

## Episode 16

### Stories from General Conference

#### CHOICES

**NARRATOR:** This is “Stories from General Conference. This collection of stories is on the topic of “choices.”

**The power to choose is one of the greatest gifts given us by a loving Heavenly Father. It allows us to direct our individual courses in life and achieve the greatest potential both for happiness and unhappiness. Life is about making choices, some more important than others, many between good and evil. Every choice we make has a natural consequence. While we are free to choose our actions, we are not free to choose the consequences of those actions.**

**In the April 2003 General Conference, Elder Spencer V. Jones told a humorous story from his youth about the consequences of our choices.**

(Elder Spencer V. Jones, Sunday Afternoon Session, April 2003)

Every decision we make, good or bad, carries an accompanying consequence.

I grew up in what some of you might call a boring farming community: Virden, New Mexico, population 135. One summer night when I was a boy, my cousins, some friends, and I were looking for ways to create some excitement. Someone suggested we play a harmless prank on a neighbor. My conscience whispered it was wrong, but I didn't have the courage to resist the enthusiastic response of the group.

After performing our mischievous act, we sprinted down the dark country road to make our escape, laughing and congratulating ourselves as we ran. Suddenly, one of the group stumbled, crying out, “Oh no, I kicked a cat!” Almost instantly we felt a very fine mist settle over us. It carried a horrible odor. What my friend thought was a cat was actually a skunk. It had sprayed us in self-defense. Very few odors are as nauseating as skunk spray, and we smelled terrible.

Dejectedly, we went home in search of a little parental comfort for our pitiful plight. As we stepped inside the kitchen door, Mom took one sniff and shooed us out into the yard. We were cast out of our home. Then she launched the cleansing process. She burned our clothes. Then, it seemed that every home remedy or concoction in the community was volunteered in our behalf. Among them, we endured a variety of baths: first tomato juice, then cow's milk, and even harsh homemade lye soap. But the stench remained. Even my

dad's powerful aftershave lotion could not overpower the stench. For days we were condemned to eat outside under a tree, sleep outdoors in a tent, and ride in the back of the pickup truck.

After a while, naively thinking the smell was gone, we tried to approach some normal-smelling girls. They would not allow us within yards, shattering our fragile teenage egos!

Now, I must admit that being sprayed by a skunk is not a common consequence of sin. Most consequences are not as immediate or dramatic. But sooner or later, for all sin, a consequence will be paid.

**NARRATOR: So much of our experience here on earth has to do with learning to make good decisions. While none of us will make perfect choices all the time, part of our growth consists of learning to listen to the Spirit and applying the principles we have been taught. Sometimes those lessons are learned the hard way.**

(Elder Kenneth Johnson, Sunday Afternoon Session, October 2002)

I was raised by caring parents in a home where the values taught and practiced prepared the way for my introduction to the Church and an acceptance of gospel principles. I was baptized in the month of August 1959, shortly after my 19th birthday. As I ponder the events that preceded my conversion, my thoughts go back to a childhood experience.

Close to the home where I lived as a child was a large house. It was located on beautiful grounds enclosed by what was to me a towering fence made of wood paneling, probably six feet in height. I recall peeping through holes in the panels where knots of wood had dropped out. It was like looking through a telescope into a different world. The beautifully manicured lawns, the well-kept flower gardens, and a small orchard provided an idyllic setting for the distinctive dwelling. Unfortunately, the opportunity to enjoy the view was always brief due to the vigilant British bulldog that patrolled the gardens and was immediately attracted to anyone standing close to the exterior of the fencing. Even though the fierce dog was confined in the garden, the sound of his sniffing as he approached the fence caused me to retreat in fear as my vivid imagination conjured up a variety of possibilities.

Mr. and Mrs. Lyons, who lived in the home, were schoolteachers. They had a dignified demeanor and seemed to enjoy the privacy that the house setting afforded them. To add to the intrigue, Mr. Lyons had no right hand, using instead a steel hook that protruded below the cuff of his jacket. In my boyish mind, I could imagine Mr. Lyons pursuing me, catching me by the collar with the hook, and taking me captive.

I recall an August morning when I was 10 or 11 years old, following a night of unusually strong winds, being greeted by friends as I left my home. They were obviously excited by something and inquired, "Did you hear the wind last night?"

When I said that I had, they proceeded to tell me what they had discovered—the wind had blown down sections of the fencing surrounding the Lyonses' home. I could not understand why this would cause so much excitement and asked them to explain the significance.

They responded with even greater enthusiasm: "We have access to the apple trees!"

I was still very cautious and asked, "But what about Mr. Lyons?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Lyons are not at home; they are away visiting relatives."

"Where is the dog?" I probed.

"The family has placed him in boarding kennels," came the reply.

