

Guideposts for Life's Journey

THOMAS S. MONSON

My young brothers and sisters, what a glorious sight you are. It is an honor and a privilege for me to be here with you. My responsibility today is great, for I realize that your time is valuable, your talents are many, and your future is bright. Earnestly I seek heavenly help in responding to this challenge.

I suppose every one of us in this congregation has had a few “heart-stoppers” in his or her life. I know that I have. Before going forward with my general theme, I might mention one or two of them.

This past general conference marked 44 years since I was called to serve as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in October of 1963. A few days following that conference, I met with my colleagues for the first time in the fourth-floor room of the Salt Lake Temple. Everything was so new to me. We were to partake of the sacrament that day. As we prepared to receive it, President David O. McKay said, “Before we partake of the bread and water, I would like to invite our newest member, Brother Monson, to instruct the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve on the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. We will hear from you now, Brother Monson.” That was a heart-stopper for me.

At the conclusion of the meeting, we moved to the lunchroom reserved for the First Presidency and the Twelve, where we were to eat. As we sat around the table, President McKay said, “Brother Monson, do you believe that William Shakespeare really wrote the sonnets attributed to him?”

“Yes,” I responded, “I do, President McKay.”

He then exclaimed, “Wonderful! So do I; so do I.”

I thought to myself, “I hope he moves away from Shakespeare.” I was a business major.

However, he turned again to me and said, “Brother Monson, do you read Shakespeare?”

I said, “Occasionally.”

“Fine,” he said. “What is your favorite work of Shakespeare?”

I thought quickly—perhaps more a desperate prayer than a reasoned thought—and replied, “*Henry the Eighth*.”

“Which is your favorite passage?” he asked.

I had a heart-stopping situation right there. Then I thought of Cardinal Wolsey, that man

Thomas S. Monson was first counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 13 November 2007.

who served his king but neglected his God. I recited to President McKay what Cardinal Wolsey lamented when he was shorn of all his power:

*Had I but served my God with half the zeal
I served my king, he would not in mine age
Have left me naked to mine enemies.*¹

President McKay said, “Oh, I love that passage, too.” Then he changed the subject, for which I shall be eternally grateful.

As we journey through mortality, heart-stoppers will come to each of us.

My young friends, I commend you for paying the price in time, in effort, in money to obtain your education. Your parents may be sacrificing, skimping, and going without so that you may be given the education which will enable you to excel in today’s world.

Whatever your future pathway may be, may I suggest to you today four guideposts to assist in your respective journeys through school and through life itself.

First: **Glance backward.**

Second: **Look heavenward.**

Third: **Reach outward.**

Fourth: **Press onward.**

Let us consider each in its turn. First, **glance backward.** A review of the past can be helpful—that is, if we learn from the mistakes and follies of those who have gone before, and if we do not repeat them. John Toland, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, in summing up his monumental work *The Rising Sun*, declared:

*I have done my utmost to let the events speak for themselves, and if any conclusion was reached, it was that there are no simple lessons in history, that it is human nature that repeats itself, not history.*²

I have suggested merely a glance at the past, for it is not practical to think we can return. Some of you may be familiar with Thornton Wilder’s classic drama *Our Town*. If you are,

you will remember the town of Grover’s Corners. In the play, Emily Webb dies in childbirth, and we read of the lonely grief of her young husband, George, left with their four-year-old son. Emily does not wish to rest in peace; she wants to experience again the joys of her life. She is granted the privilege to return to earth and to relive her twelfth birthday. At first it is exciting to be young again, but the excitement wears off quickly. The day holds no joy, now that Emily knows what is in store for the future. It is unbearably painful to realize how unaware she had been of the meaning and wonder of life while she was alive. Before returning to her resting place, Emily laments, “Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it—every, every minute?”³

May each of us learn to appreciate the gift of life that we have been given. And, in that context, at this time of year when we will soon be celebrating Thanksgiving, I would urge all of us to glance backward in order to recognize those things for which we are thankful—and then to express appreciation to anyone to whom we owe a debt of gratitude. May we express thanks to parents for caring, for sacrificing, for laboring in our behalf. May we express thanks to friends, to professors, and to any others who have helped along the way. May we express thanks to our Father in Heaven for the blessing of life and the chance to return to Him. And may we express thanks to Him for the gift of His Only Begotten Son, who died that we might live.

