



DETAIL FROM CHRIST IN GETSEMANE, BY HARRY ANDERSON

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Accepting the Lord's Will and Timing

Strong faith in the Savior is submissively accepting of His will and timing in our lives—even if the outcome is not what we hoped for or wanted.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) was a beloved disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. He served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles for 23 years, from 1981 to 2004. The spiritual power of his teachings and his example of faithful discipleship blessed and continue to bless in marvelous ways the members of the Savior's restored Church and the people of the world.

In October 1997, Sister Bednar and I hosted Elder and Sister Maxwell at Brigham Young University–Idaho (then Ricks College). Elder Maxwell was to speak to the students, staff, and faculty in a devotional assembly.

Earlier in that same year, Elder Maxwell underwent 46 days and nights of debilitating chemotherapy for leukemia. His rehabilitation and continued therapy progressed positively through the spring and summer months, but Elder Maxwell's physical strength and stamina were nonetheless limited when he traveled to Rexburg. After greeting Elder and Sister Maxwell at the airport, Susan and I drove them to our home for rest and a light lunch before the devotional.

I asked Elder Maxwell what lessons he had learned through his illness. I will remember always the precise and penetrating answer he gave. "Dave," he said, "I have learned that not shrinking is more important than surviving."



My faith was strengthened as I witnessed this couple allowing their strong and understandable desires for healing to be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

His response to my inquiry was a principle with which he had gained extensive personal experience during his chemotherapy. In January 1997, on the day he was scheduled to begin his first round of treatment, Elder Maxwell looked at his wife, reached for her hand, breathed a deep sigh, and said, “I just don’t want to shrink.”

In his October 1997 general conference message, Elder Maxwell taught with great authenticity: “As we confront our own . . . trials and tribulations, we too can plead with the Father, just as Jesus did, that we ‘might not . . . shrink’—meaning to retreat or to recoil (D&C 19:18). Not shrinking is much more important than surviving! Moreover, partaking of a bitter cup without becoming bitter is likewise part of the emulation of Jesus.”¹

Scriptures concerning the Savior’s suffering as He offered the infinite and eternal atoning sacrifice became even more poignant and meaningful to me.

“For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

“But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

“Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink—

“Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men” (D&C 19:16–19).

The Savior did not shrink in Gethsemane or on Golgotha.

Elder Maxwell also did not shrink. This mighty Apostle pressed forward steadfastly and was blessed with additional time in mortality to love, to serve, to teach, and to testify. Those concluding years of his life were an emphatic exclamation point to his example of devoted discipleship—through both his words and his deeds.

I believe most of us likely would expect a man with the spiritual capacity, experience, and stature of Elder Maxwell to face serious illness and death with an understanding of God’s plan of happiness, with assurance and grace, and with dignity. But I testify that such blessings are not reserved exclusively for General Authorities or for a select few members of the Church.

Since my call to the Quorum of the Twelve, my assignments and travels have enabled me to become acquainted with

faithful, courageous, and valiant Latter-day Saints all over the world. I want to tell you about one young man and one young woman who have blessed my life and with whom I have learned spiritually vital lessons about not shrinking and about allowing our individual will to be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

The account is true and the characters are real. I will not, however, use the actual names of the individuals who are involved. I use with permission selected statements from their personal journals.

“Not My Will, but Thine, Be Done”

John is a worthy priesthood holder and served faithfully as a full-time missionary. After returning home from his mission, he dated and married a righteous and wonderful young woman, Heather. John was 23 and Heather was 20 on the day they were sealed together for time and for all eternity in the house of the Lord.

Approximately three weeks after their temple marriage, John was diagnosed with bone cancer. Because cancer nodules also were discovered in his lungs, the prognosis was not good.

John recorded in his journal: “This was the scariest day of my life. Not only because I was told I had cancer, but also because I was newly married and somehow felt that I had failed as a husband. I was the provider and protector of our new family, and now—three weeks into that role—I felt like I had failed.”

Heather noted: “This was devastating news, and I remember how greatly it changed our perspectives. I was in a hospital waiting room writing wedding thank-you notes as we anticipated the results of John’s tests. But after learning about John’s cancer, Crock-Pots and cookware did not seem so important anymore. This was the worst day of my life, but I remember going to bed that night with gratitude for our temple sealing. Though the doctors had given John

only a 30 percent chance of survival, I knew that if we remained faithful I had a 100 percent chance to be with him forever.”

Approximately one month later John began chemotherapy. He described his experience: “The treatments caused me to be sicker than I had ever been in my life. I lost my hair, dropped 41 pounds, and my body felt like it was falling apart. The chemotherapy also affected me emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Life was a roller coaster during the months of chemo with highs, lows, and everything in between. But through it all, Heather and I maintained the faith that God would heal me. We just knew it.”

