
Life's Greatest Decisions

President Thomas S. Monson
First Counselor in the First Presidency
CES Fireside for Young Adults
7 September 2003
Conference Center

As I look into the audience this evening assembled here in the Conference Center, particularly you young ladies, I think of the words of the poet:

*Backward, turn backward, oh time in thy flight,
Make me a boy again just for tonight.*

(See Florence Percy, “Rock Me to Sleep, Mother” [ballad, 1861].)

This morning I was speaking to an audience much older than you. It was at one of the care centers in Salt Lake City. As they all came in in their wheelchairs, it was a joy to greet each one and to pass a word of cheer to each. When a young lady played a number on the piano, there was silence, as those sweet women and men who have grown old could think back of their girlhood and their boyhood, and tears came to their eyes. The young lady said she has never played better. And I said, “No, you never will. It’s the audience that brought forth your talent.” Those thoughts are in my heart today.

What a joy to be with you choice young people tonight in this magnificent Conference Center and with all those assembled in other locations who are receiving the proceedings through satellite transmission. I want you to know that there is nowhere in the world I would rather be at this moment than right here. I love the statement from the poet:

*How far is heaven?
It’s not very far.
With people like you,
It’s right where you are.*

One day during the personal ministry of our Savior, He took Peter, James, and John “up into an high mountain . . . ,

“And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.

“And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him.

“Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here” (Matthew 17:1–4).

I echo that sentiment in behalf of everyone within the sound of my voice: “Lord, it is good for us to be here.”

Young people, you live in tumultuous times. You have choices to make—choices with eternal consequences. But you are not left unaided in your decisions, however small or however large they may be.

It has been said that history turns on small hinges, and so do people’s lives. Decisions determine destiny. That is why it is worthwhile to look ahead, to set a course, to be at least partly ready when the moment of decision comes.

I would like to direct my remarks to three of the most significant decisions you will ever have to make. They are these: What will be my faith? Whom shall I marry? and What will be my life’s work?

What Will Be My Faith?

First, What will be my faith? Each one of us has the responsibility to find out for himself or herself that this gospel of Jesus Christ is true. If we study the scriptures and put the teachings to the test, then we shall know the truthfulness of the doctrine, for this is our promise.

Once we have such knowledge, it is up to us to decide what we will do with it. King Benjamin admonishes:

“Believe in God; believe that he is, and that he created all things, both in heaven and in earth; believe that he has all wisdom, and all power, both in heaven and in earth. . . .

“. . . Believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; . . . and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:9–10).

Always be active in the Church. I will give you a formula which will guarantee to a large extent your success in fulfilling that commitment. It is simple. It consists of just three words: Pay your tithing. Every bishop could tell you from his personal experience that

when the members of the Church pay tithing, honestly, faithfully, they have little difficulty keeping the other commandments of God. I call it a benchmark commandment.

Lasting happiness is found only when we live the teachings of the gospel. As we do so, we shall receive the promise recorded in Isaiah: “And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever” (Isaiah 32:17).

Little children can give us interesting examples of faith and devotion. When our children were young, I was a young bishop, twenty-two and a half, presiding over a ward of a thousand and eighty members, eighty-seven widows. My hands were full. Sister Monson and I were praying for a particular sister in the ward who was afflicted with cancer. Her name was Margaret Lister. Each night we would kneel by the side of our bed and pray for Sister Lister. On one occasion we invited our little first grade son to offer the prayer. He recalled the prayers we had offered and became a little confused by our wording. In his prayer he said, “Heavenly Father, bless Mother and Father and Sister Lister and Henny Penny and Turkey Lurkey and Chicken Licken and all the rest of the animals.” Sister Monson and I could barely refrain from bursting out laughing. But a strange thing happened—Sister Lister had a remarkable recovery and lived many years after that particular prayer. I’m not drawing any conclusions, but I’m simple enough to think that her recovery may well have been assisted by the pleading of a first grade student venturing to call upon his Heavenly Father in prayer.

Let me relate another example of stalwart faith. At the funeral service of a noble General Authority, H. Verlan Andersen, a tribute was expressed by a son. He related that years earlier he had a special school date on a Saturday night. Does that sound familiar? He borrowed the family car from his father. As he obtained the car keys and headed for the door, his father said, “Remember, tomorrow is Sunday. The car will need more gas before then. Be sure to fill the tank before coming home.”

