

Just in Case Someone Asks, I Will Be Ready

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. My wife and I are greatly honored to be with you enthusiastic students at this wonderful university. I have titled my message “Just in Case Someone Asks, I Will Be Ready.”

As a teenager I found a simple thought that had guided Abraham Lincoln’s life. President Lincoln was asked how he was able to become the president of the United States. His self-effacing answer was, “I kept preparing myself just in case.”¹ This down-to-earth phrase inspired me, and I began looking for ways that could prepare me to be ready for the future.

For example, as a young missionary in Brazil, I decided to learn to speak and read Portuguese 100 percent. Returning home from my mission, I didn’t think I would be using Portuguese again. But two years later I took the medical school entrance exam, and, lo and behold, my Portuguese was extremely helpful because Portuguese is a strongly influenced Latin-based language—as are many medical terms. Twenty years later I returned to São Paulo, Brazil, with my family as a mission president, and 35 years after that original decision, my wife and I returned to serve in the Area Presidency in the north of Brazil. Even today the joy of speaking another language

without having to interpret word for word in my mind is a mystery and a blessing.

Another example: I, like many other Church members listening to Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s talks, noted that he would regularly cite from John Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*. So I started to read Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations* to be prepared just in case someone asked *me* to give a talk in church.

Thomas Edison said, “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”² Likewise, Benjamin Disraeli said, “The great secret of success in life is for a man to be ready when his opportunity comes.”³ President Henry B. Eyring has often recalled important counsel his father gave him. That counsel was, “Hal, . . . you ought to find something that you love so much that when you don’t have to think about anything, that’s what you think about.”⁴ For me that means we will be prepared for inspiration on a specific topic if we have been seriously contemplating it. Some, on the other hand, may conclude that it is too hard

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to always be preparing or to do such focused thinking. But doing hard things builds confidence and strengthens character. We learn much from those who lean hard against us.

To prepare just in case someone asks becomes even more important as the world becomes more complex. One approach in preparing ourselves is to simplify and find the “kernel” truths and thoughts. A “kernel operator” in mathematics transforms the original unwieldy and perhaps confusing problem into an easier solution. In computer technology the kernel is the central component of most operating systems. It is the core or nucleus that makes things work. In medicine this same key concept is incorporated in the word *pathognomonic*. A pathognomonic sign is a particular sign whose presence means that beyond any doubt a particular disease is present. For example, if so-called Koplik’s spots are present in the mouth, a doctor’s diagnosis of measles is certain. This is also similar to the well-known mathematical statement of proof: *If and only if* the necessary and sufficient condition A is met; *then* condition B is true.

To prepare and simplify our lives is like finding those kernel operators, determining the necessary and sufficient conditions or discovering the pathognomonic signs so we can have confidence in our actions and do the right things for the right reasons. We know the scriptures are very clear about certain laws, bounds, and conditions as well: “And unto every kingdom is given a law; and unto every law there are certain bounds also and conditions.”⁵ Also, “There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated.”⁶

Embracing key scriptures and doctrines can help us simplify and prepare for life’s important decisions. The words God uses in the scriptures and the words of the living prophets will help us find our way, especially today.

One such kernel scripture comes from the words of the prophet Micah and gives great

strength and clarity of direction. In Micah 6:6–8 we read:

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

The Lord tells us what is good and what pleases Him.⁷ Certainly a core message here teaches us “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.” Note that the Lord gives us only three things to remember; this kernel, therefore, simplifies our direction and gives great clarity to our actions.

First, we notice that the Lord *requires* us to do justly. The Old Testament Hebrew word for *just* means to do right,⁸ to do righteousness, or to “have a . . . just weight”⁹ or balance¹⁰ when measuring something.¹¹ In today’s vernacular, to do justly may also mean to be fair in our treatment of one another. In Portuguese, for example, the words *just* and *fair* are the same word: *justo*. Doing “that which [is] right in the sight of the Lord”¹² helps us become a just person.

A just man’s character, how he thinks and how he desires to learn all that he can, is described in Proverbs, chapter 9: “Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning.”¹³

We recall Elder David A. Bednar’s recent comment: “Learning to love learning is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Hence, the things we put into our soul mold our unique character and individual identity. For all of our efforts in learning the truth and doing “that

which [is] right in the sight of the Lord," the Lord promises this wonderful blessing:

*And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come.*¹⁵

The end result and blessings of being just are worth every effort. As we read in section 76 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the just "shall have part in the first resurrection."¹⁶

[They] are sealed by the Holy Spirit of promise. . . .

