

Our Personal Game Plan

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My dear brothers and sisters, I am honored and humbled to stand before you this day. I appreciate the privilege of speaking to you about the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives. We are blessed to be here at Brigham Young University. It is the Lord's university, and at this season we are very fortunate to be a part of this campus life.

I am a beneficiary of the BYU experience. When I arrived on campus many years ago, I did not realize how my time here would influence my future. After my mission my spiritual foundation was firm. Brigham Young University continued to build upon that foundation. It added the walls and the roof, which in turn created a gospel home for my family and me. I will always be thankful for my experience here.

Well, it is the first week of summer term. In fact, it is only the second day of classes. The good news is that you can't be more than two days behind in any of your assignments. As you can tell from my biography, I have always been involved in athletics in one aspect or another: I have participated as an athlete, I have coached, and I am currently serving in athletics administration. Athletics have been a major part of my life. I guess one of the main reasons I take pleasure in athletics is that they

closely parallel the game of life. The lessons I have learned through my involvement in athletics have guided me through life's challenges and successes. Allow me to use some comparisons to illustrate my point.

In athletics one competes against an opponent. The challenger may be the opposing team, yourself, or the clock. In life we have the adversary as our opponent. He creates temptations and discourages us when we are trying our best.

In athletics one has a head coach, assistant coaches, trainers, strength coaches, and academic advisors. In life we have parents, teachers, counselors, Church leaders, and the Head Coach—the Lord Jesus Christ.

In athletics one competes to be challenged or to win an award, trophy, ring, or ribbon. In life we compete for educational pursuits, employment, and worldly possessions. We are also striving to live the commandments for our celestial reward.

In athletics during a competition there are momentum changes. One moment you are up

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by 12, then minutes later you could be down by two. In life we have peaks and valleys. We experience trials, heartaches, and sadness. We also experience success, peace, happiness, and joy.

In athletics there is pressure to perform in front of a stadium full of fans or spectators. In life we feel pressure to act in front of friends, family, and associates.

In athletics the game may dictate the proper way to manage the clock. In life we are often faced with the pressures of managing our time wisely and prioritizing the tasks at hand.

In athletics one develops physical endurance through conditioning and practice, and one must deal with injuries. In life we learn to have perseverance, patience, and long-suffering, and we suffer from illnesses of various kinds. We are taught to endure to the end.

And, lastly, in athletics one has personal goals, team goals, strategies, scouting reports, and game plans. In life we have goals, plans, aspirations, and dreams.

Both in athletics and in life, one of the most important things we can do is acquire and follow our personal game plan.

Did you begin this summer term at Brigham Young University with a game plan? If so, what is your game plan? Is your plan to be popular, have the nicest car, get a high grade point average, become the first chair in the orchestra, gain the lead role in a play, join a club or two, attend all your classes, and hand in all your assignments on time?

Allow me to ask you this question: What do you think your parents' game plan is for you? Let me give you a few ideas, having been a parent for over 20 years. I am sure they want you to do well in your classes, serve a mission, graduate from college, find a good spouse, seal your love in one of God's holy temples, have a great family, secure good employment, be a productive citizen, and of course live happily ever after. Have you adopted any of those strategies into your game plan?

Let me ask you another question: What is Heavenly Father's game plan for us? I am sure He would like you to implement some of your goals and some of your parents' goals. But His game plan for us is found in Moses 1:39: "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man." Now that is a game plan. It appears to me that our Father in Heaven has high expectations for all of us. Have we embraced those goals?

As you begin to formulate your personal game plan, may I give you one piece of advice? Please acquire some strategies from those who love you. Sometimes those who love us may not always present these methods in the right moment or with the right tone, but we must use good discretion when receiving this advice. Those who love us are not perfect, but most of the time the advice they give us is.

In the short time that I have with you, I would like to share four essential strategies for a successful game plan. I am sure these will not be new to you, but they will be presented as the Spirit has dictated.

