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But for a Small Moment

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But for a Small Moment

NEAL A. MAXWELL

I am delighted to be with you tonight, my brothers and sisters, to partake of the spirit that is here and of that marvelous music. I wish you knew how much as a generation you inspire those of us who have the privilege of working with you. I want you to know that I regard you highly—collectively and all here whom I know individually—and have great expectations for you. The highest compliment I can pay to you is that God has placed you here and now at this time to serve in his kingdom; so much is about to happen in which you will be involved and concerning which you will have some great influence.

It is because you will face some remarkable challenges in your time; it is because the Church has ceased to be in the eyes of men a mere cultural oddity in the Mountain West and is now, therefore, a global church—a light which can no longer be hid; it is because you have a rendezvous with destiny that will involve some soul stretching and some pain that I have chosen to speak to you tonight about the implications of two things we accept sometimes quite casually. These realities are that God loves us and, loving us, has placed us here to cope with challenges which he will place before us. I'm not sure we can always understand the implications of his love,

because his love will call us at times to do things we may wonder about, and we may be confronted with circumstances we would rather not face. I believe with all my heart that because God loves us there are some particularized challenges that he will deliver to each of us. He will customize the curriculum for each of us in order to teach us the things we most need to know. He will set before us in life what we need, not always what we like. And this will require us to accept with all our hearts—particularly your generation—the truth that there is divine design in each of our lives and that you have rendezvous to keep, individually and collectively.

God knows even now what the future holds for each of us. In one of his revelations these startling words appear, as with so many revelations that are too big, I suppose, for us to manage fully: “In the presence of God, . . . all things . . . are manifest, past, present, and future, and are continually before the Lord” (D&C 130:7).

Neal A. Maxwell was an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 1 September 1974.

The future “you” is before him now. He knows what it is he wishes to bring to pass in your life. He knows the kind of remodeling in your life and in mine that he wishes to achieve. Now, this will require us to believe in that divine design and at times to accept the truth which came to Joseph Smith wherein he was reminded that his suffering would be “but a small moment” (D&C 121:7). I’d like to talk to you about some of those small moments that will come your way in life and that come to each of us.

Let me begin by reminding you that we so blithely say in the Church that life is a school, a testing ground. It is true, even though it is trite. What we don’t accept are the implications of that true teaching—at least as fully as we should. One of the implications is that the tests that we face are real. They are not going to be things we can do with one hand tied behind our backs. They are real enough that if we meet them we shall know that we have felt them, because we will feel them deeply and keenly and pervasively.

The Lessons of the Atonement

Christ on the cross gave out the cry “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” That cry on the cross is an indication that the very best of our Father’s children found the trials so real, the tests so exquisite and so severe, that he cried out—not in doubt of his Father’s reality, but wondering “why” at that moment of agony—for Jesus felt so alone. James Talmage advises us that in ways you and I cannot understand, God somehow withdrew his immediate presence from the Son so that Jesus Christ’s triumph might be truly complete.

From Gethsemane and Calvary there are many lessons we need to apply to our own lives. We, too, at times may wonder if we have been forgotten and forsaken. Hopefully, we will do as the Master did and acknowledge that God is still there and never doubt that sublime reality—even though we may wonder and

might desire to avoid some of life’s experiences. We may at times, if we are not careful, try to pray away pain or what seems like an impending tragedy, but which is, in reality, an opportunity. We must do as Jesus did in that respect—also preface our prayers by saying, “If it be possible,” let the trial pass from us—by saying, “Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt,” and bowing in a sense of serenity to our Father in heaven’s wisdom, because at times God will not be able to let us pass by a trial or a challenge. If we were allowed to bypass certain trials, everything that had gone on up to that moment in our lives would be wiped out. It is because he loves us that at times he will not intercede as we may wish him to. That, too, we learn from Gethsemane and from Calvary.

It is interesting to me, brothers and sisters, to note that among the qualities of a saint is the capacity to develop patience and to cope with the things that life inflicts upon us. That capacity brings together two prime attributes—patience and endurance. These are qualities, in the process of giving service to mankind that most people reject or undervalue. Most people would gladly serve mankind if somehow they could get it over with once, preferably with applause and recognition. But, for the sake of righteousness, to endure, to be patient in the midst of affliction, in the midst of being misunderstood, and in the midst of suffering—that is sainthood!

