

Decision Making—The Lord’s Way

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Good morning, brothers and sisters. It’s wonderful to be on this beautiful campus with you today. I thank President Samuelson for this opportunity, and I thank each of you for the great spirit you bring to this devotional this morning.

Today I’d like to consider one of the most basic tenets of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ—that of *agency*. Elder Richard G. Scott called agency “a *vital element* in our Father in Heaven’s plan of happiness.”¹ And Elder Robert D. Hales said, “Our use of agency determines who we are and what we will be.”²

While agency is a powerful, eternal principle, our approach to decision making can be considered its mortal embodiment. Agency, the ability to make our own decisions, is a great blessing bestowed by a loving Heavenly Father on all His sons and daughters. In 2 Nephi we read:

*Therefore, cheer up your hearts, and remember that ye are free to act for yourselves — to choose the way of everlasting death or the way of eternal life.*³

Choice is inevitably accompanied by opposing forces. Opposition is, in fact, the very essence of choice. Today I’d like to focus

my remarks on some of the principles and processes of righteous decision making.

“The Valley of Decision”

In the last chapter of Joel in the Old Testament, we read of a place called “the valley of decision,”⁴ a place where multitudes of people will be gathered to prepare for and await the Lord’s Second Coming. I like the powerful imagery of the phrase “the valley of decision” because I see it as analogous to the young adult stage of life—the current stage of life of the majority of you in this audience.

Most of you have already made the wise decision to further your education, but you may now be choosing what to study, what classes to take, and what career path to pursue. You may have had your roommates assigned to you, but you have the choice of whom to spend time with and how to spend your time. Hopefully you young men are considering serving a mission, or, if you have already served, you are choosing to maintain the righteous habits you acquired on your

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mission. And I suspect more than a few of you are deciding whom to date and even whom to marry and when. The list of decisions you each face goes on and on.

At this busy intersection of adolescence and adulthood, you are experiencing one of the highest per-diem decision rates you will ever face in mortality! If you learn to make decisions according to the Lord's process, you will form one of the habits most critical to both your earthly and your eternal success.

The Process of Making Decisions

Let's for a moment reflect on the most basic elements of the decision-making process. When we are presented with a choice, our perspective and our attitude combine to largely determine the course of action we will pursue—or, in other words, the decision we will make.

Now, for discussion's sake, let's simplify our decision-making processes into two broad categories: making decisions the Lord's way versus making decisions the world's way.

We'll begin with a closer examination of the world's way. Let's use the example of choosing a career path as our choice or decision to be made and assume two possible outcomes, option A and option B.

The world's perspective on such a significant decision would certainly consider financial ramifications, potential for prestige and power, and ease of acquisition. And a worldly attitude might include such things as self-centeredness, a sense of entitlement, and even political correctness as major factors in choosing between options A or B.

Working together, the influences of perspective and attitude will largely determine the decision we make or, in this example, which career path we choose. The result of following the world's process of decision making in selecting a career would greatly favor certain professions over others.

In contrast, let's now take a closer look at making decisions the Lord's way. We'll begin

with the same choice of which career path to follow, but, since we know that all things are spiritual to the Lord,⁵ we'll consider a spiritual perspective and a spiritual attitude in this process.

A spiritual perspective would, first and foremost, consider eternity, it would be rooted in gospel principles, and it would allow for a quality journey. And a spiritual attitude would be infused with humility, gratitude, and faith. For example, opportunities to provide service to others, to strengthen one's family, and to spend meaningful time in Church callings would all be considered in the Lord's process. When a spiritual perspective and a spiritual attitude are factored into a major decision, such as the choice of a career, the resulting action might well be quite different than that resulting from following a worldly decision-making process.

Now, let's superimpose one of my favorite scriptures over this decision-making process. Proverbs 3:5–6 reads:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Using this scripture, we can subtitle the world's approach to decision making "leaning to thine own understanding." Our own understanding is imperfect. We cannot see the future, nor can we see our ultimate potential, but when we follow the world's process, we rely on that understanding anyway.