My friends had certainly carried out detailed research. So, reassured by their words, we headed for our target with all haste. Entering the grounds we climbed trees and hurriedly plucked fruit, filling our pockets and also the space between our shirts and our bodies. My heart was pounding and my pulse racing since I feared that any moment the dog or Mr. Lyons, or both, would appear in the garden and apprehend us. We ran from the scene of our trespass to a secluded place in a nearby wooded area and, after regaining our composure, began to consume the apples.

It was August, and the apples were not yet ripe enough to eat. In fact, they had a very bitter taste, but the tartness of these green apples did not deter us as we enthusiastically consumed our spoils, acting out of a compulsion I cannot now explain. After devouring a significant number, I contented myself with taking a bite out of each remaining apple and throwing the remnants of the fruit into the nearby bushes. The frivolity diminished as our bodies began to gradually react to the invasion they had experienced. The chemical reaction between my gastric juices and the unripe apples caused me to experience stomach cramps and to feel nauseated. As I sat regretting what I had done, I realized that a feeling within me was producing even more discomfort than the unripe apples.

The greater discomfort resulted from the realization that what I had done was wrong.

When my friends had proposed that we invade the garden, I had felt uncomfortable but lacked the courage to say no and so suppressed my feelings. Now, after the deed had been accomplished, I was filled with remorse. To my regret, I had ignored the promptings warning me of the error of my actions.

**NARRATOR:** **Elder James E. Faust shared a similar story about the dangers of ignoring the promptings of the Spirit and instead surrendering to peer pressure.**

(President James E. Faust, Priesthood Session, April 2004)

Sometimes we make poor choices when we yield to peer pressure. Kieth Merrill had such an experience when he was a young man. He and his friends were diving from sheer rock walls at the East Canyon Reservoir, northeast of Salt Lake City. It inevitably turned into a teenage contest when one young man climbed up to the top of the dam and dived 50 feet into the deep water of the reservoir. The rest of the young men all went to the top of the dam and made the same high dive. One boy wasn't satisfied with that, so he said, "All right, I'll do one better!" He climbed 60 feet up the side of the cliff. Not wanting to be outdone, Keith climbed up beside him. After the other boy had dived into the water and seemed to be all right, Keith took courage and made his dive. The contest was now down to these two boys. Keith's friend then climbed up to 70 feet and dived. He came up from the water laughing, rubbing his shoulders and his eyes. He then challenged Keith, "Well, are you going to do it?"

"Of course, I'm going to do it!" And everybody on the shore said, "Of course, he's going to do it!"

So Keith swam back to the shore and climbed up the rocks. He knew if he jumped from the same height of 70 feet that his friend would want to go higher, so he scrambled up 80 feet to the very top of the cliff. No one could go any higher than the top. As Keith looked down, he was terrified to see the water so very far away. He had made a rash decision. It was not what he wanted to do nor what he felt was right. Instead he had based his decision on the prodding and dares of a half dozen young men whose names he cannot now even remember.

He backed up and ran as hard as he could toward the edge. He found the mark he had carefully laid at the edge of the rock and sprang out into space. On the way down he remembered his parents teaching him to be careful when making decisions, because a wrong one could kill him. And now he thought, "You have done it, because when you hit the water you'll be going so fast that it might as well be concrete." When he hit the water, it even felt like concrete. How grateful he was when his head finally popped above water.

Why did he jump? What was he trying to prove? The young men who dared him didn't care and probably don't even remember that foolish act. But Keith realized afterward that he had made what could easily have been a fatal decision. He had yielded to the pressure of friends expecting him to do what he didn't want to do. He knew better. He said: "I was living in the world, and at that moment I was of the world because I was not in control of myself. I was not making decisions about my own life. The world made the decisions for me, . . . and [I] had barely avoided being in the world about six feet deep."

It takes a certain kind of courage to stand back rather than leaping forward, foolishly allowing someone else to make our choices for us. We can more readily take firm stands when we have a clear idea of our identity as sons of God and bearers of the holy priesthood, having a bright potential for a meaningful future.

**NARRATOR:** **Sometimes fear of what others think or other pressures lead us to make choices that are ultimately against our better judgment that may cause unhappiness or even**

**danger. The Spirit will always lead us to what is right but we must exercise the courage to listen and then act regardless of other worries and fears. It takes courage, but the Lord will always help us if we turn to Him.**

(President James E. Faust, Priesthood Session, April 2004)

In 1976 Elder Robert C. Oaks, then a colonel in the United States Air Force, was a member of the Incidents at Sea negotiating team. They were guests at a dinner hosted by the Leningrad Naval District. About 50 senior officers of the Soviet Union and the United States were present as the host led the group in toasts before dinner. They stood for the first toast and raised their glasses, most of which were filled with Russian vodka. Brother Oaks had pink lemonade in his glass, which was immediately noticed by the admiral leading the toast. He stopped and demanded that Brother Oaks fill his glass with vodka, stating that he would not proceed until he had done so. Brother Oaks declined, explaining that he was happy with what he had in his glass.

