

# *Decisions Determine Destiny*

THOMAS S. MONSON

**Y**ou are a glorious group, even a chosen generation, assembled both here in the Marriott Center at Brigham Young University and in many other locations. It is an honor for me to be with you, and I want you to know that there is nowhere else on earth I would rather be this evening.

I approach this assignment after earnest personal prayer. I seek your faith; I ask for your prayers.

As I look at you assembled here and contemplate those of you who are assembled elsewhere, my thoughts turn to your parents. For many years it was my privilege nearly every week to attend stake conferences and to be in the home of a stake president or a counselor to a stake president. Sometimes, rather interesting things would occur. There were occasions when a tiny brother or sister, not knowing that Mother and Dad had given their bedroom and their bed to a General Authority, would creep in the bedroom early in the morning and think that he or she was crawling into bed with Mother and Father—only to be amazed and confused to find that such was not the case.

On one occasion many years ago, while visiting the Indianapolis Stake, I remember President Lowe, who was with Purdue University there, saying to me, “Brother Monson, would you like to come out to my

home and stay with us Saturday evening, or would you prefer to forego the 40-mile drive and stay here with my counselor in Indianapolis?”

I responded, “Well, President Lowe, it’s late at night, and, if it’s all the same to you, I’ll stay with your counselor here in Indianapolis.”

The next morning President Lowe greeted me at eight o’clock and said, “Brother Monson, you made an inspired decision.”

I asked, “How’s that?”

“Well,” he replied, “we have a son away attending the university, and our anticipation was that we, of course, would have you occupy our bedroom on Saturday evening. But, unknown to us and totally unexpectedly, our son returned home from school at two in the morning, came in the front door, walked up the stairs to our bedroom, turned on the light, and yelled, ‘Surprise!’”

I’m not certain who would have been more surprised on that occasion had I stayed with the stake president—the student or me! I think it’s rather a good thing we didn’t find out.

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Well, my young friends, what a thrilling life awaits you! You may not be a John Cabot, sailing off into the blue with the king's patent to discover new lands, nor a Captain James Cook, whose voyages of discovery carried him to "far away places with strange-sounding names."<sup>1</sup> But you can be explorers in spirit, with a mandate to make this world better by discovering improved ways of living and of doing things. The spirit of exploration, whether it be of the surface of the earth, the vastness of space, or the principles of living greatly, includes developing the capacity to face trouble with courage, disappointment with cheerfulness, and triumph with humility.

Many of you are familiar with the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. It is a favorite of mine. One laughs as he observes the old-fashioned father of a Jewish family in Russia attempting to cope with the changing times brought forcibly home to him by his beautiful daughters. With abandon they sing, "Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match." Tevye, the father, sings his reply with "If I Were a Rich Man." Tears come to the viewer as he hears the beautiful strains of "Sunrise, Sunset," and he seems to appreciate Tevye's love for his native village when the cast sings "Anatevka."

The gaiety of the dance, the rhythm of the music, and the excellence of the acting all fade in significance when Tevye speaks what to me becomes the message of the musical. He gathers his lovely daughters to his side, and, in the simplicity of his peasant surroundings, he counsels them as they ponder their future. "Remember," cautions Tevye, "in Anatevka we know who we are and what God expects us to become."

As Latter-day Saints, we know who we are and what God expects us to become. Listen to the truth taught to us in the first book of Moses, called Genesis:

*God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . .*

*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.*

*And God blessed them.* [Genesis 1:26–28]

Created in the image of God. We cannot sincerely hold this conviction without experiencing a profound sense of strength and power. As Latter-day Saints, we know that we lived before we came to earth, that mortality is a probationary period wherein we might prove ourselves obedient to God's command and thus worthy of celestial glory. Yes, we know who we are and what God expects us to become. Such knowledge, however, does not ensure our success in reaching our goal of eternal life.

During the last half century or so, there has been throughout the world a gradual but continual decline in many phases of life. We observe relationships without morality, science without humanity, knowledge without character, business without ethics, worship without sacrifice, pleasure without conscience, politics without principle, and wealth without works.