May the lessons we learn as we glance backward help us to live more fully each day of our future.

Now that we have glanced backward, let us **look heavenward.** From the heavens came the gentle invitation “Look to God and live.”⁴

We have not been left to wander in darkness and in silence, uninstructed, uninspired, without revelation. One who knew and taught this truth was President Harold B. Lee, who wrote this inscription on the title page of the triple

combination of scripture which he presented to his teenage daughter:

To My Dear Maurine,

That you may have a constant measure by which to judge between truth and the errors of man's philosophies, and thus grow in spirituality as you increase in knowledge, I give you this sacred book to read frequently and cherish throughout your life.

*Lovingly, your father,
Harold B. Lee*

From the scriptures, from the prophets, comes counsel for our time as we look heavenward.

You have the blessing of receiving your education at an institution governed by the principles and ideals of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, where one of the goals of the university is to build testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and encourage living its principles.

Looking heavenward should be our lifelong endeavor. 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 resembles the disastrous experience of Esau, who exchanged his birthright for a mess of pottage.

And what are the results of such action? I testify to you today that turning away from God brings broken covenants, shattered dreams, and crushed hopes. 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 and lofty ideals.

Amidst the confusion of our age, the conflicts of conscience, and the turmoil of

daily living, an abiding faith becomes an anchor to our lives.

By reaching heavenward and seeking Heavenly Father in personal and family prayer, we and our loved ones will develop the fulfillment of what the great English statesman William E. Gladstone described as the world's greatest need: "a living faith in a personal God."⁵ Such faith will illuminate our way as the lighthouse of the Lord.

When you have an abiding faith in the living God, when your outward actions reflect your inner convictions, you have the composite strength of exposed and hidden virtues. They combine to give safe passage through whatever rough seas might arise.

Wherever we may be, our Heavenly Father can hear and answer the prayer offered in faith.

Many years ago, on my first visit to the fabled village of Sauniatu in Samoa, so loved by President David O. McKay, my wife and I met with a large gathering of small children—nearly 200 in number. At the conclusion of our messages to these shy, yet beautiful youngsters, I suggested to the native Samoan teacher that we go forward with the closing exercises. As he announced the final hymn, I suddenly felt compelled to greet personally each of these children. My watch revealed that the time was too short for such a privilege, for we were scheduled on a flight out of the country, so I discounted the impression. Before the benediction was to be spoken, I again felt that I should shake the hand of each child. I made the desire known to the instructor, who displayed a broad and beautiful Samoan smile. In Samoan he announced this to the children. They beamed their approval.

The instructor then revealed to me the reason for his and their joy. He said, "When we learned that a member of the Council of the Twelve was to visit us here in Samoa, so far away from Church headquarters, I told the children that if they would earnestly and sincerely pray and exert faith like the Bible

accounts of old, the Apostle would visit our tiny village at Sauniatu, and, through their faith, he would be impressed to greet each child with a personal handclasp." Tears could not be restrained as the precious boys and girls walked shyly by and whispered softly to us the sweet Samoan greeting "talofa lava." A profound expression of faith had been evidenced.

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

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 acknowledge that I do not understand the processes of creation, but I accept the fact of it. 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."

As we look heavenward, we will receive divine direction. I bear witness to you today that the sweetest spirit and feeling in all of mortality is when we have an opportunity to be on the Lord's errand and to know that He has guided our footsteps.

Very often on Sundays, when I am not otherwise assigned, I will attend a sacrament meeting in one of the care centers located near my home. There, precious souls, all confined to wheelchairs, meet in an attitude of worship. Worthy priesthood holders from the surrounding area are called as bishops or branch presidents to preside over the care center units, and priests and deacons are assigned each week to bless and pass the sacrament. One cannot attend without being uplifted and inspired.