I am struck quite forcibly by the idea that no man has yet become President of the church of him who suffered so much who has not himself undergone some special challenges previous to that moment. The challenges vary from President to President, but the ways in which these men have coped with these challenges are strikingly similar.

If we use Jesus as a model in the midst of the suffering about which we’re speaking, then it is also noteworthy that even in the midst of his exquisite agony he managed to have compassion for those nearby who were then

suffering much, though much less than he—those on the adjoining crosses or about him below the cross. How marvelous it is when we see people who are not so swallowed up in their own suffering that they cannot still manage sympathy, even empathy, for those who suffer far, far less. How many of us here may have undergone the embarrassment of being comforted by those who had more reason to be comforted than we? Yet we recognize in that act of theirs a saintliness to which we would so gladly aspire.

If we at times wonder if our own agendum for life deliver to us challenges that seem unique, it would be worth our remembering that, when we feel rejected, we are members of the church of him who was most rejected by his very own with no cause for rejection. If at times we feel manipulated, we are disciples of him whom the establishment of his day sought to manipulate. If we at times feel unappreciated, we are worshipers of him who gave to us the Atonement—that marvelous, selfless act, the central act of all human history—unappreciated, at least fully, even among those who gathered about his feet while the very process of the Atonement was underway. If we sometimes feel misunderstood by those about us, even those we minister to, so did he, much more deeply and pervasively than we. And if we love and there is no reciprocity for our love, we worship him who taught us and showed us love that is unconditional, for we must love even when there is no reciprocity.

Most of our suffering, brothers and sisters, actually comes because of our sins and not because of our nobility. Isn't it marvelous that Jesus Christ, who did not have to endure that kind of suffering because he was sin-free, nevertheless took upon himself the sins of all of us and experienced an agony so exquisite we cannot comprehend it? I don't know how many people have lived on the earth for sure, but demographers say between 30 and 67 billion. If you were to collect the agony for your own sins

and I for mine, and multiply it by that number, we can only shudder at what the sensitive, divine soul of Jesus must have experienced in taking upon himself the awful arithmetic of the sins of all of us—an act which he did selflessly and voluntarily. If it is also true (in some way we don't understand) that the cavity which suffering carves into our souls will one day also be the receptacle of joy, how infinitely greater Jesus' capacity for joy, when he said, after his resurrection, "Behold, my joy is full." How very, very full, indeed, his joy must have been!

I should like, therefore, to speak to you on the premise that it is a part of discipleship for us to be prepared for the kind of rigors that Jesus always leveled his disciples. He said, "My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion; and he that will not bear chastisement is not worthy of my kingdom" (D&C 136:31). That is hard doctrine. Peter made it even more rigorous. Peter didn't want us to take any credit upon ourselves for the suffering we endure because of our own mistakes. He was willing to see us take credit for the suffering we endure because of discipleship, but not because of our own stupidity or our own sin (1 Peter 2:20). Then Moroni reminded us, "For ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith" (Ether 12:6). That's the rigorous path of discipleship, brothers and sisters, about which I wish to speak at least in this one dimension tonight, giving you some examples, if I may.

If God chooses to teach us the things we most need to learn because he loves us, and if he seeks to tame our souls and gentle us in the way we most need to be tamed and most need to be gentled, it follows that he will customize the challenges he gives us and individualize them so that we will be prepared for life in a better world by his refusal to take us out of this world, even though we are not of it. In the eternal ecology of things we must pray, therefore, not that things be taken from us, but that God's

will be accomplished through us. What, therefore, may seem now to be mere unconnected pieces of tile will someday, when we look back, take form and pattern, and we will realize that God was making a mosaic. For there is in each of our lives this kind of divine design, this pattern, this purpose that is in the process of becoming, which is continually before the Lord but which for us, looking forward, is sometimes perplexing.