Heather chronicled her thoughts and feelings: “I could not stand to let John spend the night alone in the hospital, so I would sleep every night on the small couch in his room. We had lots of friends and family visit during the day, but the nights were the hardest. I would stare at the ceiling and wonder what Heavenly Father had planned for us. Sometimes my mind would wander into dark places, and my fear of losing John would almost overtake me. But I knew these thoughts were not from Heavenly Father. My prayers for comfort became more frequent, and the Lord gave me the strength to keep going.”

Three months later, John underwent a surgical procedure to remove a large tumor in his leg. Two days following the operation, I visited John and Heather in the hospital. We talked about the first time I met John in the mission field, about their marriage, about the cancer, and about the eternally important lessons we learn through the trials of mortality. As we concluded our time together, John asked if I would give him a priesthood blessing.

I responded that I gladly would give such a blessing, but I first needed to ask some questions.

I then posed questions I had not planned to ask and had never previously considered: “John, do you have the faith not to be healed? If it is the will of our Heavenly Father that you are transferred by death in your youth to

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the spirit world to continue your ministry, do you have the faith to submit to His will and not be healed?”

Frequently in the scriptures, the Savior or His servants exercised the spiritual gift of healing (see 1 Corinthians 12:9; D&C 35:9; 46:20) and perceived that an individual had the faith to be healed (see Acts 14:9; 3 Nephi 17:8; D&C 46:19). But as John and Heather and I counseled together and wrestled with these questions, we increasingly understood that if God’s will were for this good young man to be healed, then that blessing could be received only if this valiant couple first had the faith not to be healed. In other words, John and Heather needed to overcome, through the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ, the “natural man” (Mosiah 3:19) tendency in all of us to demand impatiently and insist incessantly on the blessings we want and believe we deserve.

We recognized a principle that applies to

every devoted disciple: strong faith in the Savior is submissively accepting of His will and timing in our lives—even if the outcome is not what we hoped for or wanted. Certainly, John and Heather would desire, yearn, and plead for healing with all of their might, mind, and strength. But more important, they would be “willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [them], even as a child doth submit to his father” (Mosiah 3:19). Indeed, they would be willing to “offer [their] whole souls as an offering unto him” (Omni 1:26) and humbly pray, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42).

What initially seemed to John, Heather, and me to be perplexing questions became part of a pervasive pattern of gospel paradoxes. Consider the admonition of the Savior: “He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it”

(Matthew 10:39). He also declared, “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (Matthew 19:30). And the Lord counseled His latter-day disciples, “By thy word many high ones shall be brought low, and by thy word many low ones shall be exalted” (D&C 112:8). Thus, having the faith not to be healed seemed to fit appropriately into a powerful pattern of penetrating paradoxes that require us to ask, to seek, and to knock that we might receive knowledge and understanding (see 3 Nephi 14:7).

After taking the necessary time to ponder my inquiries and to talk with his wife, John said to me: “Elder Bednar, I do not want to die. I do not want to leave Heather. But if the will of the Lord is to transfer me to the spirit world, then I guess I am good with that.”

My heart swelled with appreciation and admiration as I witnessed this young couple confront the most demanding of all spiritual struggles—the submissive surrender of their wills to God’s will. My faith was strengthened as I witnessed this couple allowing their strong and understandable desires for healing to be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

John described his reaction to our conversation and the blessing he received: “Elder Bednar shared with us the thought from Elder Maxwell that it is better to not shrink than to survive. Elder Bednar then asked us, ‘I know you have the faith to be healed, but do you have the faith not to be healed?’ This was a foreign concept to me. Essentially he was asking if I had the faith to accept God’s will if His will were that I not be healed? If the time were approaching for me to enter the spirit world through death, was I prepared to submit and accept?”

John continued: “Having the faith not to be healed seemed counterintuitive; but that perspective changed the way my wife and I thought and allowed us to put our trust fully in the Father’s plan for us. We learned we needed to gain the faith that the Lord is in charge

whatever the outcome may be, and He will guide us from where we are to where we need to be. As we prayed, our petitions changed from ‘Please make me whole’ to ‘Please give me the faith to accept whatever outcome Thou hast planned for me.’

“I was sure that since Elder Bednar was an Apostle, he would bless the elements of my body to realign, and I would jump out of the bed and start to dance or do something dramatic like that! But as he blessed me that day, I was amazed that the words he spoke were almost identical to those of my father, my father-in-law, and my mission president. I realized that ultimately it does not matter whose hands are on my head. God’s power does not change, and His will is made known to us individually and through His authorized servants.”

Heather wrote: “This day was filled with mixed emotions for me. I was convinced that Elder Bednar would place his hands on John’s head and completely heal him of the cancer. I knew that through the power of the priesthood he could be healed, and I wanted so bad for that to happen. After he taught us about the faith to not be healed, I was

terrified. Up to that point, I had never had to come to grips with the fact that the Lord’s plan might include losing my new husband. My faith was dependent upon the outcomes I wanted. In a manner of speaking, it was one-dimensional. Though terrifying at first, the thought of having the faith not to be healed ultimately freed me from worry. It allowed me to have complete trust that my Heavenly Father knew me better than I knew myself, and He would do what was best for me and John.”