Similarly, using this scripture, we can subtitle the Lord's approach to decision making "trusting in the Lord." The Lord does see the future, and only He knows our divine potential—thus this approach requires trusting the Lord. C. S. Lewis described this great truth when he likened our lives to a house undergoing renovations:

At first, perhaps, you can understand what [God] is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof. . . . But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that . . . does not seem to make sense. . . . He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of. . . . You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace.⁶

Therein lies the key reason we need to make decisions by following the Lord's process: He is building a palace far beyond our wildest plans. Mormon summarized the difference between making decisions in the world's way versus the Lord's way when he noted:

And thus we can behold how false, and also the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men; yea, we can see that the Lord in his great infinite goodness doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him.⁷

Left to our own understanding, we are unintentionally false and unsteady. But through trusting in the Lord with humility, gratitude, and faith, we are blessed and we prosper. If we trust in the Lord and acknowledge Him, not only will He "direct [our] paths," but He will also ensure that "then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble,"⁸ and that "her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace."⁹

Scriptural Examples of Righteous Decision Making

The scriptures are filled with examples of wise men and women trusting in the Lord and following His process of decision making. Keeping in mind those three important components of a righteous spiritual attitude—humility, gratitude, and faith—let's take a closer look at some of those examples.

In Genesis we read the amazing story of Joseph of Egypt, whom the Lord prospered because of his righteousness.¹⁰ In spite of being

sold into slavery by his own flesh and blood, Joseph trusted in the Lord. He did not follow the world's process of decision making; rather, he remained fully committed to making decisions in the Lord's way. For example, when repeatedly presented with seductive choices by Potipher's wife, he retained a spiritual perspective and attitude.

And when he interpreted the butler's and baker's dreams in prison, Joseph humbly stated that "interpretations belong to God"¹¹ rather than taking the credit for himself. Later, after several more years of separation from his family, Joseph gratefully rejoiced that God "hath made me forget all my toil"¹² and "hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction."¹³ Joseph retained his great faith throughout his epic ordeal. When finally reunited with his starving family, he acknowledged the Lord's hand, saying, "God did send me before you to preserve life."¹⁴ What an excellent example of trusting in the Lord and maintaining a consistently spiritual perspective and attitude.

In addition to Joseph, consider the stories of Ruth, Job, Esther, Nephi, and so many others; these courageous men and women trusted in the Lord with humility, gratitude, and faith. Faced with life-altering circumstances and decisions, they chose to trust in the Lord rather than lean unto their own understanding. By so doing, they were blessed with safety and peace, just as we will be.

Following the Lord's process of decision making results in consistently and powerfully righteous decisions. And that pattern of righteous decision making in turn develops our character. Elder Scott explained the relationship between making decisions the Lord's way and forming righteous character. He said:

Character is woven quietly from the threads of hundreds of correct decisions (like practice sessions). When strengthened by obedience and worthy acts, correct decisions form a fabric of character that brings victory in time of great need.

*Righteous character provides the foundation of spiritual strength that enables you to make difficult, extremely important decisions correctly when they seem overpowering.*¹⁵

Building our character is certainly part of the Lord's process of building us into a palace. Trusting in the Lord actually becomes an upward spiral: when we trust in the Lord, our faith and character are strengthened, and the stronger our character and the deeper our faith, the better we are able to trust in the Lord, and so on, which all results in better decision making.

This was certainly the case with Nephi in the opening scenes of the Book of Mormon. From the very first verse, we have evidence of Nephi's righteous spiritual attitude and of his humility, gratitude, and faith: "I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, . . . having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days."¹⁶

In the following pages, Nephi is faced with many critical decisions: Should he follow his father in fleeing Jerusalem? Should he believe his father's prophecies of the imminent destruction of the Jews? We know he had "great desires to know of the mysteries of God." In other words, he had a desire to know God's will for him, and that desire led to action—he "did cry unto the Lord,"¹⁷ and the Lord visited him, softening his heart and teaching him to believe the words of his father.