Keep the Commandments

Let us turn to the scriptures to discuss the first essential element. Lehi—a father and a prophet—spoke to his son Jacob and stated in 2 Nephi 2:25 that "men [and women] are, that they might have joy." So we are here upon this earth that we might have joy. We are here to experience the good things of this life. I think every one of us needs to profit from this blessed feeling. How do we receive this joy? Nephi—a brother, husband, father, and prophet—stated in 2 Nephi 5:10–11:

And we did observe to keep the judgments, and the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord in all things. . . .

And the Lord was with us; and we did prosper exceedingly.

We receive this joy through keeping God's commandments. As we keep His commandments, we feel true joy and we prosper both temporally and spiritually. King Benjamin said in Mosiah 2:41:

And moreover, I would desire that ye should consider on the blessed and happy state of those that keep the commandments of God. For behold, they are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual.

I enjoy being in the mountains. As I think about some of my favorite places on this earth, I think about hiking over the Teton Mountains on the Idaho-Wyoming border. The journey is a breathless experience. The hike from Driggs, Idaho, to Jenny Lake, Wyoming, is about 21 miles. The goal is to make it to Jenny Lake in time to catch the last ferry across. If you miss the ferry, you have to walk an additional two miles around the lake to reach your final destination. After walking 21 miles in one day, you can't bear the thought of walking an additional two miles.

Crossing all that terrain without a map would be a foolish adventure. Even with a map you can lose your way if the map isn't followed properly. As you obey the map, you find your way to your journey's end. If you reach your final destination and catch the last ferryboat leaving the dock that day—and, believe me, that is what you want to do—your joy is full.

Commandments are our map. They are what we must follow in this game of life. They give us directions, guidelines, and a course of action. Obedience to this path will bring us to our eternal destination. My patriarchal blessing states that "commandments are nothing more than wise instructions from a loving Father." Let me say it again: "Commandments are nothing more than wise instructions from a loving Father." He knows and cares for our earthly existence and wants more than we know for us

to return back to His presence. What a reunion that will be! What joy can be greater than making it back to the Father who created us? He sent us off to school to learn the lessons of life, and He wants us back home.

In athletics we work out our physical bodies in order to compete at the highest level. In life we need to exercise our spiritual muscles. This will give us the strength to overcome temptations and obey the commandments. We need to compete against our physical and spiritual opponent—"the wiles of the devil" (Helaman 3:29, Ephesians 6:11). To secure assistance in obeying the commandments, I firmly believe in the second essential element of your game plan: personal prayer.

Have Frequent and Fervent Prayer

Communication with our Father in Heaven is vital for so many aspects in our lives, especially the spiritual one. Alma told his son Helaman:

Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good; yea, when thou liest down at night lie down unto the Lord, that he may watch over you in your sleep; and when thou risest in the morning let thy heart be full of thanks unto God; and if ye do these things, ye shall be lifted up at the last day. [Alma 37:37]

This is good advice from a father to a son.

Most of us would find it very difficult to set an appointment with some of our most prominent leaders in this world. It commonly requires days, weeks, and sometimes months to schedule an appointment with anyone who has some type of professional title. I suffer from a condition called gout. One February not so long ago I experienced a major attack. I wanted immediate medical attention to receive some type of relief. The earliest appointment the specialist's secretary could make for me was August of that same year—seven months later.

The greatest aspect of prayer for me is that we can speak to the highest-ranking individual in this universe—God, our Heavenly Father—at any time and in any place we so desire. There is no need for an appointment. He is always there and always listening. And, most important, He is always, always giving us answers to our supplications. Let me repeat this: You need no appointment.

Elder Richard G. Scott stated:

*Prayer is a supernal gift of our Father in Heaven to every soul. Think of it: the absolute Supreme Being, the most all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful personage, encourages you and me, as insignificant as we are, to converse with Him as our Father. [“Using the Supernal Gift of Prayer,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 8]*

Most people, young and old, have experienced the wonderful electronic device called the cell phone. You know how frustrating it is when calls are ignored or not answered. Our Father in Heaven always answers our calls. Our reception or signal is always in range. Our prayer plan consists of unlimited minutes.

