

Episode 43

Stories from General Conference

AGENCY

NARRATION: Decisions, decisions, decisions. Life is full of choices. In fact, agency is one of the most important gifts from our Heavenly Father, and we should use it wisely. This episode of *Stories from General Conference* is all about making righteous choices.

To start off, we hear from Elder M. Russell Ballard. In the April 1991 general conference, he shared how his young grandsons helped him understand the importance of agency.

(M. Russell Ballard, 1991 April General Conference, Sunday afternoon)

“When asked who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, the Savior “called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1–4).

A recent experience illustrates the importance of each of these little children. One Saturday morning I was preparing for an activity with one of my grandsons. But before we could make our exit out the door, I heard another small voice inquiring, “Can I go too, Grandpa?” Did you ever try to say no to such a request? That activity would not have been the same without that someone else who really wanted to “go too.” Just as surely, heaven will not be heaven if some of our children who want to “go too” are left behind.

Some may choose not to go. Our Heavenly Father has given them the agency to choose for themselves. We have the task of helping them learn about our Heavenly Father’s plan for us, demonstrating our faith in the Lord, and continuing to work with our children in prayerful and patient persuasion.

NARRATION: As Nephi tells us, we can either “choose liberty and eternal life” by following Jesus Christ, or choose “captivity and death” by yielding to Satan’s temptations (2 Ne. 2:27).

To show the importance of choosing wisely, Elder Robert D. Hales shared a fable about a father, his son, and their donkey. This story comes from the October 1988 general conference.

(Robert D. Hales, 1988 Oct. General Conference, Saturday morning)

We need an eternal plan. Life’s plan and the challenge to be successful in demonstrated in an Aesop Fable, “The Man, the Boy, and the Donkey.” The objective of the man and the boy was to journey to the city marketplace and sell the donkey for winter provisions. As they started to town, the father rode the donkey. In the first village, the villagers said, “What an inconsiderate man, riding the donkey and making his son walk!” So the father got off the donkey and let his son ride.

In the next hamlet, the people whispered, “What an inconsiderate boy, riding the donkey and making his father walk!”

In frustration, the father climbed on the donkey; and father and son rode the donkey, only to have the people in the next town declare, “How inconsiderate of the man and the boy to overload their beast of burden and treat him in such an inhumane manner!”

In compliance with the dissident voices and mocking fingers, the father and son both got off the donkey to relieve the animal’s burden, only to have the next group of onlookers say, “Can you imagine a man and a boy being so stupid as to not even use their beast of burden for what it was created!”

Then, in anger and total desperation, having tried to please all those who offered advice, the father and son both rode the donkey until it collapsed. The donkey had to be carried to the marketplace. The donkey could not be sold. The people in the marketplace scoffed, “Who wants a worthless donkey that can’t even walk into the city!”

The father and boy had failed in their goal of selling the donkey and had no money to buy the winter provisions needed in order to survive.

How much different the outcome would have been if father and son had had a plan to follow. Father could have said, “I’ll ride the donkey one-third of the way; Son, you ride the donkey one-third of the way; and we’ll both walk the last third of the way. The donkey will arrive at the marketplace fresh and strong, ready to be sold.”

Then, as they received confusing advice while traveling through each hamlet and village along their way to the city, they could look at each other, give a reassuring wink of the eye, and say, “*We have a plan.*”

Indeed, you and I have a plan to guide us in our lives—the eternal plan that was given to us in the premortal world and that will bring us back into the presence of our Heavenly Father. During our mortal probation on earth, we will be tested with enticements and opposition in all things. But if we are obedient and faithful to the laws, ordinances, and covenants, which we accept with our free agency, of our own free will and choice, we can attain eternal life.

NARRATION: The father and his son tried so many different ways to ride the donkey. It would have been much easier to make the decision if they would have had a plan in the first place. We don’t have to be like that father and his son. Heavenly Father already gave us the plan we need to make our journey safely.

President Thomas S. Monson conveyed the importance of following Heavenly Father’s plan with a story about toy boats in the April 1988 general conference.