One Sunday a young man was to play the violin for the benefit of the elderly and inca-

pacitated thron. He began, and as he played, his music became sweeter with each passing minute. Tears came to the young man's eyes as he later mentioned that the notes tumbled through his mind, one following the other in perfect succession, and that he had never played with such pure inspiration as he had that particular day. He proffered, "It wasn't my skill. It was the yearning of this special audience."

At the same meeting, an elderly lady called out, "I'm cold!" A priest at the sacrament table said nothing, but he arose and walked to her side. He then removed his own jacket and placed it around the shoulders of the lady who was cold. To him I said, "What you have done today you will ever remember. Your act of kindness reflects the nobility of your soul. You have been as the good Samaritan who aided the helpless traveler on the road to Jericho."

As we look heavenward, we inevitably learn of our responsibility to **reach outward**.

To find real happiness, we must seek for it in a focus outside ourselves. No one has learned the meaning of living until he has surrendered his ego to the service of his fellow man. Service to others is akin to duty—the fulfillment of which brings true joy.

We do not live alone—in our city, our nation, or our world. There is no dividing line between our prosperity and our neighbor's wretchedness. "Love thy neighbor" is more than a divine truth. It is a pattern for perfection. This truth inspires the familiar charge "Go forth to serve." Try as some of us may, we cannot escape the influence our lives have upon the lives of others. Ours is the opportunity to build, to lift, to inspire, and indeed to lead.

The New Testament teaches that it is impossible to take a right attitude toward Christ without taking an unselfish attitude toward men. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."⁶ We may think as we please, but there is no question about what the

Bible teaches. In the New Testament there is no road to the heart of God that does not lead through the heart of man.

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught that a true Latter-day Saint

*is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to provide for the widow, to dry up the tear of the orphan, to comfort the afflicted, whether in this church, or in any other, or in no church at all, wherever he finds them.*⁷

We cannot be careless in our reach. Lives of others depend on us. The power to lead is indeed the power to mislead; and the power to mislead is the power to destroy.

Many have come into the Church—or at least have come to know and respect the Church—because someone made the effort to reach outward. I share with you a treasured family experience which had its beginning back in 1959 when I was called to preside over the Canadian Mission, headquartered in Toronto.

Our daughter, Ann, who is in the audience today, turned five shortly after we arrived in Canada. She saw the missionaries going about their work and she, too, wanted to be a missionary. My wife demonstrated understanding by permitting Ann to take to class a few copies of the *Children's Friend*. That wasn't sufficient for Ann. She also wanted to take with her a copy of the Book of Mormon so that she might talk to her teacher, Miss Pepper, about the Church. I think it rather thrilling that just a few years ago, long years after our return from Toronto, we came home from a vacation and found in our mailbox a note from Miss Pepper which read:

Dear Ann:

Think back many years ago. I was your school-teacher in Toronto, Canada. I was impressed by the copies of the Children's Friend which you brought

to school. I was impressed by your dedication to a book called the Book of Mormon.

I made a commitment that one day I would come to Salt Lake City and see why you talked as you did and why you believed in the manner you believed. Today I had the privilege of going through your visitors' center on Temple Square. Thanks to a five-year-old girl who had an understanding of that which she believed, I now have a better understanding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Miss Pepper died not too long after that visit. How happy our daughter Ann was when she attended the Jordan River Temple and performed the temple work for her beloved teacher to whom she had reached out so many years ago.

And while we reach outward, we have the responsibility to **press onward**.

No one has described this life as being easy. Indeed, it has become increasingly more difficult. The world seems to have slipped from the moorings of safety and drifted from the harbor of peace. Permissiveness, immorality, pornography, and the power of peer pressure cause many to be tossed about on a sea of sin and crushed on the jagged reefs of lost opportunities, forfeited blessings, and shattered dreams.

Anxiously we ask, "Is there a way to safety? Can someone guide us? Is there an escape from threatened destruction?"