Elder Andersen’s son then described how wonderful that evening’s activity was. Friends met, refreshments were served, and everyone had a good time. In his exuberance, however, he failed to follow his father’s instruction to add fuel to the car’s tank before returning home. He simply forgot.

Sunday morning dawned. As Elder Andersen prepared to drive to church, he discovered the gas gauge showed empty. The son saw his father return to the house and place the car keys on the table. In the Andersen family the Sabbath day was a day for worship and thanksgiving and not for purchases.

As the funeral message continued, Elder Andersen’s son declared, “I saw my father put on his coat, bid us goodbye, and walk the long distance to the chapel, that he might attend an early meeting.” Duty called. Truth was not held hostage to expedience.

In concluding his funeral message, Elder Andersen’s son said, “No son ever was taught more effectively by his father than I was on that occasion. My father not only knew the truth, but he also taught the truth and lived the truth.”

I ask the question, “What will be your faith?” Decide to ever follow the admonition of King Benjamin: “If you believe all these things see that ye do them” (Mosiah 4:10).

Whom Shall I Marry?

The second decision for us to consider is this: Whom shall I marry? Now we’re getting close to that which is in your mind and heart. Some of you, of course, have already made this decision. For most of you, however, it is still a matter to be decided.

For a moment let me take you with me back to my college days. I was a student at the University of Utah. I was attending a dance on campus in the old union building. I was dancing with my date, a girl from West High School, when a young lady from East High School danced by with her partner. Her name was Frances Johnson, although I didn’t know it at the time. I just took one look and decided that there was a young lady I wanted to meet. But she danced away. I might never have seen her again.

About two months later I did. One day while waiting for the streetcar at 13th East and 2nd South in Salt Lake City, I looked across the way and couldn’t believe my eyes. There was the young lady I had seen dancing across the floor. She was standing with another young lady and a young man whom I remembered from grade school days. Unfortunately, I couldn’t remember his name. I had a decision to make. What should I do? I found in my heart an appreciation of the phrase: “When the time for decision arrives, the time for preparation is past.” I squared my shoulders and plunged toward my opportunity. I walked up to

that young man and said, “Hello, my old friend from grade school days.”

He looked at me blankly and said, “I can’t quite remember your name.” I told him my name. He told me his name, and then he introduced me to the girl who later became my wife. That day I made a note in my student directory to call on Frances Beverly Johnson, and I did. That decision, I believe, was perhaps the most important that I have ever made.

You young people have the responsibility to make that same decision. You have an important responsibility in choosing not only whom you will date but also whom you will marry. President Gordon B. Hinckley admonished young people: “Your chances for a happy and lasting marriage will be far greater if you will date those who are active and faithful in the Church” (in Conference Report, Oct. 1981, 58; or *Ensign*, Nov. 1981, 41).

Elder Bruce R. McConkie counseled: “The most important single thing that any Latter-day Saint ever does in this world is to marry the right person, in the right place, by the right authority” (“Agency or Inspiration?” *New Era*, Jan. 1975, 38; or *Eternal Marriage Student Manual* [religion 234–235, 2003], 193).

It is essential that you become well acquainted with the person whom you plan to marry, that you can make certain that you are looking down the same pathway, with the same objectives in mind. It is ever so significant that you do this.

I should like to dispel one rumor that is very hard to put to rest. I know of no mission president in all the world who has ever told a missionary that he had the responsibility to marry within six months after his mission. I think that rumor was commenced by a returned missionary, and if not by a returned missionary, by the girlfriend of a returned missionary.

In making the momentous decision concerning whom you will marry—and in making other decisions throughout your life—you have a formula, a guide, to assist you. It is found in the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants, verses 8–9:

“You must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

“But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought.”

That counsel from the ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants has guided me, and it will guide you.

Once you make the decision, may you have the courage to move forward. After a stake conference in Tokyo many years ago, a young Japanese convert, perhaps twenty-six years of age, drove Sister Monson and me to the hotel where we were to stay. He was extremely neat and meticulous in all that he did. The car was polished to a brightness seldom seen. He even wore white gloves. I engaged him in conversation and as a result learned that he had a girlfriend who was a member and whom he had dated for some time. I asked him if he loved her. He replied, “Oh, yes, Brother Monson.”

My next question was obvious: “Does she love you?”

“Oh, yes, Brother Monson.”