Perhaps the renowned author Charles Dickens best described our day when he spoke of a period over two centuries ago. His classic *A Tale of Two Cities* begins:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.*

This is your world. The future is in your hands. The outcome is up to you. The way to exaltation is not a freeway featuring unlimited vision, unrestricted speeds, and untested skills. Rather, it is known by many forks and turnings, sharp curves, and controlled speeds. Your driving skill will be put to the test. Are you ready? You are driving. You haven't passed this

way before. Fortunately, the Master Highway Builder, even our Heavenly Father, has provided a road map showing the route to follow. He has placed markers along the way to guide you to your destination. Perhaps you may recognize some of His signs:

- “Honour thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12).
- “Search the scriptures; for . . . they are they which testify of me” (John 5:39).
- “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).
- “Be ye clean” (3 Nephi 20:41).

That evil one too has placed road signs to frustrate your progress and to lead you from the path of truth into detours of sin. His detours all lead to a dead end. Have you noticed his markers?

- Just this once won’t matter.
- It can’t hurt anyone but me.
- My love is mine to give; my life is mine to live.
- Times have changed.

Now we see coming into focus the responsibility to choose, that inevitable crisis at the crossroads of life. He who would lead you down waits patiently for a dark night, a wavering will, a confused conscience, a mixed-up mind. Are you prepared to make the decisions at the crossroads?

I can’t stress too strongly that decisions determine destiny. You can’t make eternal decisions without eternal consequences.

May I provide a simple formula by which you can measure the choices which confront you. It’s easy to remember, sometimes difficult to apply: You can’t be right by doing wrong; you can’t be wrong by doing right. Your personal conscience always warns you as a friend before it punishes you as a judge.

The Lord, in a revelation given through Joseph Smith the Prophet at Kirtland, Ohio, May 1831, counseled:

*That which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness.*

*That which is of God is light.* [D&C 50:23–24]

Some foolish persons turn their backs on the wisdom of God and follow the allurements of fickle fashion, the attraction of false popularity, and the thrill of the moment. Their course of conduct so resembles the disastrous experience of Esau, who exchanged his birthright for a mess of pottage.

To illustrate, may I share with you the results of a survey conducted by a reputable organization and reported in a national magazine.<sup>2</sup> The survey was entitled, “Would You, for Ten Million Dollars?” Let me ask you the same questions which were asked in the survey:

- For 10 million dollars in cash, would you leave your family permanently?
- Would you marry someone you didn’t love?
- Would you give up all your friends permanently?
- Would you serve a year’s jail term on a framed charge?
- Would you take off your clothes in public?
- Would you take a dangerous job in which you had a 1-in-10 chance of losing your life?
- Would you become a beggar for a year?

Of the people polled, 1 percent would leave their families, 10 percent would marry lovelessly, 11 percent would give up friends, 12 percent would undress in public, 13 percent would go to jail for a year, 14 percent would take the risky job, and 21 percent would beg for a year.

Where money, rather than morality, dictates one’s actions, one is inclined away from God. Turning away from God brings broken covenants, shattered dreams, vanished ambitions,

unfulfilled expectations, crushed hopes, and ruined lives.

Such a quagmire of quicksand I plead with you to avoid. You are of a noble birthright. Eternal life in the kingdom of our Father is your goal. Such a goal is not achieved in one glorious attempt but rather is the result of a lifetime of righteousness, an accumulation of wise choices, even a constancy of purpose. Like the coveted A grade on the report card of a difficult and required college course, the reward of eternal life requires effort.

There is a fable told about Euclid and Pharaoh and geometry. It is said that Pharaoh, entranced by some of the explanations and demonstrations of Euclid, wished to learn geometry, and Euclid undertook to teach him. He studied for a brief period and then called in Euclid and said the process was too slow for him. He was a Pharaoh; there must be a shorter road. He did not want to spend all his time to learn geometry. Then Euclid gave voice to this great truth. Said he to his Majesty, "There is no royal road to geometry."<sup>3</sup>

My young friends, there is no royal road to salvation and exaltation. There is no royal road to success in any endeavor. The A grade is the result of each theme, each quiz, each class, each examination, each term paper. So each heartfelt prayer, each Church meeting attended, each worthy friend, each righteous decision, each act of service performed all precede that goal of eternal life.

