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in Doing the Father's Will*

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The Savior's Example in Doing the Father's Will

ALAN PARKINSON

Brothers and sisters, it is a privilege for me to speak to you this morning. I would like to begin my remarks by showing you two pictures. One of these has already been shown during a devotional several months ago, but it is so remarkable I hope you won't mind if I show it again. The image is called by astronomers "the Hubble Deep Field," and it is the deepest picture of the universe ever taken. Every swirl of light in this photograph is a galaxy containing billions of stars. Although it only covers a portion of the sky equal to a grain of sand held at arm's length, scientists can count more than 1,500 galaxies in the deep field image.

Now I wish to show you another picture that is quite different from the first. It is a photograph of my grandson Joshua. Joshua, born prematurely, weighed just three pounds and seven ounces at birth. This picture was taken through the window of his isolette at the hospital. He is grasping the finger of his father.

What is the connection between these two pictures?

In 1 Nephi 11:16, Nephi was asked the question "Knowest thou the condescension of God?" Nephi was then shown the birth of the Savior. In a wonderful essay on the question asked of Nephi, Dennis Rasmussen of the BYU Philosophy Department wrote,

"The hands that made the world and hung the stars in the sky were now just large enough to grasp a mother's finger" (in *The Lord's Question: Thoughts on the Life of Response* [Provo: Keter Foundation, 1985], 60). And so when I look at these two images together, I gain a new perspective on the question "Knowest thou the condescension of God?"

Today I wish to speak of a particular aspect of the Savior's life, of a particular example He set for us. I refer to His desire to do the Father's will in all things. In speaking about the divinity of the Savior, President Ezra Taft Benson said:

The entire ministry of the Master was characterized by His voluntary subordination to His Heavenly Father's will. "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38). [In "Five Marks of the Divinity of Jesus Christ," Ensign, December 2001, 11; from a fireside address given at the University of Utah Special Events Center on 9 December 1979]

This scripture comes from the book of John, and, indeed, doing the Father's will is one of

Alan Parkinson was a BYU professor of mechanical engineering when this devotional address was given on 14 May 2002.

the themes of the book of John. Let us look at just the references in chapter 8:

For I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me. . . .

. . . If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also. . . .

. . . I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. . . .

I speak that which I have seen with my Father. . . .

. . . If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. . . .

. . . But I honour my Father. [John 8:16, 19, 28, 38, 42, 49]

Thus, in this one chapter there are six references to the Savior doing and teaching only what He has learned from His Father. Now I wish to discuss a very particular instance of the Savior following the Father's will. But before I do so, I will digress and mention a nongospel example that I hope will be helpful.

Several years ago I read an account of what was referred to as the Mount Everest Disaster. The account tells how several groups, made up of more than 20 people, attempted to climb to the top of the mountain on the same day in 1996. On their descent from the summit, exhausted and out of oxygen, the groups were engulfed in a blinding snowstorm that created windchill in excess of 100 degrees below zero. Ultimately, eight died. In the preface to a chapter where the author talked of actions and decisions that seem to the reader cruel or uncaring or selfish, the author quoted the following:

I distrust summaries, any kind of gliding through time, any too great a claim that one is in control of what one recounts; I think someone who claims to understand but is obviously calm, someone who claims to write with emotion recollected in tranquillity, is a fool and a liar. To understand is to tremble. [Jon Krakauer, quoting Harold Brodkey from

"Manipulations," in Into Thin Air (New York: Villard Books, 1997), 217]

I want to hang onto the phrase "to understand is to tremble," for I think it applies to the situation we will discuss.

That situation, and the particular instance I wish to discuss, is when the Savior accomplished the Atonement—specifically, the night in the Garden of Gethsemane. In discussing this, I feel we are treading on sacred ground, and we need to metaphorically "remove our shoes." I desire to speak with the utmost reverence. I don't wish to focus on the doctrinal aspects of the Atonement as much as on what it was like for the Savior to do it. Sometimes I think about the offering by the Savior in the following way: Of course the Savior accomplished the Atonement—after all, He is the Firstborn of the Father, a member of the Godhead, the only one without sin, and the Creator with the Father of the heavens and earth. All of this is true. But in so thinking I feel I am not recognizing what it cost—I fail to appreciate, to understand, and to tremble.