I then suggested, “Why don’t you ask her to marry you?”

“Oh, I am too shy to ask.”

I then recited, for his benefit, the words of the hymn, “Come, Come, Ye Saints,” with emphasis on the phrase, “Fresh courage take. Our God will never us forsake” (*Hymns*, no. 30).

Some months later I received a lovely letter from my Japanese friend and his new bride. They sent the wedding announcement. They thanked me for my urging and added: “Our favorite hymn is ‘Come, Come, Ye Saints.’ We took fresh courage. God did not forsake us. Thank you.”

Those are some of the things we must remember. He will bless you and guide you in those momentous decisions.

I remember when I first dated Sister Monson. I came from a home where everybody was open. I had a beautiful sister older than I, and we would size up the boyfriends and tell her which one we liked the best, and all that sort of thing. But when I went to her home, everyone was dressed up. I was ushered into the living room, and she introduced me to her father. He said, “Monson. That’s a Swedish name, isn’t it?” I responded, “Yes, it is.” He said, “Good.” He went into the other room and brought out a picture from the bureau and asked, “Are you related to this Monson?” I looked at the photograph and said, “Oh, yes, that’s Elias Monson, my grandfather’s brother.” And her father wept. He said, “He is one of the missionaries that brought the gospel to my mother and father and all

of us children many years ago in Sweden.” And then he kissed me on the cheek. Now I’ve dated many girls, but I’ve never had the father kiss me on the cheek. And then Frances’s mother was crying too. They both came from Sweden, and she spoke less English than her husband. She kissed me on the cheek. I’ve never had that before either. Then I looked for Frances. She said, “I’ll go get my coat.” Well, that was the beginning of a rather extended courtship.

What Will Be My Life’s Work?

Now may I move to the last decision: What will be my life’s work? I have counseled many returning missionaries who have asked this question. I interviewed seventeen hundred missionaries one year all over the world. My advice to them, and to each one of you young people here this evening and elsewhere throughout the world, is that you should study and prepare for your life’s work in a field that you enjoy, because you are going to spend a good share of your life in that field. It should be one which will challenge your intellect and which will make maximum utilization of your talents and your capabilities. Finally, it should be a field that will supply sufficient remuneration to provide adequately for your companion and your children. Now that’s a big order. But I bear testimony that these criteria are very important in choosing your life’s work.

While this counsel would apply to young men, it also has relevance to young women. There are situations in life which we cannot predict which will require employable skills. In speaking to the Young Women of the Church two years ago, President Hinckley said, “In this day and time, a girl needs an education. She needs the means and skills by which to earn a living should she find herself in a situation where it becomes necessary to do so” (“How Can I Become the Woman of Whom I Dream,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 95).

Have discipline in your preparations. Have checkpoints where you can determine if you’re on course.

I hope that you are not afraid of tough classes. I never did have a “cinch” class. I hope that you are not afraid of lengthy periods of preparation. Burn the midnight oil. Don’t procrastinate like my older sister, who after a late date rationalized, “I have a test tomorrow, but I am weary. What is more important, my health or my test? Aha, my health! I need my

sleep.” So she slept. I won’t say what happened to the test.

You simply have to apply yourself. I hope that you want to be so well equipped that you can compete in this competitive world. I hope that you will learn to take responsibility for your decisions, whether they be in your courses of study which you elect to take, or whether they be in the direction of the academic attainments which you strive to achieve.

Should you become discouraged or feel burdened down, remember that others have passed this same way; they have endured and then have achieved. When we have done all that we are able to do, we can then rely on God’s promised help.

You have access to the lighthouse of the Lord. There is no fog so dense, no night so dark, no mariner so lost, no gale so strong as to render useless the lighthouse of the Lord. It beckons through the storms of life. It seems to call to you and me: “This way to safety; this way to home.”

There are all sorts of people who are willing to alibi or to make excuse for a failure. During World War II, a vital decision was made by one of the great leaders of the Allied military, Viscount Slim from Great Britain. He made this statement after a defeat occurred in a battle for Khartoum in 1940 against the Italians: “I could find plenty of excuses for failure, but only one reason—*myself*. When two courses of action were open to me I had not chosen, as a good commander should, the bolder. I had taken counsel of my fears” (William Slim, *Unofficial History* (1959), 148).

