

way nor means whereby salvation can come unto the children of men, only in and through the name of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent.”⁷ I bear my witness that He lives and loves us and calls us by name to come unto Him. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. John 10:14.
2. John 10:3.
3. See Malachi 3:10.
4. Letter from J. Orth, Dec. 13, 2001.
5. See Matthew 10:29.
6. See Romans 8:35–39.
7. Mosiah 3:17.

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin

Self-improvement programs

Recently I have noticed the large number of self-improvement programs that are available. There must be a tremendous demand for these products because one can scarcely turn on the television or radio without seeing or hearing promotions for products that promise everything from losing weight to growing a lush crop of thick hair. At times I wonder if the people who make these products know me personally.

Today I would like to offer my own self-improvement program. It consists of three steps that have been useful to me, and I am confident they will be helpful to you as well. What’s more, this self-improvement program is free. There’s no need for you to pull out your credit card. No toll-free number will flash on the screen warning that you have five minutes remaining to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime offer.

Parable of the three choices

Perhaps the best way to teach these principles is by way of parable.

There was once a man named John who, although still relatively young, had experienced much suffering and sorrow. Homeless and addicted to alcohol and other drugs, John was terribly sick and weary of life. The more he descended into illness and despair, the more he knew that

if he didn’t make changes—and quickly—there was a very real possibility he would die miserable, useless, and alone.

Perhaps because he had attended Primary a few times when he was a boy, John ended up in a nearby meetinghouse where he asked to see the bishop.

“I have ruined my life,” John said between tortured sobs that emerged from the depths of his harrowed soul. He spoke of the mistakes he had made and the path of self-destruction and misery he had trod.

As the bishop listened to John’s sad story, he could tell that the man truly wanted to repent and change his life. But he could also sense that John had little confidence that he could change.

The bishop thought for a moment about what he could say. Finally, he looked up and said, “John, I have made three choices in my life that have been of value to me. They may be of assistance to you as well.”

“Please, tell me,” John pleaded. “I’ll do anything. I just want to start over. I want to go back.”

Choose to begin repentance now

The bishop smiled and told him, “The first thing you should understand is that you can’t go back and begin where you once were. But all is not lost. You can begin where you are. Choose to begin your repentance now.”

To some degree, we all are like John. We have made mistakes. But no matter how badly we want to go back and begin again, we can't. We can, however, repent and begin where we are today.

In the Book of Mormon we read of Alma the Younger. He was the son of a great prophet, but he turned against his father and sought to do evil. After a visit from an angel that left him incapacitated and unable to speak, Alma repented and worked for the rest of his life to repair the damage he had done. As a result, he blessed and enriched the lives of thousands of others. Alma did not accept that he was doomed because of past mistakes. He understood that he could not erase the past. But he also understood that he had the power to repent and begin anew from where he was.

How do we begin to repent?

By first acknowledging our errors and deciding to repent. By committing today—this very day—to do better, to live noble and compassionate lives, to strive each day to be more like the Savior.

Our destiny and ultimate fate depend upon our daily decisions.

The great Old Testament prophet Joshua knew this when he said, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."¹

Joshua understood how critical it is to choose without delay to be more righteous. We too should decide now. Will our lives be filled with regret and despair? Or will we repent and strive each day to make our days worthwhile and meaningful?

Tomorrow's joy or tomorrow's despair has its roots in decisions we make today. Perhaps some people think to themselves: "I know I need to change some things in my life. Maybe later, but not now."

Those who stand at the threshold of life always waiting for the right time to change are like the man who stands at the

bank of a river waiting for the water to pass so he can cross on dry land.

Today is the day of decision.

When John heard the bishop's words, he promised he would do what the bishop had said. Because of his addictions, John knew he needed to repent and improve his health. So he checked himself into a facility where he underwent the prolonged process of recovery. He began eating nutritious food. He began to walk and to do other exercises.

Choose your priorities

Weeks passed. John was able to free himself from his addictions. He could see that his health was improving and he was getting stronger. But still he was not satisfied. There were so many things about his life that needed improvement that he felt overwhelmed and discouraged.

