

# *Sharing Insights from My Life*

NEAL A. MAXWELL

**I**t is a special time for you as students in terms of the calendar, brothers and sisters. A new semester has started. Obviously it is the end of one year and the beginning of another. Soon it will be the end of a century, and a whole new century will open up before you. And you really are, as we enter upon that new century, part of the hope of Israel. So I am grateful for President Bateman's invitation to be with you in this time of transition, and I will, with some encouragement from my wife and some others, wax a little bit autobiographical today, which I typically don't do.

My life has been, fortunately—for me at least—intertwined with Brigham Young University for nearly 28 years: either as Church commissioner of education, as a member of the board of trustees, as chairman of the executive committee, or off and on as the grandfather of several students here. No wonder, therefore, that I feel that President Bateman and the faculty and administration are truly colleagues.

Furthermore, you as students continue to be, at least to me, another royal generation being raised up for the purposes of the Lord in your individual lives. Yes, you have some personal imperfections of which you are aware, probably painfully at times. But you are also drenched in personal gifts, talents, and abilities

of which you may be less aware. So though longevity is one reason for giving some advice today, the other reason for so doing is because of your immense possibilities carved out of this particular time in human history.

It surprises me that I have lived nearly three-fourths of the 20th century. Such a span is not comparatively a long time, considering the able and spritely septagenarians and octogenarians among whom I labor. Yet it is still a significant time span. Certainly at times in the spring of 1945, as an 18-year-old infantryman on Okinawa, it did not look very likely to me that my life would span three-quarters of this century. Nevertheless, experiences undergone and lessons learned have combined over the years to heighten my gratitude to God for the gift of life. I have lived through a depression, a world war, and a cold war, and have long since entered my anecdotage—and you will not be entirely spared from that latter symptom today.

In the passing years I have developed much appreciation for the institution of the family.

---

*Neal A. Maxwell was a member of the Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was delivered at BYU on 12 January 1999.*

Other institutions simply cannot compensate fully for failing families. If we will hold fast to the Church's proclamation on the family, we will see that we hold the jewels, as it were, that can enrich so many other things. Let the world go its own way on the family. It appears to be determined to do that. But we do not have that option. Our doctrines and teachings on the family are very, very powerful, and they are full of implications for all the people on this planet.

Though I murmured as a young man at times with chores, I have acquired in the space of this passage of time a hardened view of the spiritual necessity of work. Even if work were not an economic necessity, it is a spiritual necessity. If I have any concern about your generation, speaking collectively, it is that a few of our wonderful youth and young adults in the Church are unstretched—they have almost a free pass. Perks are provided, including cars complete with fuel and insurance—all paid for by parents who sometimes listen in vain for a few courteous and appreciative words. What is thus taken for granted, however innocently, tends to underwrite selfishness and a sense of entitlement. Selfishness and a sense of entitlement don't need any transfusions in our society today. I know that having said those things to you now, and having spoken plainly, there are some here who have worked exceedingly hard and need no comment from me on that score. As I look at the rising generation, the gospel of work, which is part of the fullness of the gospel, will need more attention, not less.

I am excited to report to you that I am enjoying the scriptures more than ever. I have read a lot in my life—thousands of books, I'm sure. But rarely do I encore reading except for the holy scriptures. Therefore, I am even more anxiously engaged in the restored gospel than ever because the restored gospel is so engaging. It really does get a grasp on our minds, and there is no end to the exploration that one can make of it. It is, as I said from this pulpit

years ago, an "inexhaustible gospel." To be anxiously engaged really does mean that we are engaged intellectually as well as spiritually, and life in the kingdom, as you all know, is also very engaging. So although some people at my stage of life might say, in effect, "Been there. Done that," not I. I feel instead this sense of anxious engagement in something that I have yet to take the full measure of. As I look back across the sweep of this century, I feel that very strongly.

Now, as already indicated, I am going to be somewhat autobiographical today. I mention first of all a small episode involving a large principle. The principle is the need for us to avoid the rush to judgment. This episode occurred just after I returned home from World War II. During months overseas while in the service, I had saved money to go on a mission. This was part of keeping my promise to the Lord made back in May of 1945, to which I will refer later. Back then I naively and foolishly thought I could pay God back, and of course I am more and more in His debt with the passing of time.

In any event, when I was discharged, I wanted to go on a mission right away. But our bishop did not call me at once. Finally, somewhat audaciously, I went to his home one night and told him I wanted to go on a mission. I had the money, and I didn't want to wait. Only then did he proceed to process the call. I impatiently wondered back then why he seemed so slow. Only decades later did I learn from the good man who was then his ward clerk that my bishop had felt, since I had been overseas for quite a while, I shouldn't be rushed into the mission field.