Traps Impeding the Ability to Meet Challenges

I should like to suggest some traps into which we can fall, if we are not careful, as we try to meet the challenges that life delivers at our doorsteps. The *first* temptation that we must resist, brothers and sisters, is the Jonah response, in which we sometimes think we can escape the calls that come to us, that we can somehow run away from the realities that will press in upon us. Jonah, you recall, had been called to go to Nineveh. He didn't want to go to that urban center that was so big. We are told it took the people hours to walk across that city. He tried to find a ship going to Tarshish. He "paid the fare thereof," hoping to leave the presence of the Lord. You and I will one day know, if we do not know now, there is no way we can escape from God's love, because it is infinite. However many times in our lives we might rather go to a Tarshish than a Nineveh, he will insist that we go to Nineveh, and we must pay "the fare thereof."

Recently a young man was called to his Nineveh. The president of the Salt Lake mission home, President Rawson, told Sister Maxwell and me that not too long ago a young man came in on a Saturday to the Salt Lake mission home and said, "President, may I see you?"

The president said, "Surely, son, come into my office."

He came in and said, "I need a blessing."
"Why do you need a blessing?"

"I need a blessing because I am the only member of my family who is a member of the Church. Yesterday, when I went to leave home, one parent told me never to come back again, the other wouldn't speak to me, and the only person who said goodbye was my little brother, who came to the front gate to say goodbye to me. I'm on my way overseas and I need a blessing."

Now, brothers and sisters, that is the kind of devotion we must have in preparation for the Ninevehs of life to which we are called. However rigorous the circumstances are, we must, as this young man did, be willing to go, to trust and to surrender ourselves to our Father in heaven, who knows why in his divine plans it must be so.

A *second* trap into which we can fall is the naïveté that grows out of our not realizing that the adversary will press particularly in the areas of our vulnerabilities. It ought not to surprise us that this will be so. The things that we would most like to avoid, therefore, will often be the things that confront us most directly and most sharply. Some of you may recall that the British military planners who built the fortress of Singapore, which was supposed to be invincible, fixed the guns of Singapore so that they would fire only seaward. The Japanese very cleverly came from behind on land. Churchill and others were stunned that this citadel and fortress had fallen so quietly and so simply. Some of us have guns that fire only in one direction. We are vulnerable, and our vulnerabilities will be probed by the vicissitudes of life. One of the great advantages of life in the Church (in which the gospel is at the center) is that we can overcome these vulnerabilities; otherwise, we shall be taken by surprise and swiftly.

A *third* trap into which we can fall, if we are not careful, is to fail to notice that at the center of many of our challenges is pride, is ego. In most emotional escalations with which I am familiar, if one goes to the very center of them,

there is ego asserting itself relentlessly. The only cure for rampant ego is humility, and this is why circumstances often bring to us a kind of compelled or forced humility—so that we may recover our equilibrium. Humility can help us to dampen our pride. Ironically, for those of us who most need to serve to develop our capacity to love, our very egos often make us unapproachable so far as others are concerned. We, therefore, are underused and we wonder why. And this is typical of the trials that we impose upon ourselves.

A *fourth* trap into which we can fall is that we may at times assume that the plan of salvation requires merely that we endure and survive when, in fact, as is always the case with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is required of us, not only that we endure, but also that we endure *well*, that we exhibit “grace under pressure.” This is necessary, not only so that our own passage through the trial can be a growth experience, but also because (more than we know) there are always people watching to see if we can cope, who therefore may resolve to venture forth and to cope themselves. Every time we navigate safely on the strait and narrow way, there are other ships that are lost which can find their way because of our steady light.

A *fifth* trap, and a major one, is the trap of self-pity. One man has said that “hell is being frozen in self-pity.” Indeed, at times when we think our lot is hard or when we feel our selves misunderstood, it will be so easy for us to indulge ourselves in feeling some self-pity. A contrasting episode comes to us out of ancient Greece: Several hundred Spartans were holding the pass at Thermopylae, that narrow pass, and the Persians came in overwhelming numbers and urged the Spartans to surrender. Hoping to intimidate them further, the Persians sent emissaries to the Spartans, saying they had so many archers in their army they could darken the sky with their arrows. The

Spartans said, “So much the better. We shall fight in the shade.”