My young brothers and sisters, don’t take counsel of your fears. Don’t say to yourselves, “I’m not wise enough, or I can’t apply myself sufficiently well to study this difficult subject or in this difficult field, so I shall choose the easier way.” I plead with you to tax your talent, and our Heavenly Father will make you equal to those decisions.

In this life, where we have opportunities to strive and to achieve, I bear witness that on occasion we need to make a second effort—and a third effort, and a fourth effort, and as many degrees of effort as may be required to accomplish what we strive to achieve.

There is much importance attached to our three questions: *What will be my faith? Whom shall I marry? What will be my life’s work?* I am so grateful that we need not make those decisions without eternal help. We can have the guidance and the direction of our Heavenly Father if we strive to receive it.

Some years ago I had the privilege of visiting Tahiti—a land and a people I dearly love. While there, I spoke to the mission president at that time, President Raymond Baudin, about the Tahitian people. They are known as some of the greatest seafaring people in all the world. Brother Baudin, who then spoke French, of course, but little English, was trying to describe to me the secret of the success of the Tahitian sea captains. He said: “They are amazing. The weather may be terrible, the vessels may be leaky, there may be no navigational aids except their inner feelings and the stars in the heavens, but they pray and they go.” He repeated it three times: “They pray and they go. They pray and they go. They pray and they go.” There is a lesson in that statement. We need to pray and then we need to act. Both are important.

Follow the Prophets

I add this: Follow the prophets of God. When you follow the prophets, you will be in safe territory. I know that the Lord inspires His prophets, His seers, and His revelators.

Tonight you sang that great song:

*Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!
Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.
Blessed to open the last dispensation,
Kings shall extol him, and nations revere.*

(“Praise to the Man,” Hymns, no. 27.) I cannot forget that song. When I was a new member of the Council of the Twelve, forty years ago next month, Elder Harold B. Lee sat at the organ in our council room on the fourth floor of the temple. He announced, “President McKay, today we will sing as our opening song Brother Monson’s favorite, ‘Praise to the Man Who Communed with Jehovah.’” He had simply seen me in the hall and in the dressing room and had asked, “What is one of your favorite songs?” I responded, “Well, I like the old priesthood songs, like ‘Praise to the Man.’” That’s all he said. Then, as I mentioned, he announced it as my favorite hymn and we were going to sing it, and we did. I’ll not forget that early introduction to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles meeting with the First Presidency and the Twelve.

As I indicated, forty years ago President David O. McKay invited me to his office and extended my call as a member of the Council of the Twelve. At my first meeting, as we sat around the table having our lunch in the temple, he turned to me and said, “Brother Monson, do you believe that William Shakespeare, the

Bard on Avon, truly wrote the sonnets attributed to him?” I was a business major. I said, “Yes, I do, President McKay.” “Wonderful, so do I.” He wouldn’t let me go.

He said, “Do you read Shakespeare?” I said, “Occasionally.” “What is your favorite work of Shakespeare?” I said, “Henry the VIII.” He said, “What is your favorite passage from Henry the VIII?” You think I didn’t pray? I said, “I am awfully fond of that great statement in Henry the VIII of Cardinal Wolsey who sold out his religious persuasions to please the monarch of the land, and in his fallen state he declared: ‘Had I but serv’d my God with half the zeal I serv’d my King, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies.’” And President McKay said, “Oh, I love that passage.”

I’ll give you another one since you are of that age. As President McKay sat with me, he said, “Brother Monson, how long have you been married?” I told him, “We were married October 7, 1948.” And then he said, “What have you learned in the years of your marriage?” I said, “I’ve learned the truth of the counsel given to my wife and me when we sat in the holy temple, and President Benjamin L. Bowring, a sealer in the temple, counseled us before we knelt at the sacred altar. He said to us, ‘Young people, I’ll give you a formula, which if you follow, you shall never have a misunderstanding that will last longer than one day. Every night kneel down by the side of your bed, and one night, Brother Monson, you offer the prayer aloud on bended knee. The next night, Sister Monson, you offer the prayer aloud on bended knee. And you shall never have a misunderstanding that will last longer than one day. You can’t pray together and still have a misunderstanding of any kind.’” I told him that, and with a great big smile he said to me, “The same formula has worked for Sister McKay and me all of our married lives.” With that big Scottish smile, he remarked, “I thought we had an exclusive on it!” And then he acknowledged that that counsel was prophetic.

