

Choose to Trust the Lord

MICHALYN STEELE

My dear brothers and sisters, I am honored to speak to you today and to share my witness of the Savior and the good news of the gospel. I want to acknowledge that we are gathered in this valley that is the traditional homeland of indigenous peoples called today the Utes, the Paiutes, and the Shoshone nations, among others. I honor their resilience, and I am thankful for their preservation as peoples.

I believe that the Lord has preserved many essential truths by preserving the indigenous peoples and their cultures. Just as Joseph of old stored up grain against the time of famine to save the house of Israel, and just as the record of Lehi and his children was preserved against a time of spiritual famine, indigenous peoples and cultures hold truths to teach us in this age of political, moral, and ecological turbulence.

I am a member of the Seneca Nation of Indians from New York. I grew up in a small branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on the Cattaraugus Reservation. I am grateful for my inheritance as a Seneca, as well as for the strength of my pioneer ancestors. I receive many blessings that come to me through those who chose the path of discipleship. I acknowledge with gratitude those who came before, who showed the way, who prepared the ground for my faith to flourish, and

who opened the doors for the opportunities that have been mine.

Similarly, I acknowledge that this campus is sacred ground. It has been set apart—consecrated—for our learning “by study and also by faith.”¹ In that spirit, I hope to share a message with you that might help you navigate the difficult days ahead and the many trials of your faith that will come as your lives unfold. We will each face the trials inherent to mortality—trials of physical frailty, mental illness, heartbreak, loss, political turmoil, and rampant injustice—and spiritual trials that will surely test our commitment to the Savior and His kingdom.

College is a time of tremendous growth, both intellectually and spiritually. We develop critical thinking skills and take in so much information. We wrestle before the Lord to develop and deepen our testimonies and flesh out our identities. In this age of abundant information and disinformation, how do we know where to turn as we refine our beliefs and mature our testimonies? And how do we respond as our faith passes through refining fires?

Michalyn Steele, BYU associate professor of law, delivered this devotional address on June 25, 2019.

My message to you today is that, whatever your trials—mortal or spiritual—you can choose to trust in the Lord. While so much around you is inconstant and fleeting, He is faithful. He will never fail you. You may rely on His love as an unerring truth.

In the Midst of Fiery Trials

In difficult times, you may find yourself asking, as this hymn does:

*Where can I turn for peace?
Where is my solace
When other sources cease to make me whole? . . .*

*Where, when my aching grows,
Where, when I languish,
Where, in my need to know, where can I run?
Where is the quiet hand to calm my anguish?
Who, who can understand?
He, only One.²*

My life experiences have taught me the truth of the hymn’s answer. The Lord is there to understand and to quiet our anguish. At many points I have seen the Lord’s hand moving miraculously to order and bless the circumstances of my life. He has prepared a path, opened doors, raised up friends, and multiplied joys in my life. I have seen how these blessings have been tailored specifically for me and fitted to my particular needs. Many blessings were set in motion long before my needs arose. So too has the adversary tailored opposition and trials to fit my weakness.

There have also been times when I have longed for the Lord’s intervention in specific ways, when I have petitioned and pleaded with the Lord for blessings that have not been realized. There have been questions that have gone unanswered and times when the heavens felt silent. In those moments the adversary has tried to whisper that no one has heard my prayers. I have prayed and fasted for many years that the promise of my patriarchal blessing and other priesthood blessings—that I would find a true companion and be a mother—might be fulfilled. Those blessings have not been realized for me on

my preferred timeline, despite my most fervent petitioning. But it has not been because no one heard them. That was a lie from the adversary. My Father in Heaven has heard and answered every prayer, even when the answers have been difficult for me.

Of course I have had a rich, happy, and fulfilling life. The Lord has poured out abundant blessings—meted out with the “good measure” of the Lord, “pressed down” and “running over”³—far beyond my merits. But my life has not looked like the life I would have sought for myself.

In coping with the Lord’s counsel to wait or to do without, I have had to learn to choose to trust the Lord. I have had to choose to let these experiences refine and deepen my faith rather than yield to the temptation to despair in the Lord and abandon my hope and faith.

Everyone passes “through fiery trials.”⁴ I know that many of you, though you may be young, are like the Savior, acquainted with grief. Many of you may be weighed down with your own sorrows, challenges, or disappointments. Some of you may be wrestling through questions concerning your faith. I know that the Savior is intimately acquainted with your grief and sees your sorrows. He has promised one day to wipe away all tears. And He will. But, in the meantime, during those moments of fiery trial, how do we choose to trust in the Lord—especially when we may, for a time, feel alone?