A significant tension began to build, and even his own team members, most of whom were senior to him, were growing uneasy over the impasse. Brother Oaks's Soviet escort hissed in his ear, "Fill your glass with vodka!" Brother Oaks uttered the shortest prayer of his life: "God, help me!"

Within seconds, the Soviet interpreter, an army captain with whom he had previously discussed religion, whispered to the host admiral, "It is because of his religion." The admiral nodded his head, the tension immediately diffused, and the program moved on.

Elder Oaks had decided years before that he would never drink alcohol, and so in the moment of trial he did not have to make this choice again. Elder Oaks was convinced that more harm would have come to him if he had compromised a tenet of his faith than the harm that would have come from drinking the vodka. Incidentally, adhering to his religious principles did not hurt his career. After this incident he went on to become a four-star general.

**NARRATOR:**

**The Lord tells us time and time again that it is in obeying the commandments and principles He has given us that we truly become free. At times we may resent what we see as restraints and wish to satisfy our own curiosity. In the next example President Faust illustrates what can happen when we ignore the guidelines that help us make wise choices.**

(President James E. Faust, Priesthood Session, April 1999)

Tonight I speak to the priesthood of this Church, and particularly to the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood, about how to become really free. Obedience leads to true freedom. The more we obey revealed truth, the more we become liberated. President David O.

McKay spoke about his horse Dandy, who wanted complete freedom and no restraints. President McKay said:

"Under the saddle he was as willing, responsive, and cooperative as a horse could be. . . .

"But Dandy resented restraint. He was ill-contented when tied and would nibble at the tie-rope until he was free. He would not run away, he just wanted to be free. Thinking other horses felt the same, he would proceed to untie their ropes. . . .

". . . His curiosity and desire to explore the neighborhood led him and me into trouble. Once on the highway he was hit by an automobile. . . .

"Recovering from that, and still impelled with a feeling of wanderlust, he inspected the fence throughout the entire boundary. He even found the gates wired. . . .

"One day, however, somebody left the gate unwired. Detecting this, Dandy unlatched it and took another horse . . . with him, and together they . . . went to an old house used for storage. Dandy's curiosity prompted him to push open the door. . . . There was a sack of grain. What a find! Yes, and what a tragedy. The grain was bait for rodents! In a few minutes Dandy and the other horse were in spasmodic pain, and shortly afterwards both were dead."

President McKay continued: "How like Dandy are many of our youth! . . . They are impulsive, full of life, full of curiosity. . . . They, too, are restive under restraint, but if they are kept busy, guided carefully and rightly, they prove to be responsive and capable; but if left to wander unguided, they all too frequently violate principles of right which often lead to snares of evil, disaster, and even death."

**NARRATOR:**

**Ultimately, the choices we make not only affect our own lives but the lives of those around us and those who will follow after us.**

(Elder Harold G. Hillam, Saturday Afternoon Session, April 2005)

One of the talks that has had an everlasting impression on me is one given in a Saturday evening session of a stake conference years ago. The talk was given by a young mother. Here's what she said: "I have been doing the genealogy of my great-grandfather. He and his large family of sons and daughters were members of the Church.

"My great-grandfather," she said, "left church one Sunday with his family, and they never returned—no indication why."

She then said, "In my research, I have found that my great-grandfather has over 1,000 descendants."

And then she said, and this is the part I have not been able to forget, "Of those 1,000 descendants, I am the only one active in the Church today."

As she said these words, I found myself thinking, "Is it only 1,000, or could it be more?"

The answer is apparent. The spiritual influence that family might have had on their neighbors and friends did not happen. None of his sons nor any of his daughters served as missionaries, and those they would have touched with their testimonies were not baptized, and those who were not baptized did not go on missions. Yes, there are probably many thousands who are not in the Church today, and not in this very meeting, because of that great-grandfather's decision.

As I heard her talk I found myself thinking, "What a tragedy! Perhaps if I had been there at that time, I could have said something to the father, to the family, to the priesthood leaders that might have helped to prevent such a calamity to their family and to so many in the future generations that would follow."

Well, that opportunity of the past is lost. But we can now look to the present and to the future. I would say to those who find themselves in the same position as that great-grandfather: Would you consider what you might be doing to your family and to all those who come after you? Would you ponder the effects of your thoughts and your actions?

**NARRATOR:**

**The choices we make today will determine the blessings and opportunities of tomorrow. The Lord will guide us in making right choices if we invite Him into our lives.**

**This has been "Stories from General Conference" on the topic of "Choices". Thank you for listening to the Mormon Channel.**