I would like to share with you a personal experience I had with prayer when I was in my youth. The setting was my junior year in high school. I was making plans with my friends to attend the junior prom. We already had in mind what we were going to do before and during the prom, but we had not finalized plans for after the prom. It was common, growing up on the East Coast, to drive down to the New Jersey shore and spend the night on the beach as an after-the-prom activity. We had the location mapped out and the cars and drivers prepared to make the trip. As the date approached I thought it would be a good idea to run these plans by my mother. I explained to her what we had planned to do after the prom. She could see that I was filled with enthusiasm but said with no hesitation, “I don’t think it is a good idea that you go.”

I said, “What? I have waited 17 years for this event to take place in my life. I am going to the New Jersey shore.”

She replied, “I don’t think it is a good idea, but can you do me a favor and pray about it?”

I said, “Pray about it? Why would Heavenly Father care if I go to the beach after the prom?”

My mother asked me once again to pray about it. I said okay, and I thought to myself, “Well, this will be easy. I will go downstairs to my room and listen to my music. I will then go back upstairs and tell my mother that Heavenly Father said it’s okay to go.” So I went downstairs, turned on the music, put on my headphones, and began to relax.

Halfway through the second song, I began to feel a little guilty. I turned off the music and sat there for a moment pondering the conversation I had had with my mother. I dropped to my knees on the side of my bed and began to pray. I did not know exactly why I was praying, only that I had told my mother that I would. I told Heavenly Father about my prom plans. I then asked if He approved of them. I didn’t feel very comfortable with the stupor of thought passing through my mind. I prayed more intently to get the answer I was seeking. I felt like Heavenly Father was saying no. I could not understand what was happening to me and my plans. For some reason this was not turning out as I had wanted.

I began to ask, “Why? Why no? Why not?” The words came to me that I should read Isaiah 55:8–9. Isaiah? What does Isaiah know about the junior prom? I opened up my Bible and read:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

“Wow,” I thought to myself, “I have just received personal revelation through prayer.” It was not exactly the answer I was looking

for, but I had just received an answer. I went upstairs and rehearsed the whole experience to my mother. She smiled and gave me the look only a mother can give. Not one major tragedy happened that night, but several small ones did. Mostly everyone was drinking alcohol and using drugs. Immorality was commonplace amongst my friends. It was not the atmosphere I needed to be in that night. But the most important event was that a 17-year-old boy received an answer to his prayer and gained more faith in his Heavenly Father's game plan.

Before departing the mission field, I had my final interview with my mission president, Robert A. Harding. He said to me that if I wanted to maintain my spiritual balance in this life, I needed to make sure to have frequent and fervent prayers. He was another Church leader concerned about my game plan.

Be Inspired by the Scriptures

The third essential element that is necessary for your personal strategy is dedicating your time to the scriptures. In the Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 4:15, Nephi stated: "For my soul delighteth in the scriptures, and my heart pondereth them, and writeth them for the learning and the profit of my children."

My brothers and sisters, history does repeat itself. We can learn from the past. The scriptures are the greatest playbooks ever written. Just as a coach gives direction to his team, the scriptures warn us and motivate us to live our lives carefully and in harmony with gospel principles. The scriptures provide answers for our temporal and spiritual well-being. The Spirit will inspire and convert our hearts and testimonies at different moments in our lives. Most of the time He will do it while we are pondering or studying the scriptures. The scriptures take on new meaning at different stages in our lives. The same verse can broaden our insight with new messages that differ from those of many years before.

As a young father I struggled to keep our family consistent in reading the scriptures on a daily basis. One day I heard a mother of a new missionary give a talk in sacrament meeting. She asked her son before he departed on his mission what was the most important thing he learned in the family. He said, "Mom, it was our family getting together every morning and reading the scriptures. Those were the best lessons I learned." This mother was astonished at his answer. She only remembered him coming to the family scripture reading every morning half asleep with his blanket pulled over his head. She gained a testimony that day, as did I, that the scriptures have tremendous spiritual power and influence over those who spend the time pondering, studying, and reading them.

