

# Grow Toward Christ

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I am humbled to be standing here today where so many prophets and servants of our Savior have stood. My primary desire—besides wanting to sit down where you are—is to say what the Lord wants me to say. I pray that both you and I may feel the Spirit and be edified.

When I was 21 I married my eternal companion, although I didn't know that at the time because we were not members of the Church. By the time I was 31, we had joined the Church, we had four children, and my husband was very, very sick, unable to ever work again. We felt prompted that I should go to nursing school so that I could support the family. I started out as a nurse's aide in a local hospital and then went on to get associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in nursing. I tell you these things not to boast of myself, because I am no different than you are, but for two reasons: first, to tell you that none of these worldly accolades were possible without the Lord's love, help, and guidance—He never left my family's side or stopped reaching out for us; and second, to talk about choices.

I have been privileged as a nurse and through many callings to be with individuals and their families at very difficult times—when a loved one just had open-heart surgery, after

an adolescent's suicide, when a family member hit bottom and was admitted to a psychiatric unit or a drug treatment program, when sexual abuse toward children was discovered, or in someone's home when a loved one was dying—to name just a few experiences. At each juncture, I noticed the choices people made. I have spent hours talking to people who were angry because things didn't turn out the way they wanted or who became offended by someone or who were angry with God. Each time these people made a choice. Often they would ask me, "Why me?" My intent is not to minimize the tribulations we go through. Our trials are exquisitely powerful and painful in so many ways and very genuine. So the question remains: "Why *not* you?" The Lord loves you, and you have the potential to be stronger and more useful in His service. Or you can choose to let your trials drive a wedge between you and the Savior—exactly what Satan hopes for.

We are masters of our choices. In fact, we have already fought a war over the right to choose. We were all there in the premortal

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existence in the Grand Council in Heaven. We were not asked which plan for our progression was the best. We were asked, “Whom shall I send?” (Abraham 3:27). Jesus said He would obey and follow the plan, which required Him to perform the Atonement. Jesus volunteered because of His great love for His Father and for us. Throughout His mortal life, Jesus repeatedly reconfirmed His choice, always expressing to the Father, “Thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10).

Satan, on the other hand, sought to take away our freedom to choose, entirely negating the plan of happiness. In addition, he wanted all the glory for himself. Heavenly Father chose Jesus. Satan chose to be angry, and a war followed—a battle that is still raging. One-third of our brothers and sisters chose to follow Satan and were cast out and denied the right to receive mortal bodies. All of us here chose the Savior and are here now to be proved and tested to see whom we will choose to follow in this life.

When challenges come—and come they must because that is why we are here—we choose how we will react. Will we grow toward Christ and our eternal home or not? I have watched as some have chosen to fall away as they succumb to their feelings of being hurt, offended, or angry or when confronted with others’ abuse, unfaithfulness, illness, addictions, suicide, and death. Yet others, when faced with the same issues, choose to allow the trial to stretch them, to allow the Savior to carry them through the trial, to seek the guidance of the Spirit, and to feel of the Savior’s love and Atonement.

Through all of these times, I have noticed that as individuals struggled with whatever was facing them, if they turned to Jesus Christ and trusted in Him, they were successful in finding the Savior, finding peace, and finding their way. The outcome may not have always been what they wanted, but one thing was certain: they grew stronger, more loving, more

trusting, and more obedient and, filled with faith, they moved closer to the Savior.

Our second estate is based on choices. If you are going to make a choice, there must be the possibility of more than one choice. How can we appreciate happiness unless we also have felt sadness? There has to be opposition in all things.

We give up our eternal right to choose when we say, “He (or she) made me angry.” I encourage you not to give away your right to choose by handing that power over to someone else. No one can “make” you angry. You make a choice to respond by being angry or by taking offense. But you can also choose to make the effort to find out what is really going on with the other person and understand their behavior—or maybe just agree to disagree.

We make hundreds, maybe even thousands, of choices daily. Some may be insignificant, such as what you chose to wear today. However, that same decision might be very significant if you chose to wear shorts when there is a blizzard going on outside. Our choices define who we are.

It was Alma and the Spirit who converted me to the gospel over 30 years ago. My husband and I strongly felt that we should bring up our daughter with some type of religious background. As we investigated many churches, the Lord sent people to talk to us about the LDS Church. It was back in the days before the three-hour block schedule we now have, and every time we went to the local church building, there was no one there. We thought, “This is strange.”

The Lord sent a member of the Church to my husband’s place of business in Los Angeles to talk to him about food storage. At the same time, a coworker and I talked about our desire to find a church, and we found out that she had an LDS babysitter. So we arranged to have a dinner at my coworker’s home and invite the babysitter and her husband so they could teach us more about the Church. At the last minute,

the LDS couple couldn't make it, but they sent the ward mission leader, and we saw the film-strip *Meet the Mormons*. But we lived in a different mission from my coworker. We wanted the full-time missionaries to come teach us the gospel, but our names were lost several times.