The answer is a resounding yes! I counsel you: Look to the lighthouse of the Lord. There is no fog so dense, no night so dark, no gale so strong, no mariner so lost but what its beacon light can rescue. It calls, "This way to safety; this way to home."

Press onward we must. The Apostle Paul described life as a race. He said, "Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain."⁸

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes also wrote of this subject, saying, "The race is not

to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.”⁹ Actually, the prize belongs to him who endures to the end.

In the private sanctuary of one’s own conscience lies that spirit, that determination, to press onward and to measure up to the stature of true potential. But the way is rugged, and the course is strenuous. So discovered John Helander from Göteborg, Sweden. John was a young adult. He had the same yearnings for the blessings of success as do all. But John is handicapped, in that it is difficult for him to coordinate his motions.

At an activity of young people in Kungsbacka, Sweden, John took part in an 800-meter running race. He had no chance to win. Rather, his was the possibility of being humiliated, mocked, derided, scorned. Perhaps John remembered another who lived long ago and far away. Wasn’t He mocked? Wasn’t He derided? Wasn’t He scorned? But He prevailed. He won His race. Maybe John could win his.

What a race it is! Struggling, surging, pressing, the runners bolt far beyond John. There is wonderment among the spectators. Who is this runner who lags so far behind? The participants, on their second lap of this two-lap race, pass John while he is but halfway through the first lap. Tension mounts as the runners press toward the tape. Who will win? Who will place second? Then comes the final burst of speed; the tape is broken. The crowd cheers; the winner is proclaimed.

The race is over—or is it? Who is this contestant who continues to run when the race is ended? He crosses the finish line on but his first lap. Doesn’t he know he has lost? Ever onward he struggles, the only participant now on the track. This is his race. This must be his victory. No one among the vast throng of spectators leaves. Every eye is on this valiant runner. He makes the final turn and moves toward the finish line. There is awe; there is admiration. Every spectator sees himself running his own race of life. As John approaches the finish

line, the audience, as one, rises to its feet. There is a loud applause of acclaim. Stumbling, falling, exhausted but victorious, John Helander breaks the newly tightened tape. (Officials are human beings, too.) The cheering echoes for miles. And just maybe, if the ear is carefully attuned, that Great Scorekeeper—even the Lord—can be heard to say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”¹⁰

Each of us is a runner in the race of life. Comforting is the fact that there are many runners. Reassuring is the knowledge that our Eternal Scorekeeper is understanding. Challenging is the truth that each must run. But you and I do not run alone. We take confidence from the hymn:

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee
to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, . . . omnipotent hand.*

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*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose
I will not, I cannot, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!¹¹*

Let us shed any thought of failure. Let us discard any habit or trait that may hinder. Let us ever press onward. Let us seek; let us obtain the prize prepared for all—even exaltation in the celestial kingdom of God.

Your future is bright. It is challenging. It awaits you. Do not venture forth alone. Minnie Louise Haskins counseled:

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
“Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the
unknown.” And he replied, “Go out into the dark-
ness and put your hand into the hand of God. That
shall be to you better than a light and safer than a
known way.”¹²*

Safe journey, my beloved friends, as you **glance backward, look heavenward, reach outward,** and **press onward** and find your way safely home again. This is my prayer for each of us, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *King Henry the Eighth*, act 3, scene 2, lines 455–57.

2. John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936–1945* (New York: Random House, 1970), author foreword.

3. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (1938), act 3, part 3.

4. Alma 37:47.

5. In W. T. Stead, “Mr. Gladstone,” *American Monthly Review of Reviews* 18 (July 1898): 63.

6. Matthew 25:40.

7. *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 10 (15 March 1842): 732.

8. 1 Corinthians 9:24.

9. Ecclesiastes 9:11.

10. Matthew 25:21.

11. Text attributed to Robert Keen, ca. 1787, “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 85.

12. Minnie Louise Haskins, prose introduction to “God Knows,” *The Desert* (self-published, 1908).