A few months ago, as I returned from an assignment in Germany, I gazed out the window of the plane and marveled at the stars by which the navigator charted our course. My thoughts were upon you and the opportunity given me to meet with you tonight. I thought of the truth "Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them with your hands. But . . . you choose them as your guides, and following them you will reach your destiny."<sup>4</sup>

What ideals, when followed, will bring to you those blessings you so much seek, even a

quiet conscience, a peace-filled heart, a loving family, a contented home?

May I suggest these three:

*Choose your friends with caution.*

*Plan your future with purpose.*

*Frame your life with faith.*

### **First: Choose Your Friends with Caution**

In a survey which was made in selected wards and stakes of the Church, we learned a most significant fact. Those persons whose friends married in the temple usually married in the temple, while those persons whose friends did not marry in the temple usually did not marry in the temple. The influence of one's friends appeared to be a more dominant factor than parental urging, classroom instruction, or proximity to a temple.

We tend to become like those whom we admire. Just as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic account "The Great Stone Face," we adopt the mannerisms, the attitudes, even the conduct of those whom we admire—and they are usually our friends. Associate with those who, like you, are planning not for temporary convenience, shallow goals, or narrow ambition but rather for those things that matter most—even eternal objectives.

Inscribed on the east transept wall of Stanford University Memorial Church is the truth: "All that is not eternal [is] too short, [and] all that is not infinite [is] too small."<sup>5</sup>

Beyond your circle of earthly friends, I urge you to make a friend of your Heavenly Father. He stands ready to answer the prayer of your heart. Being the Father of your spirit and having created you in His own image, knowing the end from the beginning, His wisdom will not fail and His counsel is ever true. Make a friend of Him.

There is another important friend you should have, and that is the bishop of your ward. He has been called of God by prophecy and the laying on of hands by those who are

in authority. He is entitled to heavenly help in providing you with counsel and guidance. Make a friend of him.

How well I remember the challenges confronting the youth in the ward over which I once presided as a bishop. One evening a lovely teenage girl came to my office with her boyfriend to talk things over with me. The two of them were very much in love, and temptation was beginning to get the best of them.

As we counseled together, each made a pledge to the other to resist temptation and keep uppermost in their minds the goal of a temple marriage. I suggested a course of action to follow and then felt impressed to say: "If you ever find yourselves in a position of compromise and need additional strength, you call me, regardless of the hour."

One morning at 1:00 a.m., the telephone rang and a voice said: "Bishop, this is Susan. Remember how you asked me to call if I found myself being tempted? Well, Bishop, I'm in that situation." I asked where she was, and she described a popular parking spot in the Salt Lake Valley. She and her fiancé had walked to a nearby phone booth to make the call. The setting wasn't ideal for providing counsel, but the need was great, and the young couple was receptive.

I won't mention how often Susan called. However, when the mailman delivered her wedding announcement to our home and Sister Monson read, "Mr. and Mrs. Jones request the pleasure of your company at the wedding reception of their daughter, Susan," she sighed, "Thank heaven!" When I noticed the small print at the bottom, which read, "Married in the Salt Lake Temple," I said silently, "Thank heaven for the strength of Latter-day Saint youth."

*Choose your friends with caution.*

### **Second: Plan Your Future with Purpose**

The great Thomas Carlyle said: "The man without a purpose is like a ship without a rudder—a waif, a nothing, a no man. Have a purpose in life, and, having it, throw such strength of mind and muscle into your work as God has given you."<sup>6</sup>

Many years ago I served as a mission president. I had 450 wonderful, dedicated missionaries. When we returned home to Salt Lake City after three years, my dear wife and I were a little surprised one evening as we ran a tally on our missionaries, only to find that there were some sister missionaries who had not as yet found an eternal companion. We determined we would do what we could to help out. I said to Sister Monson, "Frances, let's plan with a purpose and invite three or four of our lovely sister missionaries to our home. We'll have an activity where they can tell us who of all the single returned male missionaries they would like to have invited to a little fireside in our home. Then we will show pictures of the mission, and we will arrange the seating so that they can become well acquainted with one another." This was done, and I might say that the four girls whom we invited eagerly responded to the challenge.

