

The Courage to Choose Wisely: How to Deal with the Uncertainties and the Certainties of Life

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On the wall of my office in Salt Lake is a copy of the Minerva Teichert painting of Queen Esther. You will remember she was the king of Persia's Jewish queen who was charged to save her people from Haman's slaughter. The problem was that the only way to save her people was for her to personally approach the king without an invitation—a capital crime! (See Esther 4:11.) After soliciting the fasting, faith, and prayers of the Jewish people in her behalf, she left to approach the king, saying, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

The Teichert painting reminds me of how essential courage is in all we do. I love C. S. Lewis' statement that "courage is not simply *one* of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point. . . . Pilate was merciful till it became risky" (*The Screwtape Letters* [1941], letter 29, paragraph 6; emphasis in original).

Today I would like to discuss two parts of our lives in which we especially need courage—one in which things are certain and the other in which they are uncertain. As Rex E. Lee would say, "Let's consider the second one first and the first one second." So let's consider some of the uncertainties of life.

Uncertainties

In Moses 1 we read of the amazing interview that God had with Moses. It had so much impact that when it was over, Moses collapsed. After many hours he regained his strength and made the memorable statement "Now, for this cause I know that man is nothing, *which thing I never had supposed*" (Moses 1:10; emphasis added). According to that last phrase, "which thing I never had supposed," Moses was surprised. Brothers and sisters, there are and will be surprises in life! There have been in mine, and there will be in yours.

This point struck me several years ago when I realized that my wife and I have done several things we never intended to do! These things were never part of our plans—short or long term. For example, we never planned to settle in Houston, Texas. I never intended to be a financial consultant or to start a business. We did not set out to have nine children.

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We never envisioned serving seven years in Brazil—as mission president and then in the Area Presidency. As a matter of fact, it was a surprise to be called as a stake president, then a mission president, an Area Seventy, and especially a General Authority.

On the other hand, we had firm plans that I would do the joint JD/MBA program after graduation from college. I had been accepted to Harvard Business School to start that four-year program. The new J. Reuben Clark Law School at BYU was not even on the radar screen. But in the end I attended and graduated from BYU Law School! I have never done the JD/MBA program.

Once I was in the financial consulting business, I found it so flexible that my plan was to never retire but just slow down to an acceptable level. As it turned out, I retired at age fifty-nine. In that business I learned about the tax advantages of a mortgage. As a result, we decided never to pay off our house. But a few years ago, with the counsel of prophets reminding us, we asked the Lord for guidance, and He directed us to pay off the mortgage. We did it as quickly as possible.

So how did all of this happen?

Decision Points

Each time my wife and I came to a decision point, we would think it through, counsel together, and make a decision. Then we would pray to seek the Lord's confirmation. We always followed the promptings of the Spirit. If the Lord was silent, we would do what seemed best to us in light of what we already knew.

On a daily basis we asked in our prayers for the Lord to guide and direct us. We emphasized, as did Jesus, not our will but Thine be done (see Luke 22:42). Sometimes direction would come when we didn't even realize we were at a decision point—such as when we paid off our home mortgage.

Our experiences have taught us over and over again that God knows best. For example,

we succeeded in paying off that mortgage in 1998. It was on January 21, 1999, that President James E. Faust telephoned us in Houston with the call to be a mission president in Brazil. Because our home was debt free, we had the option to keep it while we served. We much prefer to do things the Lord's way.

So, should we not even make plans?

On the contrary. Instead we should continue to plan ahead for each aspect of our lives and work diligently to accomplish our goals—but we shouldn't worry about the changes. Elder David A. Bednar said, "Having a career plan is important, but we should not become so wedded to the plan that we fail to recognize or ignore the hand of the Lord guiding us to the individualized learning opportunities He has prepared specifically for us" (personal communication). With hindsight you may learn, as we have learned, that the Lord's changes are better.

Unpack Your Bag

How do we live with uncertainty?

Part of that question is, how do you handle the temporary stages of life? What if you are going to be here for only a year, two years, or a semester?

For me the classic answer to this challenge is the Lord's counsel in Doctrine and Covenants 51. The Saints were coming into Kirtland, Ohio, from the eastern states, and Bishop Edward Partridge wanted to know how to handle the situation. Listen to verses 16 and 17:

And I consecrate unto them this land for a little season, until I, the Lord, shall provide for them otherwise, and command them to go hence;

And the hour and the day is not given unto them, wherefore let them act upon this land as for years, and this shall turn unto them for their good.

Think about that situation. The Lord told them plainly that they would be there for a short time and then He would send them somewhere else. But He gave them no

indication how long it would be. My inclination would be to not even unpack the wagon! But the divine counsel was to act “as for years.”

President Boyd K. Packer learned while in the military the blessings that come from unpacking your bag and settling down—whether for days, months, or years. For him, it made the difference between misery and happiness.

Does that mean you should buy a house if you are going somewhere for a one-year master’s program? Not necessarily.

To me the Lord is telling us to *be* where we are. Have an *attitude* of “as for years.” Accept a calling, make friends, get to know the area—be there until you are not. Even here at the Y, if you will only be in your ward this semester, unpack your bag and act “as for years.”

