

A Law of Increasing Returns

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I'm grateful to be with you tonight. And I appreciate what it means for you to have decided to spend your time with me. I watched you take your seats and wait. I'd like to talk with you tonight about those two things: about time. And about waiting.

A Time to Every Purpose

I was riding in a car with a wise man a few years ago. We talked about some tragedies in lives of people we knew. Some had waited too long, missing the chance to act. And some had waited not long enough. He said quietly, more to himself than to me, "Timing is everything."

Ecclesiastes said, with an elegance that goes beyond poetry to frame our problem:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

And then later:

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away. [Ecclesiastes 3:1–2, 6]

Waiting for a harvest takes more judgment in life than it does in gardening. In your

garden, you can tell if the seed sprouts. And even an amateur can tell when the corn or carrots are ready. But I remember a story told to me long ago, far from here, by a sad voice. I remember it not because it was unique but because I have heard the same story told, again and again, about waiting or failing to wait. The details vary, but not the feeling of drama.

She said it happened on a summer Saturday afternoon. She was tired. Tired of being single. Tired of trying to be a faithful Latter-day Saint. Not so much tired of being kind and virtuous as tired of nothing good seeming to come of it. She'd not had a date in months.

She saw no prospect of even becoming friends with, let alone marrying, a man who shared her faith and ideals. In frustration she found herself deciding something. She decided that afternoon, consciously, that years of good works and restraint had produced too little and promised no more. She said to herself almost aloud, "Oh, what's the use?"

The phone rang. It was a man's voice, a man she knew. He lived in the same apartment

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building. He'd asked her out before. She'd refused because she was sure he'd expect her to compromise her standards she'd preserved at great effort. But, almost as if directed by a scriptwriter, he called at that instant.

She didn't say, "Yes." She said, "I'll think about it." She thought about it. He called again. And finally, she repeated to herself, "Oh, what's the use?" She went. She found she had been right about his intentions. And in a choice about time and about waiting or not waiting, her life changed. So, she will never know what might have been ahead on the path she decided wasn't worth the price; she knew quickly the other one was uphill, and a hard climb.

All of us make decisions every day, almost every hour, about whether it's worth it to wait. The hardest ones are where the waiting includes working. Does it make sense to keep working, to keep sacrificing, when nothing seems to be coming from the effort?

There's a young man in the mission field who's made that choice in the last month. I heard his story, but there must have been thousands of such choices made last month. His companion would have made Job's critical friends seem like the Three Nephites. Just living and working with his companion required more contribution than the young missionary had dreamed he was going to have to make. The mission president authorized them to stay in their apartment because wind brought the effective temperature to 80 degrees below zero. So, the young man had to decide, "Shall we go out? We've been tracting and it's produced nothing. For what it would cost us, what would we get? We haven't got a contact, so we'd be just hitting doors." Well, he went—that's an odd investment decision, but he went. What he got was to meet one man, behind one of a hundred doors. In his letter about the man's baptism, he said, "I've never been more happy in my life."

The Law of the Harvest

We're talking about an application of the law of the harvest. Common sense tells you there is such a law, and so did the Savior and so have the prophets. Remember how Paul said it:

Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. [Galatians 6:7–8]

Tonight we're talking just about sowing to the Spirit. We're concerned with that long list of requirements and commandments you already know are essential along the way to eternal life. Tonight we're going to try to understand one universal challenge: How to keep waiting and working when the harvest seems delayed.

The most important fact to note is that crops, even the spiritual ones, are not all of one kind. There are early maturing varieties and late varieties. Maybe you've noticed in seed catalogues that one corn can be harvested in less, sometimes nearly half, the time it takes for another to be ready. You may not pay attention to that, but I do because I've lived in Rexburg, Idaho. It freezes there just before the Fourth of July, and sometimes just after.

Efforts, spiritual or practical, don't all bear fruit in the same length of time. You know that, but you may not have noticed something about your behavior that makes sense only if most of your experience is with early crops. Those are the ones where effort produces fast results. What happens after the early harvest? Would you expect an intelligent person to keep cultivating a field that had already produced its crop and been cleared? No, at least not in the hope of getting more harvest.

Now, one trouble with most of our struggles is that you can't see the seeds and

the crops clearly. And you may not know as much about maturation time. So, you have to make this decision frequently: “Has this effort yielded about all it’s going to, or shall I keep working and waiting?”

Without even watching you at the library or in your rooms, I can guess you’ve usually assumed you were working with early crops. Think of the last set of math problems you worked. For some of you that may be very difficult, but think about it. Think of the last paper you submitted. How many times did you rework the problems? Did you try another attack on the problem after you found that your answer agreed with the one in the back of the book? Did you work extra problems, beyond those assigned? How many drafts did you write of that last paper? Two? Three? Ten?

Diminishing Returns

The answers will vary, but not much. For most of you, the best bet is that you stopped early. Why? Because you understand something called “the law of diminishing returns.” Most of you use it when you cut a lawn. You cut it in one direction, then may cut it in the other, to get it smoother. But not many of you would cut it a third time. Why? Because you’d say, “It isn’t worth it. I’ve gotten about all the smoothness I’m going to get. And more than that, cutting it the third time will take nearly as much time as it did the first.”