As I speak of following the prophets, I shall share with you a very intimate experience that I had and provide a conclusion to my remarks here tonight. When I desire to achieve, I desire to achieve with all my heart, whether it be in athletics, in school, in business, or anything else. I served in the United States navy toward the end of World War II. I was what is called a seaman, the lowest possible rank in the navy. Then I qualified to be Seaman First Class; then I

qualified to be Yeoman Third Class. You see, I took shorthand. Why did I take shorthand? I'll give you men about one minute to figure out why. There were only three boys in the whole shorthand class at West High School. And I surely did use it all through my time in the navy. The war ended, and I was later discharged. But I made a decision that if ever I went back into the military, I wanted to serve as a commissioned officer. Now if you haven't been in the military, I won't take the time to tell you the difference between the apprentice seaman and the commissioned officer. One can only learn that by experience, but once learned one never forgets. I thought no more mess kitchens for me, no more scrubbing of the decks, if I can avoid it, and I worked like a slave to qualify for that commission.

I'd been discharged. I joined the United States Naval Reserve. I went to drill every Monday night at Fort Douglas. I studied hard that I might qualify academically. I took every kind of examination imaginable: mental, physical, and emotional. Finally, there came from Denver, Colorado, the beautiful news, "You have been accepted to receive the commission of an ensign in the United States naval reserve." I gleefully showed it to Frances and said, "I made it! I made it!" She hugged me and said, "You've worked hard enough to achieve it."

But then something happened. I was called to be a counselor in my ward bishopric. The bishop's council meeting was on the same evening as my navy drill meeting. I knew there was a terrible conflict. I knew that I didn't have the time to pursue the naval reserve and my bishopric duties. What was I to do? A decision had to be made.

I prayed about it. And then I went to see my former stake president when I was a boy, Elder Harold B. Lee. I sat down across the table from him. I told him how much I valued that commission. In fact I showed him the copy of the letter of appointment I had received. And then he said to me, after pondering: "Here's what you should do, Brother Monson. You write a letter to the Bureau of Naval Affairs and tell them that because of your call as a member of the bishopric, you can't accept that commission in the United States naval reserve." My heart sank. Then he said, "Then write to the commandant of the Twelfth Naval District in San Francisco and tell them that you would like to be discharged from the reserve." I don't know how I survived that interview.

I said, "Brother Lee, you don't understand the military. Of course they will decline to give me that commission if I refuse to accept it, but the Twelfth Naval District isn't going to let me off. A noncommissioned officer will surely be called up, with a war brewing in Korea. If they are called back, I would rather go back as a commissioned officer, but I won't if I don't accept this commission. Are you sure this is the counsel you want me to receive?" Those who know Brother Lee know that I was on dangerous ground in questioning him twice. He put his hand on my shoulder and in a fatherly way said, "Brother Monson, have more faith. The military is not for you."

I went to my home. I placed a tear-stained commission back in its envelope with its accompanying letter and declined to accept it. I then wrote a letter to the Twelfth Naval District and requested a discharge from the naval reserve.

My discharge from the naval reserve was in the last group processed before the outbreak of the Korean War. My headquarters outfit was activated. Six weeks after I had been called to be a counselor in the bishopric, I was called to be the bishop of my ward. I would not be standing before you this evening had I not followed the counsel of a prophet, had I not prayed about a decision, had I not come to an appreciation of the important truth: "The wisdom of God oftentimes appears as foolishness to men. But the greatest single lesson we can learn in mortality is that when God speaks and a man obeys, that man will always be right."

My dear brothers and sisters, I pray with all the strength and all the fervor of my conviction that our Heavenly Father will guide and bless you in these important decisions, which each one of you will be called upon to make. If you want to see the light of heaven, if you want to feel the inspiration of Almighty God, if you want to have that feeling within your bosom that your Heavenly Father is guiding you to the left or guiding you to the right, instructions from this passage will help you: "Stand ye in holy places, and be not moved" (D&C 87:8), and then the Spirit of our Heavenly Father will be yours. I bear this testimony to you. I invoke upon you the promise of the Lord when He said:

"I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.

“Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory” (D&C 76:5–6).

That each of you may qualify for that great reward, that eternal glory, is my sincere prayer as I bear witness that we are led by a prophet of God, even

President Gordon B. Hinckley, and that Jesus Christ is our Lord and our Savior and our Elder Brother. This testimony I leave with you, my beloved young friends, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.