I hope that some of the lessons I am learning might be of some comfort to you now or in future times of need.

Like the blessings I have received, the challenges I have faced have been individualized, tailor-made to cultivate my strengths and to fortify my weaknesses. In walking my path, I have been given the opportunity to choose to love and obey the Lord, even when I have felt sometimes forsaken. I am learning that my faith in the Lord is not conditioned on getting what I want when I want it. Instead, I have worked to develop trust and love for the Lord that is not transactional but relational. I love Him for who He is. I trust Him and His love for me. He is my Creator and Savior.

I offer three principles that have helped me choose to trust the Lord in times of trial. I offer these principles humbly—knowing that you walk a path tailored for you—but also confidently, trusting in the constancy of the Lord.

Principle Number 1: The Seven Generations Principle

First, I offer one lesson from the Seneca tradition. It is an idea found in many indigenous cultures in some form. It is called the seven generations principle.⁵ The seven generations principle in the Seneca culture means that we are obliged to consider the consequences and outcomes of our choices on the next seven generations. It is a cultural value that entrenches the practice of taking the long view where possible and acting in the interest of the long term rather than the short term. The seven generations principle challenges us to pause and contemplate how our choices, when multiplied and amplified through future generations, might affect our relationships with the Creator, with one another, and with the earth.

This principle means that we strive to keep an eye on the things of eternity, even—perhaps especially—in the midst of blinding mortal pain. How do we maintain that long view and choose to trust the Lord when the pain of our physical or spiritual trial is so acute and present, when the suffering is sore and stubborn?

When I say to keep an eye on the eternal in the midst of mortal pain, I mean that we should seek to keep our spiritual gaze fixed on the great eternal sacrifice, the infinite Atonement of Jesus Christ. The adversary seeks to distract us by fixing our focus entirely on our temporal pain and by tempting us to dwell on perceived slights and injustices, obscuring the Lord's love. This is one reason it is imperative that we partake of the sacrament each week, renewing our covenant to "always remember"⁶ the Savior.

Just as He suffered, we will suffer as part of the mortal experience. In choosing to trust the Lord, we can consecrate our suffering to a greater understanding of His suffering and allow it to build in us a deeper capacity for compassion and mercy toward the suffering of others. Though

He was perfect, He made Himself an offering of mercy to satisfy justice. Having drunk from that bitter cup, He knows how to succor and comfort us in our infirmities if we trust Him.

As Alma taught his son Helaman, "I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day."⁷ Putting our trust in God does not spare us from trials, troubles, or affliction. Instead, God has promised to support us while we are *in* those mortal difficulties. Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught of our trials, "Rather than simply passing through these things, they must pass through us and do so in ways which sanctify these experiences for our good."⁸ By taking the long view, as the Seneca culture counsels, and choosing to trust the Lord and His eternal timeline, we can pass through our trials and let the trials pass through us as we deepen—not abandon—our faith and our kindness.

Principle Number 2: "Seek Not to Counsel the Lord"

In addition to the seven generations principle of taking the long view, might I suggest a second principle that seems especially relevant to the successful navigation of our trials. I take this principle from Jacob's plea to the wavering Nephites. He urged, "Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand."⁹

If you are like me, you are full of great ideas, hopes, and dreams about how your lives ought to go: the timing of change and the fulfillment of blessings, jobs or other experiences we might enjoy, or opportunities that we think would be a good fit and would help us to be happy. Indeed, we are commanded to ask the Lord for the desires of our hearts. With faith—and with fasting, when appropriate—we should plead with and petition the Lord for the experiences we desire.

That is a very different thing than seeking to counsel the Lord or resisting His counsel.

Seeking to counsel the Lord means to me that we adjudge our wisdom and preferences to be superior to the Lord's. That reflects a fundamental lack of trust in His omniscience, in His

omnipotence, and, more important, in His perfect love. We might suppose that if we could only persuade the Lord to do things our way, life would be much improved. We may feel frustrated by what we deem His resistance to our counsel on such matters.

