

---

# A Matter of a Few Degrees

PRESIDENT DIETER F. UCHTDORF

Second Counselor in the First Presidency

*The difference between happiness and misery . . . often comes down to an error of only a few degrees.*



**M**y dear brethren, I feel your strength and goodness as we assemble as the priesthood of God. I love you; I admire you. Thank you for your faith, your prayers, and your willingness to serve the Lord.

It is now two months since President Thomas S. Monson called me to serve as Second Counselor in the First Presidency of the Church. I am sure this came as a surprise to many, and it caught me off guard as well. In fact, I would say I may have been the second most surprised person on earth, the first being my wife.

On the day the Quorum of the Twelve met in the temple to sustain

President Monson and ordain and set him apart as prophet, seer, and revelator and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I felt overjoyed to have the opportunity to raise my hand in support of my beloved friend and leader.

After President Monson was sustained, he announced his counselors.

President Eyring was no surprise. He is a man of stature and character—a wonderful choice as First Counselor. How I love and admire him.

Then President Monson announced his Second Counselor. It was a name that sounded strangely familiar. It was my name.

I looked around the room, not sure I had heard correctly. But the smiles from my brethren and the look of compassion from President Monson assured me that once again my life was about to change.

We all miss President Hinckley. He continues to bless our lives.

President Monson is the prophet of God for our days; I honor him and pledge my heart, might, mind, and strength to this great work.

In 1979 a large passenger jet with 257 people on board left New Zealand for a sightseeing flight to Antarctica and back. Unknown to the pilots, however, someone had modified



the flight coordinates by a mere two degrees. This error placed the aircraft 28 miles (45 km) to the east of where the pilots assumed they were. As they approached Antarctica, the pilots descended to a lower altitude to give the passengers a better look at the landscape. Although both were experienced pilots, neither had made this particular flight before, and they had no way of knowing that the incorrect coordinates had placed them directly in the path of Mount Erebus, an active volcano that rises from the frozen landscape to a height of more than 12,000 feet (3,700 m).

As the pilots flew onward, the white of the snow and ice covering the volcano blended with the white of the clouds above, making it appear as though they were flying over flat ground. By the time the instruments sounded the warning that the ground was rising fast toward them, it was too late. The airplane crashed into the side of the volcano, killing everyone on board.

It was a terrible tragedy brought on by a minor error—a matter of only a few degrees.<sup>1</sup>

Through years of serving the Lord and in countless interviews, I have learned that the difference between happiness and misery in individuals, in marriages, and families often comes down to an error of only a few degrees.

### **Saul, the King of Israel**

The story of Saul, the king of Israel, illustrates this point. Saul's life began with great promise, but it had an unfortunate and tragic end. In the beginning, Saul was “a choice young man, . . . and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he.”<sup>2</sup> Saul was personally chosen by God to be king.<sup>3</sup> He had every advantage—he was physically imposing,<sup>4</sup> and he came from an influential family.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Saul had weaknesses, but the Lord promised to bless, uphold, and prosper him. The scriptures tell us that God promised to always be with him,<sup>6</sup> give him another heart,<sup>7</sup> and turn him into another man.<sup>8</sup>

When he had the Lord's help, Saul was a magnificent king. He united Israel and defeated the Ammonites, who had invaded their land.<sup>9</sup> Soon a much greater problem faced him—the Philistines, who had a terrible army with chariots and horsemen “and people as the sand which is on the sea shore in multitude.”<sup>10</sup> The Israelites were so terrified of the Philistines that they hid “themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks.”<sup>11</sup>

The young king needed help. The prophet Samuel sent word for him to wait and that he, the prophet, would come and offer sacrifice and seek counsel from the Lord. Saul waited

seven days, and still the prophet Samuel had not arrived. Finally, Saul felt he could wait no longer. He gathered the people together and did something he had no priesthood authority to do—he offered the sacrifice himself.

When Samuel arrived, he was brokenhearted. “Thou hast done foolishly,” he said. If only the new king had endured a little longer and not deviated from the course of the Lord, if only he had followed the revealed order of the priesthood, the Lord would have established his kingdom forever. “But now,” Samuel said, “thy kingdom shall not continue.”<sup>12</sup>

On that day, the prophet Samuel recognized a critical weakness in Saul's character. When pressured by outside influences, Saul did not have the self-discipline to stay on course, trust the Lord and His prophet, and follow the pattern God had established.

### **Small Errors Can Have a Large Impact on Our Lives**

The difference of a few degrees, as with the Antarctica flight or Saul's failure to hold fast to the counsel of the prophet just a little longer, may seem minor. But even small errors over time can make a dramatic difference in our lives.

Let me share with you how I taught the same principle to young pilots.

Suppose you were to take off from an airport at the equator, intending to circumnavigate the globe, but your course was off by just one degree. By the time you returned to the same longitude, how far off course would you be? A few miles? A hundred miles? The answer might surprise you. An error of only one degree would put you almost 500 miles (800 km) off course, or one hour of flight for a jet.

No one wants his life to end in tragedy. But all too often, like the pilots and passengers of the sightseeing flight, we set out on what we hope will be an exciting journey only

to realize too late that an error of a few degrees has set us on a course for spiritual disaster.

### **Is There a Lesson for Our Lives in These Examples?**

Small errors and minor drifts away from the doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring sorrowful consequences into our lives. It is therefore of critical importance that we become self-disciplined enough to make early and decisive corrections to get back on the right track and not wait or hope that errors will somehow correct themselves.

The longer we delay corrective action, the larger the needed changes become, and the longer it takes to get back on the correct course—even to the point where a disaster might be looming.

