

# *Depending on the Lord: Gospel Insights from a Musician*

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**G**ood morning! It is a cherished privilege to share this time with you this morning.

Thirty years of college teaching, 32 years of parenthood, 40 years of Church service, and 45 years of performing as a musician have convinced me that I am nothing. As to my own strength, I am weak, and I must depend fully upon the Lord if I am to succeed in accomplishing anything good. You recognize those are nearly the words of Ammon in the chapter 26 of the book of Alma (see verses 11–12). Moroni said something very similar:

*And now I speak unto all the ends of the earth—that if the day cometh that the power and gifts of God shall be done away among you, it shall be because of unbelief.*

*And wo be unto the children of men if this be the case; for there shall be none that doeth good among you, no not one. For if there be one among you that doeth good, he shall work by the power and gifts of God. [Moroni 10:24–25]*

I know that is true! Those of us who have been given the gift of the Holy Ghost will never achieve our full potential without His presence in our lives. In the words of the Savior Himself:

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.*

*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. [John 15:4–5]*

I know I am completely dependent on the Lord, but despite my weaknesses and inequities and my mistakes and even failures, in His strength many good things have also been accomplished.

Early in my life, at age three, I began a string of experiences when I contracted polio that would always make me feel a keen sense of dependence on the Lord. This happened about six months before the vaccine was released that has now nearly eliminated this devastating disease in the United States. When we have the capacity to accomplish great good, there is always commensurate opposition and adversity to try to prevent us from fulfilling our potential. I have never begrudged having

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this challenge in my life because I think it has blessed me in my spiritual and musical development more than it could ever hinder me. I believe, too, that the Lord has used this adversity in my life to better prepare me for a world dominated by humanism. Humanists believe that man must succeed completely on his own abilities with no supernatural power to help. They believe in depending on themselves, not on the Lord. There is a terrifying scripture in the book of Helaman about that. In chapter 4, verse 13, Mormon describes the people of that time: “And because of . . . their boastings in their own strength, they were left in their own strength; therefore they did not prosper.”

I needed and felt extra power from the Lord from early in my life. Because of the polio, I went through a series of surgical operations. Each time I faced one of these corrective procedures my father would give me a priesthood blessing. I remember one postsurgery follow-up visit when my doctor, Paul R. Milligan—a fine man not of our faith—commented, “Raymond, I always love to operate on you because everything we do works so well and you heal so quickly.” I knew the source of that power. Through such experiences my faith developed, I recognized my clear dependence on the Lord, and I learned to pray.

I delight in an analogy offered by the late Truman G. Madsen some years ago:

*Even at our best we are like the blind boy who walks with his friend. He does not believe, nor bluff, that he is self-sufficient. Instead, he responds to the slightest nudge. (If you would know the power of God, try, early in life, to become just this dependable in your dependence.)* [“Christ and Prayer,” *Christ and the Inner Life*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 16; see also Madsen, “Yearning Prayer,” in *Era of Youth: “Learn of Me,” Improvement Era*, June 1964, 545]

Also early in my life, from age eight I was blessed with opportunities for involvement

and growth in my present field of study, music. Music has given me, by metaphor, gospel insights that have further helped me to learn my dependence on the Lord and the trust in Him that comes from that dependence.

I knew when I became a student of music at BYU that I would not be able to succeed without the blessings and extra help of the Lord, so I decided from the beginning that I would try to keep myself in a position to receive that help. I decided that meant that I must keep the Sabbath day holy by not studying and practicing on the Lord’s day. I was also determined that I would keep first things first in my life by reading my scriptures daily, praying daily, attending the temple regularly, and serving faithfully in my callings and as a home teacher.