In shoe boxes we maintained individual five-by-seven-inch photographs of every missionary. We had four such boxes, with missionary pictures in each. As those four girls sat around our living room, I said to each of them, "Here is a gift. Thumb through your box of pictures and tell me which of all the pictures represents the young man whom you would most like to have invited to come to this fireside." My, that was an interesting scene. I think that the only way I could adequately describe it is to ask a question. Have you ever seen children on Christmas morning? We went forward and invited the chosen four young men to join these four young ladies in our home, and we had a glorious evening. At the conclusion of the evening, I noticed two of them slowly

walking down our driveway, and I said to Sister Monson, “This looks promising.” They were walking very close together.

It wasn’t long afterward that I received a telephone call from the young man. He said, “President Monson, do you remember that I promised you if I ever fell in love, I would let you know?”

I said, “Yes, sir.”

He continued, “President, I have fallen in love.”

I replied, “Good. With whom?”

He said, “You’ll never guess.”

I was discreet; I didn’t guess. I said, “You tell me.” And he named the sister missionary with whom he walked side by side and hand in hand from our party that evening. They have now been married for 42 years and have five children and many grandchildren.

Some of you within the sound of my voice have already married; others are still seeking that special someone with whom you would want to spend eternity. For those of you in the latter category, in your quest for the man or woman of your dreams, you may well heed the counsel given by King Arthur in the musical *Camelot*. Faced with a particularly vexing dilemma, King Arthur could well have been speaking to all of us when he declared, “We must not let our passions destroy our dreams.”<sup>7</sup> May you follow this most essential counsel. I urge you to hold fast to your standards. I plead with you not to waver.

As a young boy I had a very special Sunday School teacher who has since passed away. Her name was Lucy Gertsch.

Lucy was lovely and ever so sweet. She was deserving of a worthy companion, yet none had come her way. The years flew by and Lucy was becoming resigned to the fact that she would never marry. And then, when she was in her mid-forties, she met Dick. It was a case of love at first sight. Just one problem: Dick was not a member of the Church. Did Lucy succumb to the age-old fallacy of marrying out

of desperation, with the fleeting hope that one day he would become a member? Not Lucy. She was wiser than this. She simply told him, “Dick, I think you’re wonderful, but we would never be happy dating each other.”

“Why not?” he countered.

“Because you’re not a Mormon.”

“How do I become a Mormon? I want to date you.” He studied the gospel. She answered his questions. He gained a testimony and was baptized.

Then he said, “Lucy, now that I’m a member, we can be married at last.”

Lucy replied, “Oh, Dick, I love you so much. Now that you are a member of the Church, you wouldn’t be content with anything but a temple marriage.”

“How long will that take, Lucy?”

“About a year, if we meet the other requirements.”

One year later Lucy and Dick entered the house of the Lord.

Lucy lived the truth of the verse:

*Dare to be a Mormon;*

*Dare to stand alone.*

*Dare to have a purpose firm,*

*And dare to make it known.*<sup>8</sup>

*Plan your future with purpose.*

### **Third: Frame Your Life with Faith**

Amidst the confusion of the times, the conflicts of conscience, and the turmoil of daily living, an abiding faith becomes an anchor to our lives.

Little children can give us interesting examples of faith. Some time ago I jotted down from one of our national magazines a short compilation of “Children’s Letters to God.” I found them most interesting.

Little Mark wrote: “Dear God, I keep waiting for spring but it never [did] come yet. Don’t forget.”

Another child stated: “Dear God, If you made the rule for kids to take out the garbage please change it.”

Little Mickey wrote: “Dear God, If you watch in Church on Sunday I will show you my new shoes.”

Jeff wrote: “Dear God, It is great the way you always get the stars in the right places. Why can’t you do that with the moon?”

Joyce wrote: “Dear God, Thank you for the baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy.”