(Thomas S. Monson, April 1988 General Conference, Sunday morning)

When I think of the race of life, I think of another race, from boyhood days. When I was about ten years old, my boyfriends and I would take pocketknives in hand, and from the soft wood of a willow tree, fashion toy boats. With a little triangular-shaped cotton sail in place, we would launch our boats in the relatively turbulent waters of the Provo River. They would move up and down bobbing violently in the swift current then would sail serenely as the water deepened. We would run alongside, cheering on our particular boat.

In one race I noticed that one particular craft led all of the rest. Then its bow came just a little too close to the edge of a whirlpool. The current caught the bow, turned the little boat on its side and it capsized. Around and around it went, attempting to make its way back to the main current, but to no avail. At last it was shunted off to a deep and mossy pool where it was held prisoner by the flotsam and the jetsam which surrounded it.

You see my brothers and sisters, the toy boats of childhood had no keel for stability. They had no rudder to provide direction. They had no source of power. Invariably their direction was one in the same—downstream.

Unlike toy boats, our Heavenly Father did not launch us on our eternal voyage without giving us Heavenly attributes. We have the capacity to think, to reason, to achieve. Our Heavenly Father sent us forth with the ability to communicate with him, and he with us, so that we might find our way back to His eternal presence.

I speak of prayer. I speak of the whisperings of the still, small voice, and I speak of the Holy Scriptures, written in part by mariners who sailed successfully the seas we too must cross.

NARRATION: As President Monson explained, the best way to stay on the path to our Heavenly Father is by daily prayer and scripture study.

In the April 1991 general conference, Sister Janette C. Hales, who was serving in the Young Women general presidency, told us that we need to make these two things a daily pattern in our lives.

(Janette C. Hales, 1991 April General Conference, Sunday afternoon)

Many years ago while my children were very young, the nighttime bottles and the daytime diapers seemed as endless as the frozen ground outside our military apartment. When I feel sorry for myself, it helps me to do something for someone else. That winter my need was great, so I needed a grand solution. I decided to make a sport coat for my husband. Having no experience in tailoring, I began by finding the best pattern and materials on the market. With great enthusiasm I took out the pattern guide. My heart nearly failed me. There were pages of instructions—138 steps, as I remember. It was beyond my ability. The next few days I took that pattern everywhere I went. I decided to work on no more than two steps per day so I wouldn't get discouraged. When two steps were completed, I would read the directions for the next day's task. Occasionally I got overanxious and had to unpick, but fortunately mistakes in good materials don't remain if they are carefully removed. A few months later I had created a masterpiece. The pattern had made the miracle possible. Patterns had become very important to me.

As my awareness of patterns has continued, I have become very appreciative of the Lord's patterns. Patterns for his handiwork are detailed in the scriptures. They describe the building of a tabernacle, an ark, an altar, and temples. The materials are important; the purpose is grand. Then comes that most important pattern of righteousness set by Jesus Christ, "a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting" (1 Tim. 1:16). In every imaginable setting from ancient times to modern days, we see this pattern repeated—faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, repentance, baptism, the gift of the Holy Ghost.

NARRATION: As we create a daily pattern of reading scriptures and praying, answers come a lot easier.

Our Heavenly Father also gives us prophets and apostles to help us make decisions. This next story is about Naaman in the Old Testament. At first, Naaman was hesitant to follow the prophet's counsel. But Naaman soon learned that God's way is always the best way. Elder Waldo P. Call shared this story in the October 1990 general conference.

(Waldo P. Call, 1990 October General Conference, Sunday afternoon)

In the Old Testament, in 2 Kings, we read of a man by the name of Naaman. He was the "captain of the host of the king of Syria, . . . but he was a leper" (2 Kgs. 5:1).

An Israelite maid who “waited on Naaman’s wife” said: “Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! For he would recover him of his leprosy” (5:2–3).

Captain Naaman, not a member of the Church, accepted this in full faith and hope. The Syrian king gave him a letter for the king of Israel, and gold, silver, and fine clothing as gifts.