A blessing was given, and weeks, months, and years passed by. John’s cancer miraculously went into remission. He was able to complete his university studies and obtained gainful employment. John and Heather continued to strengthen their relationship and enjoy life together.

Sometime later I received a letter from John and Heather informing me that the cancer had returned. Chemotherapy

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was resumed and surgery scheduled. John explained: “Not only did this news come as a disappointment to Heather and me, but we were puzzled by it. Was there something we did not learn the first time? Did the Lord expect something more from us?”

“So I began to pray for clarity and for the Lord to help me understand why this recurrence of the cancer was happening. One day as I was reading in the New Testament I received my answer. I read the account of Christ and His Apostles on the sea when a tempest arose. Fearing the boat would capsize, the disciples went to the Savior and asked, ‘Master, carest thou not that we perish?’ This is exactly how I felt! Carest thou not that I have cancer? Carest thou not that we want to start a family? But as I read on in the story, I found my answer. The Lord looked at them and said, ‘O ye of little faith,’ and He stretched forth His hand and calmed the waters.

“In that moment I had to ask myself, ‘Do I really believe this? Do I really believe He calmed the waters that day? Or is it just a nice story to read about?’ The answer is: I do believe, and because I know He calmed the waters, I instantly knew He could heal me. Up until this point, I had a hard time reconciling the need for my faith in Christ with the inevitability of His will. I saw them as two separate things, and sometimes I felt that one contradicted the other. ‘Why should I have faith if His will ultimately is what will prevail,’ I asked? After this experience, I knew that having faith—at least in my circumstance—was not necessarily knowing that he *would* heal me, but that He *could* heal me. I had to believe that He could, and then whether it happened was up to Him.

“As I allowed those two ideas to coexist in my life, focused faith in Jesus Christ and complete submission to His will, I found greater comfort and peace. It has been so remarkable to see the Lord’s hand in our lives. Things have fallen into place, miracles have happened, and we

continually are humbled to see God’s plan for us unfold.”

Righteousness and faith certainly are instrumental in moving mountains—if moving mountains accomplishes God’s purposes and is in accordance with His will. Righteousness and faith certainly are instrumental in healing the sick, deaf, and lame—if such healing accomplishes God’s purposes and is in accordance with His will. Thus, even if we have strong faith, many mountains will not be moved. And not all of the sick and infirm will be healed. If all opposition were curtailed, if all maladies were removed, then the primary purposes of the Father’s plan would be frustrated.

Many of the lessons we are to learn in mortality can be received only through the things we experience and sometimes suffer. And God expects and trusts us to face temporary mortal adversity with His help so we can learn what we need to learn and ultimately become what we are to become in eternity.

The Meaning of All Things

This story about John and Heather is both ordinary and extraordinary. This young couple is representative of millions of faithful, covenant-keeping Latter-day Saints all over the world who are pressing forward along the strait and narrow path with steadfast faith in Christ and a perfect brightness of hope (see 2 Nephi 31:19–20). John and Heather were not serving in highly visible leadership positions in the Church, they were not related to General Authorities, and sometimes they had doubts and fears. In many of these aspects, their story is quite ordinary.

But this young man and young woman were blessed in extraordinary ways to learn essential lessons for eternity through affliction and hardship. I have shared this episode with you because John and Heather, who are just like so many of you, came to understand that not shrinking is more important than surviving. Thus, their experience

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was not primarily about living and dying; rather, it was about learning, living, and becoming.

For many of you, their story is, has been, or could be your story. You are facing, have faced, or will yet face equivalent challenges in your lives with the same courage and spiritual perspective that John and Heather did. I do not know why some people learn the lessons of eternity through trial and suffering—while others learn similar lessons through rescue and healing. I do not know all of the reasons, all of the purposes, and I do not know everything about the Lord’s timing. With Nephi, you and I can say that we “do not know the meaning of all things” (1 Nephi 11:17).

But some things I absolutely do know. I know we are spirit sons and daughters of a loving Heavenly Father. I know the Eternal Father is the author of the plan of happiness. I know Jesus Christ is our Savior

and Redeemer. I know Jesus enabled the Father’s plan through His infinite and eternal Atonement. I know the Lord, who was “bruised, broken, [and] torn for us,”² can succor and strengthen “his people according to their infirmities” (Alma 7:12). And I know one of the greatest blessings of mortality is to not shrink and to allow our individual will to be “swallowed up in the will of the Father” (Mosiah 15:7).

Though I do not know everything about how and when and where and why these blessings occur, I do witness they are real. And I know that as you press forward in your lives with steadfast faith in Christ, you will have the capacity to not shrink. ■

From a Church Educational System devotional, “That We Might ‘Not . . . Shrink,’” delivered at the University of Texas at Arlington on March 3, 2013.

NOTES

1. Neal A. Maxwell, “Apply the Atoning Blood of Christ,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1997, 22.
2. “Jesus of Nazareth, Savior and King,” *Hymns*, no. 181.

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