Although I am now a law professor, in my heart of hearts and by experience and inclination, I am a civil rights lawyer. I loved working as an attorney enforcing the federal civil rights laws at the United States Department of Justice. I feel passionately about the rule of law and the pursuit of justice. I believe in the equal dignity of all God's children. I mourn with those who mourn about the deep injustice that falls so disproportionately on people of color, on religious minorities, on our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters, on immigrants and refugees, and on others. I believe my love for the equal dignity of all God's children is one of the spiritual gifts He has given me. But as much as I may love and seek after justice, I do not have anything to teach the Lord about justice. He does not need my counsel as an advocate about how to bless and provide for His children or about how to order His kingdom. He sees the end from the beginning, "and there is not anything save he knows it."¹⁰

One title for an attorney is "counselor." It is a title I have held in various settings. In my roles as an attorney and as a law professor, I offer counsel to others that draws upon my study and professional judgment. It is meant to guide and protect those I serve. With the credentials of my education and experiences comes trust. Some attorneys earn thousands of dollars an hour for their counsel. (Not me, by the way. Despite how expensive law school feels to law students, I would much rather be here with you.) But as attorneys, we come to think that our counsel has tremendous value to help resolve problems and address challenges. And it can. This is true for all professionals.

You too, as educated individuals, are earning credentials and having experiences that are shaping and informing your judgment. Those credentials will give weight and amplification to your views in society and will add value to resolving the many varied problems—personal and

professional—that you will face. Those of us who have responsibilities for your education are eager for you to develop sound critical thinking skills and judgment.

Whatever your field of study, I have no doubt that you will contribute your learning and good judgment to the inevitable and daunting challenges of your families, your employers, your communities, and your congregations. But no matter how learned we may become in whatever field, and no matter the earthly value of our counsel, we will never have knowledge or judgment that will exceed the Lord's. That is why we should not seek to counsel the Lord but should seek to take counsel from His hand.

Jacob warned against seeking to counsel the Lord because of what he called the "cunning plan of the evil one"¹¹ specifically targeting those of us who have opportunities for learning. Jacob lamented:

O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men! When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

*But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God.*¹²

We must not allow the great gift and blessing of our learning and education to divide us from His wisdom. Instead, we must let our learning deepen our trust in Him and multiply the gifts we have to offer to Him and His children. I have learned that He does not need to be persuaded to do good things or advised about "how to give good gifts unto [His] children."¹³ While there are many settings in which He will draw upon our good judgment and learning to bless lives, we must remember that He does not need the best thinking of the wisest and brightest among us to augment His understanding. He already has all wisdom and all judgment.

I will add here a warning about another great temptation that we must guard against as those with the blessings of advanced education.

Nephite society, including the Church, was stratified and destroyed because “there became a great inequality in all the land.”¹⁴ What caused the inequality? In part it was because “the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning.”¹⁵ The people who had money or who had “chances for learning” looked down on those who did not. Let us never misappropriate the blessing of our education as a cause to vaunt our knowledge over those who have not had the same opportunities we have had—and certainly not as a reason to vaunt our wisdom over the Lord’s. Rather, let us humbly consecrate our gifts to the Lord. Let us serve and love His children, no matter their circumstances and even when we do not understand the Lord’s purposes.

A long time ago, I was called as a missionary to the Texas Houston Mission. The call said that I should report to the MTC to prepare to teach the gospel in the English language. As my stake president set me apart as a missionary, I remember him saying these words: “The language the Lord would like you to learn is the language of the Spirit.”

I knew that to learn the vocabulary and grammar of the language of the Spirit, I would need to study the scriptures, identify promptings, and understand the whisperings of the Holy Ghost. I knew that it was a language I had been learning my whole life as my parents taught me to keep the commandments and to love the Lord. I had mentors and teachers who had modeled fluency in the language of the Spirit. “To take counsel from [the Lord’s] hand,”¹⁶ as Jacob instructed, we must develop our own fluency in the language of the Spirit. To try to learn that language, I undertook a deep study of the Book of Mormon.

Once I had arrived at the MTC, I enjoyed learning the principles of missionary work, but I kept wondering how I might say certain phrases in Spanish. When that happened, I told myself to keep focused on the tasks at hand. But my mind kept wandering to the few Spanish phrases I knew, and I kept wondering about Spanish grammar and vocabulary.

I eventually recognized that these unbidden thoughts were the whisperings of the Spirit

helping to prepare me to go to Houston, Texas, where there would be many people I would meet who would speak Spanish. So I went to the MTC bookstore and bought a copy of *El Libro de Mormón* and put it with my things, pleased that I had felt and recognized a prompting and sure that I would have the opportunity to share that book with someone as a missionary.

