

Choices for Eternity: Prophetic Counsel

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As we begin the new academic year, let me join Peggy in welcoming you back to BYU. It is so good to see you here and to feel your excitement and energy.

Fall is a rejuvenating time of year at universities. It is also a time of choices and decisions. Your array of education-related choices has expanded over the years. In elementary school, the school determined when your first class began, what subjects you would study, and who would teach the subject. The school also decided when you ate lunch, what you had for lunch, and even what you did with your recreation time during the day. Over the years, as you gained more experience, your involvement in the choices expanded. In high school, you had choices concerning some of the subjects and some of the teachers. But your choices were still quite limited.

Suddenly, as a college student, you now have almost unlimited choices. You can determine when your first class begins, what courses to take, and which professors you prefer. If you want

a break from classes in the afternoon, you can arrange that. If you want a longer lunch hour, you can schedule accordingly. You even get to decide whether to show up for classes. Thank goodness compulsory education laws don't apply to colleges. Your educational choices also include more basic things, such as which university to attend and what major to pursue.

In addition to expanded educational options, you also face decisions that can affect your eternal trajectory, such as whether to serve a mission or whom to marry. Just as you have gained more educational choices as you matured since first grade, the scope of your general choices will broaden as you make wise choices. This pattern will continue into eternity, as your wise choices in mortality can ultimately lead to exaltation and its endless opportunities for joy.

“During This Life We Get to Choose”

As I contemplated what to say to you that would help you at this key decision-making

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point in your lives, my mind kept returning to last May, when we witnessed an extraordinary event. President Russell M. Nelson—the prophet of the Lord—invited all young adults throughout the world to attend a special meeting to receive a message directly from him. He encouraged those within driving distance to attend in person at the Conference Center in Salt Lake City.¹

It was a remarkable evening. Young adults from the Wasatch Front responded in large numbers. Not only did they fill all twenty thousand seats in the Conference Center but thousands of other young adults also congregated in overflow areas on Temple Square and hundreds of thousands watched online throughout the world.²

President Nelson’s message was powerful and profound. It touched on key issues such as the difference between secular education and spiritual education. It clarified important fundamental truths such as the truth of who we are, the truth about what Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have offered us, and the truth about our own conversion. Each of these topics by itself was compelling. Each by itself could be the focus of a devotional address—or two or three. Every time I reread President Nelson’s talk, I received new insights on each individual topic. But that only made my task more complicated. The quandary I faced was how to choose which topic to emphasize. Each was so powerful. Each was so important.

At one point I thought maybe I should just show you a video of President Nelson’s talk. After all, President Marion G. Romney on one occasion emphasized the importance of the seminal discourse by President J. Reuben Clark Jr. on “The Charted Course of the Church in Education”³ by reading to his audience almost verbatim President Clark’s entire talk.⁴ But I had a feeling that my stewardship for this devotional required that I do more than press the play button on a video. So I continued to pray and ponder.

The answer came—after I had read the talk several times—when I noticed for the first time the title of President Nelson’s talk: “Choices for Eternity.” As I read those three words, the thought forcefully hit me that President Nelson had not only provided prophetic counsel on fundamental truths and inspired direction on individual topics

of immediate relevance to young adults but had also given an overarching sermon—some would call it a metanarrative—on choices and decisions.

Viewed in that light, the talk—and several of the individual topics President Nelson addressed—took on deeper meaning for me. For example, in discussing the difference between secular and spiritual education, President Nelson emphasized the “three absolute truths” that “should form the foundation of [our] spiritual education”:

1. *First, each of us is going to die.*
2. *Second, because of Jesus Christ, each of us is going to be resurrected and become immortal.*
3. *And third, Judgment Day is ahead for each of us.*⁵

These insights by themselves are invaluable to BYU students who are engaged in an educational process that seeks to bring secular and spiritual education into one great whole.

