

“Be Strong and of a Good Courage”

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Thank you, President Samuelson. BYU is blessed to have you serve as its president. It is an honor to be here today with this outstanding assembly of students. President Gordon B. Hinckley has spoken about how “you represent a great generation in the history of the world and in the history of this Church.” He has described you as “part of the greatest generation we have ever had” (“True to the Faith,” *Ensign*, June 1996, 2).

As students here at BYU you represent one of the great centers of strength in the Church. Along with the future leadership you will provide to the Church, many of you will make significant contributions to our communities across the nation and the world. You have so much to give and so much to do in the years that lie ahead. The challenge of your professors and leaders is to help you be prepared both spiritually and temporally for the world of opportunities and challenges that awaits you. I trust you are preparing now to make the most of those future opportunities.

Interestingly, it was 50 years ago about this very week that we graduated from the University of Illinois with my PhD degree. I say “we” because Sister Staheli earned her share of that degree as she worked to help pay

the rent and food bills during our three years of graduate school.

Over the ensuing 40 years we lived in the suburban areas of Chicago and New York City, where we worked and raised our family. We were blessed with a rewarding career as we traveled the world of business. We were blessed with opportunities for service in the Church, as well as in organizations in various areas of the world. For the past nine-plus years I have served as a member of the Quorum of the Seventy. That, too, has been a special experience and blessing.

The Lord’s hand has truly been in our lives. But with these blessings have come tests and challenges—just as most of you periodically experience and will continue to experience in the years ahead.

This is a special time in your life when choices are made and patterns and habits are formed that will have a major impact on who you will become.

Donald L. Staheli was a member of the Second Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 13 June 2006.

Your enrollment here at BYU is a significant step in preparing for your future. In addition to your educational pursuits, your future happiness, personal righteousness, and relationship with the Lord will depend in large part on the habits you embrace and the choices and commitments you make over these next few years.

As you think about your preparation for the next steps in your life, ponder with me for a moment how the Lord transferred responsibility from Moses to Joshua. He gave Joshua an extraordinary promise, followed by some strong counsel. Listen to a few excerpts of what the Lord said:

As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.

Be strong and of a good courage. . . .

Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law . . . : turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. [Joshua 1:5–7]

After reminding Joshua of the importance of obedience, the Lord promised: “For then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (verse 8). This is a great promise.

And then, for the third time, the Lord repeated in verse 9: “Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”

The Lord’s message to Joshua—“I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee”—has been repeated through the ages in the scriptures and through the prophets of the Restoration. It applies to each of us today—conditioned, of course, upon our obedience to His commandments and the covenants we make in the temples.

Some of you know exactly what you want to do with your life. Others are still pondering and discovering opportunities for the future. In either case, it is essential to your future success

and happiness that you keep your minds and your hearts open to the promptings of the Spirit. As you live to be worthy of those spiritual promptings, the Lord has promised that He will be with you.

Joshua later made his own choice clear to his people when he said, “Choose you this day whom ye will serve . . . : but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Joshua 24:15).

A philosopher once gave good counsel regarding choices:

*Choose well; your choice is
Brief, and yet endless.*

[Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Symbolum” or “Mason Lodge,” trans. Thomas Carlyle]

As you acknowledge that the Lord “will not fail thee,” as long as you are obedient to His teachings, then I would ask, Are you happy with the present conduct of your life? What changes or course corrections should you make in order to take full advantage of your daily opportunities for learning and personal spiritual growth?

Now is the time to set the course for what you want to be—five or 10 years or even 50 years from now.

During our few minutes together today, it would be my prayer that something might be said or felt that will help you crystallize your thoughts as to who you are and what you have the potential to become.

It has been said that one of the greatest tragedies of our time is that so many people live so far below their potential.

President Spencer W. Kimball frequently encouraged us to “lengthen our stride” and to “enlarge our vision” (“When the World Will Be Converted,” *Ensign*, October 1974, 5).

President Gordon B. Hinckley continually counsels, “Do your best.” And then he has added: “But I want to emphasize that it be the very best. We are too prone to be satisfied with mediocre performance. We are capable

of doing so much better” (“Standing Strong and Immovable,” World Leadership Training Meeting, 10 January 2004 [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004], 21).

The late Elder Neal A. Maxwell said it another way: “The Lord loves each of us too much to merely let us go on being what we now are, for he knows what we have the possibility to become!” (“In Him All Things Hold Together,” *BYU 1990–91 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 1991], 107).

Implicit in the statements from each of these distinguished leaders is the message that each of us can and should do more to meet the Lord’s expectations of us.

Let’s talk about a few principles that are essential for success and happiness as you develop your careers, families, and service to the Lord. As you further refine your plans for the future, you will not only find success in a temporal sense but you will be moving toward achieving a relationship with your Father in Heaven and Savior that prepares you for an eternal relationship in the celestial kingdom.

