

“Choose You This Day”

LARRY L. ST. CLAIR

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity and pray that the Holy Ghost will bless and enlighten all of us during the next 30 minutes. I pray that He will be with me that I might speak clearly and truthfully, and with you that you might hear with your ears and understand with your hearts.

Over the course of our lives we are required to make many decisions. Some of them are simple and straightforward, whereas others are more complex and in some cases may alter the course of our lives forever. During our earliest years, someone else, usually our parents or grandparents or siblings, either makes or helps us make all of our decisions. Yet as we grow and mature, more and more decisions are left to us.

Initially our decision-making responsibilities are relatively simple: Who shall I play with today? What clothes shall I wear? Shall I have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or a cheese sandwich for lunch? Although these decisions may seem somewhat challenging to young minds, usually there is no particular advantage or disadvantage of one decision over another. However, as we reach young adulthood, our choices become more and more important, and the implications and ramifications of each decision become more and more serious. We hope that at that critical juncture we are still open to

the helpful insights and experiences of the mature adults in our lives—parents, grandparents, Church leaders, and teachers. So many times in our adolescence and early adult years our lives can be enriched and blessed if we are simply able to recognize our own lack of experience and wisely seek the advice and counsel of those who have our well-being and success first in their hearts.

At times, if we fail to make the right choices, we may find ourselves at least somewhat removed from that strait and narrow path that leads to eternal life. But fortunately that condition is not necessarily permanent. We need only repent and recover our standing with Christ and begin anew making the choices that will secure our souls in Him. In some cases we may forever lose some blessing or opportunity, but there are always future choices and wonderful blessings available to the repentant soul. Of his personal experience with repentance, the prophet Alma said:

For three days and for three nights was I racked, even with the pains of a damned soul.

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And it came to pass that as I was thus racked with torment, while I was harrowed up by the memory of my many sins, behold, I remembered also to have heard my father prophesy unto the people concerning the coming of one Jesus Christ, a Son of God, to atone for the sins of the world.

Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain! [Alma 36:16–20]

The Old Testament prophet Joshua labored faithfully among the children of Israel from their departure out of the land of Egypt until his death at the age of 110. He was consistently faithful and supportive of the prophet Moses, and of all the adults in Israel who left Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb were permitted to enter the promised land. To a new Israelite generation, whom he had nurtured and blessed as if he were their father, he gave this wise admonition:

Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord.

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. [Joshua 24:14–15; emphasis added]

With a wisdom cultivated in 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, a new generation of Israelites, without reservation or hesitation, replied:

God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods;

For the Lord our God, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way wherein we went, and among all the people through whom we passed:

And the Lord drave out from before us all the people, even the Amorites which dwelt in the land: therefore will we also serve the Lord; for he is our God. [Joshua 24:16–18; emphasis added]

Across time and space Joshua calls to modern Israel, to you and me: “Choose you this day whom ye will serve.” To us, just as it did to the children of Israel in Joshua’s time, comes the opportunity to declare that we will “also [choose to] serve the Lord; for he is our God.”

For the balance of my time this morning I would like to share with you, in some detail, two personal experiences. One comes from my childhood and the other from my adult life. With each experience I found myself faced with a choice: in one case I made the wrong decision and the lesson came the hard way, whereas in the other I finally listened to the promptings of the Holy Ghost and was able to make the right decision. However, from each experience I learned a valuable, life-altering lesson. My purpose this morning is to try to bless your lives by sharing with you some of the lessons I have learned as I have made critical choices.

At first I thought I would share only experiences where I made the right decision, but none of us are perfect, and many of the important lessons of life are learned as we make mistakes and repent. Regardless, with every experience I have learned that the Lord’s way, no matter how difficult or out of step with the rest of the world, is always the best way. Choosing Him and His ways has always brought the best blessings and opportunities into my life.

When I was six years old, my father, a career soldier, was assigned to the Southern NATO Command in Naples, Italy. We spent three marvelous years in that wonderful country. Prior to Christmas in 1958, my young friends and I determined that we all wanted BB guns for Christmas. I began discussing my request with my parents early in the fall, since many of our Christmas presents had to be purchased in the United States and sent by mail to Italy. My father sent the money for my BB gun to my Grandmother St. Clair well before Christmas, and yet the gun did not arrive until February of 1959. Despite regular encouragement from both myself and my father, my grandmother seemed reluctant to buy and send the gun to me. She repeatedly emphasized to us in her letters that she did not feel good about my having a BB gun at such a young age. As it turned out, my grandmother's concerns proved to be intuitive, perhaps even inspired.

