, I will become more Christlike. As I become more Christlike, I begin to exhibit the important attributes of one who is living in a way to qualify for eternal life.

“Ponder the Path of Thy Feet”

You are at this wonderful time of life when you are making choices and doing things to propel yourself into the future. I ask that you take seriously the counsel found in a beautiful scripture, Proverbs 4:26: “Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established.”

I testify that if you will pause and think about the things you really want to achieve in the future and then begin doing the things that are consistent with that desire every day, you will achieve that desired result.

This probably all makes sense. But why is it so hard for us to do the things necessary for us to become who we want to be and to achieve the things we want to achieve? As mentioned earlier, distractions are a real part of life. Like my experience of being distracted and shooting at the wrong basket, we deal with distractions every day that may cause us to figuratively shoot at the wrong basket.

Our dear prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, has given us some timely guidance on how to avoid distractions and how to stay focused on what is most important: He said:

*The voices and pressures of the world are engaging and numerous. But too many voices are deceptive, seductive, and can pull us off the covenant path. To avoid the inevitable heartbreak that follows, I plead with you today to counter the lure of the world by making time for the Lord in your life—each and every day.*⁷

The prophet continued:

If you are not also seeking the Lord through daily prayer and gospel study, you leave yourself vulnerable to philosophies that may be intriguing but are not true. Even Saints who are otherwise faithful can be derailed by the steady beat of Babylon’s band.

*My brothers and sisters, I plead with you to make time for the Lord!*⁸

When I hear the Lord’s prophet plead for me to do something, I listen. When he pleads twice in the same message, I really listen. The prophet’s guidance to help us overcome distractions and to stay focused is to make time for the Lord every day.

The Savior has made a similar plea. It came in the form of an invitation. The Savior’s plea is “Come, follow me.”⁹ As I was contemplating this well-known invitation, I made an amazing discovery. The invitation “come, follow me” has a comma in it. That is significant because that comma results in this invitation really being two invitations. The first invitation is to come to Christ, and the second is to follow Him. We have to come to Him before we can follow Him.

Often in the scriptures Christ asked people to give up something before they could come unto Him and follow Him. Let’s look at a couple of examples.

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

*And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.*¹⁰

In order to follow the Savior, they needed to give something up. Here is what happened:

And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.

*And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets; and he called them.*¹¹

What did they have to give up? As we follow the story further, “they immediately left the ship and their father, and followed him.”¹²

The Savior was approached by a rich young man who asked, “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”¹³ The rich young man explained that he kept the commandments, he did not commit adultery, he did not kill, he did not steal, and he honored his father and mother.¹⁴

But the Savior said, “Go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou

shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.”¹⁵

The rich young man “went away grieved” because “he had great possessions.”¹⁶ Apparently he wasn’t willing to give up riches in order to come to the Savior and then to follow Him.

Many of you have served missions, and many here are in the process of preparing to serve missions. Thank you for your service. The Savior has beckoned you to come to Him and then to follow Him and preach His gospel. To do that, He requires you to give something up, or perhaps many things. This is explained very well in *Preach My Gospel* when the setting apart of a missionary is described:

*The setting apart may be taken literally; it is a setting apart from sin, apart from the carnal; apart from everything which is crude, low, vicious, cheap, or vulgar; set apart from the world to a higher plane of thought and activity.*¹⁷

These are the things you were asked to give up to come to Him and then to follow Him and preach His gospel.

What about now? What about today? What distractions do you need to give up to truly come to Him so you can diligently follow Him? Some may need to give up lusts, some must give up pornography, some perhaps must give up gaming, and some must give up other distractions.

I want to emphasize that if we truly want to come to the Savior and follow Him, we can’t pick and choose what we give up. We have to give up anything that distracts us and that keeps us from truly coming to the Savior and following Him.

In the Old Testament, we learn that Naaman tried to pick and choose. You know the story of Naaman. He was the “captain of the host of the king of Syria.”¹⁸ He “was a great man . . . and honourable.”¹⁹ He was “a mighty man in valour, but he was a leper.”²⁰ His wife’s maid told of a prophet in Samaria who could surely heal Naaman of his leprosy. Naaman traveled to Samaria to see the prophet Elisha.²¹

So Naaman came with his horses and with his chariot, and stood at the door of the house of Elisha.

*And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.*²²

Naaman was given directions from the prophet of what to do.

But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

[Naaman continued his rant:] *Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? may I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went away in a rage.*²³

Naaman wanted to pick and choose how he would be healed, where he would be healed, and what would be done to heal him, but that isn't the way the Lord works. So it is with invitations we receive from the prophet or from the Savior. We can't pick and choose. We have to be willing to give up anything that keeps us from coming to the Savior and following Him.

Fortunately, Naaman's servant asked Naaman, "If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?"²⁴

Naaman then went and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan River and was healed.

Achieve All That God Wants You to Achieve

We all are faced with defining moments in our lives. Will we do the things on a daily basis that will help us achieve those things we want to achieve? Will we give up those things that keep us from truly coming to the Savior and then following Him?

The Savior's disciples and followers ultimately had to make a decision regarding the Savior and who He was and if they were going to continue following Him. "Many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him."²⁵

As many left, the Savior asked the Twelve this question: "Will ye also go away?"²⁶

Simon Peter's response gives me courage:

Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.

*And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.*²⁷

I leave you with an invitation to ponder the direction of your life. Determine if you are doing the things on a daily basis that will truly lead you to where you want to go or who you want to become. Determine what distractions you need to give up to truly come to the Savior and to follow Him. Then do those things, and I testify that as you do them daily, you will achieve all that God wants you to achieve.

I testify that we have a loving Heavenly Father. We really are His children, and He wants us to live with Him again. His work is "to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man."²⁸ That means His work is all about you and me. Heavenly Father's plan of happiness is marvelous; however, it is made possible only because Heavenly Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to be our Savior and Redeemer.

Speaking of the plan, the Savior didn't say that He knew the way to get back to the Father; rather, He testified, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."²⁹

I add my witness that Jesus is the Christ, and He is the way back to our Heavenly Father. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. 1 Nephi 15:26.
2. 1 Nephi 15:27.
3. Ronald A. Rasband, "Lest Thou Forget," *Ensign*, November 2016.
4. Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 171; see also discussion about fractals, 170–72.
5. Richard G. Scott, "The Transforming Power of Faith and Character," *Ensign*, November 2010; emphasis in original.
6. Russell M. Nelson, "Now Is the Time to Prepare," *Ensign*, May 2005; emphasis in original.
7. Russell M. Nelson, "Make Time for the Lord," *Liahona*, November 2021.
8. Nelson, "Make Time."
9. Luke 18:22.
10. Matthew 4:18–19.
11. Matthew 4:20–21.

12. Matthew 4:22.
13. Mark 10:17.
14. See Mark 10:19–20.
15. Mark 10:21.
16. Mark 10:22.
17. Spencer W. Kimball, *CR*, October 1958, 57; emphasis in original; in *TSWK*, 478; quoted in *PMG*, 2019, 4.
18. 2 Kings 5:1.
19. 2 Kings 5:1.
20. 2 Kings 5:1.
21. See 2 Kings 5:2–8.
22. 2 Kings 5:9–10.
23. 2 Kings 5:11–12.
24. 2 Kings 5:13.
25. John 6:66.
26. John 6:67.
27. John 6:68–69.
28. Moses 1:39.
29. John 14:6.