Now, brothers and sisters, the disciple has to be ready to fight in the shade of circumstance. One of the ways we can have perspective that will permit us to fight in the shade of circumstances is to read the scriptures and have involvement—intellectually and spiritually—with the case studies in the scriptures of those men and women who have coped, and coped successfully, who have undergone far more than you and I are asked to undergo. When we understand these models, we may then understand that God is totally serious about his purpose “to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man,” that his chief concerns are not real estate and political dominion, but the growth of souls, the celestializing of the souls with whom he works.

I am one of those, for instance, who does not believe the Mormon colonies in Mexico and Canada had much to do in the Lord’s eyes with real estate or physical empire, but I feel rather that these colonies were established for the preparation of a people. I call your attention to the fact that two members of the First Presidency and the wife of President Kimball have come out of those colonies in Mexico and Canada—individuals prepared beforehand for the mighty roles they now carry on in the kingdom. I don’t think God’s too interested in real estate. He owns it all anyway. He does seem to be incredibly interested in what happens to us individually and will place us in those circumstances where we have the most opportune chances to grow and to carry out our purposes.

A *sixth* trap into which we can fall quite easily, brothers and sisters, is the trap in which we sense that something special is happening in our lives but are not able to sort it out with sufficient precision and clarity that we can articulate it to someone else. That is so often true of the gospel. Its truths are too powerful for us to manage on occasion. Let me give you this simple illustration of how we can know

something and yet not be able to communicate it fully without the help of the Spirit. If I were to bring one of you into this hall and if, instead of all of you, it were filled with fifteen thousand mothers and if I were to say to you, “Somewhere in that audience is your mother; find her,” you could do it, and I suspect it wouldn’t take you very many minutes. But if I said to you, “Wait outside. There are fifteen thousand mothers in there and one of them is your mother. Now, you describe her to me with sufficient precision and clarity so that I can go find her,” you couldn’t do it. You would still know what she looked like, but tongue could not transmit what you knew. It is that way often with the gospel. That is why we are so in need of the Spirit—so that knowledge can arc like electricity from point to point, aided and impelled by the Spirit—aid without which we are simply not articulate enough to speak of all the things which we know.

It would be interesting, for instance, if I were to ask one of you to describe to the satisfaction of all here the color yellow. Yellow, of course, is a primary color, but it would be difficult for you to describe it to us without comparing it with other colors. Yet you have no difficulty recognizing yellow when you see it. We know more than we can tell! Sometimes the things we know take the form of knowledge about what is happening to us in life in which we sense purpose, in which we sense divine design, but which we cannot speak about with full articulateness. There are simply moments of mute comprehension and of mute certitude. We need to pay attention when these moments come to us, because God often give us the assurances we need but not necessarily the capacity to transmit these assurances to anyone else.

I would like to share with you at this moment a highly personal experience. I will not mention the name of the man involved. I mention the experience only because of one of my own tendencies (those on the stand and elsewhere who know me know that I am often

too verbal and silence does not come easily to me). Fortunately, on this occasion there was a kind of mute comprehension on my part that the most important thing I could do was to be still.

A few days after April conference, a very bright, able professional man called my secretary for an appointment. Fortunately she gave it to him, and fortunately it was of sufficient duration that there was time for the chemistry of this experience to operate. He came in and we greeted each other. I, frankly, was not sure of the purpose of his visit. I assumed it might even be that he had come to complain about something. There are portions of our time as General Authorities that are given over to being ombudsmen. But I said little and sat down. I resisted the temptation to fill the silence that then ensued. Tears welled up, filling his eyes. It seemed to me we must have sat there for ten minutes, but I am sure it was only three or four. I kept still, resisting the natural temptation to rush in with supporting words, and simply let the Spirit operate. Then out it came—a marvelous, manly confession, in which he said for him to become active in the kingdom again it was necessary that he set certain things right. Over the years he felt he had been unfair to me and unkind to me, and he wanted to come and to ask for forgiveness. I again largely resisted the temptation, which by then was strong, to rush in with some quick reassurances that might put him at ease. As thoughts tumbled on thoughts and verbalizations on verbalizations, this sweet man cleansed his soul. Indeed, I had *not* felt injured by him. I was not aware of his concerns, but it would have been folly for me to have so said before there was full closure in the matter at hand.