As a student here, I was inspired by the president of BYU at that time, Dallin H. Oaks, when he spoke at a devotional like this and shared with us his commitment to keep the Sabbath day holy while he was a law student in Chicago. Here are his words:

*I had a personal experience that taught me for all time the importance of observing the Sabbath. As a Brigham Young University student, married with two small children to support, I had a job that required me to work on the Sabbath. Consequently, I did not enjoy the blessings of the Sabbath in full measure, despite my efforts always to attend at least one of my Sabbath meetings. When I left this campus to study at the University of Chicago, my mother reminded me that my father had never studied on the Sabbath during his professional training. She said to me very casually, “Son, if you want to enjoy that blessing you should arrange your activities so that you never study, so that you never do anything on the Sabbath except partake of the spiritual food that is available to you on the Lord’s day.”*

*I made up my mind at that time that I would observe the Sabbath faithfully so that I could qualify for the blessings of spiritual growth and the companionship of the Spirit that come from observing faithfully the Sabbath of our Lord. I testify to you*

*that I realized those blessings in measurable ways on innumerable occasions. My concern for the Sabbath is to earn the blessings available to those who observe it, not to keep myself from sinning. My attitude is to look on the commandment of the Sabbath as a gift of my Heavenly Father to teach me what I should do if I want to enjoy his richest blessings. That is the attitude I encourage each of us to develop toward each of our Father in heaven's commandments.*

*We read this in Isaiah about the Sabbath, and I affirm to you its truth: "If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honorable; and shalt honor him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it" (Isaiah 58:13–14). ["The Blessing of Commandments," BYU devotional address, 10 September 1974]*

The Lord also gave me encouragement in my own learning process about the Sabbath with many small miracles along the way. One remarkable experience I will share with you, hoping that it will encourage you in a similar approach in your life. I was taking that certain class that all majors have at least one of—the one that strikes fear into the heart of every student when even mentioned. We were preparing for the final exam and had been given a study page of terms and questions. At the encouragement of the teacher, we had formed study groups, farmed out research, and shared with each other. But on the day of the test, I still had not covered all the questions. We were told that we would be given two questions that we would write about for 30 minutes each, and one question that we would write about for an hour. Therefore, I needed to be prepared with an hour's worth of material for every question on the study list. The task was overwhelming!

The morning of the test came, and an hour and a half before the test I was on my knees pleading with the Lord for help to know how to best use that last hour and a half of study time. I told the Lord that I had kept first things first in my life according to my commitments and that I now really needed His help. As I prayed, I looked down the study list lying on the bed in front of me. I was impressed to study one particular question. Every other time I went by that question, I skipped it. Because it was just so big, I thought, "No one with a human bone in his body would ask that question." I similarly rationalized it again and went on past it. But as I finished the list, nothing else stood out to me. I started down the list again from the top, and when I came to that same question, it really hit me over the head.

"Ray, wake up! That's the question!" I said to myself. I spent the next hour and a half outlining an answer for that question and then fleshing out the outline from my class notes and from the textbook.

When I arrived at the test site, the teacher announced that he had changed his mind. There would be only one question on the test, and we would need to write two hours on the one question. Well, you can guess which question it was! I was so grateful for the Lord's guidance. I got a good grade on that test, and an hour and a half earlier I would have flunked it. I knew where that gift came from and why.

Similarly, I had much miraculous help when I kept my commitment to the Lord about the Sabbath day. When I returned from my mission, writing was not one of my strong points. I found it very difficult, and my freshman English class was all about writing compositions. For some reason they were always due at nine every Monday morning. There were numerous times when I was still struggling with it late Saturday night. It was so tempting to work on it on Sunday, but I did not. I would get up early Monday morning and go after it, and often it would just flow. It felt so different

than it had on Saturday night. I usually got it done by nine, but occasionally I did not. When that was the case, I would go to class and it would turn out that many class members were not finished, and the teacher would grant us until Wednesday. Or the teacher would be sick, and I would get an automatic extension until Wednesday or some other intervention. I can testify to you that I was never penalized on my grades for keeping the Sabbath day holy. Now this would not have been the case if I was slacking off in my studies or failing in my spiritual obligations. I knew the Lord would not just do the work for me if I had not done my very best.