So, once again, he scheduled a meeting with his bishop.

That is when he learned the second choice: "John," the bishop said to him, "you'll most likely have a rough time if you think you can make yourself perfect all at once. What you must learn is to choose your priorities. You have to put first things first."

In most cases, growth comes slowly—one step at a time. We understand this when it comes to mastering a musical instrument, becoming an accomplished athlete, or flying a jet aircraft. Yet we often can scarcely forgive ourselves when we don't make the progress we expect in all areas of our own lives.

Great sculptors and artists spend countless hours perfecting their talents. They don't pick up a chisel or a brush and palette, expecting immediate perfection. They understand that they will make many errors as they learn, but they start with the basics, the key fundamentals first.

So it is with us.

We become masters of our lives in the same way—by focusing on first things first.

We all have a pretty good idea of the most important decisions we need to make—decisions that will improve our lives and bring us greater happiness and peace. That is where we should start. That is where we should place our greatest effort.

Each night before I go to bed, I take out a small card and write a list of the things I need to do the next day in order of their priority.

When I arrive at the office each morning, I check my card and put all my efforts into the first item on the list. When I accomplish that item, I move on to the second and so on. Some days I finish every item on my list. On other days some tasks are not completed. I don't become discouraged, however, because I'm focusing my energies on the things that matter most.

John began to understand that he couldn't change everything that was wrong with his life in an instant, but he could choose his priorities. He could focus on the things that mattered most, and with time his life would begin to improve.

With help from the elders quorum president, John found a modest place to live. He knew he needed to find a way to support himself, and as his health and attitude improved, he found part-time work.

Each night before John went to bed, he made a list of the most important things he needed to accomplish the next day.

Choose the right

Eventually, John was earning a steady income. He moved into a more comfortable place and bought a car. Yet, although he was feeling much better about his life, he still felt that something was missing.

Consequently, John returned a third time to meet with his bishop.

"The reason you still feel empty," the bishop said, "is because you have not made the third choice."

John asked what it was.

"It's not enough to make choices and decisions and to work on them each day," the bishop said. "Many have spent their lives in productive labor and have accomplished much. But they still feel empty. At the end of their days they lament that their lives had little meaning."

That was exactly what John had been feeling. The bishop continued, "It is not enough to do things. We must do the right things—the things our Heavenly Father would want us to do."

"How do I know what the right things are?" John asked.

The bishop smiled and pulled from his desk a set of scriptures. The leather cover was scuffed and wrinkled. The gilded edges on the paper were nearly worn away. "Through the scriptures and the words of latter-day prophets," the bishop replied. "These are the 'right things.' Some believe that the commandments of our Heavenly Father are restrictive and hard. To the contrary, they're a handbook to happiness. Every aspect of the gospel of Jesus Christ—the principles, the doctrines, and the commandments—is a part of our Heavenly Father's plan to help us obtain peace and happiness."

The bishop turned to the Book of Mormon and read the words of King Benjamin: "Consider . . . the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and if they hold out faithful to the end they are received into heaven, that thereby they may dwell with God in a state of never-ending happiness."²

As the bishop spoke, John thought about his own life. The things he had acquired hadn't brought him happiness. Perhaps what the bishop was saying was true. Maybe happiness did come from living in harmony with the commandments of our Heavenly Father.

"Remember the words of the Savior," the bishop said, as though he knew what

John was thinking, “‘For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’”³

That very night, John made a commitment to open the word of God and to learn for himself the commandments and doctrines of his Heavenly Father. No longer did he resist the words of the Lord, but rather he embraced and cherished them. As he did, the emptiness in his soul began to shrink, and in its place he gradually discovered joy and peace that surpassed his understanding.

The things the bishop had told John had indeed transformed his life. Where once he was broken, sorrowful, and close to death, now he felt alive, vibrant, and filled with joy.

God has given all we need to choose right

Brothers and sisters, our loving Heavenly Father has given us the scriptures to teach us the way to peace and happiness. Today we have great reason to rejoice, for His Son speaks to all of us!