I like this one from Matthew the best: “Dear God, I read your book and I like it.” Then he asked, “I would like to write a book someday with the same kind of stories. Where do you get your ideas? Best wishes.”<sup>9</sup>

True faith requires determination, and the kind of determination which is required is that set forth by a 21-year-old female college senior, who declared:

*Our generation has been exposed, through every means of communication, to major and minor fears—the little threat of not finding a mate if one does not use a certain mouthwash or fear of nonacceptance if one does not succumb to a low moral standard because it is “the nature of the beast.”*

*Many of us accept the premises that “You can’t fight city hall” and “Live life to its fullest now, for tomorrow we will be destroyed by nuclear war or some other catastrophe.”*

*I am old-fashioned enough to believe in God; to believe in the dignity and potential of His creature, man; and I am realistic, not idealistic, enough to know that I am not alone in these feelings.*

*Some say that, unlike other generations, we have no mission in life—that everything has been handed to us. We have not been pampered but spiritually impoverished. I don’t want to live in the poverty of affluence—and I cannot live alone.*

Remember that faith and doubt cannot exist in the same mind at the same time, for one will dispel the other. Be firm in your faith.

I think of an account I read about the wife of one of our early pioneers. Her name was Catherine Curtis Spencer. Her husband, Orson Spencer, was a sensitive, well-educated man. She had been reared in Boston and was cultured and refined. She and Orson had six children. After leaving Nauvoo, her delicate health declined from exposure and hardship. Elder Spencer wrote to her parents and asked if she could return to live with them while he established a home for her in the West. Their reply: “Let her renounce her degrading faith, and she can come back, but never until she does.” Sister Spencer would not renounce her faith. When her parents’ letter was read to her, she asked her husband to get his Bible and read to her from the book of Ruth: “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16). Outside the storm raged, the wagon covers leaked, and friends held milk pans over Sister Spencer’s head to keep her dry. In these conditions, and without a word of complaint, she closed her eyes for the last time.<sup>10</sup>

Though we may not necessarily forfeit our lives in service to our God, we can certainly demonstrate our love for Him by how well we serve Him. He who hears our silent prayers, He who observes our unheralded acts will reward us openly when the need comes.

Should doubt knock at your doorway, just say to those skeptical, disturbing, rebellious thoughts: “I propose to stay with my faith, with the faith of my people. I know that happiness and contentment are there, and I forbid you, agnostic, doubting thoughts, to destroy the house of my faith. I grant that I cannot explain the miracles of the Bible, and I do not attempt to do so, but I accept God’s word. I wasn’t with Joseph, but I believe him. My faith did not come to me through science, and I will not permit so-called science to destroy it. When

I change my mind about God and His work, only the inspiration of God will change it.”

*Frame your life with faith.*

When you choose your friends with caution, plan your future with purpose, and frame your life with faith, you will merit the companionship of the Holy Spirit. You will have a perfect brightness of hope. You will testify through your own experience to the truth of the Lord’s promise:

*I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.*

*Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory. [D&C 76:5–6]*

To these perfect truths I bear my solemn witness and invoke the blessings of our Heavenly Father upon each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Words and music by Joan Whitney and Alex Kramer, “Far Away Places,” 1948.

2. See James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth: What People Really*

*Believe About Everything That Really Matters* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991), 65–66.

3. Euclid to Ptolemy I, from *Proclus*, Commentary on Euclid, Prologue.

4. Carl Schurz, address in Faneuil Hall, Boston, 18 April 1859.

5. [http://religiouslife.stanford.edu/memorial\\_church/inscriptions.html](http://religiouslife.stanford.edu/memorial_church/inscriptions.html)

6. See Harold B. Lee, *CR*, October 1952, 17; Thomas S. Monson, *CR*, April 1982, 84.

7. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, *Camelot*, 1960.

8. Thomas S. Monson, *CR*, April 2000, 70; or “Your Eternal Home,” *Ensign*, May 2000, 54; see also Mark E. Petersen, *CR*, April 1952, 104.

9. In Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, comps., *More Children’s Letters to God* (New York: Essandess Special Editions, 1967); Hample and Marshall, *Children’s Letters to God: The New Collection* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1991).

10. See Nicholas G. Morgan, “And Thus History Was Made,” *Improvement Era*, July 1940, 399; see also Preston Nibley, *Exodus to Greatness* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1947), 132–35.