A few years later, in graduate school in Indiana, a fellow student came into my practice room just before spring break. He looked quite dejected. I said, “Gary, what’s bothering you?” He was upset because he had decided to go to Florida with some friends for spring break, and that would mean he could not practice for a whole week.

I said, “Gary, lighten up, man! You will do better when you get back because of the break. It will be better than if you had stayed here the whole time working.”

“You really think so?” he said.

“Yes! Why, I take a day off every week, and things always go better because of it.”

He was incredulous, and we began comparing practice routines. He was practicing three hours during the day and two hours after dinner plus 12 hours each Sunday. I was practicing the three hours during the day, but often missed the two hours in the evening because I was working with the full-time missionaries, and I wasn’t practicing at all on Sundays. This was a real testimony to me of the Lord’s blessings in my practice because Gary and I were always in a friendly competition for the best playing opportunities, and I always seemed to stay just a little ahead of him in auditions and ensemble placement.

I have found the same holds true when it comes to professional work. I have never

been able to justify that my particular talents and services were needed professionally on the Sabbath day. I am often invited by others to work on the Sabbath day, and it would be tempting if I didn’t know that depending on the Lord yields much greater benefits than Sabbath employment. This was a learning curve for me, however, and I still remember one of my early experiences with this.

I was a student here at BYU and getting calls to play professionally, usually in Salt Lake City. This particular call, though, was to play in Boise for the Buddy Morrow Orchestra. It was very tempting because I was two months behind on rent and had no money for food. This job would have paid both months’ rent and put me back on my feet with some food, but it was on Saturday and Sunday. I was still trying to develop the faith and trust to really depend on the Lord in these kinds of situations, so I didn’t have a pat answer ready. I said to the caller, “Let me check on those dates, and I will call you back within half an hour.” I went immediately to my knees to check on the dates, and I knew what I must do. I called him back and said, “I’m sorry, but I have another commitment on that weekend.” I did not explain to him that it was my commitment to the Lord to keep His day holy, but, as I hung up, I felt the confirming burning of the Spirit in my heart and knew that the Lord would take care of me somehow. It doesn’t always happen so soon, but it was less than 24 hours later when another call came, this time to play for the Shrine Circus in Salt Lake. It was for the same weekend, but it was on Friday and Saturday. I made \$25 more than I would have in Boise, and I was glad I was in my meetings that Sunday when I was called into the elders quorum presidency.

It doesn’t seem logical that if I turn down work, I will make more money, and if I study one day less in a week, I will get better grades. Similarly, it does not seem logical that if I pay my tithing I can really do more with only 90

percent of my income. But that's because part of the equation is missing. It isn't really that I can do more with 90 percent than 100 percent. Rather, it is that 90 percent plus the Lord's blessings equals more than 100 percent. It is so with all things in life for those who recognize their dependence on the Lord and put Him first in their lives and trust Him to fulfill His scriptural promises. I love President Ezra Taft Benson's teachings about this:

*Men and women who turn their lives over to God will discover that He can make a lot more out of their lives than they can. He will deepen their joys, expand their vision, quicken their minds, strengthen their muscles, lift their spirits, multiply their blessings, increase their opportunities, comfort their souls, raise up friends, and pour out peace. Whoever will lose his life in the service of God will find eternal life. [TETB, 361]*

I know that is true!

When we learn these principles, then it is logical for us to consecrate all of our talents and efforts toward serving the Lord and building His kingdom. Consecration says, "I will do what is right now and trust the Lord for the outcome." Whereas aspiration says, "I must do whatever it takes to control the outcome." If we aspire enough to certain goals and are willing to pay any price, we can accomplish those things. But sometimes the price is too high. (We may lose our integrity or ultimately even our soul.) And sometimes the things we have aspired to accomplish turn out not to be a blessing to us. But if we consecrate our preparations unto the Lord and leave the outcome in His hands, the outcome will always be a blessing to us. He can control the outcome much better than we can ourselves.