This proved to be an important character-building exercise because an even tougher decision lay directly ahead: should Nephi follow his father's counsel to return to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates in spite of the inherent dangers and his brothers' unwillingness? We probably all know Nephi's faith-filled reply by heart:

I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he

*shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.*¹⁸

Elder Scott described this type of motivating faith as follows:

*Motivating faith is centered in trust in the Lord and in His willingness to answer your needs. . . . The consistent, willing exercise of faith increases your confidence and ability to employ the power of faith.*¹⁹

Again we see the upward spiral that results from having a spiritual perspective: the stronger our faith, the more we are able to trust in the Lord, and the better the decisions we will make.

The scriptures and the lives and experiences of modern-day prophets are filled with excellent examples of making decisions the Lord's way. I urge you to study the scriptures with a focus on searching these out. The lessons we learn from the scriptures will strengthen us and fortify our determination to seek the Lord's will in our own lives as well.

A Personal Example

I am very fortunate to have had opportunities at your age to improve my decision-making abilities. It may surprise you to learn that I struggled with the decision of whether or not to serve a mission. I was young for my grade, so all my friends left on their missions nearly a full year before I was eligible to go. By that time I was quite comfortable in my studies, and I was dating a young woman whom I thought was "just right." I was a novice at trusting the Lord. I will be forever grateful for the wise counsel of my father and bishop at that critical crossroads. Their loving guidance helped me see the inadequacy of leaning on my own understanding, and I began the upward spiral of trusting the Lord.

By the time I met Margaret following my mission to Scotland, I had added depth and

breadth to my spiritual attitude and spiritual perspective. Experience had made trusting in the Lord much easier for me, and I knew right away the correct answers to the questions “Whom should I marry and when?”

Together Margaret and I have made following the Lord’s process for decision making a habit. I testify to you that one of the great blessings of forming this habit as a young adult is that in later years, the Lord will know He can trust you to respond to the directions of His Spirit.

Not all decisions are anticipated the way choosing what to study or whom to date might be. We aren’t necessarily given a road map of the hard choices that we will encounter. Margaret and I came upon just such a decision a few years ago—one that required great trust in the Lord and great faith in responding to the directions of His Spirit.

Before leaving to preside over the England London Mission in the summer of 2000, we prayerfully decided to sell our family home and retire from my career. However, three years later, near the end of our mission, we felt strong promptings to change our plans and return to Boston. Due to our earlier decision, we needed to find a place to live.

After an extensive search we purchased a small home that was just right for the two of us located about a mile from where we had lived for over 20 years. We moved in and immediately went to work renovating and improving it like we had done to prior homes several times before. For the next eight months we lived there comfortably.

Then, one Sunday afternoon, I received a strong impression from the Spirit that we needed to move. I was shocked by this prompting. Another move was not in our plans, and it made absolutely no sense. Yet I knew I had been told that we needed to move.

Later that day I drove down the street we had lived on for so many years before our mission. I hadn’t been on that street in nearly four

years—not since we had sold our home there. But as I followed the gentle guidance of the Spirit, I noticed a nice home across the street from the home we had raised our family in. It had a “for sale” sign out in front. The thought quickly crossed my mind, “I wonder if that is the house the Lord wants us to buy.”

For two weeks I pondered the clear impression I’d had, wondering why we needed to move. Unable to make sense of it, but trusting in the Lord with humility, gratitude, and faith, I concluded I just needed to act upon the prompting, and so I finally told Margaret what had happened. She, too, was shocked, but we both felt we should do as the Spirit had prompted, so we put our home on the market and prepared to move.

After a few days of house hunting, we knew that the house across the street from our previous home was indeed the one we should buy. Now, if you knew the Boston housing market, especially at that time, you would have known as I did that this was not likely to be a wise financial decision! We had been in our other home for less than a year, and now we were selling it and buying a home larger than we needed, but we felt strongly prompted that it was what the Lord wanted us to do. We were grateful for the Lord’s guidance, even though we did not understand it.

The day after we moved, Margaret walked next door to visit Barbara, the elderly neighbor she had been acquainted with when we had lived on this street before. She knew Barbara had been raised in the Church but had become inactive when she went away to college. She hadn’t been back to church in over 60 years, and in all the years we had been neighbors previously, Barbara had seemed uninterested in the gospel. When Margaret entered Barbara’s kitchen that morning, Barbara threw her arms around Margaret and immediately began telling her about her 40-year-old daughter, Karen. Karen was dying of stomach cancer, and she and her husband were now living with Barbara

so Barbara could help with Karen’s care. Before Margaret could even think, the words came out of her mouth: “Barbara, do you think that Karen would like a priesthood blessing?” Without hesitating Barbara said, “Yes, I know that she would.”