Oh, how quick we are sometimes to judge with so little data! And these experiences are in each of our lives, and they are illustrative of large issues, if we will but learn from them. I am so grateful to that ward clerk who, at least 40 years later, sent me a note one day saying he'd heard I'd mentioned this tapping on the

bishop's door at night, and he thought I ought to know the bishop's feelings. The rush to judgment continues to be the reflex of the natural man and the natural woman if we do not guard against it carefully.

Another insight that seems to recur again and again in confirmation is that the todays of life constitute the holy present. We can't fix the past. We may be able to repent of it, but we can't change past events. We *can* fashion the future, and we do that by using what someone has called the holy present, which indeed it is.

I share with you again a simple little insight that may help you at certain junctures in your lives. It is that you must not mistake passing local cloud cover for general darkness. They are very different things, and for us to distinguish local cloud cover, which will soon be blown away, for general darkness is a terrible thing, especially with the restored gospel, which is so full metaphorically of light. We must not be mistaken about this.

I have likewise learned that illness can be a tutoring and sanctifying experience as well as a debilitating thing. There await each of us clusters of circumstances and experiences, and if we see "things as they really are," to use Jacob's felicitous phrase (Jacob 4:13), we'll be able to understand that illnesses may be debilitating but are also very tutoring, and we will be open to what they can convey to us. Such is spiritually very, very important.

In modern revelation we are told very frankly, brothers and sisters, that "when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated" (D&C 130:21). I don't know how it is for you, but I have felt so often in my life so greatly blessed for what little obedience I have given. My conclusion with regard to that verse is that the Lord's ratio of blessings to our obedience is a very generous ratio indeed. He is so quick to reward us, so quick to reassure us, and so anxious to take delight when we serve Him. So if you puzzle over that verse, as I have in life,

including in recent times, the only bottom line I can give you is that the ratio of blessings to our minuscule obedience is a very, very generous ratio indeed.

I have also watched enough of human history and tried to be something of a student of public affairs to recognize passing movements, fads, and things of that kind. There are political fashions over which people become so excited, and they feel so threatened by them. They tend to equate them with the scriptural phrase "the kingdom of the devil" (2 Nephi 28:19). The kingdom of the devil, brothers and sisters, must be regarded as a collective, generic designation. We must not confuse it with any of its subsets, as ominous and bad as they may be for their season in human history. We must not confuse the subsets with the whole of it.

Once again the Book of Mormon and modern revelation give us the guidance we need so that we are not taken out of our places by too much concern over what on the landscape of history may after all be a very temporary thing, real and menacing though it may be. In the Book of Mormon is a verse I wish I fully understood, but which I draw to your attention. It is 2 Nephi 28:19, which says "the kingdom of the devil must shake." It is a very intriguing verse. I do not presume to know what this redemptive turbulence will be like, but it will be such that a few people now caught up in that generic kingdom of the devil will be "stirred up" and find their way out and into the kingdom of God. I don't know how that will happen, but it will happen. I rather imagine, and this is sure speculation, that there will be in this redemptive turbulence some jarring inconsistencies brought to the fore—jarring enough that they will cause some people who are caught up in the subsets to leave and find the truth. As prophesied in the Book of Mormon, full of portent for Latter-day Saints, there will be real turbulence.

Then, in like manner, as I have watched a few personal friends over the years go through

the ebb and flow of faith, I have wondered about the underlying causes. What happened? And again and again a verse in the Book of Mormon is the most satisfactory explanation. It is an interrogative in Mosiah 5:13: “For how knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?” This describes what usually happens: otherwise basically decent people simply get caught up with the cares of the world. If instead of drawing closer to the Master we become a stranger to Him, then we have lost our way. The decent people to whom this happens haven’t engaged in major transgression, as a rule, but they have distanced themselves from the Savior and He has become a stranger to them. If, on the other hand, we really are drawing closer to Jesus and we are becoming however incrementally more like Him, then we are progressing. To use another Book of Mormon phrase, we must be “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict” (Mosiah 3:19). Whenever our wills are increasingly subsumed by His—the Book of Mormon calls it “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7)—then we really are on the road to discipleship. But that can’t happen with the sort of superficiality with which some approach discipleship.