However, President Nelson went on to expressly state that he had an even larger goal in mind when he presented those truths: “My purpose tonight is to make sure that your eyes are wide open to the truth that this life really *is* the time when you get to decide what kind of life *you* want to live forever.”⁶ There it is—in plain terms. President Nelson’s purpose was to make sure we clearly understand that we get to decide our ultimate destiny. In a similar vein—and in that same section of the talk—President Nelson asserted, “During this life *we get to choose* which laws we are willing to obey . . . and, therefore, *in which kingdom of glory we will live forever.*”⁷

Pause for a moment to ponder the significance of those observations and their insight into the impact of our choices. *We* get to decide—*we* get to choose—the most important thing in our existence: our eternal destiny. God will leave that up to us. That does not mean that we can simply check a box on an eternal menu and say, “I choose this kingdom.” Our eternal destiny is not determined solely by a single act but through a lifetime of actions and decisions. Those actions and decisions prepare us to live in accordance with eternal laws. In turn, which laws we are prepared to live determine our ultimate destiny. As the scriptures put it:

For he who is not able to abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.

And he who cannot abide the law of a terrestrial kingdom cannot abide a terrestrial glory.

*And he who cannot abide the law of a celestial kingdom cannot abide a celestial glory.*⁸

To repeat President Nelson's words: "During this life we get to choose which laws we are willing to obey . . . and, therefore, in which kingdom of glory we will live forever."

Our destiny is ultimately determined by our deepest desires. As Alma stated, "God . . . granteth unto men according to their desire."⁹ But that true desire—that "will" which ultimately governs our decisions—is both manifested *and shaped* by our actions. Likewise, our actions are manifested *and shaped* by our desires. Through an iterative process, desire and action can ultimately merge into one harmonious whole where there is no gap between our desire to do something and its actual accomplishment. Thus it is said of God, who is the perfect example of one willing to abide by the law of a celestial kingdom, "There is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it."¹⁰ There is no gap between desire and action in a celestial being. This wholeness or integrity changes our very nature. Those abiding by a celestial law abide by that law not because it is a requirement but because that is what they desire to do—that is who they have become.

That truth should impact the way we approach and think about the choices we make. When faced with a decision, we might profitably ask ourselves, "Is my choice consistent with celestial laws, or am I settling for a telestial level of glory?" The answer to that question will be manifested and shaped not only by our actions but also by our motivation—by our desire.

Let me provide a simple example. Let's imagine that we are in a combined fifth-Sunday meeting and the bishop announces that there is a service opportunity to help a widow in the area. There is no direct conflict with any mandatory event on your calendar, but finals are only a week away, and you think it might be a good time to finally start studying. You could make it to the service project, but it would be inconvenient, and

it might cost you a little. If you decide not to take the assignment, you might be living a telestial law. You are not a bad person; the widow's needs will be met, and you will be better prepared for finals—assuming you actually study during the time that you would be doing this. Alternatively, you might guilt yourself into accepting the assignment, maybe even hoping that God will help you with your finals if you make the sacrifice. Acting out of this sense of duty—or hope of a reward—might be living a terrestrial law. It's better than not helping, but still short of what it might be. Finally, you could gratefully accept the assignment, welcoming the opportunity to do something that brings you true joy. That would be living a celestial law, and acting in *that* way with *that* motivation would change both your attitude about serving and your very nature. You would begin to understand the profound truth described by President Marion G. Romney¹¹ and also emphasized by Elder D. Todd Christofferson¹² just a couple of weeks ago here on campus.

President Marion G. Romney said:

Service is not something we endure on this earth so we can earn the right to live in the celestial kingdom. Service is the very fiber of which an exalted life in the celestial kingdom is made.

*Knowing that service is what gives our Father in Heaven fulfillment, and knowing that we want to be where He is and as He is, why must we be commanded to serve one another? Oh, for the glorious day when these things all come naturally because of the purity of our hearts. In that day there will be no need for a commandment because we will have experienced for ourselves that we are truly happy only when we are engaged in unselfish service.*¹³

People abiding by a celestial law serve not because they are commanded to do so. They do it because of who they have become. They want to serve; their deepest desire is to serve. They are people like President Thomas S. Monson, who, when he had free time—when he could choose for himself what to do in a spare moment—sought to serve others. That is what brought him joy, and that is what brings God joy.