He is a marvelous, sweet man. I admire his courage. He said even that morning he had wondered if he could come, or if he shouldn’t cancel his appointment. I love him. We embraced and have stayed in close contact since. He is able and is making marvelous progress in the kingdom. I’ll always be grateful

for that sensing of mute comprehension that something special was about to happen which I couldn't describe but in which my role for that occasion was mostly to be still and to listen. There are times when life will visit us with challenges in which we will have a mute comprehension of what is underway but cannot transmit it fully to someone else.

A *seventh* trap, brothers and sisters, is that some of us neglect to develop multiple forces of satisfaction. When one of the wells upon which we draw dries up through death, loss or status, disaffection, or physical ailment, we then find ourselves very thirsty because, instead of having multiple sources of satisfaction in our lives, we have become too dependent upon this or upon that. How important it is to the symmetry of our souls that we interact with all the gospel principles and with all the Church programs, so that we do not become so highly specialized that, if we are deprived of one source of satisfaction, indeed we are in difficulty. It is possible to be incarcerated within the prison of one principle. We are less vulnerable if our involvements with the kingdom are across the board. We are less vulnerable if we care deeply about many principles—not simply a few.

An *eighth* trap to be avoided, brothers and sisters, is the tendency we have—rather humanly, rather understandably—to get ourselves caught in peering through the prism of the present and then distorting our perspective about things. Time is of this world; it is not of eternity. We can, if we are not careful, feel the pressures of time and see things in a distorted way. How important it is that we see things as much as possible through the lens of the gospel with its eternal perspectives.

I should like, if I may, to share with you on this point the fine writing of your own A. Lester Allen, a dean and scientist on this campus. This is what I have come to call the "Allen Analogy" about time. Let me read you these

lines, if I may. Their application will be obvious. Dean Allen writes:

Suppose, for instance, that we imagine a "being" moving onto our earth whose entire life-span is only 1/100 of a second. Ten thousand "years" for him, generation after generation, would be only one second of our time. Suppose this imaginary being comes up to a quiet pond in the forest where you are seated. You have just tossed in a rock and are watching the ripples. A leaf is fluttering from the sky and a bird is swooping over the water. He would find everything absolutely motionless. Looking at you, he would say: "In all recorded history nothing has changed. My father and his father before him have seen that everything is absolutely still. This creature called man has never had a heartbeat and has never breathed. The water is standing in stationary waves as if someone had thrown a rock into it; it seems frozen. A leaf is suspended in the air, and a bird has stopped right over the middle of the pond. There is no movement. Gravity is suspended." The concept of time in this imaginary being, so different from ours, would give him an entirely different perspective of what we call reality.

On the other hand, picture another imaginary creature for whom one "second" of his time is 10,000 years of our time. What would the pond be like to him? By the time he sat down beside it, taking 15,000 of our years to do so, the pond would have vanished. Individual human beings would be invisible, since our entire life-span would be only 1/100 of one of his "seconds." The surface of the earth would be undulating as mountains are built up and worn down. The forest would persist but a few minutes and then disappear. His concept of "reality" would be much different than our own.

That's the most clever way I have seen time and intimations of eternity dealt with. *It is very important that we not assume the perspective of mortality in making the decisions that bear on eternity!* We need the perspectives of the gospel to make decisions in the context of eternity. We

need to understand we cannot do the Lord's work in the world's way.

The Church's Basis in Christ

Now, brothers and sisters, may I prepare to close with these thoughts: The Church is fully *Christ-centered*. The Church is also *Christ-powered*, and it is also designed to help its members become more *Christlike*. Since the gospel of Jesus Christ focuses on the truths that deal with everlasting things and not on obsolescent realities, it is very important for us, brothers and sisters, to recognize that the truths in which we traffic as members of the kingdom pertain to eternity as well as to this life.

