

The Dauntless Spirit of Resolution

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It is a delight for me to be with you on this campus tonight. It makes me feel young to see you and be with you, and I commend you for choosing to be in attendance at this fireside. I suppose the title of “fireside” is a bit of a misnomer inasmuch as we’re not allowed to start any open fires, but you do kindle great warmth in my heart, and I surely pray that the Spirit of the Lord will kindle a flame in yours.

We have just enjoyed another season of rejoicing and commemorating the birth of the Savior and, for most of us, the opportunity of renewing family ties. Almost all agree that December is a happy month, when we sing of “Peace on earth and good will toward men,” but too many people leave this festive season and move into January with feelings of depression or discouragement. To some, January is foreboding: the beginning of the winter doldrums or, heaven forbid, something worse—the beginning of winter semester. Too many of us slip into a mind-set of grim resignation. We somberly look beyond January, and probably beyond February and March, to the warmer days of spring. In fact, we think if we look far enough, we can almost see the end of the school year.

I think January ought to be a happy month of the year. Of all people on the face of the earth, Latter-day Saints, with the perspective given them by the gospel, ought to be happy and optimistic. I hope that your very presence here today is indicative of your optimistic outlook. The start of a new semester and a new year gives you every reason to be happy, and I encourage you to feel that way tonight.

January always brings a renewed hope for personal and family progress in the coming year. It is the time of the year when people tend to set goals and make commitments—resolutions, if you will, New Year’s resolutions. I am assuming that most of you made one or more resolutions last Wednesday as the new year began. I am also assuming, because that was all of four days ago, that you may have already bent a few of those resolutions, if not totally broken them. So perhaps our discussion of such a topic tonight is still timely—sort of a Sunday-night resolution to be a bit more

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resolved about the original ones made last Wednesday.

But that's all right. This is a gospel of repentance, and we need to be repenting and resolving. Indeed, the process of repenting, making commitments, and setting goals should be a continuous one, so there is nothing wrong with using this traditional time of the year to evaluate the past and plan the future. It is much like our personal prayers in which, while communicating with our Father in Heaven, we ponder our thoughts, words, and deeds of the day and seek help in our personal progress for the morrow. The practice of reviewing the past and setting new directions for the future is a very healthy one, a scripturally encouraging one, in which we can beneficially alter our lives. I commend the practice to you, especially if it is thoughtfully pursued and the resolutions made are made in righteousness, bringing behaviors and attitudes that truly bless your lives and the lives of others. Shakespeare once wrote that one should live so that "Eyes, / That borrow their behaviours from the great, / Grow great by your example and put on / The dauntless spirit of resolution" (*King John*, act 5, scene 1, lines 48–53).

Sometimes our resolutions are a part of the process of repentance from past sins—actual transgressions for which we need forgiveness. Sometimes our goals focus on less serious matters, such as errors of judgment or flaws in our personality that may not be sins as such but that we nevertheless desire to change. Yes, life offers a multitude of lessons and plenty of things to improve. It is wonderful to believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which encourages such lofty views and gives us every avenue to achieve them.

While true godly sorrow leads to repentance of sins, our reflections on the past should not be self-debasing nor generate self-doubt. Indeed, one of the signs of mature Latter-day Saint life is the ability to see a limitation in ourselves without letting it cast a shadow over all the

many other good things we do and say. We read of, and sometimes know, individuals who are so self-critical that their attitude leads to extremes—even destructive behavior. It is almost as if they are compelled to belittle themselves.

I suppose it is inevitable that we will compare ourselves to others, but that is an unfortunate mortal tendency in us and seldom leads to anything very constructive. Usually we just get depressed, thinking everyone else is doing so well while we are not or has this or that quality we don't have. Why are we so hard on ourselves, knowing full well that everyone has problems and limitations, as well as strengths and talents? We would never let others be so hard on themselves, but we are certainly inclined to be hard on ourselves.

Let me use an example close at hand. I think of two young men who are both fine BYU basketball players. More important, they are both fine young men. But they are not alike in physical makeup or personal interests or academic majors or a hundred and one other differences that one person has from another. But we applaud that and understand it. Wouldn't it be foolish, even destructive, if these two men spent a lot of time wishing they were the other person? It would not help our basketball fortunes to have a nearly seven-foot man bringing the ball down the court nor one slightly over six feet playing the post position. Obviously, each of these young men has a task of his own, best suited to himself, and individual talents to develop.