I am going to preach a hard doctrine to you now. The submission of one’s will is really the only uniquely personal thing we have to place on God’s altar. It is a hard doctrine, but it is true. The many other things we give to God, however nice that may be of us, are actually things He has already given us, and He has loaned them to us. But when we begin to submit ourselves by letting our wills be swallowed up in God’s will, then we are really giving something to Him. And that hard doctrine lies at the center of discipleship. There is a part of us that is ultimately sovereign, the mind and heart, where we really do decide which way to go and what to do. And when we submit to

His will, then we’ve really given Him the one thing He asks of us. And the other things are not very, very important. It is the only possession we have that we can give, and there is no resulting shortage in our agency as a result. Instead, what we see is a flowering of our talents and more and more surges of joy. Submission to Him is the only form of submission that is completely safe.

This ought to be more obvious to us than it is sometimes, brothers and sisters, because developmentally, as well as doctrinally, all the other commandments hang, as Jesus said, on the two great interactive commandments. Let me read them to you now because they are so vital.

*Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*

*This is the first and great commandment.*

*And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*

*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. [Matthew 22:37–40]*

Now we don’t think about it enough in the Church, but the first commandment is first for a reason. And the second commandment is second for a reason. True, the second commandment is like unto the first, but it isn’t the first commandment. We worship the perfect object of that first commandment, God, because of His spiritual supremacy. We do not worship our neighbors. We are to love them but not worship them. This recognition of God’s supremacy on all counts is why that commandment is first and why it is completely safe for us to submit to Him. Besides, at a university it is not inappropriate to remind you that that first commandment includes all of our heart, soul, and mind. The mind must surrender to God, too. It is my impression, looking about the world, that there are comparatively more knees bent in reverence to God than there are

minds bent in reverence to Him. That human stubbornness tends to show up in terms of our unwillingness to submit our minds to Him.

C. S. Lewis put it well when he said, “We are bidden to ‘put on Christ,’ to become like God. That is, whether we like it or not, God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want” (*The Problem of Pain*, chapter 3, paragraph 18). Hence it is so vital for us to be submissive because we’ll be puzzled when He gives us what we need in order to become more like Him and the Son, unless we are submissive in mind.

Now that grand key, therefore, is why we will have missed the train if Jesus is a stranger and far from the thoughts and intents of our heart. Because of his intellectual submissiveness, Enoch learned about what Paul called “the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). I love that phrase of Paul’s. Enoch personally saw the tears of the Lord. He personally heard the Lord’s lamentations about the human family. God recited how He has given us our agency, commanded us to love and to choose Him and likewise love one another. Here again are the two great commandments. Yet we mortals so often choose evil or let the cares of the world crowd out the important things.

Instead of choosing God and His ways, we get busy with the cares of the world, and that is when neighbors get excluded, too. So obeying that first great commandment permits us to acknowledge and love the Lord and to accept His love of us, brothers and sisters, including the timing and shaping of us. Remember Nephi’s meek acceptance of God’s will: “I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17). We don’t know the meaning of all things, but we know that God loves us, and that is sufficient to get us by and through anything.

We have a lot of people who partially keep the second commandment more than they truly keep the first. The trouble with just focus-

ing on the second commandment to the exclusion of the first is that we may momentarily do some good deed for a neighbor, but it may not mean that we have worshipped God with all our mind. The first commandment sets the high tone, the divine standard. If it were not so, then, as the scriptures say, “Every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own god, whose image is in the likeness of the world” (D&C 1:16). That first commandment is the linchpin for everything else. Even self-centered people find themselves doing good, keeping the second commandment at times, but it is almost a kind of sidebar thing, as though they really have other things to do but are going to do a modicum of service here and feel good about it. We must not, therefore, overlook how crucial that first commandment is.

Furthermore, regarding that commandment, mortal choices need not necessarily be wicked in order to do harm. Some choices are diversions more than they are transgressions. As a result of these diversions, the sins of omission mount up. And they constitute a real deprivation because of what we withhold from our fellow human beings. Perhaps it is unintentional, but without that first commandment, some things get omitted.

In contrast, the Lord’s reach for us is so redemptive and constant. His arm, we are told in the Book of Mormon, extends all the day long (see 2 Nephi 28:32). And the prophet Mormon spoke in powerful lamentation of those who did not respond even so (see Mormon 6:16–22). Yet Jesus waits with open arms to receive you, and if we are fully faithful at a much later date, we can eventually know at the entrance to His kingdom that sublime moment the prophet Mormon described when we could be “clasped in the arms of Jesus” (Mormon 5:11). There, the Lord Himself, by choice, is the gatekeeper, “and he employeth no servants there” (2 Nephi 9:41). This is why King Lamoni’s father surely had it right. In His halting initial faith he said to the Lord, “I will

give away all my sins to know thee” (Alma 22:18). That sacred deep act of discipleship is so crucial. I love, therefore, this statement of the Prophet Joseph Smith. I find it encouraging, as you doubtless have in terms of your discipleship. The Prophet Joseph said:

*We consider that God has created man with a mind capable of instruction, and a faculty which may be enlarged in proportion to the heed and diligence given to the light communicated from heaven to the intellect; and that the nearer man approaches perfection, the clearer are his views, and the greater his enjoyments, till he has overcome the evils of his life and lost every desire for sin; and like the ancients, arrives at that point of faith where he is wrapped in the power and glory of his Maker and is caught up to dwell with Him. But we consider that this is a station to which no man ever arrived in a moment. [Teachings, p. 51]*

King Benjamin said of that moment, that when we reach it, we will “have no more disposition to do evil” (Mosiah 5:2). And we can tell in our hearts and with the help of our conscience how we are doing on the basis of those two criteria. This means, frankly, that our sins of omission, at least speaking for myself, need more attention and appreciation and more repentance. They don’t involve, as said earlier, transgression, but they are a matter of deflection.

Perhaps it is true in discipleship as it is in athletics that the legs go first. Good spiritual legs such as those of ancient Joseph, in the face of temptation from Potiphar’s wife, are so crucial. In that terse verse we read of Joseph that he “fled” (Genesis 39:12). It takes courage to run away from evil, and good legs. And those same good legs are needed for us to lengthen our stride and to continue. That’s why we sing the song “Do not weary by the way” (“If the Way Be Full of Trial, Weary Not,” *Deseret Sunday School Songs* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1909], no. 148). And if

we don’t worry by the way, we will pass life’s daily quizzes, not just the major exams. And that takes good legs.

We must keep things in proportion. Remember Thomas B. Marsh and the dispute over milk? He had let the issue grow out of proportion, and it caused him to focus jealously on the minor imperfections of the Prophet Joseph. This led to his excommunication. Happily, Thomas B. Marsh came back.

At that same time, Lorenzo Snow, a contemporary, said that he noticed the minor imperfections in the Prophet Joseph, but he was grateful that the Lord could use him even so to do such a significant work (see Neal A. Maxwell, *“But for a Small Moment”* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1986], p. 127). This made Lorenzo Snow grateful because there was then some hope for himself.

One of the realities of the kingdom is that we work with each other in the midst of our imperfections. We see those imperfections as well as the traits and talents that God has blessed us with. And during this process of life together in the community of Saints, we watch each other grow. It is not surprising when we see each other grow as a result of the opportunities in the kingdom. And it isn’t usually just one muscle that is developed. On the other hand, we see people in the Church for whom adversity is an anesthetic and for whom suffering is a sedative. And in that soil the root of bitterness can spring up. I wish I could say to you that suffering teaches automatically, but it doesn’t. To paraphrase Anne Morrow Lindbergh: If suffering inevitably taught us, the human family would be a very wise family indeed (see *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead* [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973], p. 214). It takes meekness to learn from suffering. Some here know that for 25 years I have felt one of the precious verses in all scripture about discipleship was the one given to the Prophet Joseph in Liberty Jail: “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy

good” (D&C 122:7). That premise is that experience is valuable, and the only way to have it is to have it. And whether it involves adversity or whatever, then we are blessed. Notice these lines from Paul: “Knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope” (Romans 5:3–4).

You may ask, “There is no other way?”

And I answer, “No, there is not. There is no other way.” And thus, in this discipleship about which I am speaking, it is so essential that out of these experiences we form character. It is much easier in this life to be a character than to have character. And we see characters before us in the media all the time. To have character is a special and wonderful thing, but to develop it is not a pain-free process. The Prophet Joseph said:

*I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force . . . all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty.* [Teachings, p. 304]

It doesn’t happen in a day, and you and I see these collisions between members and challenges. Those who are meek handle them, and they become smooth and polished.

I love a line from the prophet Moroni and say it to my posterity, some of whom are here today. I can’t express it any better. He said:

*Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, neither my father, because of his imperfection, neither them who have written before him; but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been.* [Mormon 9:31]

What a marvelous, meek way for one generation passing on to relate to the one that is

rising. Thus I return again to the words *anxiously engaged*. They do not mean hectically engaged. They do not mean frantically engaged. Rather, they reflect a deep, quiet commitment—some anticipation of what lies ahead. We must be willing to let our gears of commitment be hammered and shaped so that they mesh with life’s opportunities in ways that are crucial.

We are so blessed with a rich theology, so blessed with the Church that is full of ordinances and doctrines and all of those things that make it so engaging and so easy to be anxiously engaged.

Now there is a problem that we have to face. C. S. Lewis called it “the tether and pang of the particular” (“The Brook,” *The Pilgrim’s Regress* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974], p. 198). He was describing life’s local situations with which we must deal.