First and foremost in your pursuit is the development and nurturing of a strong personal testimony. I assume that each of you has a basic testimony of the gospel. Some periodically struggle. Many are strong as you have returned from missions or have focused on prayer and study that have brought you to an undeniable testimony of the truth. Presumably that was a major factor in motivating you to come to BYU.

Hopefully you feel that your testimony is vibrant and growing stronger each day. Yet, even though you are in a special environment here at BYU, I would suspect that many of you are being challenged by the “things of the world” with which you periodically deal. I am referring to the daily bombardment of worldly messages and enticements from the media of TV, movies, and the Internet that tend to tempt or distract you from keeping your testimony

strong and staying completely true to gospel principles and covenants. Certain kinds of peer pressures can also be challenging.

Let me tell you about a young friend I met while serving as president of a stake that included West Point Academy in the state of New York. He was a bright 4.0 student at the academy. He had been given a leave of absence from West Point to serve a mission and was readmitted on completion of his mission—not a common occurrence. On one of my visits to the West Point Branch he requested some time to talk.

As we talked he told me of how he had deepened his conversion to the gospel as he served his mission. He remembered the feelings and strength of his testimony when he returned to West Point following his mission. Then he said: “In the two years since my mission I have gradually felt the Spirit slipping away from me. Every day I am associating with other cadets with different values. Their whole focus in life is successfully graduating from the academy. Periodically the honor code is compromised. Nearly every weekend is party time—alcohol and young women. I am hazed and ridiculed when I refuse to join with them.

“President Staheli, I need help. I feel like I am being tossed to and fro on the seas of life, and I have lost my mooring. My gospel anchor of the past seems to be giving way to the life of fun and pleasures enjoyed by my colleagues at the academy.”

As we talked it became clear that the magnet of the adversary was gradually but surely drawing him into Satan’s grasp. My young friend had lost his mooring—not because Satan had become stronger but because my friend had not been nurturing and tending to his testimony. He was in the process of losing what he had previously so deeply cherished.

I realize you are in a very different environment here at BYU, yet I relate this experience because even here at BYU you are not immune

to the adversary's many wiles that look attractive on the surface and may appear harmless only because you feel you can resist.

Just claiming to know the gospel is true is not always enough. My young friend at West Point knew. He had developed a testimony, but it had slipped away from him because he failed to nourish it. As he had begun to respond to and engage in the activities of his peers, he gradually lost the promptings of the Spirit.

I cannot think of a greater loss to anyone than the loss of the promptings of the Spirit.

Our testimonies grow through faith, prayer, scripture study, and obedience to the commandments. The daily exercise and nurturing of these principles is key to a strong and resilient testimony and commitment to gospel principles. Let me comment on each of these principles.

President Gordon B. Hinckley speaks often about our need for faith. I had the privilege of returning with President Hinckley from Nauvoo on the plane following the cornerstone ceremony at the Nauvoo Temple. As we flew over the rich farmland of Iowa, I was commenting on the unbelievable faith and commitment of those early Saints. I was musing that I was not sure I would have had sufficient faith to keep company with those faithful Saints.

In his usual optimistic response, President Hinckley said, "Sure you would, Don." And then he made his real point with me as he reminded me that some of the most faithful Saints faltered, lost faith, and fell by the way-side. His response strongly suggests that our testimonies are vulnerable if we do not stay on course in keeping God's commandments.

President Gordon B. Hinckley frequently encourages us to have "the kind of faith that moves one to get on his knees and plead with the Lord and then get on his feet and go to work" ("God Shall Give unto You Knowledge by His Holy Spirit," *Speeches of the Year, 1973* [Provo: BYU, 1974], 109; see also *TGBH*, 186).

That is sound advice for every one of us. As we follow his counsel, our testimonies and our commitments to make right choices will grow.

When I reflect on my youth and the initial development of my testimony, I realize nothing had a greater impact on its development than the faith of my mother and father and their daily application of that faith in their prayers. The Lord responded to their faith and prayers, and as children we witnessed the hand of the Lord in our family. We came to know the meaning of what Moroni meant when he said: "I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6).

The faith of our family was tried time and again. And, periodically, special spiritual experiences too tender to tell followed. I bear testimony that the Lord does hear and answer prayers—prayers from the hearts of His faithful children.

When your lives become crowded with other activities, it is easy to periodically skip a prayer or to use an abbreviated version of your prayers. *Don't shortchange the Lord on your prayers.* Nothing you will do during any day of your life will be more important to your temporal success or your eternal progress than consistent, humble, sincere prayers offered at least morning and night of every day.