The alternative attitude of a transient is not good. We are only here for a little while, so we won’t make friends or we can’t accept a calling or we shouldn’t settle in. That attitude of being a “floater” will rob you and your family of much joy and satisfaction and that ward or community of the many contributions you could make.

Certainties

Now, what about things that are certain?

One of the most certain things in the gospel of Jesus Christ is that we will one day die and there will be a final judgment. We don’t talk much about the Judgment Day, but it will happen.

Judgment Day

What do we know about the final judgment? It will occur after the Resurrection. God, through Jesus Christ, will judge each one of us to determine which eternal glory we will receive. This final judgment will be based on our receiving ordinances, keeping the associated covenants, and obeying the commandments of God, and central to all is our acceptance of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ

(see Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. “Judgment, the Last,” scriptures.lds.org).

The scriptures clarify many other things as well: “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ” (Romans 14:10). “There is none to escape” (D&C 1:2). We will be brought to judgment for all our doings (see 1 Nephi 10:20). Specifically, that includes our works (see Mosiah 3:24), our words (see Matthew 12:36–37), our sins (see D&C 101:78), our thoughts (see Alma 12:14), and even the intents and desires of our hearts (see Moroni 7:9; D&C 137:9). It is important to remember that only He “knowest thy thoughts and the intents of thy heart” (D&C 6:16). Also, for each of us an account of our stewardship will be required (see D&C 70:4). It will be “a righteous judgment” (Mosiah 3:10)—to the point that each will agree that His judgment is just (see Mosiah 27:31).

For the worthy and righteous it will be a “glorious day” (2 Nephi 9:46). “[They] may have boldness in the day of judgment” (1 John 4:17) because the guiltless have the promise to dwell in the presence of God in a state of happiness that will have no end (see Mormon 7:7).

The wicked will find it a terrible one—even a “great and terrible” day (2 Nephi 26:3). Their evil plans and designs will “turn to their shame and condemnation in the day of judgment” (D&C 10:23). As an example, when Alma the Younger recognized his unworthy state, he suffered the pains of hell and would have preferred annihilation to having to stand before God to be judged (see Alma 36:11–16).

We Judge Ourselves

We also learn from the scriptures that in many respects we judge ourselves. First, we do this by what we choose. Alma explained that “every man receiveth wages of him whom he listeth to obey” (Alma 3:27), “whether they were good or whether they were bad, to reap eternal happiness or eternal misery” (Alma 3:26). Nephi clarified that those who “have

sought to do wickedly . . . are found unclean,” and since “no unclean thing can dwell with God,” they are “cast off forever” (1 Nephi 10:21).

Secondly, we judge ourselves by the standard we use in our dealings with others. The Savior taught, “For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged” (Matthew 7:2; 3 Nephi 14:2).

One way we can add to our grief is to not magnify our callings. President Thomas S. Monson quoted President John Taylor as saying: “If you do not magnify your callings, God will hold you responsible for those whom you might have saved had you done your duty” (JD 20:23; quoted in Monson, “A New Spirit Will I Put Within You,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, 21 June 2003 [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003], 20). President Henry B. Eyring warned that “if we fail to do all we can to see that [the people] rise to the Lord’s standards, their sorrows will come upon us” (“Standards of Worthiness,” *First Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting*, 11 January 2003 [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003], 13).

All Truth Revealed

One of the saddest groups at the final judgment will be that of those who have believed Satan’s lie that “no one will ever know.” The truth is that “there is nothing which is secret save it shall be revealed; there is no work of darkness save it shall be made manifest in the light” (2 Nephi 30:17). “There is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known” (Matthew 10:26). “Whatsoever [is] spoken in darkness shall be heard in the light; and that . . . spoken in the ear in closets shall be proclaimed upon the housetops” (Luke 12:3). “The rebellious shall be pierced with much sorrow; for their iniquities shall be spoken upon the housetops, and their secret acts shall be revealed” (D&C 1:3).

How foolish are those who think they are safe because they have lied to the bishop or fooled the stake president or deceived the mission president. Elder Quentin L. Cook recently warned us of a variation of this trap called the “mask of anonymity” (“What E’re Thou Art, Act Well Thy Part,” CES devotional address, 4 March 2012). When we think we are hidden in the crowds or behind a nameless presence on the Web, we think no one will ever know, and we are led to do things totally out of character. The truth is, we know and God knows. It will be so much better for those who fully repent now with the help of a loving priesthood leader than for those who suffer the public humiliation of the truth being broadcast on Judgment Day with the accompanying wrath of a just God.

Alma asked a very important question of all of us: “Can ye imagine yourselves brought before the tribunal of God?” (Alma 5:18; see verses 17–25).

Jacob reminded us that there “we shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt [or] a perfect knowledge of [our] righteousness” (2 Nephi 9:14).

Good News

The good news is that the Judgment Day is not here yet. There is still time to prepare to meet God!

Jacob wisely counseled us to “prepare [our] souls for that glorious day when justice shall be administered unto the righteous” (2 Nephi 9:46).