In a First Presidency message in 1976, President Spencer W. Kimball said:

I am convinced that each of us, at some time in our lives, must discover the scriptures for ourselves — and not just discover them once, but rediscover them again and again. . . .

*The Lord is not trifling with us when he gives us these things, for "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." (Luke 12:48.) Access to these things means responsibility for them. We must study the scriptures according to the Lord's commandment (see 3 Ne. 23:1–5); and we must let them govern our lives. ["First Presidency Message: How Rare a Possession—the Scriptures!" *Ensign*, September 1976, 4, 5]*

Protect Yourself from the Adversary

I would like to conclude with the last essential element. Before we participate in athletics or a competition, we generally use some type of uniform, gear, or equipment. Ephesians 6:11–12 reads:

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

[Now listen to this:] *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against*

powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Sometimes it is hard enough to compete against an opponent we can see. I believe it is even more difficult to compete against the adversary—one whom we don't see. We need to protect ourselves and be prepared to compete and to battle our nemesis. Elder M. Russell Ballard stated:

I like to think of this spiritual armor not as a solid piece of metal molded to fit the body, but more like chain mail. Chain mail consists of dozens of tiny pieces of steel fastened together to allow the user greater flexibility without losing protection. I say that because it has been my experience, covering many more years than you have yet been privileged to live, that there is not one great and grand thing we can do to arm ourselves spiritually. True spiritual power lies in numerous smaller acts woven together in a fabric of spiritual fortification that protects and shields from all evil. ["Be Strong in the Lord, and in the Power of His Might," BYU devotional, 3 March 2002]

To me, that is another great apostle of the Lord shouting out signals from the sidelines.

Allow me to use one last personal story. As a young man I had great dreams of one day playing college football and also playing in the National Football League. I set high goals and expectations for myself to achieve while in high school. I remember going the extra mile during the off-season so that I could compete and perform at my highest level.

The football season did not go so well. At the end of the season our team had won only two games. After the last game of the year I walked off the field with my head down. I was discouraged, and rightly so. My mother spotted me from a distance and noticed the disappointment in my body language. She came over to me as I tried to walk away from her. She asked me what was wrong. I said, "I am

so frustrated. I have worked so hard to make myself better, and we can't win more than two games. I feel like a loser."

She said to me in that moment words that changed my life for good. She said, "Son, I know that you are disappointed in the results of your team. I know you have put forth much effort in your preparation to be successful. But I promise you: Because you have the gospel in your life, you are on the Lord's team. And if you keep His commandments, you will be a winner in this life."

Those words have resonated with me and have echoed in my mind for the last 30 years.

Here is just one more example of one who loved me and gave me direction in a time of need. In the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell:

Actually, brothers and sisters, Jesus is already victorious in the greatest battle anyway: "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). . . .

*. . . Moreover, though we live in a failing world, we have not been sent here to fail. ["Encircled in the Arms of His Love," *Ensign*, November 2002, 16, 17; emphasis in original]*

The battle has been won. We know the final outcome. We need to choose whose team we want to be on. Joshua 24:15 states: "Choose you this day whom ye will serve; . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

The Prophet Joseph Smith was an outstanding coach. He said in Doctrine and Covenants 128:22: "Brethren [and sisters], shall we not go on in so great a cause? Go forward and not backward. Courage, brethren; and on, on to the victory!"

My dear brothers and sisters, know what your personal game plan is for today and for your future. Incorporate these strategies into your lives. Keep the commandments, have frequent and fervent prayer, be inspired by the scriptures, and protect yourselves from the adversary. I know we have a Redeemer and

Savior. He stands at the head of this Church. He knows us personally and loves us individually.

He is Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God. In His holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.