

Flags, Faith, and Finishing the Race

LYNNETTE B. ERICKSON

My brothers and sisters, it is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today.

Some years ago I taught third grade in Gilbert, Arizona, with a woman who had just moved there from Indiana. Every year just before Memorial Day she would hang black-and-white-checked flags from the ceiling of her classroom and would create for her students thematic studies focused on the Indianapolis 500 car race. All of her excitement piqued my interest in race car driving and the Indy 500. To be honest, much of my curiosity came from the concept of driving in a circle for 500 miles.

The Race

The first Indy race was in 1911, and the competition has continued to grow into the event that it is today. Regardless of the weather or other conditions, the race has taken place every year except during World Wars I and II, when the track was used as a landing runway for U.S. aircraft. Drivers who participate in this race have to qualify for one of the limited number of prestigious spots available by proving they have the knowledge, skills, experience, and resources that will allow them to win the race. The motivation for participating in the

Indy 500 is not only a love of racing but also the multimillion dollar prize that goes to the winner.

If you have ever watched even part of one of these races, you know that the drivers go at breakneck speeds of over 200 miles an hour around the track, weaving in and out of the other cars, cutting some off to get ahead in the race, and often skimming the wall to pass the competition. This is a dangerous sport not only for the drivers but also for the support teams and spectators. Great precautions have been taken to reduce the risks to those participating in and watching the race, yet over 40 drivers, 20 crewmembers, and 10 spectators have been killed since the first Indy 500.

Although it first seemed to me that the cars were just driving around in circles and going nowhere, I now realize that for the drivers who have qualified for the race, it is a carefully planned and calculated effort to be the first to safely cross the finish line.

Lynnette B. Erickson was a BYU associate professor of teacher education when this devotional address was given on 30 June 2009.

Life's Race

I'd like to compare the Indy 500 to our lives. We go through life and its various experiences—many joyful and some challenging—at a rapid pace. Our race began in the pre-earth life when we were introduced to and chose to be a part of Heavenly Father's great plan of happiness. We qualified for the race in the grand councils of heaven when we stood with the Savior and chose agency and righteousness. Having qualified, we came into this life prepared with everything we needed to succeed.

Regardless of the conditions, our task is to participate in the race, safely cross the finish line, and receive the grand prize. Our motivation is the priceless prize designated for finishers of the race—that of eternal life. An important part of the race of life is that the Creator of the plan knows who we are and has given us the necessary conditions and tools for successfully completing our race. Additionally, He has promised to guide us on our path. Isn't it wonderful to know that Heavenly Father loves us and knows us individually?

We are promised in 1 Nephi 9:6 that "the Lord knoweth all things from the beginning; wherefore, he prepareth a way to accomplish all his works among the children of men; for behold, he hath all power unto the fulfilling of all his words." Knowing this, we are ready for our race.

Flags

During the Indy 500, race officials and pit crews have the job of tending the track, monitoring the conditions, clearing debris, and keeping the drivers apprised of the various conditions of the track, possible obstructions, or potential dangers. The way race officials communicate to the drivers is through the use of flags. Some of these flags have been standardized to mean the same thing to all drivers, while others are unique to a particular driver and his team. It is up to the driver to know

what the signals mean and to heed the communication in order to race safely and effectively.

For example, the green flag signals the beginning of the race, the yellow flag cautions drivers to slow down due to hazards on the track, and the yellow-and-red-striped flag warns drivers that there is something on the track that could reduce grip or cause a car to lose control. The red flag tells drivers that conditions are too unsafe to continue the race and that the car must stop. The white flag signals to the driver that there is one lap remaining in the race, and the waving of the black-and-white-checkered flag signals the driver that the scheduled distance has been met and the race is over. All the racers understand these flags.

Individualized flags are used to communicate important messages with one driver at a time. For example, the black flag summons a car into the pits due to a mechanical problem or because the driver has disobeyed a rule. Each crew also has special flags that are used to communicate specific messages to their driver.

On the racetrack, anything that takes the driver off the course, slows him down, or distracts him from moving toward the finish line is a pitfall. The objective during the race is to avoid as many of these pitfalls as possible. Oil on the track, gravel, encounters with other drivers, going too fast or too slow, and mechanical malfunctions all increase the risk of the driver being harmed, taken off the course, or not making it to the finish line.