I believe that one measure of our willingness to abide by celestial law is how much joy we derive from service. As I have mentioned before to some of you,¹⁴ when I get as much joy out of serving as I do from watching BYU win an athletic contest, I will know that I am beginning to develop a true desire to abide by a celestial law.

If we can begin to see our choices as formative acts that manifest and increase our desire and ability to abide by the celestial laws that give God a fullness of joy, we will greatly advance our spiritual and secular education.

Knowing the Truth of Who We Are

Another example of President Nelson’s emphasis on choices and decisions is found in his memorable discussion about the importance of knowing the truth of who we are. President Nelson began that instruction with the declaration that “if the Lord were speaking to you directly tonight, the first thing He would make sure you understand is your true identity.”¹⁵ It is hard for me to imagine a stronger way to underscore the importance of knowing who we really are—that it would be the first thing Christ would want us to understand if He were personally delivering a message to us.

The significance of that truth was further underscored by President Nelson’s powerful instruction on the importance of making sure our true identity as children of God, children of the covenant, and disciples of Jesus Christ remains our primary identity. Recognizing that while there are other identities that are important to us, President Nelson made clear that “no identifier should *displace, replace, or take priority over* these three enduring designations.”¹⁶ He also described the disastrous and devastating consequences of misplacing those priorities: “If any label replaces your most important identifiers,” he said, “the results can be spiritually suffocating.”¹⁷ “Doing so,” he added later, “could stymie your progress or pigeonhole you in a stereotype that could potentially thwart your eternal progression.”¹⁸ Spiritual suffocation, stymied progress, thwarted eternal progression—none of those is a good thing. The desire to avoid any one of them should give us sufficient motivation to keep our primary identity as our primary identity. That lesson for me

by itself is so significant that it would have been worth all the prophet’s planning and preparation for that devotional in May.

Once again, however, President Nelson tied this important lesson back into the title of his talk with this profound observation: “The way you think about who you really are affects almost *every decision* you will ever make.”¹⁹ Think about that for a moment. What would happen if when you are making decisions such as what to do when someone is rude to you either in person or online, what to do on a Friday evening when you feel left out, or even what music to listen to or which movies to watch you took into account your true identity as a child of God, a child of the covenant, and a disciple of Jesus Christ? It could make a profound difference in your daily life and in your eternal destiny. It might cause you to act differently when you are in a traffic jam, when a roommate “borrows” your food without permission, or even when you are feeling alone and abandoned. Moreover, if you take into account who you really are while making longer-lasting decisions, it will profoundly affect your eternal progress and destiny.

The theme of choices and decisions is also found in one aspect of President Nelson’s talk that caught my attention when I heard the talk live: his inclusion of children of the covenant in the list of our true primary identities. I was not surprised that President Nelson included children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ as part of our primary enduring identities. I had sung “I Am a Child of God”²⁰ and “I’m Trying to Be like Jesus”²¹ in Primary. But I couldn’t remember a song about being a child of the covenant. Moreover, I will confess that I did not immediately recall having heard the term “children of the covenant” in any context before. A quick scripture search revealed at least two instances in which the term is used in some form (3 Nephi 20:26 and Acts 3:25). A little more searching revealed—somewhat to my embarrassment—that President Nelson had actually focused on the concept in at least two general conference talks, one of which was entitled “Children of the Covenant.”²² I made a note to myself again to start paying more attention to the titles of President Nelson’s talks. In those two talks—given in April 1995 and October

2011, when President Nelson was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve—President Nelson made clear that children of the covenant are those who enter into and keep sacred covenants with God, including the covenant first made with their fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²³ I also learned these things:

- “A giant step toward spiritual immunity is taken when we understand the expression ‘children of the covenant.’”²⁴
- “Committed children of the covenant remain steadfast, even in the midst of adversity.”²⁵
- “Children of the covenant become a strain of sin-resistant souls.”²⁶
- “When we realize that we are children of the covenant, we know who we are and what God expects of us.”²⁷

Clearly there is power in fully understanding the significance of our true identity as children of the covenant. Covenants bind us to the Lord and allow us to draw on His strength as we draw closer to and become more like Him.