If that is so obvious on the basketball court, why can't it be a little more obvious in life? Why do we allow ourselves to waste such energy and emotion comparing ourselves to others when our real task is to develop what we are and what we have, to be all that we can be.

This is especially true in matters of the spirit and salvation. We need to put our quest

for perfection into context, including the kind of time that may be involved in such an effort.

Elder Joseph Fielding Smith offered this counsel:

Salvation does not come all at once; we are commanded to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. It will take us ages to accomplish this end, for there will be greater progress beyond the grave, and it will be there that the faithful will overcome all things, and receive all things, even the fulness of the Father's glory.

I believe the Lord meant just what he said: that we should be perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect. That will not come all at once, but line upon line, and precept upon precept, example upon example, and even then not as long as we live in this mortal life, for we will have to go even beyond the grave before we reach that perfection and shall be like God. [Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie, vol. 2 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56), p. 18]

It has always struck me as being sad that those among us who would not think of reprimanding our neighbor, much less a total stranger, for mistakes that have been made or weaknesses that might be evident, will nevertheless be cruel and unforgiving to themselves. When the scriptures say to judge righteously, that means with fairness and compassion and charity. That's how we must judge ourselves. We need to be patient and forgiving of ourselves, just as we must be patient and forgiving of others.

Of course, continual repentance followed by continual transgression isn't pleasing to the Lord, so we do have to be serious and responsible about our commitments. But God is usually more willing to forgive us than we are willing to forgive ourselves. It may not surprise you to know that God loves us more than we love ourselves. We are his creation, spirit children of a celestial birth, and we stand in the image of him whom we rightly call our Father.

We ought never to be destructive in our criticism of others, but perhaps our greatest caution needs to be regarding the tendency to be destructive in the criticism we apply to ourselves.

As I understand it, in this mortal life the direction we are moving is more important than a particular degree of perfection. We all experience cycles of progression and times when we fight against these inevitable challenges of regression. Great blessings from the Lord attend our efforts to progress. And progression is certainly more effective if it is a process, a long-term commitment, rather than just a series of isolated and irregular events.

Let me illustrate the principle this way: Many of us have undoubtedly learned that studying a subject on a regular, daily basis provides a better and longer-lasting understanding of the subject than does last-minute "cramming." The first approach gives the mind time to process and ponder the information, allowing it to weigh the information in relation to other ideas and concepts. This makes it easier to incorporate the information into an overall perspective. Cramming, on the other hand, may fill the mind with facts and figures, but the information usually doesn't stay around very long. Using the often-quoted example, it is probably safe to say that most of you would prefer to undergo surgery at the hands of a physician who had not crammed for his exams, but one who had consistently and carefully continued his studies and practice with the solid determination to keep learning, keep growing, keep progressing. Such an approach is "good medicine" for us as well.

What I hope to encourage tonight is a long-term commitment to righteousness, a long-term view of our task. I hope to enlarge your vision of yourself and your potential. Goal setting is often considered synonymous with resolutions, especially New Year's resolutions. But in a recent article, James J. Mapes noted that the setting of goals is not nearly so important

as setting a vision for individuals and organizations. Wisely selected goals are intermediate mile-posts that mark our course. Vision, on the other hand, is more far-reaching and exceeds the goals in importance. He noted this:

A vision is like a lighthouse which illuminates rather than limits, gives direction rather than destination. Almost all successful individuals and organizations have one thing in common: the power and depth of their vision. A positive, meaningful vision of the future supported by compelling goals provides purpose and direction in the present. [James J. Mapes, “Foresight First,” *Sky Magazine*, September 1991, p. 96]

Spiritual survival for each son and daughter of God, not to mention the success of our New Year’s resolutions, is like-wise predicated on a sound vision of eternal possibilities and promises. An often-quoted verse from Proverbs notes that “Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he” (Proverbs 29:18). Surely Solomon was inspired to associate happiness with vision.

In addition to vision there must be genuine effort, wholehearted effort, if change is to come. Consider this aspect of resolve, of genuine resolution. There is a phrase common in the Book of Mormon that describes what our efforts should entail. The phrase “full purpose of heart” is used by Nephi in his final counsel to our generation. He promises that if we will follow the Son of God with “full purpose of heart,” *then* the promised blessings will flow to us. Nephi clarifies the phrase by adding “acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:13). The “full purpose of heart” Nephi describes is much more fixed and determined than are the usual New Year’s resolutions with many people. As a youth, Nephi had so committed his life that when his father described

that difficult and dangerous errand of returning to Jerusalem for the brass plates, he could reply to his father:

I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.

