

Taking up the Cross

NEAL A. MAXWELL

I have been delighted, brothers and sisters, as you no doubt have been, with the quality of the music tonight. I always anticipate that portion of the program when I come. I appreciate the hospitality of your stake presidents—the able high priests who preside over the twelve stakes here—with whom we have just had a few brief, informal moments in a reception. I am grateful for these men and for the outstanding women who are ever at their sides. I appreciate, too, every chance I have to be with my colleagues, Dallin Oaks and Bob Thomas, and others who are here representing the faculty and administration. Most of all, my young brothers and sisters, I appreciate the privilege of being with you.

I need to alert you to two possible problems in the course of what I say tonight. First, I write very illegibly, and I have been trying to finish this speech in airports and elsewhere this weekend. My style of writing presently was once characterized by President Lee as unreformed Egyptian. More recently, I passed President Kimball a note on the stand at sacrament meeting to tell him that our school in Tonga had “burned” down. In his own sweet, courteous way, reluctant to embarrass me, and having studied my inscrutable inscribings as long as he could, he sent back a note and said, “Did you mean ‘buried’ or ‘burned’?” Second,

I have deliberately tried to leave myself open to the Spirit, in particular as I reach that point of closing my remarks tonight.

The Role of Women in the Church

I appreciate, more than I can say, this opportunity to be with you as you begin the Winter Semester. I am grateful that my wife, son, daughters, and son-in-law are here also. Since my wife and daughters are here, that creates a moment when, before proceeding to my text, I wish to observe that the role of women in the Church has never been more important than it is now, because never has the Church been so directly important and influential to so many as it is now. While the Church will always be priesthood-led and priesthood-centered, we must not make the mistake of drawing wrong conclusions from that reality. I hope the young women of the Church will do all they can to develop their God-given talents and to stretch themselves intellectually and spiritually during their youth and young adult years, for the learning process is scaffolding for the soul.

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We desire our women to be unarguably superb individuals, wives, and mothers, and they can contribute so much to this outcome by making the most of their educational opportunities, both now and by having a posture of lifetime learning. A short time ago, during one of the few times at our own ward sacrament meeting, our bishop called attention to a brochure describing a local Church Education program which he then placed at the side of the pulpit. Significantly, after the benediction, the first person to get a brochure was Sister Camilla Kimball, the wife of the prophet, who has rightly been called “Lady of Constant Learning.” She continues to be involved spiritually; she has been a Relief Society spiritual living teacher for more than twenty years—until recently she continued to be involved. Educationally she has taken classes of one kind or another every year since she has been married, except for the last two years when traveling has precluded this kind of participation. She was the first pace-setting child of that family of eighteen high-achieving children in her father’s and mother’s family.

I remember a BYU movie a few years ago in which there was a line something like this: “Some men never recover from the ignorance of their mothers.” Conversely, one cannot fully appreciate the Prophet Joseph Smith without noting the remarkable qualities of his outstanding mother, Lucy Mack Smith. We give to our children what we are. The more a mother brings to a nest, the more nutritive the nest. It is very important that we genuinely encourage the full development of women in the Church, so that they can carry out their unique roles effectively and articulately—in the nursery and neighborhood, and in the classroom as well as in cookery.

Brethren, marry a woman who is your better in some respects; and, sisters, do likewise, so that your eternal partnership is one of compensating competencies. This is certainly the case in my own marriage, so far as certain

attributes are concerned. I am gladdened—not threatened—by my wife’s superior qualities. I am grateful for her traits and qualities that excel my own in some critical dimensions of our partnership.

I hope that our young sisters will not only acquire the vital skills of homemaking, therefore, but also that they will not neglect their natural talents in literature or language and in science, just as I hope our young men will study the facts of fatherhood, as well as physics or fine arts, and put their hands to that plow without looking back. Education involves the preparing of the person, and that is usually what matters—more than the particular calisthenics that are used.

Remember, we take our knowledge, skills, and attributes with us not only into marriage—but also into eternity. Knowledge rises with us in the resurrection, and the limitations on our luggage then will not be limitations of volume but of kind.