They are . . . given all things.

They . . . have received of his fulness, and of his glory. . . .

Wherefore, . . . they are gods, even the sons of God. . . .

*[And] these shall dwell in the presence of God and his Christ forever and ever.*¹⁷

Second, as we saw in Micah 6:8, the Lord *requires* us "to love mercy." *Mercy* from the Old Testament Hebrew word has the connotation of gentleness, kindness, grace, forgiveness, and compassion upon anyone.¹⁸ These are attributes of God. Certainly we desire God's mercy toward us and are happy, like Enoch, to know that "mercy shall go before [His] face and have no end."¹⁹ But the Lord also gives to us the commandment "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful"²⁰ and tells us, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."²¹

Daily life seems to teach us that the foundation and enabling power for doing justly comes from a heart full of compassion. Notice the Savior's instruction to the Nephites: "What manner of men ought ye to be? Verily . . . , even as I am."²² These words came *after* the Lord had taught the principles of compassion, grace, and mercy. The Lord encourages us to rely on His grace, saying:

*My grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; [now notice the "necessary and sufficient" condition He gives us] for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them.*²³

Third, we are told in Micah 6:8 that the Lord *requires* us "to walk humbly with . . . God." The Old Testament Hebrew word *humble* connotes to bow down, to bow our heads, or "to be low in situation."²⁴ We recall Enoch feeling overwhelmed with the Lord's command to call his people to repentance: "And when Enoch had heard these words, he bowed himself to the earth, before the Lord."²⁵ Enoch prostrated himself before the Lord; then he was ready for the Lord's instruction. It seems very significant that when we bow our heads in prayer, we also get ourselves ready for the Lord's instruction to our hearts and minds.

There are many things that cause us to "bow our head," humbling us every day. At times we may actually control situations. For example, an engineer controls the construction of a bridge or building; a doctor controls a surgical procedure—both see positive outcomes. They may conclude that their skill guaranteed the outcome. But at other times we experience circumstances in our lives seemingly beyond our control, such as getting a bad case of the flu on the day of our biggest final exam or our car breaking down on the way to an important interview. The unexpected seemingly occurs at the worst possible time.

Many in the world conclude that because of this apparent randomness, no one is in control—and, further, that no one can know the future. But the scriptures and the prophets affirm that God is not only master of the universe but "is in the details"²⁶ and "know[s] the end from the beginning."²⁷ He "knoweth all things, for all things are present before [His] eyes."²⁸ It has been said, "The great act of faith is when man decides that he is not God."²⁹

When we so decide and accept the limits of our external control, we are powerfully sustained by faith in God. We trust His timing and have confidence in His plan.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell observed: “Because we are eternal beings, time is not our natural dimension. . . . Life is so designed that we constantly feel time . . . and its prickly presence.”³⁰

We feel this “prickly presence” when unexpected, undesired circumstances irritate us; yet it is those events that mold our character. Perhaps the difficult situations in our lives teach us what it is that we may truly control: ourselves, our thoughts, our words, our deeds,³¹ and our reaction to life’s unexpected events. President James E. Faust reminded us, “It’s not so much what happens to us but how we deal with what happens to us.”³²

Recognizing our personal responsibility and exercising self-control make repentance possible and strengthen our character. Each day tests how we will react to unexpected circumstances, for the same set of circumstances can bring either resentment or gratitude.

Another test may be how we react when those who don’t live God’s commandments seem to get ahead in the world while we, trying very hard to serve the Lord, don’t seem to have much outward success. But in 3 Nephi, chapter 24, the Lord reorients us, saying:

Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say: What have we spoken against thee?

Ye have said: It is vain to serve God, and what doth it profit that we have kept his ordinances and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of Hosts?

And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.

Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another, and the Lord hearkened and heard; and a book of remembrance was written before him for

them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.

*And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of Hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.*³³

Hence, even though we may set goals, establish procedures, make plans, and act nobly, we may not control the immediate results. We must continue, however, to seek the good, establish the right, and walk humbly in the full faith that God *guarantees* the just and merciful outcome.

The courage to vigorously move ahead thusly was echoed by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.*³⁴

Or, as stated simply by President Harold B. Lee, “It is the pursuit of easy things that makes men weak.”³⁵ The pursuit of hard things makes men strong.