I was talking with a widow of just one month who is left with several children. Her young husband died of cancer. She was not whining. She was not complaining. She was just describing for me the tether and pang of the particular and what it is like to be a single parent and to have to do all things on her own. Such is the tether and pang of the particular. Again that marvelous Book of Mormon tells us that we have got to be content with the things allotted to us. Whatever the circumference of our tether is, we ought to be content with that and live within the tether and pang of the particular.

Now, as I prepare to close, you face a time in which there is a significant amount of social decay in our society. Some of its roots lie in the 1960s. You can easily see why the Book of Mormon described people as having “become weak, because of their transgression, in the space of not many years” (Helaman 4:26). It doesn’t take very long. For you to be strong is absolutely crucial, brothers and sisters.

I hope you will forgive me if I say something your parents might like me to say, because I can do it better than they. I can remember three or four times when I was a little feisty and independent before marriage—not as to behavioral or doctrinal things, just more assertive—and while my parents saw that, they respected my agency. I knew how they felt, but they backed off a little bit. There was almost a sacred zone there where they could say, “You know how we feel.”

I found myself loving and respecting them all the more. If some of you may be in that situation now or subsequently, and see in your wonderful parents a willingness to back off a little bit because they honor your agency, honor them. Back off a little bit, and out of that will come the kind of negotiation you’ll come to expect a little more when you are on the other side of that equation. Lehi described himself as “a trembling parent” (2 Nephi 1:14). I think that is not too graphic. Even with good children there are times when you will know that trembling as a parent. Get some experience with this sacred zone, therefore, by honoring parents now who may be wise enough to back off a little bit, and you back off a little bit in such a way that there is an accord such as you would like to have.

Now I close with two experiences. As a teenage boy I watched my six-week-old sister, Carol, struggle with what seemed to me to be lethal whooping cough at a time when there were no antibiotics. I came home one night from having been a grease monkey at a Greyhound bus depot and saw the light was on. It was about four o’clock in the morning. I knew it meant trouble. As I came in, Carol was laid out on the round dining room table, and Dad was waiting for a neighbor to come to join in blessing her. I thought she was gone. It seemed to me she had quit breathing. Then I watched the power of the priesthood, and I watched her start breathing again. That experience let me know the reality of the priesthood

at a very young age. Our prayers for her were answered.

Have I had some prayers that were not answered? Yes, and so have you. Sometimes the reason is that we may ask for something without enough faith, or we may in fact ask for something that isn’t expedient or that isn’t right. For us to get used to the fact that all prayers are not automatically answered is one of life’s growing experiences.

Despite the constant turnover in the experiences and generations of students, let me try to make this second story relevant. It took place during the fighting on Okinawa in May of 1945. Enemy artillery had been searching for our little mortar squad for several days, and the shells had been going over us. We felt fairly secure. But they must have moved their artillery pieces because they dropped a shell right between my hole and the foxhole of my friend. I’m sure I was not the only one praying, but I did pray mighty hard, and I made some promises to the Lord about how I would seek to serve Him if indeed He chose to spare me. I’m still trying to keep that promise. Some prayers are answered dramatically, as with Carol and the prayer in the foxhole. With others we must importune and wait. But if we do that, there will come to us in those waiting moments special things.

Let me mention without naming anyone the experience last night of being with a wonderful matriarch. In the last three years this wonderful lady and good friend of Colleen’s and mine has lost a husband, a daughter, a son, and two brothers. At 8:30 this morning, her remaining son had brain tumor surgery. As I watch that family, so settled, so established, I can see that they know what Nephi knew: “I know that [God] loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17). The feeling I felt watching that family circle and their many friends was that this family is okay. They will make it, whatever the results of the surgery may be.



If we are meek enough and we are willing to submit enough, then we can be like our friend's marvelous young son last night after his blessing. He was secure. This is a son who, when his first wife died a few years ago, was seated with the family in the first two rows at the funeral. When it was his turn to praise his wife, he passed the young baby to someone else on that row and then came to the pulpit and gave a wonderful sermon, as if speaking at his wife's funeral was something he did twice a month.

Such intrinsic spirituality has grown in him and in his family. This family could indeed have a conversation with Job and hold their own.

Thank you for letting me be autobiographical. Please, submit your will to God. It is the only gift you've got to give. And the sooner it is placed on the altar, the better it will be for all.

I love you. I have great hopes for your generation. Thank you for this chance to bear my witness to you today. This is the Lord's work. There is nothing else that even approaches it in significance. And you have been called to carry it forward today in a time of opportunity such as we have never seen before. God loves you that much, of which I gladly testify in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.