In life we are all on a risky course, and at times we don't have the experience or perspective to see the pitfalls on the track ahead of us. As on a raceway, individuals who know the course well provide signals that help us understand the conditions we are facing so we can respond appropriately to them. Communication from the Lord comes in many forms as He warns us of pitfalls and dangers and tells us of joys and blessings that we can experience as we proceed through life. He also

reminds us of the goals we are working toward and encourages us in our journey.

Flags of Warning

In our race, the road conditions aren't always apparent to us and, on our own, we may not always perceive threats to our progress. Thankfully, the Lord warns us about pitfalls globally through His prophets, scriptures, and doctrine. But He also warns us individually through the quiet promptings of the Spirit to let us know how to adjust our journey. He has also given us a pit crew, so to speak, who help us avoid possible hazards on our course. Consider some of the pitfalls our crew has recently warned us about.

Inspired leaders have warned of the importance of protecting our bodies, minds, and spirits from those influences that would harm us or diminish our ability to stay on course. Just as the race car driver wears a sturdy helmet and clothing appropriate for his task, we are admonished to gird ourselves in the whole armor of God in our dress, in our thoughts, and in our actions.

Another pitfall that we have been warned of is the influence of the media and technology in our lives. Like all powerful things, these can influence us both positively and negatively. The reason media present potential hazards is that their messages can distort, alter, block out, or supersede the more eternal and important messages from a loving Heavenly Father. The media directly attack our sense of direction, our purpose, and our sense of who we are. We need to know that what is largely represented in the media isn't reality in an eternal sense. Studying the scriptures, doing temple work, developing relationships with family and friends, participating in physical activities, and rendering service are some of the things that we have been counseled to do in the plan the Lord has created for us. Oftentimes we allow the media to have greater and greater influence in our lives, leaving us little time to attend to

more meaningful activities that keep us moving in the direction of the finish line. How much time do you spend studying the scriptures, praying, and listening to the word of the Lord in comparison to the time you spend texting, e-mailing, blogging, and listening to the messages of the media?

In April 2009 general conference, Elder Robert D. Hales addressed another pitfall—the danger of debt. He counseled us all to learn to live “joyfully . . . within our means, [to be] content with what we have, [avoid] excessive debt, and diligently [save] and [prepare] for rainy-day emergencies” (“Becoming Provident Providers Temporally and Spiritually,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 8). You may say to yourself, “Hey, I’ll think about that when I am out of school or married or have an income.” But the flag of warning is for all to heed now. Each of us must be careful to live within our means and even put a little away for emergencies. Current economic conditions show the wisdom in this counsel. Heeding this flag of warning not only protects us from hazards but also blesses us in ways that we cannot predict or imagine.

In that same conference, other Church leaders reminded us of the importance of attending the temple, honoring our covenants, serving others, learning from the past, exercising faith, trusting in the Lord, and following other important guides that will help us. As we heed the warnings and guidelines of the prophet and our leaders, we can avoid those things that would stand in the way of our goal of reaching the finish line.

Refueling Our Faith

In the Indy 500, there are times when the officials or the driver's team recognize that both the car and driver need to be recharged and refueled. These pit stops are essential to ensuring that the car's engine is running efficiently, the tires have enough tread to be safe, fluid levels are full, and the driver is able to continue the race. In our lives we also have

occasions when we need to take time out to refuel, repair, recharge, and realign our testimonies so we can better steer our course. Church leaders, the scriptures, caring family members, the Holy Ghost, and patriarchal blessings all provide substance and vision to keep us moving toward the finish line.

In the most recent general conference, President Thomas S. Monson taught us how to focus on the road beyond a possible pitfall. He spoke of all there is in the world today to be depressed about—financial downturns, social and moral decline, wars, natural disasters, and personal hardships. He admonished us, however, not to dwell on the negative in the world and rather to focus on the blessings we have as members of the Church. He encouraged us as he closed his remarks, “My beloved brothers and sisters, fear not. Be of good cheer. The future is as bright as your faith” (“Be of Good Cheer,” *Ensign*, May 2009, 92).

When we are struggling on our raceway or when we need extra encouragement to keep going, the Lord often allows us to have experiences that help us to know that He is aware of us and helping us along. As only a loving Father can, He also provides individualized communication to us through answers to prayer. These messages are often very personal and direct.