A key scripture from the Book of Mormon can help in our personal preparation: “For every man receiveth wages of him whom he listeth to obey.”³⁶ This scripture is pointing to the fact that the master to whom we incline will be the one who will reward us—either we incline to the Savior, who will grant us eternal life, or we lean toward Satan, from whom we will receive spiritual death.³⁷

We recognize the verb *list* means to tilt, incline, or move off center just a little bit. It is like when we slightly move off center in a canoe. The canoe quickly lists and finally tips us overboard.³⁸ *Listing* may also connote leaning first to one side and then leaning to the other side. We know the result of rocking back and forth in a canoe—overboard we go again!

The Apostle James wisely taught, “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.”³⁹

Similarly, the Lord said to John the Revelator:

I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot.

*So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*⁴⁰

Listing may also suggest being carried away on the subtle “ever learning”⁴¹ breeze. The Apostle Paul described our day as follows: “In the last days . . . men shall be lovers of their own selves, . . . ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁴²

Ever learning may be interesting, but we cannot sample from every intriguing corner of life. We are reminded: “It is not a matter of *if* [we will accept divine truth]. It is a matter of *when*.”⁴³ We are told in Philippians that “every knee should bow . . . and . . . every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”⁴⁴

At times we can’t discern whether we are tilting or not. Hence we need guides—especially the Holy Ghost—to point out the slight adjustments we need to make in our lives as we begin to tip or list; thusly, we do not waste time and can more safely reach our ultimate goal. The Book of Mormon prophet Jacob counseled those who “are pure in heart” to “look unto God with firmness of mind, and pray unto him with exceeding faith, . . . and receive the pleasing word of God, and feast upon his love; for ye may, if your minds are firm, forever.”⁴⁵

Mahatma Gandhi gave some salient guide points as well. He said sin is the following:

- Politics without principle
- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Commerce without morality
- Science without humanity
- Worship without sacrifice⁴⁶

Indeed, we too can learn much by observation, and we can learn even more by allowing our guides to give us suggestions. President James E. Faust said:

*Learning by experience has value, but the “school of hard knocks” is deserving of its name. Progression comes faster and easier by learning from our parents, those who love us, and our teachers. We can also learn from the mistakes of others, observing the consequences of their wrong choices.*⁴⁷

So, we simply need to catch ourselves before we tilt too far. Those studying electrical engineering know that feedback loops prevent circuits from becoming unstable. Even experienced pilots will encounter sensory illusions or worse if they make slow-banking turns without visual references. The hair cells of the human vestibular apparatus can’t discern the correct bearing, and the pilot quickly loses his sense of reality. Like those visual references maintaining stability, our guides can become “a lamp unto [our] feet,”⁴⁸ helping us see the important signposts before we list too far. We can then make the slight adjustments to any listing. Although humbling, we will receive yet another promise: “Because thou hast seen thy weakness, thou shalt be made strong.”⁴⁹ How encouraging! The Lord wants us to see our own weaknesses, and then His “grace is sufficient” for us all as we come to Him.

When we understand and accept true principles, our decisions do become clearer and less confusing. Thus, acceptance of the truths can make us free⁵⁰—free from ambivalence, ambiguity, tentativeness, excuse making, and ignorance. Accepting truths requires obeying the feelings of the Spirit, having self-discipline, and then courageously living “that which [is] right in the sight of the Lord.” Describing this type of courage, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said:

It will take the same kind of spunk the Spartans displayed at Thermopylae when they tenaciously

held a small mountain pass against overwhelming numbers of Persians. . . . The Spartans were told that if they did not give up, the Persians had so many archers in their army that they would darken the skies with their arrows. The Spartans said simply, "So much the better, we will fight in the shade!"⁵¹

With this type of courage, we can accept a true principle as it really is, without debate, sidestepping, or hesitancy. Thus, by following the impressions of the Holy Ghost, we will find solutions⁵² and wisely use our precious gift of time. The power in truth gives complete commitment to our lives and clarity to our decisions. We gain the certainty that our "course [in] life . . . is according to [God's] will,"⁵³ and our divine character emerges.

As the restored truths sink into our soul, we become more keenly aware that *only* the power of the redemption and the resurrection of Jesus Christ can and does preserve our individual divine identity. It is this power that requires that the grave "must deliver up the spirits [and must] deliver up the body; . . . and all men *become* incorruptible, and immortal, . . . living souls."⁵⁴ In fact, these restored truths and doctrinal declarations create an intensification of our individual identity and a greater awareness and gratitude for the power of the redemption of the Son of God.