When I arrived in Houston a few weeks later, my mission president, Clark T. Thorstenson, pulled me aside at the airport. He said, “Sister Steele, the Lord has made it clear to me that He would like you to learn Spanish. I am assigning you to the Spanish-speaking program.”

I felt like the Lord had been trying to whisper it to me all along and was smiling, now that I was in on the plan too. That evening I wondered how I would ever learn Spanish, and I wished that I could go back to the MTC. Then I remembered my *Libro de Mormón*. I took it out and began to read. My study of the Book of Mormon in preparing for my mission helped me to follow along: “Yo, Nefi, nací de buenos padres.”¹⁷ *Buenos padres?* “Goodly parents!”¹⁸

At first I had no other books to use to study the Spanish language except for the Book of Mormon. But I remembered the inspired counsel of my stake president: the language the Lord wanted me to learn was the language of the Spirit. I enlisted the Spirit—who, it turns out, speaks perfect Spanish—to magnify my abilities and to tutor me in both the Spanish language and the language of the Spirit. Those two languages would be crucial to my missionary service.

A few months in, I had a companion from El Salvador, Hermana Seravia. She was a great missionary and senior companion. One day she said to me, “Hermana, you are doing pretty good with Spanish, but you talk too much like a Book of Mormon! We don’t really say, ‘Now behold, we rejoice to be in your home.’”

I have reflected a lot in the years since this experience about the way that calling unfolded. I know that the Lord is omniscient. Surely He knew that the people I was called to teach in Houston spoke Spanish and that I did not know Spanish when my call had been issued months earlier.

So why did the Lord send me to Texas without MTC language training? At the time, if I were to have designed the experience for myself, I would have called me to learn Spanish in the MTC. However, although I have the power of choice and autonomy in many things, I am not the primary architect of my own life experiences. I am called to trust that the Lord has a plan for my life, just as I know that He has a plan for yours. Both the big picture and the smaller details are within His infinite and loving calculus.

As it worked out, the experience was tailored to draw upon my particular strengths and to fortify my particular weaknesses. The airport switcheroo meant that I could not lean upon my own capacities to learn Spanish as a purely intellectual exercise. I had to rely on the gifts and tutelage of the Spirit. I had to plead for the gift of tongues. I had to rely on the prayers of loved ones—the power of which I could feel bringing words and phrases to my mind and loosing my tongue as I taught. The Lord foresaw that Spanish would be a great blessing in my life but that learning to trust Him and rely on Him while learning the language of the Spirit was an even more important lesson.

Sometimes we are asked to submit to ongoing ambiguity or to a grueling lesson we would prefer not to learn. Such moments provide us with the opportunity to realize one of the purposes of our mortal experience: to choose to trust Him to bless us with the experiences that we need rather than the experiences we might want.

As we put our trust in the Lord and lean not on our own limited understanding of eternal things, the individualized path He has designed for each of His children will unfold. It is marvelous to contemplate that although He is the great God of the universe and the works of His hands are beyond our numbering, each of us is known and loved by Him. Indeed, we are “graven . . . upon the palms of [His] hands.”¹⁹ To fulfill God’s purposes for our lives, we must learn to trust in His love and goodness, even in times when we feel alone—just as Jesus felt alone. It does not mean that we do not keenly feel the full weight of the pain of our trials—just as Jesus felt His mortal pain.

The Savior felt the hunger, thirst, fatigue, rejection, grief, pain, and loneliness of His mortal experiences. He even asked that the unimaginable weight of His burden of sorrow and pain be removed, if possible. Matthew recorded that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told His disciples, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.”²⁰ The scripture tells us that so great was His suffering that “he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.”²¹

The experience of Jesus in Gethsemane teaches me that it is not a sin to desire that we be spared some experiences or to ask that burdens be removed. The pain of those crossroads, in which our will and the Father’s will diverge, is profound. Nevertheless, Jesus modeled how such moments are best resolved: choosing, because of our love for the Father, to trust His will. We trust Him by receiving the Lord’s counsel rather than insisting that He take ours.

Principle Number 3: Love Abundantly

The third principle that I would urge you to adopt is to love abundantly. In most any situation we face, love really is the answer. We can trust that the will of the Lord is motivated entirely by perfect love. When we cannot understand the things that are happening—or the things that are not happening—the one true constant is the perfect love of God. You can trust it entirely.