But again, choice comes into play. As President Nelson explained in his devotional talk, “If you choose to make covenants with God and are faithful to those covenants, you have the promise of ‘glory added upon [your head] for ever and ever.’”²⁸

As you make decisions in the coming year, ask yourself: “Is this choice helping me make and keep sacred covenants? Is it consistent with my identity as a child of the covenant—as an heir to the promises made to Abraham?” To repeat President Nelson: “When we realize that we are children of the covenant, we know . . . what God expects of us.” What a great aid to us in making decisions.

The overarching theme of the importance of our choices is also found in other portions of President Nelson’s devotional. When summarizing the truth about what Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ have offered each of us, President Nelson noted, “God will do everything He can, short of violating your agency, to help you not miss out on the greatest blessings in all eternity.”²⁹ God, who has all power, will do all in His power

to exalt us. But, ultimately, we have to choose for ourselves. He will not—He cannot—make that choice for us. As the hymn explains so well:

*Know this, that ev’ry soul is free
To choose his life and what he’ll be;
For this eternal truth is giv’n:
That God will force no man to heav’n.*³⁰

C. S. Lewis put it more pointedly: “There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says . . . , ‘Thy will be done.’”³¹ In the long run, the choice is up to us. To quote President Nelson again: “During this life we get to choose which laws we are willing to obey . . . and, therefore, in which kingdom of glory we will live forever.” Thus, as President Nelson made clear, and as Peggy has just emphasized, we have to “own [our] own conversion.”³² The choice is up to us.

Choose to Let God Prevail in Your Life

Let me conclude with an observation, an admonition, an invitation, and a promise.

The *observation* reflects one more insight about the central role of agency in the plan of salvation that I gleaned from President Nelson’s talk. I noted that the second and third of our three primary identities—children of the covenant and disciples of Jesus Christ—are identities that we choose for ourselves. We become children of the covenant through our actions by becoming members of the Church,³³ and we become disciples of Christ by keeping His commandments.³⁴ By contrast, the first of the three primary identities—child of God—is not dependent on our choice. It is a fact. *We are* His children, even if we refuse to recognize that fact. And because we are His children, He will love us, even if we choose not to love Him. As the apostle Paul indicated, God’s love is always available to us. Paul wrote:

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

*Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*³⁵

Because we are His children, God will love us. But we still have a choice: whether or not to feel and reciprocate that love. Literature is full of stories of unrequited love—love that is deep and sincere but not reciprocated. My heartfelt *admonition* to you is this: Don't be part of what would surely be the most tragic of all stories of unrequited love by refusing to feel the transformative, soul-changing love that God and Christ offer you if you will just choose to accept it. Nothing! Nothing! Nothing but your own will can separate you from the love of God. No sin, no harm inflicted by others, no failure, no mistake can alter God's love for you. Please, let Him love you.

The *invitation* is simple: I invite you to read or reread President Nelson's devotional talk. It is inspired revelation given by a prophet for your benefit in your current situation. Consider how the counsel he gives can help you in making the many decisions you will face in the coming year.

I *promise* that as you do so, you will receive personal revelation so that you can proceed with confidence in making decisions. I feel secure in making that promise because it really is echoing a promise given by President Nelson at the end of his devotional.