[1 Nephi 3:6]

We love to quote that scripture not only for the marvelous mental assent that it portrays, but because this young man immediately thereafter *demonstrated* that his actions were one with his resolve. His younger brother Jacob used the same words, “full purpose of heart,” in his great invitation for all to repent and return (Jacob 6:5). Likewise, King Limhi promised his people that if they would “turn to the Lord with *full purpose of heart*”—and then added a dimension of commitment that will be of interest to students—“and serve him with all diligence of mind,” they would be freed from their bondage (see Mosiah 7:33; emphasis added). Oh, that we could learn the important truth that it is impossible to have full purpose of heart without serving with all diligence of *mind*.

I would hasten to add a word of caution that the type of strong, long-term resolution for both heart and mind does not necessarily come all at once. There are not many experiences like that of Saul with a blinding light from heaven, or of Moses with a burning bush, or of Alma hearing a voice of thunder. Those are the exceptions, not the rule. In working with most of us, God has our vision or perspective come line upon line and precept upon precept, here a little and there a little, until the complete picture is before us.

When an individual has the light of the gospel, certainly progression in the right direction is made much, much easier. Our paths may frequently be strewn with difficulties and

uncertainties, but the Light of Christ, illuminating the way, still gives assurance that the direction is correct. So it goes without saying that life-changing resolutions need a gospel vision or perspective, they need to be built on a foundation of stone, the rock of revelation. Resolutions without this underpinning are likely to be shortsighted and short-lived. So we should ponder gospel principles carefully as we plot our course through this year and throughout our lives.

The example of others who have gone ahead of us and faced our same problems can be invaluable. Look at the examples of the Savior and the prophets and other Christlike people to help you establish a pattern of resolve and successful living .

An experience when I was a small boy helped me to understand the principle of example:

It was on a summer day early in the morning. I was standing near the window. The curtains obstructed me from two little creatures out on the lawn. One was a large bird and the other a little bird, obviously just out of the nest. I saw the larger bird hop out on the lawn, then thump his feet and cock his head. He drew a big fat worm out of the lawn and came hopping back. The little bird opened its bill wide, but the big bird swallowed the worm.

Then I saw the big bird fly up into a tree. He pecked at the bark for a little while and came back with a big bug in his mouth. The little bird opened his beak wide, but the big bird swallowed the bug. There was squawking in protest.

The big bird flew away, and I didn't see it again, but I watched the little bird. After a while, the bird hopped out on the lawn, thumped its feet, cocked its head, and pulled a big worm out of the lawn.

[Howard W. Hunter, CR, April 1972, p. 95]

It is crucial to the survival of all who are "little birds" to learn practices and principles that will allow them to make their way in life and, indeed, fill the measure of their creation.

My young friends, it is appropriate at this time of the year that we reflect on the past and our future and on the direction of our lives. It is worthy to make resolutions regarding our behavior, goals, or pursuits. Such resolutions become mileposts to guide our lives, now and later. They will lead us past the kind of transitory fads that evaporate like the morning dew in the heat of the sun.

In conclusion, let us be reminded of the prophet-leader Joshua as one who became a sterling model of resolution. You will remember his fidelity to Moses. He later succeeded Moses in leading Israel for many years. There is an instructive verse in the early part of the book of Joshua where the Lord instructs this prophet in a way that can be helpful to us as we learn the principles and process of resolutions. The Lord said to Joshua:

Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest.

This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. [Joshua 1:7-8]

Joshua's long life of 110 years reflected that commitment. He did not wander to the right or to the left. In all things that are important, Joshua prospered. Near the end of his life he gave this marvelous challenge to his people that we learned as children in Primary:

Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord.

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the

gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. [Joshua 24:14–15]

Where do you find the strength and wisdom to live with such conviction and resolution? You will find it as you search the scriptures; as you communicate with the Lord through prayer; as you conform your lives to the requirements of the gospel, including the sacred covenants you have entered into; as you listen to wise counsel of loving parents, priesthood leaders, and

faithful teachers and instructors; as you continue your studies with all diligence of mind; and as you give ear to that still, small voice of the Comforter that speaks to the human heart.

May God bless you this coming year and always to have the spirit of firm resolution to live righteously, to know that God loves you and that repentance is always available to us if we are truly trying to improve. I thank the Lord for such a gospel of hope and progress, and I thank him for you, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.