Finally, I have never sung Eliza R. Snow’s lyrics of 1845 in the anthem of appreciation “O My Father” without being touched by its reverence for womanhood, which is light years ahead of some current attempts to dignify womanhood. The inspired truths for those lyrics came through the Prophet Joseph Smith, but the inspired poetry was Eliza’s, as President Joseph F. Smith once observed.

Sisters, if there are some prophetic sayings you do not fully understand, do what a magnificent Mary did—keep those sayings in your heart and ponder them. Meanwhile, push out your own borders, just as the borders of the kingdom are being pushed out. Let LDS women show the real way to womanhood, preening not for the praise of the world or pressing for passing political preeminence. Male or female, we must not fail to see the simple truths because we are forever “looking beyond the mark.”

The Challenges of Mortality

The bulk of what I wish to say tonight focuses on the need, individually and collectively, to summon all our skills and our strengths to life and then to carry the challenging cross each of us has been called to shoulder.

The specific strategic statements of divine intent about mortality are rare and profound. We know that the work of God is to “bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). We also know that God places a premium on our having righteous experience, for “all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7). *These are most fundamental perceptions about life!*

Without a correct understanding of these realities by great men and women, there could not have been the faith, trust, and courage needed at Gethsemane and Golgotha, or a battered but prevailing Job, or a willing Prophet Joseph Smith who went to Carthage “like a lamb.”

Correct conduct under stress is more likely when one has correct expectations about life.

To err by having naive expectations concerning the purposes of life is to err everlastingly. Life is neither a pleasure palace through whose narrow portals we pass briefly, laughingly, and heedlessly before extinction, nor is life a cruel predicament in an immense and sad wasteland. It is the middle (but briefest) estate of the three estates in man’s carefully constructed continuum of experience.

One day we will understand fully how complete our commitment was in our first estate in accepting the very conditions of challenge in our second estate about which we sometimes complain in this school of stress. Our collective and personal premortal promises will then be laid clearly before us.

Further, when we are finally judged in terms of our performance in this second estate, we will see that God, indeed, is perfect in his justice and mercy. We will also see that when we fail here it will not have been because we were truly tempted above that which we were

able to bear. There was always an escape hatch had we looked for it! We will also see that our lives have been fully and fairly measured. In retrospect, we will even see that our most trying years here will often have been our best years, producing large tree rings on our soul, Gethsemanes of growth! Mortality is moistened by much opportunity if our roots of resolve can but take it in.

Just as no two snowflakes are precisely alike in design, so the configuration of life’s challenges differs also. Some of our experiences are not fully shareable with others. Thus, others, try as they may, cannot fully appreciate them. They must trust us, our generalizations and testimonies concerning these experiences. A few of our experiences should not even be shared. But it is useful to ponder the past examples of our partners on the pathway.

In the midst of some of these individualized challenges, however, we may cry out on our small scale as the Savior did on the cross, or as the Prophet did in Liberty Jail. Being in agony, we will pray more earnestly, for cries of agony are not the same as cries of despair.

Our individual experiences may not always be unique, but they are always authentic. God will even take into account our perceptions of, as well as our responses to, our trials. For those of us who do not, for instance, find claustrophobia a challenge, it is difficult to measure the terror that comes to those for whom it is such a challenge. Thus, a friend may seem to struggle unnecessarily long before finally prevailing with regard to a particular principle of the gospel. But for that individual, the struggle was real enough! We need, particularly, to understand with kindness those who are asked to go out to do battle again on a familiar field—on the very battleground where they have already suffered defeat several times. Yet some of our most difficult victories will occur on new terrain—like Joseph’s in Egypt—when we do not have the equivalent of a “home court” advantage.

We must remember that, while the Lord reminded the Prophet Joseph Smith that he had not yet suffered as Job, *only the Lord can compare crosses!*

Immortal Moments in the Scriptures

As I review some “case studies,” I will leave it to you to make the relevant application to your own life, if there be such, from the examples to which I turn now. To begin with, there is always more drama about us than we can drink in. Mortal minds cannot fully measure the immortal moments we are about to consider. For instance, in terms of learning impact, there is simply no comparison between what you and I thought of when we last heard a rooster crow and what Peter thought that once when he heard the soul-piercing sound of a cock crowing—especially the third time! That sound, no doubt, sent a shudder of sorrow through Peter—but it was godly sorrow, the kind that causes a cleansing and sends us inward to scrub our soul. You and I have heard roosters crowing many times in our lives, but for him that moment was special.