Alma counseled the people of the Church to avoid contention and to have “their hearts knit together in unity and in love one towards another.”²² I have found that my happiness is multiplied and my challenges are dulled when I have opened my heart to be knit in loving ties to friends, colleagues, and family. The Savior commanded us to love even our enemies and to do good to those who despitely use us.²³ My life is not defined by the blessings I have not received but by the abundance of love and blessings that I have received.

My maternal grandmother, Norma Seneca, was a great example of expansive, abundant love. She lived her whole life on the Cattaraugus

Reservation. Though her geographic frame of reference was limited, her understanding and wisdom were wide and deep. I especially admired her ability to take genuine, full-throated joy in the good things that happened to others. I loved telling her my good news because she was so thrilled when good things happened to me. She never begrudged others their successes. She rejoiced with those who rejoiced. It was the habit of a generous spirit who multiplied and expanded the happiness of her life, even in the many difficulties she endured.

It is not always easy to love. I have often called upon the wise counsel my mother gave me when I was relating to her some perceived injustice I had suffered. I insisted that my grievances were justified. Knowing she could not undo the injustice, my mother advised me to “throw a blanket of mercy” over the situation. In essence, she advised me to love, to forgive, and to show mercy even when I felt my demand for justice was valid. She urged me to let mercy pay the debt and satisfy my claims. This advice has saved me much anguish and provided me great relief when I have been able to heed it. Choosing to love is choosing to heal from the spiritual wounds inflicted by injustice and suffering.

One important way that we magnify our love to others and to the Lord is through the words that we speak. Many Native American creation stories describe the world’s creation as having been brought about because the Creator spoke it. Speaking is, in a way, giving birth to ideas and forming and shaping our reality. Similarly, in the creation account in Genesis, we understand that God said, “Let there be light: and there was light.”²⁴ One title for the Savior is “the Word.”²⁵

Our words are powerful beyond measure. Words have the power to create and heal, but they also have the power to destroy and wound. Let us speak with abundant love and use the power that is ours to heal and build others, just as the Savior uses His.

Most important, we should not place conditions or limits on the love that we offer to our Father in Heaven and His Son. But even when we have done so, having withheld love or obedience, He stands

ever ready to receive and heal us. As often as we will repent, He will forgive. His arms are ever outstretched. We can trust His love.

So we ask: “Where can I turn for peace? . . . Where is the quiet hand to calm my anguish?”²⁶

Here is the reply: “He answers privately, Reaches my reaching In my Gethsemane, Savior and Friend. Gentle the peace he finds for my beseeching. Constant he is and kind, Love without end.”²⁷

My brothers and sisters, I testify that He is constant and kind. He is worthy of our trust and adoration. That we may choose to trust in Him during times of doubt or difficulty is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. D&C 88:118.
2. “Where Can I Turn for Peace?” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 129.
3. Luke 6:38.
4. “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 85; see also 1 Peter 4:12.
5. See Arthur C. Parker, “The Constitution of the Five Nations or the Iroquois Book of the Great Law,” in *Parker on the Iroquois: Iroquois Uses of Maize and Other Food Plants; The Code of Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet; The Constitution of the Five Nations*, ed. William N. Fenton (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 37, article 24 of “The Council of the Great Peace.” See also Wikipedia, s.v. “seven generation sustainability,” en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_generation_sustainability.
6. Moroni 4:3, 5:2; D&C 20:77, 79.
7. Alma 36:3.
8. Neal A. Maxwell, “Enduring Well,” *Ensign*, April 1997; see D&C 122:7.
9. Jacob 4:10.
10. 2 Nephi 9:20.
11. 2 Nephi 9:28.
12. 2 Nephi 9:28–29.
13. Matthew 7:11.
14. 3 Nephi 6:14.
15. 3 Nephi 6:12.
16. Jacob 4:10.
17. 1 Nephi 1:1 (Spanish).
18. 1 Nephi 1:1.

19. See 1 Nephi 21:16; Isaiah 49:16.
20. Matthew 26:38.
21. Matthew 26:39.
22. Mosiah 18:21.
23. See Matthew 5:44.

24. Genesis 1:3.
25. John 1:1; see also verse 2.
26. “Where Can I Turn for Peace?”
27. “Where Can I Turn for Peace?”