The first step of preparation is to completely repent—now. One of the Savior’s commandments is to “repent . . . and come unto me . . . that ye may stand spotless before me at the last day” (3 Nephi 27:20). Anytime we read *spotless* in the scriptures, it is a reminder of what the Lord desires most: our eternal life. We must be spotless at the Judgment Day to receive that reward. The Lord has counseled that it is much better to repent and prepare now for the great

day of the Lord than it will be when that day is come (see D&C 43:20–22). Jacob promised that if we “repent . . . and enter in at the strait gate, and continue in the way [we] shall obtain eternal life” (Jacob 6:11). As King Benjamin taught, let us put off the natural man and become a Saint through the Atonement of Christ (see Mosiah 3:19). Wickedness never was, nor ever will be, happiness (see Alma 41:10). President Gordon B. Hinckley said, “There is a better way than the way of the world” (“Standing Strong and Immovable,” *Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting: The Priesthood and the Auxiliaries of the Relief Society, Young Women, and Primary*, 10 January 2004 [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004], 20).

Choose to be good and to do good (see D&C 6:13). Cease trying “to cover [y]our sins” (D&C 121:37). Choose to school your feelings (see Alma 39:9). Choose life, not death; good, not evil (see Helaman 14:31; see also Moroni 7:12–16).

Free Forever

Lehi, in his final words to his family, summarized all of this in these words:

And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.

Wherefore, men are free . . . to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil. [2 Nephi 2:26–27]

That same Alma who suffered the pains of hell for his guilt said, “There could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. . . . On the other hand [after repentance], there can

be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy” (Alma 36:21). Let us prepare now.

How should we deal with these certainties, such as that of a final judgment?

Learn the Truth

Make the effort to study and learn the truth. Then have the courage to accept it and to live accordingly. Satan will sow seeds of doubt and even generate outright lies. He is the one who told Eve, “Partake of the forbidden fruit, and ye shall not die” (2 Nephi 2:18). He authored the lie described by Nephi in his writings that God will “justify in committing a little sin” (2 Nephi 28:8). Have the courage to claim the promise that “by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5).

Common Denominator

So what is the common denominator in handling certainty and uncertainty?

Having the courage to choose wisely!

Many centuries ago, Esau, the older son of Isaac, came back from a day of hunting both tired and hungry. His younger twin brother Jacob had made some savory pottage—a thick soup or stew. Esau wanted the stew. Jacob agreed, *if* Esau would sell him his birthright. Esau felt he was so hungry he could die, saying, “What profit shall this birthright do to me?” (Genesis 25:32). He sold his birthright to Jacob. The scriptures say, “Thus Esau despised his birthright” (Genesis 25:34; see also verses 29–33).

What was the birthright?

The Bible Dictionary tells us it was “the right or inheritance of the firstborn under the patriarchal order” (Bible Dictionary, s.v. “birthright,” 625). The spiritual part was the authority to preside and give leadership to the family. The temporal part involved the firstborn receiving “a double portion of his father’s possessions” (Bible Dictionary, s.v. “firstborn,” 675).

Esau's selling his birthright for a bowl of stew or a "mess of pottage" (Genesis 25, section summary) qualifies as the epitome of a bad deal. He chose poorly!

Poor choices are all around us today as well. Some have chosen pornography and lost their temple marriage and family. Others have chosen not to go on a mission or not to marry in the temple. On a daily basis we are sometimes too tired to pray, too busy to study the scriptures, or not interested in going to church this Sunday, or we rationalize that we can go to the temple anytime—it is so close! Brothers and sisters, pottage by any other name is still pottage!

The Savior asked two sobering questions recorded in Matthew: "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). Our choosing wisely can have eternal consequences.

Our Heavenly Father, who knows us and loves us, gave us our agency: "the ability and privilege . . . to choose and to act for [ourselves]" (Guide to the Scriptures, s.v. "agency," scriptures.lds.org). He declared to Enoch, "In the Garden of Eden, gave I unto man his agency" (Moses 7:32).

Some call this free agency, but there is nothing free about it! The Lord explained to

Moses that "Satan rebelled against me, and sought to destroy the agency of man" (Moses 4:3). The effort to preserve our agency cost the Father a third of His children (see D&C 29:36).

Choosing wisely is a critical part of His plan of happiness and an integral part of the test of our earth life. God's direction to Enoch was to say to the people, "Choose ye this day, to serve the Lord God who made you" (Moses 6:33). He really does know best. Elijah put it this way: "How long halt ye between two opinions? if the Lord be God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

May we follow Him through the uncertainties in life and in preparing for the certainties that surely will come.

May we have the courage to choose wisely. It is a leap of courage and of faith. But I am a witness that it is worth it! I am a witness of these things, and I am also a witness of our Heavenly Father, who knows us and loves us. I am a witness of our Savior Jesus Christ, who showed us the way through His great example and who atoned to give us these opportunities to prepare and to improve and to be better. I am a witness of the Holy Ghost, who will guide and direct us as we seek for the Lord's counsel and guidance in our lives that we may choose wisely. I testify of these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.