After blessing those listening with enhanced ability to follow the counsel he had just given, President Nelson stated:

*As you [keep your covenants], I promise that you will experience spiritual growth, freedom from fear, and a confidence that you can scarcely imagine now. You will have the strength to have a positive influence far beyond your natural capacity. And I promise that your future will be more exhilarating than anything you can presently believe.*³⁶

That is a prophetic promise on which you can rely. I bear my witness that God lives and loves each one of you. He knows who you really are, and He wants you to succeed at BYU and in life. You just need to choose to let Him prevail in your life. As you do so, God's love will transform you. I so testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Russell M. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity," worldwide devotional for young adults, 15 May 2022, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/broadcasts/worldwide-devotional-for-young-adults/2022/05/12nelson). I can think of only one other occasion on which the president of the Church convened a meeting aimed directly and exclusively at the youth of the Church. On November 12, 2000, President Gordon B. Hinckley held a special fire-side for a little more general group—all youth and young adults—and at that time noted, "I think there never before was a meeting anything like this in this Church" ("First Presidency Message: A Prophet's Counsel and Prayer for Youth," *Ensign*, January 2001).

2. See Mary Richards, "President Nelson Asks Young Adults, 'Decide What Kind of Life You Want to Live Forever,'" *Leaders and Ministry, Church News*, 15 May 2022, [thechurchnews.com/2022/5/15/23218165](https://www.thechurchnews.com/2022/5/15/23218165).

3. See J. Reuben Clark Jr., "The Charters Course of the Church in Education," address to Church seminary and institute leaders, BYU Aspen Grove, 8 August 1938. See also Scott C. Esplin, "Charting the Course: President Clark's Charge to Religious Educators," *Religious Educator* 7, no. 1 (2006): 113; commenting about Marion G. Romney, "The Charters Course Reaffirmed," address to Church Educational System religious educators, 12 September 1980.

4. President Romney substituted "the word *you* for the original phrase 'the Church seminaries and institutes'" (Esplin, "Charting the Course," 113; see also Romney, "Charted Course Reaffirmed").

5. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; see 1 Corinthians 15:22; John 11:25; Mormon 3:20.

6. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; emphasis in original.

7. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; emphasis added.

8. Doctrine and Covenants 88:22–24.

9. Alma 29:4. See also "The Lord said unto me: I will grant unto thee according to thy desires, because of thy faith" (Enos 1:12); "The one raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness,

or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil" (Alma 41:5); "For I, the Lord, will judge all men according to their works, according to the desire of their hearts" (Doctrine and Covenants 137:9).

10. Abraham 3:17; see also 1 Samuel 9:6; Isaiah 14:24.

11. See Marion G. Romney, "The Celestial Nature of Self-Reliance," *Ensign*, November 1982.

12. See D. Todd Christofferson, "The Aims of a BYU Education," BYU university conference address, 22 August 2022.

13. Romney, "Celestial Nature."

14. See Kevin J Worthen, "Enter to Learn; Go Forth to Serve," BYU commencement address, 16 August 2018.

15. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity."

16. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; emphasis in original.

17. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity."

18. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity."

19. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; emphasis added.

20. See "I Am a Child of God," *Songbook*, 2–3.

21. See "I'm Trying to Be like Jesus," *Songbook*, 78–79.

22. See Russell M. Nelson, "Children of the Covenant," *Ensign*, May 1995; see also Nelson, "Covenants," *Ensign*, November 2011. "In every age, the temple has underscored the precious truth

that those who make covenants with God and keep them are children of the covenant" (Nelson, "The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation," *Liahona*, November 2021; emphasis in original).

23. See Nelson, "Children of the Covenant"; Nelson, "Covenants"; and Nelson, "The Temple."

24. Nelson, "Children of the Covenant."

25. Nelson, "Children of the Covenant"; Nelson, "Covenants."

26. Nelson, "Children of the Covenant."

27. Nelson, "Covenants"; see also Nelson, "Children of the Covenant."

28. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; quoting Abraham 3:26.

29. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; emphasis added.

30. "Know This, That Every Soul Is Free," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 240.

31. C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 72 (chapter 9); emphasis in original.

32. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; see also Peggy S. Worthen, "Eternal Perspective Through Owning Our Testimony," BYU devotional address, 6 September 2022.

33. See Nelson, "Choices for Eternity"; Nelson, "Children of the Covenant."

34. See John 14:15.

35. Romans 8:38–39.

36. Nelson, "Choices for Eternity."