The king of Israel, a man of little faith, was upset about this because he knew he could not heal Naaman, and he said, “See how he seeketh a quarrel against me” (5:7).

“When Elisha the man of God had heard” this, “he sent to the king, saying, . . . let him come . . . to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel” (5:8).

Naaman went to the prophet. “Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean.

“But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper.

“Are not . . . rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? . . . So he turned and went away in a rage” (5:10–12).

His pride would not let him follow the prophet’s direction. He was going home, and he was leprous still. Could this be because of a proud heart?

His good servants convinced him that he should do as the prophet had said, saying:

“If the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it?”

“Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean” (5:13–14).

Naaman was grateful for this and went to the prophet with the gold and silver and fine clothes. But the prophet of God, of course, would not accept payment for the blessings of God.

So Naaman and his company started home. The servant of Elisha, the prophet, found it hard to see these riches slip from his hands, so he ran after Naaman. Naaman stopped when he saw him coming. The servant said that his master had company and asked for a talent of silver and two changes of clothing.

Naaman was delighted to give them to him and even sent two of his servants to carry them. Before coming to the house of Elisha, the servant stopped and put them in a house. Then he went in to Elisha.

And Elisha said: “Whence comest thou? . . .

“Went not mine heart with thee? . . . Is it a time to receive money? . . .

“The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow” (5:25–27).

NARRATION: We should never doubt the counsel our Heavenly Father gives us. Choosing God’s counsel will help us navigate through the storms of life. In the October 1990 general conference, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin told us how staying in the lines helped him drive through a severe storm.

(Joseph B. Wirthlin, 1990 October General Conference, Sunday morning)

While traveling along a mountainous road one evening through a driving rainstorm punctuated with frequent claps of thunder and flashes of lightning, Sister Wirthlin and I could barely see the road, either in front of us or to the right and the left. I watched the white lines on that road more intently than ever before. Staying within the lines kept us from going onto the shoulder and into the deep canyon on one side and helped us avoid a head-on collision on the other. To wander over either line could have been very dangerous. Then I thought, “Would a right-thinking person deviate to the left or the right of a traffic lane if he knew the result would be fatal? If he valued his mortal life, certainly he would stay between these lines.”

That experience traveling on this mountain road is so like life. If we stay within the lines that God has marked, he will protect us, and we can arrive safely at our destination.

NARRATION: Elder Richard G. Scott provided another example about keeping our choices in line with God’s plan. He encouraged us to be automatic in making righteous choices. He told this story in the April 1991 general conference.

(Richard G. Scott, 1991 April General Conference, Saturday afternoon)

My parents gave me a beautiful watch for high school graduation. I looked at it frequently because of the love it communicated. Each night I carefully cleaned and wound it. As years passed, I often neglected to wind the watch. Consequently, it stopped being useful, often when I most needed it.

Today I use an automatic watch. It is consistent and always gives me the correct time. It is totally dependable. I never need to worry whether I can count on it or not.

I realize that as with watches, there are differences in youth. Some need to be wound up, while others are automatic because of important decisions already made.

I commend you who are automatic, who have committed to be true to the Lord and to live by faith when you cannot see the end from the beginning. When faced with choices, you select the path consistent with the teachings of the Savior. I know you are criticized by those who call you fanatical, who cannot understand why you don’t do what the crowd does. Hold fast to your principles.

You cannot today remotely imagine what that decision to be unwaveringly obedient to the Lord will allow you to accomplish in life. Your quiet, uncompromising determination to live a righteous life will couple you to *inspiration* and *power* beyond your capacity now to understand.

NARRATION: Elder Scott advised us to make the decision to follow the Savior’s plan early on in life. Elder Robert L. Backman shared similar counsel in the October 1989 general priesthood meeting.