I am surprised (I would be amused if the cost were not so great) that people think they can remove the foundations of our social structure—things like work, chastity, and family and then wonder why other things crumble. You can't remove the foundation of a building while standing inside and not be hit with falling plaster. We are now in the interesting position in the kingdom of trying to warn about what is happening in the world and, at the same time, of keeping ourselves personally secure. We must be Christ-centered individually. We must have his and God's power to do our work, and we must take seriously the challenge of becoming more Christlike. You're soon going to go out into a world full of marshmallow men. Like the act of putting a finger into a marshmallow, there is no core in these men, there is no center, and when one removes his finger, the marshmallow resumes its former shape. We are in a world of people who want to yield to everything—to every fad and to every fashion. It is incredibly important that we be committed to the core—committed to those things that matter, about which our Father in heaven has leveled with us through his Son, Jesus Christ, and his prophets.

I saw an interesting cartoon not too long ago that bears on this point of marshmallow men. It showed two multicolored desert lizards

conversing. One said to the other, "Of course you're going through an identity crisis. You're a chameleon."

Of course the world is going through an identity crisis. Of course it's adrift: it's got no anchor. It does not have core principles upon which to decide all other things. I am grateful that our beliefs are related to the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I am grateful that God has told us that we must be ready for the trials that life will bring our way.

I speak to this generation with some sense of vicarious anticipation in your behalf of what lies ahead—urging you to pour out your hearts in supplication and prayer. There is nothing more powerful than prayer, nothing more masculine or more feminine (at the same time) than prayer. There was more power processed and expended on that single night in Gethsemane, in that small garden, than all the armies and navies have ever expended in all the battles on the land and sea and in the air in all of human history. The catalyst of prayer helped Jesus to cope with suffering, and by his suffering he emancipated all men from death and made possible eternal life. This cardinal fact about the central act of human history, the Atonement, ought to give us pause, therefore, as we face our challenges individually.

I believe it was George Macdonald who reminded us that the only door out of the dungeon of self is the love of one's neighbor. How proud we ought to be, in a quiet way, that we are members of the church of the most selfless being who ever lived. How proud we ought to be to belong to a church that makes specific demands of us and gives us specific things to do and marks the strait and narrow way, lest we fall off one side of the precipice or the other. I am so grateful that God loves us enough to teach us specifically. Had secularists written the Ten Commandments, they might have said, "Thou shalt not be a bad person." Note what the Ten Commandments say: "Thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not take

the name of the Lord thy God in vain, thou shalt not commit adultery," and so on. The gospel of Jesus Christ is specific because God cares specifically for each of us and, caring for us, will mark the way carefully lest we fall out of happiness.

A vague creed is fitted only for a vague God. We have a Father who loves us specifically and gives us things to do and, because he loves us, will cause us, at times, to have our souls stretched and to be fitted for a better world by coping with life in this world.

May God bless us with that kind of commitment, with the capacity to be serious disciples and to accept both the agenda that he has prepared for each of us because he loves us and the curriculum, prepared for each of us, which he has customized to teach us the things we most need to know, because he loves us.

There is a man I hope someday to meet—a brother of yours and mine in the kingdom. He lives somewhere behind the Iron Curtain. Another man, a priesthood leader behind the Iron Curtain, was told that there was such a man, who had not seen another member of the Church for many years. This good brother, moved by the Spirit, saved his money (which he didn't have much of), made his way through the red tape of crossing borders, and found this brother of yours and mine; he learned that he who was found had not seen another member of the Church for over twenty

years. And when the man who was the finder indicated that it was possible, because he had been so authorized, to give this brother a patriarchal blessing, this good brother demurred momentarily until he got the tithing which he had saved for over twenty years and gave it to this other man so that he would be fully worthy of that blessing!

I don't know what the divine design is in the challenge of that kind of solitude. I know that this man, our brother, is meeting that challenge. Some of us will have to be most courageous, not when we're alone, but when we're in a crowd. Whatever the form the test takes, we must be willing to pass it. We must reach breaking points without breaking. We must be willing, if necessary, to give up our lives—not because we have a disdain for life as some do, but even though we love life—because we are the servants of him who did that in such an infinite way for all of us.

I testify to you in the solemnity of my soul that we are prophet-led, that this is the church of Jesus Christ, presided over by a prophet who himself knows a great deal about suffering. We are all the servants of him who suffered most that we might have with him a fullness of joy. May we be committed to that task this day and always I pray in the name of him whose church this is, even Jesus Christ. Amen.