When we see each other in the morning, our sleep has often not been the same, even though we usually each say the same “Good morning!” Uriah apparently slept very well when, as a loyal lieutenant of King David, he slept with the servants on the floor at King David’s door. Uriah was loyal to both his men “in the open fields,” to his king, and to his wife, Bathsheba. By contrast, one cannot help but wonder how well the conspiring and adulterous David slept that same night! The later lamentations of David indicate many sleepless nights following his sending the uncompromised Uriah to his death—in the “forefront of the hottest battle,” where the “valiant men were” (see 2 Samuel 11:15–16). Uriah fell, but David plummeted from the privileged place portioned for him in the next world.

Thus, there are certain mortal moments and minutes that matter—certain hinge points

in the history of each human. Some seconds are so decisive they shrink the soul, while other seconds are spent so as to stretch the soul.

Contemplate a tale of two kings: There was a brief moment when King Agrippa was genuinely stirred by Paul’s preachment. Paul discerningly knew that Agrippa knew; he even asked Agrippa the ultimate question: “Believest thou?” But Agrippa would not own up to his intimations and spiritual stirrings, probably computing the cost were he to do more than smoothly say he “almost” believed (see Acts 26:27–28). In my opinion, Agrippa’s comment was not just flippant feedback. He had received a measure of the witness of a special witness, and some part of that king knew that what he had been told was true.

By contrast, another king, Lamoni’s father, heard Aaron’s preachment and owned up to as much truth as he then understood. He was willing to acknowledge the spiritual stirrings within him. Trustingly, he said in reply to the interrogatory “Believest thou that there is a God?” “And if now thou sayest there is a God, behold I will believe” (Alma 22:7). What great words from a great moment! Time in such settings is measured not by clock seconds, but by soul seconds! Those individuals who are free enough to acknowledge the first feelings of faith are true to themselves—and are surely those whom the truth makes free.

Contemplate two walks up, and then down, the slopes of two adjacent mountains—Mount Moriah and the Mount of Olives. Up one mountain came Judas “with a great multitude” to kiss and to betray the Master. One wonders what the walk *down* the mountain that night was like for Judas and which was more searing—his lips on Jesus’ face, or Jesus’ words to him, “Betrayest thou the Son of Man with a kiss?” (Luke 22:48). Few scenes of pathos rank with that of a guilty Judas trying to give back the thirty pieces of silver and seeing how those who had used him fiendishly were devoid of mercy and empathy for him. Judas’ soul-slide

was not a sudden thing, and his subsequent suicide ranks as perhaps the most self-contemptuous in history.

In contrast, early in the morning—centuries before—an obedient Abraham walked up and then down nearby Mount Moriah with his son, Isaac: “They went both of them together.” Abraham had been told, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest.” We do not know what, if anything, the father and son conversed about on the way up Moriah, but ponder what marvelous moments when father and son walked down that mountain!

Significantly, Abraham did not see the substitute ram on Mount Moriah—until *after* the moment that mattered—when he obediently “stretched forth his hand, and took the knife” (Genesis 22:2–13). Sometimes the cross must be taken up decisively. There is no time for an agonizing appraisal.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not know if God would spare them from the fiery furnace. They simply said:

If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.

But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. [Daniel 3:17–18]

Note the words “but if not”—these are words of unconditional commitment. Sometimes we must “take the heat” even if we are not certain the thermostat of trial will soon be turned down. *We must decide before anything else is really decided!*

When we have that kind of courage, neither will we walk alone in our own “fiery furnace,” for as is recorded in Daniel, there was a fourth form in that fiery furnace with the valiant threesome, and the form was “like the Son of God.” Peter gave us wise counsel when he said to the disciples, which each of us aspires to be, the following words: “Think it not strange concerning

the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you” (1 Peter 4:12). When we carry the cross we must expect to share, in some measure, in the sufferings of Christ. But he will be near us even in the “fiery furnace.”