(Robert L. Backman, October 1989 General Conference, Priesthood)

Brethren, set limits to your actions—bounds you will not pass—far from the line which separates good from evil. Be prepared for the experiences that lie ahead. Plan in advance how you will face temptations—weigh the consequences, now and forever. Be sure you understand the situation confronting you. If someone, perhaps a friend, asks you to do something you are not sure about, restate what he has said, “You want me to do what?”

Next, ask yourself, “Will doing what my friend says break my rules, or the law, or hurt someone I respect or love, or make someone distrust me?” Then look at both sides of the question. What good things will happen if

you do this, and what bad things will happen? Now that you have assessed all the results, you are prepared to make a decision. If everything is positive, you will probably want to go along with your friend; if not, you have the responsibility to say No. (Adapted from John W. Larsen, *Youth's Frontier, Making Ethical Decisions* [Irving, Texas: Boy Scouts of America, 1985], p. 14).

Get tough with yourself. President Spencer W. Kimball gave us a powerful example in a talk to the youth of Stockholm, Sweden. Describing his own boyhood, he said:

“As I was out alone, milking the cows, or putting up the hay, I had time to think. I mulled it over in my mind and made this decision: ‘I, Spencer Kimball, will never taste any form of liquor. I, Spencer Kimball, will never touch tobacco. I will never drink coffee, nor will I ever touch tea—not because I can explain why I shouldn’t, except that the Lord said not to.’ He said those things were an abomination. There are many other things that are, too, that are not in the Word of Wisdom. But I made up my mind.

“That’s the point I am trying to make. I made up my mind then, as a little boy: ‘I will never touch those things.’ And so, having made up my mind, it was easy to follow it, and I did not yield. There were many temptations that came along, but I did not even analyze it; I did not stop and measure it and say, ‘Well, shall I or shall I not?’ I always said to myself: ‘But I made up my mind I would not. Therefore, I do not.’

“I’m a little older than any of you here tonight, and I want to just say that I will soon go into another year and that I have never tasted tea, nor coffee, nor tobacco, nor liquor of any kind, nor drugs. Now that may sound very presumptuous and boasting to you, but I am only trying to make this point: that if every boy and girl—as he or she begins to grow a little more mature and becomes a little more independent of his friends and his family and all—if every boy and girl would make up his or her mind, ‘I will not yield,’ then no matter what the temptation is: ‘I made up my mind. That’s settled’ ” (in Conference Report, Stockholm Sweden Area Conference 1975, pp. 86–87).

NARRATION: The right choice might not always be the popular choice. The final story is from Elder Dallin H. Oaks in the October 1986 general conference. He talked about a businessman who chose principle over profits.

(Dallin H. Oaks, October 1986 General Conference, Saturday afternoon)

Last year the *Deseret News* carried an article about a Salt Lake City pharmacist who stopped selling cigarettes in his drugstore. He explained, “It’s just incompatible for a profession dedicated to saving people’s lives to sell a product that does nothing but kill” (“S.L. Pharmacist Using Backhoe to Snuff out Cigarette Stock,” 20 Dec. 1985, sec. B, p. 1). That merchant was more concerned about his customers’ welfare than his personal profits.

Sister Oaks called my attention to a similar example in the world of advertising. The magazine *Women’s Sports and Fitness* does not accept cigarette ads, thus foregoing much-needed revenue. A woman columnist and physician, Dr. Joan Ulliyot, praised this policy and contrasted it to the practice of another organization:

“I am dismayed that a prominent women’s sport, tennis, continues to take support from a cigarette company. Surely the top women in this sport, none of whom smoke, have the [courage] to say no to this hypocrisy and stop lending their names and prestige to sanction and glamorize a lethal product. Any role model in sport who accepts support or sponsorship from a company whose products destroy health and fitness should take a hard look at what she is, by association, endorsing” (*Women’s Sports and Fitness*, Sept. 1986, p. 12).

NARRATION: Thanks for listening to *Stories from General Conference*. The topic of this collection is agency. When you have a choice to make, choose the one that adheres closest to our Heavenly Father's plan for you. This is the Mormon Channel. For more information go to www.radio.lds.org. Tell your friends about us!