Learning to use our talents to build the kingdom started for me with my full-time mission. I put off going at first because I was serious about my music, and I wasn't sure I could put down my instruments for two years and then

become competitive in my field ever again. It became an issue of faith and trust that if I consecrated those two years to the Lord, He would help me when I came back. Such has indeed been the case. I know that when we put the Lord first, then the blessings of support come when we need them.

Some years ago I attended a conference of the International Association for Jazz Education in Atlanta, Georgia. One of the presentations was by Kirk Whalum, a great tenor saxophonist and recording artist known in Los Angeles as "Mr. Soul." The title of his clinic was "How to Become the In-Demand Recording Session Player." He started out by clarifying that the most important thing in becoming this in-demand session player was one's motive. He said to that audience that if their goal was to see their names up in lights on the marquee and to go into Tower Records and see all their CDs filed behind their name cards, then there never was a better time than right then to just quit playing. He explained that that motive would never be strong enough to carry one through all that would be necessary.

Then he said, "I will tell you what your motive should be. God gave you your talent, and it is your job to hone it and then give it back in service to His other children."

I was thrilled to hear the gospel taught so clearly at an international assembly of jazz musicians. This principle does not just apply to musical talents. All of you have many talents of many kinds that have been given to you so you can serve more deeply.

Brigham Young, prophet and founder of this university, taught, "Our education should be such as to improve our minds and fit us for increased usefulness; to make us of greater service to the human family" (*JD* 14:83). The prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon shed further light on this principle when he taught:

*But before ye seek for riches, seek ye for the kingdom of God.*

*And after ye have obtained a hope in Christ ye shall obtain riches, if ye seek them; and ye will seek them for the intent to do good—to clothe the naked, and to feed the hungry, and to liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and the afflicted.*  
[Jacob 2:18–19]

This applies not only to seeking riches but also to developing our talents and honing our intellects. When we seek first a hope in Christ, then the blessings will come in developing our talents, and we will seek to develop those talents so we can be of service.

Many of my students are surprised to find out that when I was making decisions about my career, I never thought about how much money I would make or what was in it for me. That is not how we thought about it back then. My concern was, “What are my talents and how can I best develop them so I can make the greatest contribution of which I am capable in the Church and in society.” I sometimes wonder how Brigham Young would feel about the prevalent focus in our studies here on the campus today on how much money we can make: “What’s in it for me?”

It really is not about “me.” We enter to learn so we can go forth to serve. I have had to learn that in the performance arena. When we perform in front of others, it is natural to experience what is often termed “stage fright.” This can happen whether we perform a musical number, give a sacrament meeting talk, play on the football field, or participate in any other similar performance opportunity. Why do we get so frightened? If I could be so blunt, it is because we are too focused on ourselves. Our performance becomes self-centered: “I wonder if they like what I am doing?” “I wonder if they are impressed?” “I wonder if they noticed the mistake I made?” I, I, I. Those thoughts are all about me. I have spent significant time in my life trying to learn to be others-centered in my performance, as I know the Savior would be. Is He not our Exemplar in this area too?

If He were performing my part tonight, He would play with a confidence born of humility—that is, knowing the true source of all power. He would play with compassion and love. He would serve and build and lift with His performance.

For years I have spent time before an important performance reading the scriptures—such as Alma 26 and John 15, as previously mentioned—and pondering and praying to have a private victory over any conflicting motives so that I could align myself with my Heavenly Father’s purposes and have the Holy Ghost to make me adequate to the situation. I often feel inadequate. This is simply because I am inadequate. But in His strength, I can do all things! I can be an instrument in His hands to bless and lift others. When I perform in this manner with the aid of the Holy Ghost, I can play beyond my natural abilities. As Moroni put it, “If there be one among you that doeth good, he shall work by the power and gifts of God” (Moroni 10:25). Moroni also told us, “And Christ hath said: If ye will have faith in me ye shall have power to do whatsoever thing is expedient in me” (Moroni 7:33).