Finally our missionaries came. We opened the door and asked them, "What took you so long?" I will always be eternally grateful to Elder Wardle and Elder Mulford for their choices to go on missions. As I read the Book of Mormon for the first time, Alma 32:27 came so powerfully to me: "If ye will . . . experiment upon my words." I could do that! While the choice to join the Church brought some opposition from our extended families, it was, and still is, the best decision we ever made.

After we joined the Church, we continued to nourish the seed. Challenges came: poverty, the birth of a baby with a handicap, my husband becoming disabled, my trying to go to nursing school and working to support our family. When I graduated as an RN with an associate degree, I was pregnant. We were told the name of that child, but he was stillborn a couple of days before I was to take the RN-NCLEX exam. The Lord was there to help us through. We were taught about unconditional love, survival, obedience, and submissiveness to the will of the Lord and that the Lord was always near to lift us up. Occasionally I wondered why the Lord was not as near, and I realized He was not the one who had moved away—I had.

I taught early-morning seminary at six o'clock in the morning for four years. I love Lehi's vision (see 1 Nephi 8). Once, one of my students painted a full mural about 8 feet by 10 feet on my living room wall of Lehi's vision. It was a great reminder to me of God's love for us—how He desires for us to come home and actually shows us the way to return.

Lehi's vision is really a schematic or blueprint for living in our second estate. To reach the tree of life and taste of the love of God, we must choose to walk in the strait and narrow

path by holding fast to the iron rod. Did you notice that you cannot sit down on the iron rod or the strait and narrow path? You must press forward. Nephi tells us:

*Ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting [not snacking] upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life. [2 Nephi 31:20]*

Many, including those in the tall and spacious building, will not even enter onto this path. Or they may start on the path, but when times get tough, for one reason or another, they will choose to go off the path, and even those who do make it to the tree of life and taste of God's love may respond to the mocking people in that tall and spacious building by becoming ashamed and making the choice to leave, thus suffering the consequences of not enduring to the end.

When we moved from that house, we wallpapered over that mural. I often wondered what the new owners thought when they took down the wallpaper and saw Lehi's vision.

We had a son, Seth, who was born with Down syndrome. He loved everyone and would never allow anyone in his presence to get upset or to use the word *stupid*. He would always tell us, "Calm down. Relax." One day when he was 20, he came to me and said that he wanted to go home. I said "Silly, you are home." He said, "No, I want to go to my home far away." Shortly afterward he was diagnosed with leukemia and was dead seven months later. In those seven months Seth spent his time helping us to get ready for him to leave. He decorated his entire room from floor to ceiling with pictures of rainbows to remind us that God loves us.

There were many miracles during those seven months. I will mention only one. My

oldest son, David, and his beautiful wife, Leah, were getting married in the Washington D.C. Temple. Seth was very ill, and we knew that he probably didn't have much longer to live. It was a difficult choice for me to choose which son to be with that day: with my son as he was married for time and all eternity or with my son who was dying.

I stayed with Seth, and my husband went with David to the temple. Seth wanted to go to the reception that night very, very badly. We decided to let him go for just a few moments and even planned to take him there in a wheelchair because he was so weak and had difficulty keeping food down.

When we got to the reception, Seth would have none of that. He ate what he wanted and he danced with all the young women there. He didn't want to leave for hours, but eventually we took him home, where he immediately was very sick again. He died a day later. I learned so much from Seth, particularly about unconditional love. We chose to look for the spiritual and positive things in this experience, and we found them.

Over the 27 years my husband, Joel, was sick, I noticed that he became stronger spiritually as his physical health declined. He never complained. It still amazes me that despite the literally hundreds of doctor visits, procedures, hospitalizations, and surgeries, he didn't see himself as sick until the last three months of his life. He always looked for the positive despite being in constant pain. He had some partial amputation of toes. When people would ask him how he felt, he would say "Well, if the Lord is going to take me a piece at a time, I'm glad that He started at that end"—a quote he had heard attributed to Bruce R. McConkie. He always looked forward to his renewed perfect body. Even in the last two days of his life when our dear bishop came to our home and asked him if he had any message for our ward family, Joel quickly replied, "He lives!"

But not everyone who has trials seeks for the positive aspects of that learning. A woman I knew came to me complaining that her husband had left her and that they were getting a divorce. She said, "I have been active in the Church, always paid my tithing, always accepted any calling, and this is what I get?" She chose to leave the Church because she could not look beyond her pain to the lessons she could learn. She chose instead to be bitter. She chose to look for the negative, and she found it.