Sometimes the learning process is prolonged. It was only—to use a felicitous phrase describing Enoch’s people, “in the process of time” (Moses 7:21)—that the reconciliation of Esau and Jacob occurred. How one warms to the later meeting of those two matured men and their immense caravans in the desert—years after the earlier struggle over status, when “Esau hated Jacob.” How magnanimous are the words then of a secure Esau in declining Jacob’s proffered gift. The scriptures say, after Jacob made his offering: “And Esau said, I have enough, my brother; keep that thou hast unto thyself” (Genesis 33:9).

Much time also ensued between the walk of Joseph’s brothers back from the pit into which they had thrown Joseph and their later walk back (with much-needed corn) from Egypt to Canaan, when all the brothers who had treated him so terribly were saved by a generous Joseph. If we wonder today why, when individuals in groups become unprotesting participants in a veering toward evil, no one seems to speak up; and if we are perplexed that when some speak up it is only in a weak Reuben-type dissent (which makes “I told you we shouldn’t have done that” a likely utterance),—if we wonder why those things happen, it is because individuals, in this case Joseph’s brothers, failed. It is always the same, brothers and sisters. Our failures are individual. You and I, therefore, have an obligation to grasp those opportunities for truth saying and for restraining evil. If we do not, we will tumble, as Joseph’s brothers did, collectively. Weak individuals make great dominoes!

Perhaps a young Joseph, of whom his brothers could not even speak peaceably, might even have given them some small cause for

jealousy. But a matured, magnanimous, and highly spiritual Joseph (significantly and modestly) did not at first even reveal his identity to his poverty-stricken brothers. The tree rings on Joseph's soul must have been large, indeed, including the year when he was in the pit and was then sold into a strange culture in the beginning of a great adventure. Joseph was victorious "on the road."

The same basic substance, for instance, chemically two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, left Pilate's hands very dirty when he washed them (he thought) of the affair concerning Jesus of Nazareth. He would not listen to feedback. But notice how water was used cleansingly by Naaman, the Syrian military commander who listened to feedback (and from less statusful servants) and as a result was willing to be washed in the Jordan River and was healed of his leprosy.

Thus, the scenery, the sounds, the substance are often similar—but the consequences are immensely different, depending on how we use our mortal micromoments. As George MacDonald warned: "The moment which coincides with the work to be done, is the moment to be minded; the next [moment] is nowhere till God has made it."

There are some decisions we make when we have a reasonable understanding of the consequences that will flow from such decisions. Jesus knew and Joseph Smith knew about their impending martyrdom.

There are other times when we are swept along by events and must simply trust the Lord. For instance, Paul may not have known that his judicial appeal to Caesar would finally take him to Rome and to precious points in between. But the Lord wanted him to go to Rome, and Paul was swept along on wants of divine design and making.

Development of Personal Strength

There are still other times when we can see the consequences of our decisions, but we

deliberately try to repress them because we do not want to face them. David's relationship with Bathsheba could have both started *and* stopped with his view from the terrace. But it did not, for David not only saw, but sent for Bathsheba.

What, then, are some of the skills and strengths other than those now noted which enable us to lift and then to carry the cross?

First, we must realize that the weight of the cross is great enough without our carrying burdens that we could jettison through the process of repentance. Paul gave us wise counsel in this regard when he said, "Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1). It is so much more difficult for us to carry the cross when our back is already bent with the burdens of bad behavior.

Second, the cross is something we cannot shoulder and then stand still with. Of the Savior we read the following: "And he bearing his cross went forth" (John 19:17). The cross is easier to carry *if we keep moving*. Action and service, happily, require enough of our attention that the sagging of self-pity can be avoided.

Third, we must realize, finally, that we can only contemplate the cross just so long; rhetoric will not raise it. It must soon either be taken up or turned away from!

Fourth, no "natural" resource is more precious and to be used more wisely than time. These mortal moments matter more than we know. There are no idle hours; there are only idle people. In true righteousness there is serenity, but there is an array of reminders that the "sacred present" is packed with possibilities which are slipping by us, which are going away from us each moment.

I have chosen to speak on this topic tonight because of my immense, deep, and high regard for your generation of youth and young adults in the Church. More than you know, and no doubt more than the rest of us know, you have

been fashioned for a time in which the Church will be asked to do things we have never done before or done so well. The time you have to prepare yourselves for what will come is shortening with each passing second and moment. I, for one, have such great confidence in you collectively that I find no difficulty at all in believing the utterances of the prophets in this dispensation who have told us (from the beginning of the dispensation) that some of the most choice and special spirits of our Father in heaven will have been reserved for the very last days. If one, therefore, takes that kind of pride in you and has that kind of perspective about you, perhaps he can be pardoned for speaking to you, as I have, about the challenge of lifting and carrying the cross.