In the fall of 2000 I had an assignment to attend a series of meetings at BYU–Hawaii. I had my last chemotherapy treatment the morning I was to fly out of Salt Lake City. After I left the clinic, I went directly to the airport. By the time I arrived at the Los Angeles airport, I was feeling very ill. I checked my luggage, and by the time I got to my departure gate, I was absolutely miserable. As I sat down, leaning against the wall, I thought about the coach seats in the plane and how tight it would be with people on both sides of me. I felt even sicker as I contemplated the four- or five-hour flight. I silently thought, “Heavenly Father,

would it be so bad if I was in first class today?” The thought came and left.

Almost immediately the woman at the check-in counter came over to me and asked my name. Finding out that I was indeed Lynnette Erickson, she asked if I would be willing to be bumped to the next flight to allow a family to fly together. Apparently the flight was overbooked and the plane was filled to capacity. By this time I felt so bad that I didn’t care if I ever got to Hawaii, so I said yes. The arrangements were made, and the plane left the gate. Not ten minutes later the same woman came back with my new tickets and, to my surprise, informed me that the next plane would be leaving in just 30 minutes. As she was leaving, she turned back to me and asked, “By the way, do you mind if you are in seat A1?” A1, of course, was in the first-class section of the plane. While some may say that this was a coincidence, in my mind this was nothing short of a miracle, and I knew that Heavenly Father was aware of me and my needs.

Elder David A. Bednar referred to these individualized answers to our prayers as “tender mercies” in our lives:

The Lord’s tender mercies are the very personal and individualized blessings, strength, protection, assurances, guidance, loving-kindnesses, consolation, support, and spiritual gifts which we receive from and because of and through the Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

. . . The Lord’s tender mercies do not occur randomly or merely by coincidence. . . .

*We should not underestimate or overlook the power of the Lord’s tender mercies. [“The Tender Mercies of the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 2005, 99–100]*

What do these tender mercies look like in your life? How does the Lord answer your personal prayers? How does He affirm to you that you are on course? The answers to these questions are for you to ponder and then,

as President Henry B. Eyring instructed, to recognize how the Lord communicates His tender mercies to us and to remember them (see “O Remember, Remember,” *Ensign*, November 2007, 66–69).

President Spencer W. Kimball reaffirmed that God not only knows us and watches over us but He also often sends others to deliver His message to us (see “Small Acts of Service,” *Ensign*, December 1974, 2–7). These members of our racing team include priesthood leaders who are aware of our needs and act upon spiritual promptings.

My daughter competed for a prestigious award in her senior year of high school that required several months of intense preparation and hard work. After passing several stages of competition, she reached the point of being one of 15 finalists for the award. It was a stressful time for her, and she was concerned about being able to demonstrate her abilities and talents. One Sunday morning before Church, our stake president made a point of congratulating her on her achievement. Then he took her hand, looked her squarely in the eyes, and said, “No matter what happens, *we* know who you are.” To my daughter, and to all of us, that was a crowning point. Yes, she knew what she had put into preparing for the award and also what she had gained from it. Unlike the Indy 500, the final burst of speed was not the measure of her success. No matter what the judges decided in their assessment, she was a winner, and those who loved her, including the Lord, recognized her accomplishments.

One of the Lord’s most powerful ways to relay messages to us is through the Holy Ghost. If we have prepared ourselves to receive and follow His communications, we can more successfully avoid the dangers along our course, and we will feel the peace and joy of the journey during the race. Messages from the Holy Ghost are quiet and still. Therefore, we must be willing to tune out the world and continually listen for and to his promptings. In his

devotional speech here at BYU in January 2007, Elder Boyd K. Packer admonished:

You live in an interesting generation where trials will be constant in your life. Learn to follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost. It is to be a shield and a protection and a teacher for you. [“Lehi’s Dream and You,” BYU devotional address, 16 January 2007]

When we are looking for direction, guidance, and encouragement in our lives, reading and pondering the scriptures allows us to know the will of the Lord for us. In 2 Nephi 32:3 we are encouraged to “feast upon the words of Christ; for behold, the words of Christ will tell you all things what ye should do.” As we read the words of those who have traveled the course before us, we find courage and strength to learn from them and finish the race.