As I visited with my young friend from West Point, it became clear that his faith had wavered and the consistency and sincerity of his prayers had waned. The joshing of his peers and the seeming attractiveness of Satan's alternatives had begun to overshadow his commitment to exercise his faith and prayers.

Equally important in our pursuit of happiness and a secure testimony is the daily habit of reading and pondering the scriptures. The reading and study habits you are forming in your religion classes will have a lasting impact on your personal commitment to the

scriptures. The busier life becomes, the more difficult it is to stay connected to this important part of our spiritual growth. Yet making the scriptures a part of your daily life is another foundation stone of your testimony.

King Benjamin sternly admonished his people, “If you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10).

Living to be worthy of the Spirit and then responding to its promptings is an essential ingredient to a strong and vibrant testimony.

To be worthy of the Spirit embodies the bottom line of obedient living. To truly accomplish this is the quest of a lifetime.

Nephi’s early example of obedience has been taught to us from our youth. Likewise, we know how Laman and Lemuel developed into the “murmurers” of the family. They played the role of the “natural man” that King Benjamin described.

Conversely, Nephi made his commitment to the Lord early on when he said, “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded” (1 Nephi 3:7). And then he did, with unwavering faith.

The important point is that Nephi had made the decision as to how he was going to respond to the Lord’s commandments. From that point forward he was steadfast. I suspect Satan worked on him, just as he does each of us today, yet the scriptures indicate that Satan was totally unsuccessful in affecting Nephi’s decision to do the Lord’s will.

The prototype of Lehi’s family has played out through the centuries. The world is replete with the Lamans and Lemuels. They are some of Satan’s best students. Great blessings come to those who follow Nephi’s example.

Understanding and responding to the principle of obedience has singular importance in preparing us for success and eternal happiness. As the Lord promised Joshua, He “will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” as long as you are striving daily to obey His commandments.

As you progress through your education here at BYU, you have some electives or choices in what you pursue in your education. You also have some “required” subjects.

The same is true of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It gives us agency and ample freedom of choices, but the ultimate success of those choices depends on our diligence in keeping the commandments and covenants we have made with the Lord.

As you pursue your educational goals, it is essential that you keep focused on your spiritual commitments. The challenge with most of us is the tendency to become casual or to lose focus on those non-negotiable or non-compromising commandments from which promised blessings flow. Let me give you an example.

When Sister Staheli and I left Utah, en route to the University of Illinois with everything we owned contained in our little car, we were excited about embarking upon a new adventure. We had tried to be diligent in keeping the covenants we had made in the temple as a part of our marriage of about one year.

As we became fully engaged in our new life as a happily married but financially struggling couple, we lost focus on one important—in fact, essential—commandment of the gospel. As we approached the end of the year and tithing settlement, we had not only slipped on paying our tithing but were literally without food money for the last week of the year.

As we sheepishly and humbly approached our branch president at tithing settlement, he taught us an important lesson in financial management. More important, he gave us a phenomenal promise.

He promised that if we would make up the tithing owed to the Lord and then faithfully pay it each month before we addressed our other needs and wants, the Lord would bless us as promised. In fact, he promised us that as future faithful tithe payers we would have an increase in income each year thereafter. That came true—and stayed so, until my call as a

Seventy. The Lord truly did open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings to us.

My wife and I had been raised by faithful tithing-paying parents. We had been full-tithe payers throughout our youthful years. Yet this came as a poignant lesson of how becoming casual on important principles can cause one to lose focus on what is really essential to the Lord.

Satan works constantly on this principle of blurring our focus relating to gospel principles. He seductively encourages our casualness by helping us feel secure that “this won’t matter” or “that won’t taint my mind.” This is especially true as he casually leads young people down the slippery slope of immorality.

I believe Satan has a dominant influence on the media—television, movies, and the Internet. Each becomes seductive in its own way. As young adults you may feel you can handle the sexually explicit programs on television without affecting your spiritual well-being.

Even more pernicious are the R-rated movies that carry you into the even more explicit. It is clear that frequent exposure tends to legitimize that which we see and hear. It dulls our sense of conscience between the acceptable and unacceptable. It is Satan’s way of leading you down the slippery slope toward immoral thoughts and actions.

And those parts of the Internet that move you into pornography serve as the devil’s trump card. It only takes a few viewings of pornography and he has you hooked. Then he begins to work his evil power, because what you have seen and heard becomes paramount in your thought processes. And the more you see, the more addicted you become.

You young people, especially you young men, have become Satan’s target audience. It is his way of leading you into the abyss of immorality. Let me hasten to add that neither are you married students immune to Satan’s attractions. Pornography can become one

of the most destructive elements of your marriage.

We plead with any of you who are in any way involved in pornography to see your bishop so that he can help you find your way out of the cesspool of filth that is designed to destroy you.