Sometimes we don't make such great choices. The Lord loves us so much that we can, through applying the power of the Atonement, repent. Accessing the Atonement on a daily basis, even on a minute-to-minute basis sometimes, is necessary. We don't have to be perfect—after all we can do, the Savior does the rest. When we repent we *choose to be changed*, to be spiritually stronger, and to come closer to the Savior. Choosing to repent, while it does not take away the consequences of our choice, does turn us around and point us in the direction of the Savior. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught:

*The soul that comes unto Christ, who knows His voice and strives to do as He did, finds a strength, as the hymn says, "beyond [his] own." The Savior reminds us that He has "graven [us] upon the palms of [His] hands." Considering the incomprehensible cost of the Crucifixion and Atonement, I promise you He is not going to turn His back on us now. When He says to the poor in spirit, "Come unto me," He means He knows the way out and He knows the way up. He knows it because He has walked it. He knows the way because He is the way. ["Broken Things to Mend," *Ensign*, May 2006, 71; emphasis in original]*

Christ is our GPS—He will guide us successfully back home if we will but choose to follow Him.

We must, as we have been told many times in the scriptures, choose whom we will serve

(see Joshua 24:15; Alma 30:8; Moses 6:33). Elder Boyd K. Packer taught:

*Our lives are made up of thousands of everyday choices. Over the years these little choices will be bundled together and show clearly what we value.*

*The crucial test of life . . . does not center in the choice between fame and obscurity, nor between wealth and poverty. The greatest decision of life is between good and evil. ["The Choice," Ensign, November 1980, 21]*

There really are only two choices for us: we are either for or against the Savior. The Savior Himself said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30). You cannot sit on the fence or be neutral or lukewarm. If Satan can get you to sit on the fence and be lukewarm, you are essentially deactivated—out of the battle raging for the souls of men and not valiant. You have not chosen the Savior. In D&C 76:79 we are warned that if we are "not valiant in the testimony of Jesus" we will inherit the terrestrial (not the celestial) glory. However, as Lehi tells us, we are always 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" (see 2 Nephi 2:27).

As we come to love the Savior more and more, we realize that He has given us so much, lending us the very air we breathe, as King Benjamin tells us (see Mosiah 2:21). He has given us the scriptures, the Holy Ghost, the priesthood, Relief Society, family, prophets, General Authorities, stake and ward leaders, and each other to help us return home. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught:

*Our wills constitute all we really have to give God anyway. The usual gifts and their derivatives we give to Him could be stamped justifiably "Return to Sender." ["Consecrate Thy Performance," Liahona, December 2008, 24]*

The vast majority of you have chosen to be here today at this time because of your love of the Savior. You want to be spiritually strong. Me too! President Thomas S. Monson said:

*We need not feel that we must be without fault in order to receive the blessings of God. He will take us from where we now stand if we will come to him. He will build us up, spiritually, and he will build us up with confidence in ourselves. ["The Message: 3R's of Free Agency," New Era, April 1973, 5]*

You may not think of yourselves as leaders in the cause of Zion, but you are. Your example influences those around you. Your choices influence others' choices. You are here at this time for a reason. President Ezra Taft Benson said:

*Each day we personally make many decisions showing the cause we support. The final outcome is certain—the forces of righteousness will win. But what remains to be seen is where each of us personally, now and in the future, will stand in this battle—and how tall we will stand. Will we be true to our last days and fulfill our foreordained missions? [President Ezra Taft Benson, "First Presidency Message: In His Steps," Ensign, September 1988, 2; emphasis in original]*

Yes, these are difficult times we live in. Yes, we will have struggles to wade through. Yes, as President Henry B. Eyring has said, "As the forces around us increase in intensity, whatever spiritual strength was once sufficient will not be enough." But President Eyring immediately went on to say, "And whatever growth in spiritual strength we once thought was possible, greater growth will be made available to us" (*Because He First Loved Us* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002], 66–67). We are not alone if we choose not to be. The Savior will always be reaching out to us to lift us up.

I would never have chosen the trials that I have been given. But I know that the Lord

knows the beginning from the end. He loves me and He loves you and He knows exactly how to strengthen us. I am very glad I have had those experiences because I have learned so much. In fact, the more I learn, the more I realize how little I know. I didn't always make the best choices, but I know that choices are fundamental to our existence and to our success in life. I exhort you to grow toward the Savior. If you do, you will be successful. When

we put the Savior first in our lives, everything literally falls into place.

This much I know: He *lives!* The Savior knows each of us individually—He knows our names! (How great is that?) He *loves* us individually. He *saves* us individually. He gave His perfect life for us. He wants us to succeed and come home, and He will never stop reaching after us. I say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.