Our patriarchal blessings also provide warnings and guidance tailored to our specific needs. Elder Richard D. Allred said:

*These blessings are inspired and are personal revelations to the recipient. Patriarchal blessings are a guideline or similar to a road map that indicates the paths that may be traveled and destinations that may be reached if we stay within those paths. They may bring comfort and joy and encouragement when we have need to look, to listen, and to feel of the contents of these blessings so that we may go forward on life’s journey, not alone, but with the accompanying Spirit of our Father in Heaven. [“The Lord Blesses His Children Through Patriarchal Blessings,” *Ensign*, November 1997, 28]*

Finishing the Race

What a blessing it is to recognize that the Lord has a plan for us and that He always has and will continue to guide, warn, and encourage us on our course. We have the guides and the tools to get us there. But let’s be realistic. This race isn’t easy—it is grueling. The Indy

500 is 200 times around the arena, and it is dangerous! Our race has eternal significance. It is our test, and the course isn't flat, nor is it straight. Trials will come and life will be challenging, but we need to know and remember Heavenly Father is there, and we must have faith that the flags and guides that He has prepared will help us achieve our ultimate goal.

In our race to the finish line, we need to anticipate and be ready for unexpected events that may hamper us on our course and detour us from our goal. Sometimes we don't anticipate that life doesn't always go as we dreamed or planned. When this happens, we may be tempted to think that Heavenly Father has forsaken us and reject the flags and guides that have been provided. We cannot think this way—we must stay in the race and keep our focus on the finish line. Elder Dallin H. Oaks gently reminded us that:

Many important things will occur in our lives that we have not planned, and not all of them will be welcome. . . . Even our most righteous desires may elude us, or come in different ways or at different times than we have sought to plan. ["Timing," BYU devotional address, 29 January 2002]

Like each of you, I have had my share of unexpected detours in my race. I had planned on marrying shortly after college, having 24 children, and being a stay-at-home mom. Instead I married at an older age and only for a very short time, have only one child, and am a woman with a profession. My life wasn't how I had planned or even imagined it, but I have been richly blessed with perspective and patience, understanding of the Lord's timing, and a lovely daughter who is my friend. The lesson here is to keep going, keep building the kingdom, keep improving yourself, stay worthy of His blessings and His love, and stay on the course!

Remember, His timetable doesn't always look like ours. Disappointments will happen—

you can count on it. But if you keep yourself focused on the finish line and what is really important, your disappointments will eventually fade. Elder Quentin L. Cook encouraged us when he said, "Even though our journey may be fraught with tribulation, the destination is truly glorious" ("Our Father's Plan—Big Enough for All His Children," *Ensign*, May 2009, 37).

Sometimes we might think of trials as pitfalls when, in fact, they may be the very things that help us stay on course. President Eyring taught us that none of us is exempt from trials and challenges. He helps us to understand that "we all must deal with adversity" ("Adversity," *Ensign*, May 2009, 23), and that even though trials aren't something we seek after, they are times when we can exercise our faith and grow from the experiences. He also taught us that we have to learn to get through the trials, that there are lessons to be learned, and that we can't bypass or skip certain parts of the race because they are unpleasant. During these times we need to pray like Nephi for our strength to be increased to get through and to learn the needed lessons the trial affords.

Knowing that our destination is the greatest gift that we can receive, we must be faithful and press on in order to achieve our goal. President Dieter F. Uchtdorf urged us to remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer to our problems and challenges and that we must continue faithful:

*Brothers and sisters, we have to stay with it. We don't acquire eternal life in a sprint—this is a race of endurance. We have to apply and reapply the divine gospel principles. Day after day we need to make them part of our normal life. ["The Way of the Disciple," *Ensign*, May 2009, 76]*

I live in a community where many of my dear friends are dealing with physical challenges of varying types and degrees—the kind of trials that most of us may eventually have to

accept as we progress into the twilight of our lives. I am impressed and humbled to observe that in spite of their challenges, they continue constant in their race along the course, always focused on the finish line. These experienced ones have the wisdom to know “that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong” (Ecclesiastes 9:11). My seasoned senior friends and neighbors are noble examples of those who continue fighting a good fight, pressing forward to finish their course, and keeping the faith (see 2 Timothy 4:7).

In the history of the Indy 500, there has only been one winner each year. Fortunately that isn't true in the race of life. In our race, the winners' circle is not limited to just one person; in fact, the circle will expand to encompass

all those who finish the race. My brothers and sisters, my testimony to you today is that our Heavenly Father has a perfect plan for us. His plan is for all of us to live eternally with Him. We have qualified for the race of this earth life and, though the race course may at times be rough and obstacles may get in our way, we each must navigate our own course successfully. It is up to us to exercise our faith, follow the flags and warnings that He provides, and keep moving toward the finish line. Keep moving, brothers and sisters. Watch for the flags along the way. If you heed their messages of warning and encouragement and apply them in your lives, you will cross the finish line—you will achieve the prize. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.