The next day a close friend from the ward joined me, and we gave Karen a priesthood blessing. It was then that Margaret and I began to understand why the Lord needed us to buy the house next door to Barbara and her daughter, Karen. Living a mile away would not have been sufficient for what the Lord needed us to do. Our trust in the Lord had created an amazing opportunity and blessing for us.

Within a week, we started sharing the gospel with Karen. We visited with her almost daily, teaching her and comforting her and her mother in any way we could. Karen started attending Church with us and loved the people in the ward and everything she was learning. She felt like she was coming home! Within a couple of months she was baptized.

Karen said that the day she was baptized was the happiest day of her life. Even though she only lived three months after her baptism, she felt such great joy and happiness and peace from the Lord. Even in her pain and misery, she felt the Lord’s arms around her as she neared the end of mortality. Those last few months of her life were truly a gift from the Lord.

We felt a little like Joseph of Egypt, trusting in the Lord though we didn’t completely understand His plan. We didn’t save an entire region from physical starvation, but, with His help, we did help feed a small family struggling with spiritual hunger at a critical time in their lives. That experience provided a capstone to all we had previously learned of trusting in the Lord.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell summarized beautifully the blessings of habitually trusting in the Lord:

Your personal possibilities, not for status and position but for service to God and mankind, are

immense, if you will but trust the Lord to lead you from what you are to what you have the power to become. . . .

. . . If you are righteous, his purposes will be served.²⁰

Remember, each of us can choose to trust in the Lord, letting Him develop us into a palace rather than settling to become a cottage. And what better time to commit to developing the habit of following the Lord’s process of decision making and learning to trust in Him than during this critical period of young adulthood, full of frequent and significant decision-making opportunities. If we can shift from the world’s way of making decisions to the Lord’s way, our paths will be safe and peaceful and our destination divine.

I testify that the Lord’s promise is sure:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

Rather than focusing on ease and prestige, may we concentrate on eternal considerations as we make life’s daily decisions. I pray that we will be able to replace feelings of self-centeredness, entitlement, and political correctness with an attitude of humility, gratitude, and faith through righteous obedience to God’s commandments. Like Saul on the road to Damascus, may we ask, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”²¹

I have a deep and abiding testimony, brothers and sisters, of the sanctity of agency. Our free will is literally the only thing that is truly ours; therefore, the ultimate consecration is in yielding ourselves to God.²² I pray that as we seek to know the Lord’s will for us and as we humbly and gratefully make decisions in His way, we will feel strengthened and enhanced, faithfully contributing to the building up of His kingdom, and that we will enjoy

His promised peace in the process. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Richard G. Scott, "To Heal the Shattering Consequences of Abuse," *Ensign*, May 2008, 40; emphasis added.

2. Robert D. Hales, "To Act for Ourselves: The Gift and Blessings of Agency," *Ensign*, May 2006, 8.

3. 2 Nephi 10:23.

4. Joel 3:14.

5. See D&C 29:34.

6. A George MacDonald analogy used by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 160.

7. Helaman 12:1.

8. Proverbs 3:23.

9. Proverbs 3:17.

10. See Genesis 39:2.

11. Genesis 40:8.

12. Genesis 41:51.

13. Genesis 41:52.

14. Genesis 45:5.

15. Richard G. Scott, "Trust in the Lord," *Ensign*, May 1989, 37.

16. 1 Nephi 1:1.

17. 1 Nephi 2:16.

18. 1 Nephi 3:7.

19. Richard G. Scott, "The Sustaining Power of Faith in Times of Uncertainty and Testing," *Ensign*, May 2003, 76.

20. Neal A. Maxwell, "I Am But a Lad," *New Era*, May 1981, 4–5.

21. Acts 9:6.

22. See Neal A. Maxwell, "Consecrate Thy Performance," *Ensign*, May 2002, 36–38.