Each of us comes to know his cross quite well. We know its configurations; we know its weight. We feel its rough edges. It would be so much easier for us to carry it if we could develop the faith which would permit us to cast our cares upon our Father in heaven, because he cares for us, as Peter reminds us. It would be so much easier to carry if we could do as Paul suggests and rid ourselves of the weights that we need not carry. We may think these are a part of carrying the cross when, in fact, they are a function of our own stupidity or our own sin. We can rid ourselves of these so that we may take up the cross and move swiftly and deliberately on to our journey.

The Role of Youth in This Dispensation

At the risk of some repetition for some here, as I close, I should like to suggest to you three different ways of feeling your place in the scheme of things, of sensing your place in this dispensation. Each of the examples I use comes out of an entirely different setting, but I share them with you because each contains an important reality of what lies ahead of you and, in fact, is now upon you, as a generation.

The first comes out of U.S. Marine history. On one of those rare occasions when the U.S.

Marines had been driven back and were surrounded, the general commanding that particular unit, instead of sending off a despairing and discouraging communique to the commandant of the corps, sent this interesting message: "At last we have the enemy just where we want him. We are surrounded and we can fire in every direction!" I say to you, at last The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has the world just where we want it—we can serve in every direction! Not only these young men and women present who are now in the Language Training Mission, but each of us. There is always more to be done than we have time to do it in. Rejoice, for though we may seem to be encircled, in fact we are not.

For my second analogy I turn to the prophet Elisha and that episode when a young man (I expect about the age of the young men and women here tonight) awoke one morning and saw that Israel was surrounded by a hostile force. The mountains were compassed about with horses and chariots. In his honest anxiety, the young man went to the prophet and said: "Master, how shall we do?" And Elisha, the matured spiritual leader, said, hoping to comfort the young man: "They that be with us are more than they that be with them." But somehow it was not enough, and the prophet so sensed. The scriptures record that he prayed for the young man and asked that the Lord open his eyes that he, too, might see. The prayer was granted. The scriptures, in words like this, record: "And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire" (2 Kings 6:15–17). We, too, must have our eyes opened. We must have that perspective which permits us to see that, in fact, insofar as the kingdom of God is concerned, "they that be with us are more than they that be with them." There will be times when it will not be clear to us, but we will be supported by the equivalent of "horses and chariots of fire." Your task is to have your eyes opened.

Third and last, in Shakespeare's *Henry V* are those marvelous lines when the small force face a battle on the morrow. Their leader tried to give them a sense of their place in history by saying to them:

*He that outlives this day, and comes safe home, Will
stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd . . .
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall count themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon St. Crispin's day.
[Henry V, 4.3.41–42, 64–67]*

If we come safely home spiritually, you, in particular, as a generation of young adults, can stand a tip-toe when this part of this dispensation is named, and others will be envious of the special privileges and opportunities which were yours!

Now, these have been my feeble attempts to give you perspective. I have spoken frankly to you about the need to have realistic expectations about the purpose of life, so that when stress comes you will not be taken by surprise or by deepening despondency.

I witness to you that this is the work of our Father in heaven. There is none other! There are many marvelous men and women around this globe who are kept from the truth only because they know not where to find it, but nowhere is there a force of human beings so organized, so authorized, so trained to do what you have been trained to do. Therefore, much of the weight of glory rests upon you prospectively. Therefore, as your friend, as one who has high hopes for what you are clearly capacitated to do, I leave those hopes with you. I am one who sees you, collectively, measuring up to your great mortal moments, a few of which I have attempted to lay before you tonight.

May God bless you to that end. We are prophet-led, and the tempo of that prophet, if we needed any other indication, is so urgent, so selfless, that it is crystal clear that the majestic momentum of the Church in our time will thrust you to your places on the stage even before you feel ready. God grant, however, that you may be ready and that all of us may be ready, is my tender prayer, which I leave in the name of him whose church this is, Jesus Christ. Amen.