When the gun finally arrived, my father took great care to teach me how to use it properly. He not only drilled me on various basic safety rules, but he repeatedly emphasized that I could not take the gun out of the house without his permission. I remember distinctly that my gun was the most powerful and best model that Daisy Manufacturing Company made, and my friends were both impressed and, at least in one case, somewhat jealous. One boy in our group of friends did not receive a BB gun that Christmas. In time this young man's jealousy, compounded by what I think was probably an abusive family situation, resulted in tragedy for me and in a very real sense for all of us.

My friends and I went on several "hunting" expeditions during the late winter and early spring of 1959, one of which I remember in particular. Very early one Saturday morning we went out to an open rocky area, not too far from where we lived, to hunt lizards. I recall that the lizards were far easier to shoot during the early morning hours when they

were still somewhat lethargic. I vividly remember shooting my first lizard and for the first time feeling a clear sense of taking life from another living creature. It was a feeling I have never forgotten, and I remember from that time forward being content to shoot only at tin cans and other inanimate objects.

Toward the end of April 1959, on a Saturday, my parents went to Naples to pick up some friends. My brother and sister and I stayed with the maid. As the morning progressed, I became bored and decided that I would take the BB gun and shoot for a while from the flat roof of our apartment building. I clearly understood that this was against my father's rules, but I felt that I could "play with the edge" without getting caught. I also remember that the maid frantically pleaded with me not to take the gun, but even at the tender age of eight (almost nine), I was more concerned with what I wanted than with what the adults in my life knew was best for me. Little did I know that before that day came to a close, my life would be forever changed. Never again would I think or feel or see things the same way.

After shooting for a while, I invited one of my friends to come over. At some point I decided that I would have greater success if I climbed atop the small building covering the steps that exited from the main part of the building to the roof. After shooting from that vantage point for a while, I handed the gun down to my friend, who had remained on the main roof, and I jumped from the small building. When I asked for the gun back, he moved away from me, refusing to return it. Then spontaneously he raised my BB gun to his shoulder and shot me twice. I remember standing there as he pointed the gun at me, hardly able to believe what was happening. The first BB hit me in the body and the second BB struck me in the right eye. I fell to the roof, completely stunned by what had happened. My friend dropped the gun and ran away.

I have no idea how long I lay on the roof of that building. My recollection of it today is that it was not very long. I finally scrambled downstairs to our apartment, and when I encountered the maid, she immediately became hysterical. I went to the bathroom mirror in hopes of assessing the damage to my eye. The trauma had caused my eyelid to “freeze” shut. Later the doctors explained to me that this is a normal response to severe eye injury, though the eyelid itself was not damaged. I was frantic, to say the least, because as I pried my eyelid open, I realized that I could not see with my right eye.

At that point I think the maid took me downstairs to our friends who lived in the first-floor apartment. They immediately put me in their car and started for the hospital. On the way to the naval hospital in Naples, they stopped at a local Italian hospital. The doctor there made a cursory examination of my injured eye, simply bandaged the eye, and recommended that they rush me to the American hospital. Just before arriving at the naval hospital, we passed my parents on their way back from the morning’s activities. To this day, one of my most painful memories from that nightmare is my mother’s response as she climbed into the backseat of our neighbors’ car with me. She immediately began to weep as she took me in her arms. Even after all these years, I grieve at the pained expression I can still see etched on her face.

My father followed us to the hospital in our car. When we arrived, they took me to the emergency room, where one of the doctors rinsed my injured eye with a sterile saline solution. I remember one of the doctors in the emergency room that day was a navy captain. My only question was: “They don’t have one-eyed soldiers, do they?” I think in some small measure the magnitude of my mistake and the lifelong consequences of my choice had already become apparent to me. The balance of that day is a blur.

Fortunately, a young navy ophthalmologist, Dr. Woods, had been temporarily assigned to the hospital in Naples. Dr. Woods was summoned to the hospital, and after a thorough examination he determined that the retina had been severely and irreparably damaged. He gently recommended that the eye be removed immediately. The trauma of the injury, compounded by Dr. Woods’ radical suggestion that my eye be removed, was more than my parents and I could assimilate. We pleaded for time to think and time to see if by some miracle the sight in my eye would be restored.

That night Dr. Woods, using a powerful electric magnet obtained from a nearby Italian hospital, removed the BB from my eye. Because I had a slight fever, the doctor determined that it would not be wise to use a general anesthetic; therefore, he numbed my face with several injections of Novocain. I distinctly remember Dr. Woods explaining that the BB had been lodged deep in the eye, very close to my brain. After the BB had been removed, the doctor bandaged both eyes, explaining to us that by covering both eyes, movement in the right eye could be restricted, thus promoting healing and recovery. Dr. Woods was immensely supportive and genuinely kind and gentle. I was immediately impressed by him and consistently felt confident in his skill as a physician.