The Lord does not sit in His heavens, silent and sealed behind impenetrable walls. Under the direction of our Heavenly Father, the Lord gives direction to His anointed servants. At this very hour, our prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, directs the holy work of the Lord here upon the earth.

In addition, the Light of Christ leads all mortals to our Heavenly Father and to His truths. It teaches us to love the Lord and to love our fellowmen, for “the Spirit of Christ is given to every man, that he may know good from evil.”⁴

We have little excuse for not choosing the way of the Lord. Do you suppose at the day of judgment, our Savior will care one little bit about the wealth we have accumulated or the praise we have received? He wants us to come unto Him, to learn of Him, and to discover the pure love of Christ that comes through embracing His word and obeying His commandments.

That is the way to remove emptiness from our lives and to fill our souls with joy beyond description.

Review of three choices

May I review these three choices for you to consider? No doubt you have had choices of your own that you have successfully followed throughout your life.

First, choose to begin the process of repentance now. Do not delay. Attend your meetings and serve cheerfully in the Church. Learn and live by gospel principles. Begin now to turn your steps toward the temple.

Second, choose your priorities. Let your family come first. Hold worthwhile family home evenings. Let the time that you spend with your families be consistent with how important they are. Cherish and nurture family members, and never allow busy schedules and frustrations to drive a wedge between you and your loved ones. Strive each day to be more obedient to the Lord’s commandments.

Third, choose the right. Study the scriptures and the words of our prophet today, even President Gordon B. Hinckley. Apply these sacred teachings to your lives. Reach out to those in distress—the lonely, the sick, and the needy. Do what you can to relieve suffering and help others become self-reliant. As you do so, the Lord will be well pleased with you.

Brothers and sisters, I know that our Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son live. I testify to you that Joseph Smith was raised up to organize the Lord’s Church in the dispensation of the fulness of times. As a special witness of Jesus Christ, I know that the Savior laid down His life for us. Through His Atonement, all mankind can repent and be cleansed of sin. We can return to our Heavenly Father and realize the value of our Savior’s infinite sacrifice. This I testify in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

NOTES

1. Joshua 24:15.
2. Mosiah 2:41.
3. Mark 8:36.
4. Moroni 7:16.

The choir sang “My Redeemer Lives.”

President Faust

The choir has sung “My Redeemer Lives.” We express our thanks to the Tab-

ernacle Choir for the beautiful music they have provided this morning.

As you leave the conference we ask you to obey traffic rules, use caution, and be courteous in driving.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, our beloved prophet, will be our concluding speaker at this session. Following President Hinckley’s remarks, the choir will sing “O Divine Redeemer.” The benediction will then be offered by Elder Keith Crockett of the Seventy. The concluding session of this conference will begin at 2:00 this afternoon.

President Gordon B. Hinckley

All working as one in a great cause

My beloved brethren and sisters, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude for your sustaining faith and prayers. The Lord has imposed upon the leadership of this Church a great and serious trust, and you have supported us in that responsibility. We know that you pray for us, and we wish you to know that we pray for you.

Not a day passes that I do not thank the Lord for faithful Latter-day Saints. No day passes that I do not pray that He will bless you wherever you are and whatever your needs.

I wish to remind you that we are all in this together. It is not a matter of the General Authorities on one hand and the membership of the Church on the other. We are all working as one in a great cause. We are all members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Within your sphere of responsibility you have as serious an obligation as do I within my sphere of responsibility. Each of us should be determined to build the kingdom of God on the earth and to further the work of righteousness.

I think I can honestly say that we have no selfish desires with reference to this work other than that it succeed.

Be strong and of a good courage

We of the First Presidency are constantly dealing with a great variety of problems. They come before us every day.

At the close of one particularly difficult day, I looked up at a portrait of Brigham Young that hangs on my wall. I asked, “Brother Brigham, what should we do?” I thought I saw him smile a little, and then he seemed to say, “In my day, I had problems enough of my own. Don’t ask me what to do. This is your watch. Ask the Lord, whose work this really is.” And this, I assure you, is what we do and must always do.

As I reflected on these matters that recent difficult day, I opened my Bible to the first chapter of Joshua and read these words: “Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee” (Joshua 1:9).