That is, on one hand, we recognize the Savior as a person of perfect integrity who committed to undertake the Atonement in the premortal existence. And, indeed, so sure was this commitment that for thousands of years people repented and were baptized and took advantage of the Atonement as if it had already occurred. And yet, on the other hand, we need to understand how difficult it was to keep that commitment. "The mortal mind fails to fathom," continued President Benson, "the tongue cannot express, the pen of man cannot describe the breadth, the depth, or height of the suffering of our Lord—nor His infinite love for us" ("Five Marks of the Divinity," 12). He was not compelled to take upon Himself this burden. He did so voluntarily. And as He made that choice, what was it like for Him?

The references in the scriptures are quite brief—about four verses each in Matthew,

Mark, and Luke. They challenge us to understand. Let us read from Luke:

And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed,

Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.

And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and he sweat as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. [JST Luke 22:41–44]

The accounts in the New Testament are secondhand accounts, written by others. In surely one of the most remarkable verses in all of scripture, in Doctrine and Covenants 19:18, the Savior Himself told us what it was like:

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.

In all of these accounts we are told the Savior asked if it were possible that this cup be taken from Him. But this request was always followed with an affirmation of His desire to do the Father's will. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has written:

In the extremity of his suffering, Jesus beseeched the Father to take the cup from Him "if it be possible" (Matthew 26:39). The agony—though anticipated by Him from premortal times—apparently was so much worse than even Jesus had imagined. . . . "Nevertheless," said the ever-submissive Savior, "not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39). ["Not My Will, But Thine" (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 46–47]

What began in Gethsemane continued at Calvary. Although I do not fully understand

the ebb and flow of suffering between the garden and the cross, Elders James E. Talmage and Bruce R. McConkie indicate that the agonies of Gethsemane may have recurred during the Crucifixion (see *Jesus the Christ* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1916], 661; and *The Mortal Messiah* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979–81], 4:224–26). I find significant the Savior's last words as given in the Joseph Smith translation of Matthew: "Father, it is finished, thy will is done" (JST Matthew 27:50).

I am profoundly impressed by the lesson we are taught here. During the most important event in all of history, when the Savior trembled and prayed that the cup might be removed, His overriding desire and freely made choice was to do the Father's will.

The Savior's submission is emphasized at another place in the scriptures. As discussed by former BYU president Jeffrey R. Holland in a devotional given on campus more than 10 years ago, we should note how the Savior introduced Himself when He appeared to the Nephites (see "The Will of the Father in All Things," *Brigham Young University 1988–89 Devotional and Fireside Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 1989], 75–84). Imagine, if you will, the drama of this scene. The cities of the Nephites have largely been destroyed in cataclysmic events. Those who have survived hear the voice of the Father declare, "Behold my Beloved Son" (3 Nephi 11:7). They see the Savior descending out of heaven. How does the Savior introduce Himself? Think of all the different names or descriptions He might have used. What did He say?

Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.

And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning. [3 Nephi 11:10–11]

What does the Savior’s example mean in our lives? I have been interested to contemplate what the Savior’s example means to me. Let me share three examples from my family.

Some five and a half years ago, my wife, Christina, began to experience some unusual physical symptoms. She wasn’t sick, but something wasn’t right. It did not seem, at the time, to be serious. Doctors began some tests. I can still clearly remember receiving a message that our physician wished to meet with both of us at eight o’clock that night in his office. I didn’t know doctors made appointments for eight o’clock at night. Since I was supposed to be somewhere else at that time, I inquired if we might postpone the appointment until the next day. “No,” the answer came back, we needed to meet that night. Confused and somewhat apprehensive, we kept the appointment. The doctor explained that tests showed Christina had cancer in multiple places in her body. The outlook for a cure was not promising.

Now, as have many of you, we have friends or relatives who have faced this threat. And we have tried to do what we could to help make that burden somewhat lighter. But I did not understand even the beginnings of what they went through until this happened to Christina.

That night we met with our children. We felt we should be honest with them. One daughter was so overwhelmed she ran out of the house and down the street and collapsed into the arms of a startled but compassionate neighbor.

I felt I should give Christina a blessing. We discussed with our children beforehand that receiving a blessing does not always mean the person will be healed. The result of the blessing was peace. We did not know what the outcome would be, but we felt great peace.

Christina was the only one, I believe, who slept soundly that night. With great faith she accepted the will of Heavenly Father in this matter—regardless of the outcome. Some weeks later, exploratory surgery revealed Christina did not have cancer, although she did have a

serious but manageable illness. Everyone was relieved—everyone but Christina, who said she felt a deep sense of gratitude at being given more time on earth. Relief was not the emotion she felt, for, either way, she fully trusted her Heavenly Father.