I was in the hospital for two weeks. During that time one of my parents was always with me, day and night. Several times each week Dr. Woods and the medical staff would come into my room, remove the bandages, and use a small penlight to see if there was any light perception in my right eye. Each time the result was the same: “No response.”

Mom and Dad read to me continually while I was in the hospital. I remember that I would lie there and listen to one Hardy Boys book after another. I must have been kept somewhat sedated, because I would often drift off to sleep and then suddenly wake up,

realizing that I had lost track of the story line. Because both of my eyes were bandaged, my parents found it difficult to determine whether or not I was asleep.

One particular night when my father was staying with me, I remember waking up and hearing him as he wept, saying over and over again, "This is all my fault. Why did I ever buy that BB gun? What have I done?" For the second time the tragic impact of my poor choice on the lives of my innocent parents sank deep into my heart, and I wished more than anything that I could lift the burden of grief and responsibility from their shoulders. As I lay in that hospital bed, I felt a strong resolve begin to grow in my soul that never again would I cause my parents to suffer for my mistakes.

At some point during the two weeks I spent in the hospital, Dr. Woods came to my parents and again explained to them that my chances of recovery were essentially zero. I think we were all still hoping against hope that somehow things would change. But each time the doctor checked my injured eye, it was clearer and clearer to me that there was no change. I never said anything to anyone, but the dread of being blind in one eye weighed heavily on my mind. As much as I wanted the situation to be different, I knew that I had been permanently blinded at the moment the BB entered my eye.

Eventually I returned to school again, with a patch covering my injured eye. I remember several times praying fervently that somehow the Lord would heal my eye and allow me to see again. Fortunately the Lord knew and understood so much more than I did. His perspective was eternal, and mine was limited only to what seemed most important to my young heart. There was not to be any miraculous restoration of my sight; rather, another much more profound miracle was to begin—one that would unfold over a lifetime, one that would bless and enrich my life in ways that I could never understand at that point in my life.

As always, the God who knew and loved me best did what was best for me in the end.

That beautiful spring day in April 1959 has become a benchmark day in my life, a day that has shaped and molded so much of what I have become over the course of my life. To this day, more than 40 years later, I vividly remember what happened, and, in spite of the pain and disappointment that at times have washed over me because of the choices and consequences of that day, I can honestly say that God in His infinite wisdom has been able to bless and enrich my life because of that experience. At this point in my life I regret only my disobedience and the pain and grief inflicted on my good parents because of my bad choice. However, I would not trade out of my life the lessons, insights, vision, and compassion that have come to me as I have dealt with my handicap. My soul is more committed to virtue, my heart is more dedicated to truth, and my own life is more filled with mercy and charity because of what happened to me in the spring of 1959.

Ten years later, in the spring of 1969, I received a call to serve a full-time mission for the Church in the Japan Okinawa Mission. Most of my friends would have been delighted with a call to such a mysterious and exotic place, but not me. I was stunned, and inside I was deeply disappointed. In high school I had concluded that I had absolutely no foreign language skills. I had studied Spanish for two years with little or no success. I decided that I would be delighted to serve a mission as long as I did not have to learn a foreign language. A call to Japan for me seemed devoid of inspiration. I was heartsick!

However, over the six weeks before I entered the Mission Home in Salt Lake City, I tried hard to adjust my feelings and prepare for a mission to Japan. But in all honesty, as I entered the Mission Home on June 14, I was still a reluctant servant. Three

days later I left Salt Lake City with a group of new missionaries and traveled to Laie, Hawaii, to study Japanese for two months at what was then called the Church College of Hawaii. From the moment I exited the airplane in Honolulu, I was homesick and deeply discouraged by what seemed to be an absolutely impossible task.

That first evening each of us missionaries was handed an 81-page booklet containing the six missionary discussions in Japanese. We were informed that our task over the next two months was to memorize all six discussions. What our teachers failed to tell us was that so far no one had been able to accomplish the task. Nonetheless, it was perfectly clear to me that it was impossible. I struggled along on the verge of tears most of the time. I wanted so badly to go into the mission president's office and have him tell me that a terrible mistake had been made and that I had been reassigned to the Hawaii English-speaking mission. But there was no such luck. From morning to evening I struggled, becoming more and more discouraged with the passing of each day. The only thing that kept me from giving up and going home was the thought that my parents would be bitterly disappointed if I quit.