Be careful that you don’t let Satan use his influence to control your thoughts and actions, and ultimately your future.

When you are able to recognize and overcome any personal irritants you may have toward certain principles of obedience, you will feel God endowing you with the power of the Spirit to resist the inappropriate things of the world that Satan would have you enjoy.

When we are able to declare as the people did to King Benjamin that there has been “a mighty change in us, or in our hearts, that we have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually” (Mosiah 5:2), then we will be well on the road to success and eternal happiness.

The companionship of the Spirit and the strength of your testimonies will depend on daily nurturing of your faith, praying, studying the scriptures, and obeying the commandments. As you do so, you will be moving toward achieving the spiritual and temporal blessings the Lord has in store for you.

You will realize the blessing promised to Joshua: “For then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success” (Joshua 1:8).

The Lord wants each of you to find joy and happiness and success in your professional and vocational pursuits. But He wants you to do it in a way that your ambitions for success do not supersede your priority for living gospel principles.

President Thomas S. Monson painted the picture as follows: “We have been provided divine attributes to guide our journey. We enter mortality not to float with the moving currents of life, but with the power to think, to reason,

and to achieve" ("Invitation to Exaltation," *Ensign*, June 1993, 5).

These are the years when you must take responsibility for who you now are and what you want to become.

Think carefully about where you are. Remember, education is the key to the door of opportunity.

The Savior's parable of the talents is so applicable to you at this stage in your lives. Jesus knows there are differences between you—intellectually, emotionally, and physically. Therefore He only expects you to magnify and develop whatever talents and abilities you have.

But He expects you to be accountable for your actions in so doing. He will not measure your progress against others. He does not grade on the curve! Rather He blesses you for what you are doing to magnify whatever gifts and talents you have been given.

At all costs do not allow yourself to "float with the moving currents of life," as President Monson has counseled. Take control of your actions and prepare to succeed at whatever you are capable of doing.

Remember President Hinckley's counsel: "Just do the best you can, but be sure it is your very best" ("A Challenging Time—A Wonderful Time," An Evening with President Gordon B. Hinckley, seminary and institute broadcast, 7 February 2003, 5).

This is also a time in your life when counsel from others can help you decide what you should be doing that will move you toward achieving your full potential.

It is the wise counsel and mentoring of a few special teachers, priesthood leaders, parents, and a loving wife that helped me make some course corrections in preparation for what has turned out to be a wonderfully challenging and happy pursuit of life.

As you recall, the Lord counseled Joshua to "be strong and of a good courage" as he took on his new responsibilities. That same coun-

sel applies to you as you prepare to pursue careers that will take you to different parts of the world.

Periodically you will be placed in situations that will require you to "be strong and of a good courage" in order to stay true and faithful to gospel principles. As President David O. McKay has said, paraphrasing William George Jordan, "There is one responsibility which no man can evade, and that responsibility is personal influence" ("The Mission of Brigham Young University," address given at BYU, 27 April 1948, 3; also *CR*, October 1969, 87; see William George Jordan, "The Power of Personal Influence," chapter 3 of *The Majesty of Calmness* [New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900], 19).

Worldly standards will always be in a state of flux. The only true and unchanging standards are those set by the Savior and His teachings and principles of the restored gospel.

My wife and I have lived all our married life in the mission field. We have traveled the world as part of our business career. In the earlier years of our career, to live by LDS standards was an oddity—and not a generally accepted one either. Yet, with a few exceptions, once people understood our principles and standards and our desire to stay true to them, they respected us for them.

As you have the courage to be true to your beliefs, your exemplary conduct will not go unnoticed. While you will be tried and tested, your faithful adherence to the Lord's standards will be seen as a beacon in the night to those around you.

I could recite dozens of examples of my personal experiences on this subject, but let me conclude with a reference to President Hinckley.

President Hinckley is an impeccable example of courageous leadership. He is steadfast and true to principle and courageously forthright in his convictions. Yet with unwavering courage he has the ability to express his

commitments to gospel principles in clear but acceptable terms to those not of our faith.

Hopefully his example will help you to “be strong and of a good courage” when pushed to compromise your standards. You will be respected for your integrity. And if occasionally you are not, you need not worry, because that is not the kind of association you will want or need in your future.

“As the finest generation in the history of the Church,” much is expected of you (Gordon B. Hinckley, *CR*, April 1992, 96; or “A Chosen Generation,” *Ensign*, May 1992, 69). And we

have confidence you will live up to those expectations.

I bear testimony, brothers and sisters, of the divinity of Heavenly Father’s plan for each of you. Jesus is truly our Savior, and He very much loves and cares for you. As you keep His commandments and follow the counsel of the prophets and your leaders, He will be there to guide you through the challenges that lie ahead. He “will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

May His choicest blessings be with each of you, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.