You men of the priesthood have been entrusted with a great responsibility. Just think of it: our Heavenly Father trusts you young deacons, teachers, and priests with the “key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel.”<sup>13</sup> You men of the Melchizedek Priesthood have received an oath and a covenant in which you have been promised all the Father has if you magnify your priesthood.<sup>14</sup>

The Lord reminds us that “unto whom much is given much is required.”<sup>15</sup> Those who bear the priesthood of God have a great responsibility to be examples of goodness to the world. We live up to these expectations when we quickly recognize the dangers and influences that tempt us to drift from the Lord’s way and when we courageously follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost to make decisive corrections that will bring us back on course.

This conference is being translated into 92 languages and broadcast to 96 countries by the miracle of modern technology. Many of you brethren attend general conference by means of the Internet. New technologies



such as this make it possible for the gospel message to be spread throughout the world. The Church Web sites are good examples of how you can use this technology as a wonderful resource of inspiration, help, and learning. They can be a blessing for you priesthood holders, your families, and the Church.

But be cautious. These same technologies can allow evil influences to cross the threshold of your homes. These dangerous traps are only a mouse click away. Pornography, violence, intolerance, and ungodliness destroy families, marriages, and

individual lives. These dangers are distributed through many media, including magazines, books, television, movies, and music, as well as the Internet. The Lord will help you to recognize and avoid those evils. It is the early recognition of danger and a clear course correction that will keep you in the light of the gospel. Minor decisions can lead to major consequences.

Entering a strange and risky chat room on the Internet could lead you into the center of a raging storm. Putting a computer in a private room that the rest of the family cannot access could be the starting point for

a deceitful and dangerous journey.

But the Lord requires not only outward acts but also your inner thoughts and feelings to be close to the spirit of the law.<sup>16</sup> God “require[s] the heart and a willing mind.”<sup>17</sup>

We, the priesthood of God, have the responsibility and the power of self-direction: “It is not meet that I should command in all things,” saith the Lord. “Men should be anxiously engaged in a good cause, and do many things of their own free will, and bring to pass much righteousness; for the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves.”<sup>18</sup>

Our Heavenly Father knew before we came to this mortal existence that negative forces would tempt us to drift from our course, “for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>19</sup> That is why He prepared a way for us to make corrections. Through the merciful process of true repentance and the Atonement of Jesus Christ, our sins can be forgiven and we will “not perish, but have everlasting life.”<sup>20</sup>

Our willingness to repent shows our gratitude for God’s gift and for the Savior’s love and sacrifice on our behalf. Commandments and priesthood covenants provide a test of faith, obedience, and love *for* God and Jesus Christ, but even more importantly, they offer an opportunity to experience love *from* God and to receive a full measure of joy both in this life and in the life to come.

These commandments and covenants of God are like navigational instructions from celestial heights and will lead us safely to our eternal destination. It is one of beauty and glory beyond understanding. It is worth the effort. It is worth making decisive corrections now and then staying on course.

Remember: the heavens will not be filled with those who never made mistakes but with those who recognized



that they were off course and who corrected their ways to get back in the light of gospel truth.

The more we treasure the words of the prophets and apply them, the better we will recognize when we are drifting off course—even if only by a matter of a few degrees.

### **What If We Have Drifted Far off Course?**

Now, brethren, there are those who have neglected to make appropriate course corrections and now believe that they are too far from the Lord’s way to ever make it back. To them we proclaim the good news that is the gospel of redemption and salvation. No matter how terribly off course you are, no matter how far you have strayed, the way back is certain and clear. Come, learn of the Father; offer up a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Have faith, and believe in the cleansing power of the infinite Atonement of Jesus the Christ. If we confess and repent of our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.<sup>21</sup> “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be [made] as white as snow.”<sup>22</sup>

It may not be an easy path, and it requires self-discipline and determination, but its end is glorious beyond

description. You are not doomed to a tragic end. Many are eager to assist you—your family, bishops and stake presidents, your quorum leaders, and home teachers. Of course, your greatest friend is the all-powerful Creator of the universe. It is His priesthood you bear. He understands your sorrow. He knows your grief. He and our Father in Heaven will bless, comfort, and strengthen you; They will walk beside you and carry you as you strive to right your course.

My dear brethren, you are truly choice and precious sons of Heavenly Father. He has entrusted you with the sacred power of the priesthood. Please do not drift off course, not even a few degrees. Harken unto the Lord your God, and He will do for you what He promised to do for Saul: He will give you a new heart, make of you a new man, and always be with you.

I testify of our Heavenly Father, who knows and loves you. I bear witness of Jesus Christ our Savior, who is the head of this Church. President Thomas S. Monson is the prophet of God today. I express my love and gratitude for you, my dear friends and brethren of the priesthood. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

### **NOTES**

1. See Arthur Marcel, “Mount Erebus Plane Crash,” [www.abc.net.au/rn/ockhamsrazor/stories/2007/1814952.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/ockhamsrazor/stories/2007/1814952.htm).
2. 1 Samuel 9:2.
3. See 1 Samuel 9:17.
4. See 1 Samuel 10:23.
5. See 1 Samuel 9:1.
6. See 1 Samuel 10:7.
7. See 1 Samuel 10:9.
8. See 1 Samuel 10:6.
9. See 1 Samuel 11:11.
10. 1 Samuel 13:5.
11. 1 Samuel 13:6.
12. 1 Samuel 13:13–14.
13. D&C 84:26.
14. See D&C 84:38–39.
15. D&C 82:3.
16. See Alma 12:12–14; D&C 88:109.
17. D&C 64:34.
18. D&C 58:26–28.
19. Romans 3:23.
20. John 3:16.
21. See 1 John 1:9.
22. Isaiah 1:18.