As a jazz musician, when I perform, I am an improviser. That means that I am responding to the very moment and making up what I am playing right on the spot. One improvisation scripture is found in the Doctrine and Covenants, section 84, verse 85:

*Neither take ye thought beforehand what ye shall say; but treasure up in your minds continually the words of life, and it shall be given you in the very hour that portion that shall be meted unto every man.*

At first glance that sounds like the Lord is telling us not to worry about preparing what we will say—to just wing it and it will all work out. We don’t need to prepare anything. That, of course, is not what He is saying. Rather, we are to prepare continually, and then the Spirit

can bring out of us that which is needed for the very moment, that which is needed to bless another or to bless others. I cannot improvise a jazz solo without any present preparation if I have not been preparing for it all my life. This is exactly how the Lord would like us to do missionary work these days. When I was a missionary, we had to memorize every word of the discussions “word perfect.” But now the Lord wants us to move to the next level and know the gospel and the scriptures so well that the Spirit can bring out what is needed for the very moment. This has always been the scriptural standard for teaching the gospel whether in missionary work or home teaching or family home evening. But now the Lord is asking us to actually grow into that standard. Of course this is also the standard for a jazz musician—to be so prepared that he can improvise to bless and lift others in their lives.

At the time of Joseph Smith—and still today—Christendom in general has taught that the Creation of the world was like a magic trick. God said, “Abracadabra,” and then poof, the world sprang into existence, so to speak. Joseph Smith taught us that it did not happen that way; rather, God took existing materials (which, by the way, cannot be created or made but are coeternal with God) and organized them into a new form. Here are Brother Joseph’s words:

*The word create came from the [Hebrew] word baurau, which does not mean to create out of nothing; it means to organize; the same as a man would organize materials and build a ship. Hence, we infer that God had materials to organize the world out of chaos—Chaotic matter. [Teachings, 350–51; also HC 6:308]*

If that is the creative process for God, I don’t think that we are going to improve on that definition of creativity. Many of us are trying to pursue studies in creative fields. In the visual arts, we are trying to organize color and

shape and line as they exist in space. In music we are organizing sound colors, both vertical and horizontal, as they exist in time—and then similarly with the many other fields of creative endeavor. We are then in the process of mastering control over those materials so that we can organize them in such an expressive way that we become a blessing to others. As President Boyd K. Packer said it, “Because of what [artists] do, we are able to feel and learn very quickly . . . some spiritual things that we would otherwise learn very slowly” (“The Arts and the Spirit of the Lord,” BYU fireside address, 1 February 1976). That is our privilege and responsibility as creative people. Again, it is not about “me” or “us.” It is about depending on the Lord to bring out of us what will be a blessing to others and build His kingdom.

I count it a great blessing to be able to use my professional talents to serve the Lord. It has been such a wonderful blessing for me to be able to tour internationally with Synthesis and use the music that I love so much to do missionary work. We don’t actively proselyte when we tour so much as we try to create goodwill and make friends for the Church. Believe it or not, the Lord is able to do this with a jazz band as His vehicle. When people see these clean-cut, wholesome-looking young people playing so well, there is something miraculous that takes place. Often people will come to the stage after the concert and ask, “What is it that is different about this band? There is something different that comes from the stage than from any other group I have heard. It’s like there is some kind of *love* or something that emanates from the stage.” They don’t know how to say, “I’m feeling the Spirit,” but they are touched and want to know what is behind that.

We always try to make sure the people know who we are and who sponsors our trip to their country. After introducing and thanking local sponsors, I add that we come from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, in

the United States and that our university is owned and operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also tell them that without the Church's sponsorship, we could not be there. I then pause and say, "Yes, you are right. You are looking at a whole stage full of Mormons. But don't be alarmed, we are pretty nice people when you get to know us."