The second experience I would like to discuss involves my oldest daughter, Catherine. This experience, although not as dramatic as the first, is perhaps more relevant to most of you, for it involved making a decision regarding what I call “the three Ms”: choosing a major, serving a mission, and considering a proposal to marry. When Catherine was 18, she began to date a fine young man who was 24. Friendship developed into romance, and soon they were meeting every day. Catherine, who is here today, will probably blush as I mention that I sat her down one day to explain where this was heading. After all, what are fathers for? Sure enough, a proposal of marriage was made shortly after the end of her freshman year.

In this decision Catherine wanted to make the right choice, and she prayed fervently to obtain guidance. The difficulty was not so much about whether she was marrying the right person—rather it was about timing. You see, Catherine (and her father) hadn’t ever thought she would marry so young. This wasn’t how she had planned things. She was enjoying her experience at BYU and wanted to take advantage of all it has to offer. She anticipated participating in Study Abroad. She wondered if she might serve a mission. If she accepted this proposal, all of this would change. Why couldn’t this proposal have come along a few years later? Then she would have been ready. As American author Betty Talmadge once said, “Life is what happens to you while you’re making other plans.”

My daughter Catherine’s sense from her prayers was that accepting the proposal was the right thing for her to do. Yet it was hard. It took real faith for her to make this unplanned step. Indeed, I have noticed it is relatively easy

to talk about doing Heavenly Father's will when it is someone else's life being discussed, but when it is your life, that is altogether a different matter. As a result of that decision, she went year-round at BYU to finish two years later. She did not attend Study Abroad, and she did not serve a mission. The day after her graduation she gave birth to her first child. A week later she and her husband and son moved to Los Angeles. As she looks back, Catherine knows she made the right choice, but it has still been somewhat hard for her to have her younger sisters travel or serve missions. Moving ahead in faith is not always easy.

As discussed in a devotional given by Elder Dallin H. Oaks several months ago, this experience is representative of many situations in life where things don't always happen according to the time line we would choose (see "Timing" [29 January 2002], in *BYU 2001–2002 Speeches* [Provo: BYU, 2002], 187–93). Indeed, although in this case events happened sooner than expected, often the reverse is true, and we endure the real trial of having patience.

The third experience involves me. Since I am the slow one in the family, this experience is more ambiguous than the other two. Some years ago I had the opportunity to make a choice about the path I would take in my career. The two choices offered to me were both good and honorable. I wanted to travel both paths, but that wasn't possible. I felt I knew which path would be best. It was a path for which I felt I was well suited and that appeared bright with opportunity. Nevertheless, I prayed to know if I was making the right decision. I was surprised at how hard it was to be open and submissive when I had a bias about what I wanted the answer to be. I did not receive a clear direction about which path to take, so I moved ahead and made the best decision I could.

Given that I was unsure what I should do, what is the point of this example? It wasn't too long after I made my decision that the path I

chose—which appeared bright and promising at the time—turned dark and difficult. I lay awake many nights wondering how to address the problems before me. Just because the path I chose did not turn out as I expected does not mean it was the wrong path. In fact, just the opposite might be the case. Perhaps I learned lessons I could not have learned otherwise or I rendered service that I needed to give. But as I look back, I feel that if the same situation were to occur again—that of having to choose between two good paths—I would be less inclined to think I knew which path was best for me and less sure I knew what the future would bring. I would be, I hope, more submissive, more trusting, more open.

I reflected on this experience some months ago when in Sunday School the class discussed the ministry of President Spencer W. Kimball. I can remember as a student your age hearing President Kimball ask, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" in reference to being prepared for the gospel to be preached to the Communist bloc countries. This was at the height of the cold war. I marveled at his faith. I doubted I would see the day this would happen. Last year, in joyful irony, I welcomed back my daughter Emily from a mission to Russia. President Kimball yearned for the gospel to go forth to all nations and peoples. You may recall that during his presidency he received a revelation extending the priesthood to all worthy males. In an area conference in Johannesburg, South Africa, President Kimball talked about the circumstances surrounding that revelation:

Day after day I went—and with great solemnity and seriousness—alone in the upper rooms of the temple, and there I offered my soul and offered our efforts to go forward with the program. And we wanted to do what He wanted as we talked about it to Him, and we said, "Lord, we want only what is right. We are not making any plans to be spectacularly moving. We want only the thing that Thou dost want, and we want it when You want it and

not until.” We met—all of the Council of the Twelve Apostles—time after time in that holy room, and finally we had the feeling and we had the impressions from the Lord, who made them very clear to us, that this is the thing to do to make the gospel universal to all worthy people. [Spencer W. Kimball, 1978 area conference in Johannesburg, South Africa; audiotape transcription by Alan Parkinson]

There are many lessons to learn here, but the one I wish to emphasize is the desire of President Kimball to do Heavenly Father’s will and to be submissive.