President James E. Faust said, "Without turning back to the word of our Creator, no one is wise enough to sort out what ethical, spiritual, and moral values should be taught to the next generation."⁵⁵

May we search for, find, and embrace the kernel truths, thus simplifying our lives so that our decisions can be "yea, yea" or "nay, nay."⁵⁶ We want to be ready when the Lord asks—for *He will ask*. He said to John the Revelator, "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne."⁵⁷ The

Lord is so gracious. He further prepares us for that day, saying:

*I give unto you these sayings that you may understand and know how to worship, and know what you worship, that you may come unto the Father in my name, and in due time receive of his fulness.*⁵⁸

May we also move from grace to grace, as did the Lord, and in due time receive of the fulness of the Father is my prayer for all. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Attributed to Abraham Lincoln.
2. Attributed to Thomas A. Edison on Michael Moncur's quotations; <http://quotationspage.com/quote/793.html>.
3. Attributed to Benjamin Disraeli, address to the young men of Liverpool, quoted in "Prize Question No. 41," *The Literary News*, November 1881, 337; see also "The Nick of Time," *New York Times*, 23 March 1868.
4. In Gerald N. Lund, "Elder Henry B. Eyring: Molded by 'Defining Influences,'" *Ensign*, September 1995, 12.
5. D&C 88:38.
6. D&C 130:20.
7. See Alma 12:15, Matthew 23:23, Hebrews 11:6.
8. See Isaiah 26:7.
9. Deuteronomy 25:15.
10. See Leviticus 19:36, Ezekiel 45:10.
11. See William Wilson, *Old Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1978), s.v. "just," 235–36.
12. 2 Kings 15:3; see also Deuteronomy 6:18, Helaman 3:20.
13. Proverbs 9:9.
14. David A. Bednar, "Learning to Love Learning," BYU commencement address, 24 April 2008.
15. D&C 130:19; emphasis added.

16. D&C 76:64.
17. D&C 76:53, 55–56, 58, 62.
18. See Wilson, *Old Testament Word Studies*, s.v. “mercy,” 273–74.
19. Moses 7:31.
20. Luke 6:36.
21. Matthew 5:7; see also 3 Nephi 12:7.
22. 3 Nephi 27:27.
23. Ether 12:27.
24. Wilson, *Old Testament Word Studies*, s.v. “humble,” 223.
25. Moses 6:31.
26. Neal A. Maxwell, “Encircled in the Arms of His Love,” *Ensign*, November 2002, 18.
27. Abraham 2:8.
28. D&C 38:2.
29. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., letter to William James (1907).
30. Neal A. Maxwell, *The Promise of Discipleship* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2001), 80, 82.
31. See Mosiah 4:30.
32. James E. Faust, “Where Do I Make My Stand?” *Ensign*, November 2004, 20.
33. 3 Nephi 24:13–17.
34. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Ladder of St. Augustine* (1858), stanza 10.
35. Harold B. Lee, *Decisions for Successful Living* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 15.
36. Alma 3:27.
37. See Mosiah 2:32.
38. See James 3:4, Alma 26:6.
39. James 1:8.
40. Revelation 3:15–16.
41. 2 Timothy 3:7.
42. 2 Timothy 3:1–2, 7.
43. Spencer W. Kimball, First Presidency Message, “Absolute Truth,” *Ensign*, September 1978, 4; emphasis in original.
44. Philippians 2:10–11.
45. Jacob 3:1–2.
46. Attributed to engraving on a wall at Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s memorial in Delhi, India, by President Jimmy Carter in his eulogy at funeral services for former Vice President Hubert Humphrey, St. Paul, Minnesota, 16 January 1978; in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter* (Washington, D.C.: General Services Administration, National Archives and Records Service, Office of the Federal Register, 1978), 1:80; see also Stephen R. Covey, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Summit Books, 1991), 87–93.
47. James E. Faust, “Choices,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 52.
48. Psalms 119:105.
49. D&C 135:5.
50. See John 8:32.
51. Neal A. Maxwell, Speaking Today, “The Prohibitive Costs of a Value-Free Society,” *Ensign*, October 1978, 55; see Maxwell, *The Promise of Discipleship*, 18; also John Bagnell Bury, *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander the Great*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1902), 1:296–97.
52. See Moroni 10:5.
53. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 38 (3:5).
54. 2 Nephi 9:13; emphasis added.
55. James E. Faust, “Will I Be Happy?” *Ensign*, May 1987, 82.
56. Matthew 5:37.
57. Revelation 3:21.
58. D&C 93:19.