I like to tease them a little. I add, "You have probably seen these fellows walking or riding bicycles, you know, with the white shirts and ties and name tags. Maybe they have even knocked at your door before."

There are always smiles and a few knowing nods. You have to realize that by this time, late in the concert, they are in love with the band. So when I say, "All these guys on the stage with me have been those guys," there is always a buzz in the audience. I introduce some of the band members and tell where they served on their missions. This seems to help break down fear and prejudice.

After one concert in Durham, England, a fellow from the audience came up and talked to Stan Taylor, our tour leader, and said, "If those guys knock at my door, I'm going to let them in."

The real key to serving with our talents is to have the Spirit with us. When I was a missionary, I read at the top of the second page in my mission handbook: "The Key to Spirituality." (This was before the mission handbook was standardized, and the handbook would have been unique to my mission.) It said, "Arise at six each morning and pray intently, hungering and thirsting for the influence of the Spirit to fill your body, *until* it does." Of course, the time of rising is negotiable; that was just our mission rule. When I was out five weeks, I was called to train a new missionary, and I really felt my inadequacy. It was the blind leading the blind. I decided I must have the Spirit if I was to succeed, so I started applying this Key to Spirituality. I had prayed *for* the Spirit before, but never *until* the Spirit. It was difficult at

first. I tried to repent and humble myself and struggle in prayer *until* I felt the Spirit. I had already had experiences in the first weeks of my mission that had shown me the difference between working with the "power and gifts of God" and working with the power and gifts of Ray Smith. The difference was stark, and I knew that it was hardly worth walking out the door to do the work if I did not have the Spirit with me. I learned that I really could feel the Spirit on a daily basis. It became the norm for the rest of my mission.

When I left my mission to come home, I realized that I needed the Spirit just as much at home as I did in the mission field. I decided to continue the practice of praying daily until I felt the Spirit. I am still doing it today. After returning home, I found a quote from Truman G. Madsen: "Happy is the youth who prays for, and then until, and finally with, this subtle flame" ("Christ and Prayer," 17). I have experienced the power of that idea.

This daily maintenance of our spirits is something that has a strong metaphor in music. If I miss days of practice, my performance will lack that edge of excellence that I would have had if I was paying the daily price. No matter how well or how much I practice one day, I must repeat it the next day. Professional calls sometimes come at the last minute or with very short notice. I must always be prepared for those calls, and I must always have a good reed and have my instrument in good working order. Our daily scripture study and prayer and daily obedience will make of us sharp instruments that can respond to every opportunity for service, even on short notice. Just as in practicing music we repeat things over and over until they become easier and more natural for us, we must repeat prayer and scripture study and church and temple attendance over and over until they become natural to us and we become really good at them. It takes perseverance and patience whether we



are practicing our discipline or practicing spiritual things.

One of the things I am always on the line for when I perform or record musically is to play in tune with the other players. When I think about how critical it is to my professional success to always be in tune, it makes me realize how much I should always pay attention to being in tune with my Father in Heaven so I can best serve Him in my spiritual performance. This is a vastly more important performance than the ones on the concert hall stage or in the recording studio.

Well, thank you for letting me share these thoughts with you this morning. A lifetime of service in the Church and of service as a musician has taught me that I am completely and utterly dependent on the Lord for my success. That is because it is not about me. There is a much bigger cause. The Lord has said, “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to

bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). And I echo with Alma, “Yea, and this is my glory, that perhaps I may be an instrument in the hands of God to bring some soul to repentance; and this is my joy” (Alma 29:9).

I testify that the greatest joy comes from bringing souls to our Father. We can do this through our professional work and our spiritual work. But we cannot do it alone or on our own power. As we depend on the Lord and trust Him, we will be empowered to bless the lives of others and to help build the kingdom of God and redeem Zion. That will be our greatest privilege and our greatest joy.

I testify that this is true. I testify that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ. He is our great Exemplar and our great strength.

I so testify, with love and warmest wishes for each of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.