The examples I have discussed have involved fairly major situations: trusting Heavenly Father in the face of serious illness and following Heavenly Father’s will in making major decisions. In the Savior’s life it is clear that His day-to-day actions were influenced by His desire to do His Father’s will. Is this true for us also? Does a desire to do the Father’s will have implications for us in the commonplace day-to-day aspects of our lives? I would submit that it does.

Striving to understand and do the Father’s will is connected with what it means to go throughout each day with a prayer in your heart. Such a prayer is accompanied by a desire to be open to the promptings of the Holy Ghost. Further, as we seek Heavenly Father’s will, we adopt an attitude of humility and submissiveness that helps open the door to feel those promptings.

When we direct our thoughts and desires toward our Heavenly Father, we turn ourselves outward. We focus more on helping others and on helping to build the kingdom than on ourselves. Thus we are able to lose ourselves—but, paradoxically, we are then able to find ourselves. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has stated, “Only by aligning our wills with God’s is full happiness to be found,” and, “Progression toward submission confers . . . an enhanced capacity for joy” (“Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 23, 24).

When we direct our desires toward our Heavenly Father, the difficulties and trials of life have a refining influence. We are not so prone to ask “Why me?” as we are “What am I to learn from this?” As we journey through our personal wilderness, trials have the effect of softening us—as they did Nephi—rather than hardening us—as they did Laman and Lemuel. As the Savior explained to Joseph Smith, “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. The Son of Man hath descended below them all. Art thou greater than he?” (D&C 122:7–8).

The topic of enduring well could be a devotional in itself. Although our time today is short, I would like to briefly mention an experience of Elder Robert D. Hales that has deeply impressed me. Elder Hales related in the October 2000 general conference that he had sought the Lord during the previous two years as he experienced intense pain associated with three major surgeries. He said:

*On a few occasions, I told the Lord that I had surely learned the lessons to be taught and that it wouldn’t be necessary for me to endure any more suffering. Such entreaties seemed to be of no avail, for it was made clear to me that this purifying process of testing was to be endured in the Lord’s time and in the Lord’s own way. It is one thing to teach, “Thy will be done” (Matt. 26:42). It is another to live it. I also learned that I would not be left alone to meet these trials and tribulations but that guardian angels would attend me. There were some that were near angels in the form of doctors, nurses, and most of all my sweet companion, Mary. And on occasion, when the Lord so desired, I was to be comforted with visitations of heavenly hosts that brought comfort and eternal reassurances in my time of need. [Robert D. Hales, “The Covenant of Baptism: To Be in the Kingdom and of the Kingdom,” *Ensign*, November 2000, 6]*

I am sobered by the thought that just as Heavenly Father sent an angel to sustain the

Savior, so He might also do for us in our time of trial.

Striving to do Heavenly Father's will helps us move forward in faith. Sometimes we can be anxious about the future. I have talked with students who were fearful about getting married, raising or providing for a family, and whether they could compete in graduate school or have successful careers. But when you sense that a particular path is right for you and is acceptable to your Heavenly Father, it helps you move ahead in faith, knowing He will bless and help you. I know from personal experience that if you move ahead in faith and humility, even though the path ahead appears daunting, the Savior will "make weak things become strong unto [you]" (Ether 12:27).

Finally, as we try to do Heavenly Father's will, in ways I feel but have a difficult time

articulating, I believe we open ourselves, day by day, to the sanctifying power of the Atonement (see Moroni 10:33).

In closing, I wish to express my gratitude for the Savior. He is our Exemplar in all things—in how He lived day to day and how He met the supreme challenge of His life. Though the Savior trembled, yet He was submissive and trusted in His Heavenly Father. The Savior's capacity to nurture us expanded because of what He went through in Gethsemane and at Calvary (see Alma 7:11–12).

May we appreciate and tremble as we contemplate His example and sacrifice. And may we realize that our own capacity to be like Him will grow as we are submissive and yield our will and heart to our Heavenly Father. This is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.