One Saturday, our preparation day in the Language Training Mission, I was reading my scriptures. I had just started the New Testament and was reading in the book of Matthew. I had read several chapters that morning and then suddenly realized that the mail had probably arrived. Since mail from family and friends was the one thing that seemed to lift my spirits, I decided to walk down to the mission office and see if anything had come for me. I was delighted to discover that I had a letter from home! As I looked at the envelope more closely, I was immediately alarmed. The letter was from my father. My father never wrote to me, and a letter from him invariably meant that something was wrong. With dread building in

my soul, I took the letter back to my cubicle, opened it, and read it.

Just as I had suspected, the news was not good. My father, ever so briefly, explained that my mother was quite sick and had been taken to the hospital for surgery. He indicated that the prognosis was not good but that he would let me know more as soon as he was able to discuss the situation with the doctors. As I recall now, he didn't even tell me in the most general way what my mother's problem was.

My father had been assigned to Germany in December of the previous year, and I had not seen my family in more than six months. I had no idea how to place a phone call, and certainly my father had no idea how to contact me by phone. I would have to wait for his next letter. I was truly overwhelmed. I remember kneeling by my bed to pray. At first no words would come out of my mouth. I felt betrayed and abandoned. Then the words came slowly. With a measure of pain and disappointment, I reminded the Lord that I was trying to be His missionary and that the whole mission proposition had not been easy at all. I was frustrated and discouraged before, but now with the uncertainty of my mother's situation I was angry and devastated. It all seemed so unfair and unreasonable that I could have made such an incredible commitment to Him and now He was failing me. Between my tears I told the Lord that I was very unhappy with the way He was handling the whole situation. I also told Him that I had had all I could bear and that I was fully ready to call it quits and go home. I don't remember how long I went on, but I finally wiped away the tears and laid down on my bed.

Eventually I picked up my Bible again and began reading. In some miraculous fashion, just before I went to check the mail, I had finished reading Matthew 9. So when I resumed my reading, I started with chapter 10. In short order I reached verse 37, where I read these words:

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.

He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.

[Matthew 10:37–39]

In the words of Joseph Smith, “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine” (Joseph Smith—History 1:12). I was completely stunned. I knew, beyond any capacity on my part to doubt, that the ancient Apostle Matthew had recorded those words so that a young, struggling, latter-day missionary would finally be able to get his soul in order. Every ounce of my self-pity and personal uncertainty was swallowed up in the absolute knowledge that I had to make a choice, and that choice might very well be between my mother and my Savior.

I teetered only for a brief moment and then fell weeping back onto my knees. I pleaded for forgiveness. I had accepted His invitation to serve but had held back most of my heart. I knew then that anything less than my whole soul, fully committed to Him and His work, was not good enough. With a resolve that I had never experienced before, I promised Him that I would be different than I had been, that I would give everything that He required, even whatever mortal time I had left with my mother.

Instantly my grief and disappointment were gone. There was no longer any heaviness or uncertainty in my heart. In an instant I had committed all I had, and He had in return cleansed my soul of every burden and filled my heart with a sublime peace. I was His, and without any reservation I knew He was my Savior and Master. I had finally

“put [my] hand to the plough” (Luke 9:62), and never once since that day have I looked back!

I am grateful to say that my mother is still alive today, and I have been richly blessed with a long and meaningful relationship with this beautiful and wise woman. But I am here today to tell you, if she had died in 1969, it would not have changed my commitment to Christ. Just as I found out that summer day in 1969, I still know today that He is first and foremost in my life, He is my Savior and Master, and He has never forgotten me!

Choosing the Lord is both a daily and a lifelong task. In mortality we simply never arrive. We must diligently endure to the end every day. But I want you to know that with every choice you make in favor of Christ will come some blessing, some insight, some gift that will enrich and ennoble your life—not at all in a worldly way but rather in those beautiful, simple, and profoundly spiritual ways that secure our souls with the promise of eternal life.

Often in my prayers, both in private and with my family, I plead with the Lord to bless my children that they might see clearly and choose wisely. Today I extend that prayer to each of you that you, too, might be able to see clearly and choose wisely. I can think of no better blessing as you strive to successfully navigate the complex and uncertain waters of mortality. In all your choosing, please remember these simple but important lessons: consistent obedience to eternal law will always bless your life; poor choices will always bring grief and pain to the people that love you best; and, finally, we can never measure our relationship with Christ in degrees. His great gift requires our whole heart and soul. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.