Most of us believe in the law of conservation of energy, particularly our own. We treat most of our effort like planting and harvesting an early crop. We expect early results with little more to come from keeping up the effort after the first rush of rewards.

That makes good sense for cutting lawns. And it makes good sense for many other things. In fact, it makes sense for so many that I think you may find it easy to say in your mind, “I pity some of those people who just seem like losers, always working and always waiting.”

Something going on in the world around you encourages, almost demands that attitude.

The Late Crops

Husbands, wives, parents, and even children are familiar with deciding, “Shall I keep giving when I’m getting so little?” Families may be the best place to find out how the world feels about working and waiting for late crops. Families require some of the toughest investment decisions of all. Statistics show clearly which way the decisions are going in this country. In 1945, half the people in America thought four or more children was the ideal number for a family to have. By 1980, only 16 percent thought so. From 1960 to 1977, it’s estimated that the number of unmarried people living together doubled, from half a million to a million. That’s a million people who are unwilling even to start the investment process in a family.

Most of you know what investments—and patience—are required to maintain virtue, serve an effective mission, or build an eternal family. But perhaps many of you haven’t given enough attention to how much the world is moving away from the idea of delaying gratification long enough to do those things.

Here’s some grim arithmetic to let you see it. An economist named Henry Kaufmann has added up the wealth in America and subtracted all the debt. In 1964, that showed us about \$400 million in the hole. By 1980, the hole had increased, or, since it’s a hole, I should say sunk, to \$3 trillion. Even if his figures overstate the problem, they make clear the direction we’ve chosen. That tells you something about how much more we’re demanding to have our future now. One farmer heard those numbers and said, “Why, we’ve been eating our seed corn.”

You shouldn’t really be surprised to have arrived in an “I want it now” generation. A prophet, Peter, saw it long ago. He said,

Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts,

And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. [2 Peter 3:3–4]

You are believers, not scoffers. Yet the scoffers can be helpful, because they encourage you to get an answer to this question: “What am I willing to keep giving heart and soul for, when neither I nor the scoffers may see returns for a long, long time?” And when we decide there are potential rewards worth that commitment, you’ll want answers to another question: “How can I keep myself working and waiting if the scoffers are loud and the delay long?”

There are spiritual crops that require months, years, and sometimes a lifetime of cultivation before the harvest. Among them are spiritual rewards you want most. That shouldn’t surprise you. Common sense tells you that what matters most won’t come easily. But there is another reason suggested in the scriptures. Remember this from the Book of Mormon?

And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things; I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith. [Ether 12:6]

And from the Doctrine and Covenants:

Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation.

For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand. [D&C 58:3–4]

The Law of Increasing Returns

If you wanted to give this idea a name, you could call it “the law of increasing returns.” The simple fact is that there is a God who wants us to have faith in him. He knows that to strengthen faith we must use it. And so he gives us the chance to use it by letting some of the spiritual rewards we want most be delayed. Instead of first effort yielding returns, with a steady decline, it’s the reverse. First efforts, and even second efforts, seem to yield little. And then the rewards begin, perhaps much later, to grow and grow.

Most of us need encouragement to work and wait for rewards. But not everybody. I knew one man who lived his life pretty much as if everything he did was working on a late crop. He was my father. He died this Christmas after a life filled with getting rewards, from the National Medal of Science in this country to the Wolff Prize in Israel. But if you’d watched him in private, you would have seen some unusual behavior.

I remember him wrestling my Aunt Rose once. She was visiting us in New Jersey, and we’d driven to the ice cream store. You’ll know how old I am when I say a cone cost a dime. Aunt Rose tried to pay for our cones. Dad wrestled her for it. I remember being afraid he’d break her arm. He was determined he’d give, not receive. And she was going to receive a broken arm if that’s what it took. They laughed, but Dad won.

He won that fight all his life, giving more than he got. He taught every term in his years at the University of Utah, including summers. There was no extra pay. It wasn’t even required as part of the job. I remember his trading a first-class ticket for tourist and sending the difference to the company that had provided the ticket. His life was to give first class but always take the tourist. Why? I’ve got an idea. He believed in the law of increasing returns. Give more than you take; invest in the future; cast your bread upon the waters.

You might think he was extreme. He probably was. My guess is that he left more of everything of this world's goods than he consumed in a lifetime, despite all the awards heaped on him. I don't recommend that to you, partly because it might drive your spouse slightly bonkers. But there is a scripture about behavior like that. It's in Matthew 6:1-4:

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

I wouldn't suggest Dad fought to buy the ice cream because he wanted a reward in heaven. He just had a general bias toward putting in hard work up front and letting the rewards take a long time to come, even forever.

Even in the confusion of the last night I spent with him, he gave me some advice. I was helping him walk. I'm not even sure he knew I was there. But very clearly, almost with a booming voice, he said, "Well, let's just do the homework tonight, and we'll see how the exam goes in the morning." He's getting the grade now, and he spent a life doing as much homework as he could. Most of us could move profitably toward a little more homework and leave the grades for tomorrow.

My guess is that all of us want to be better at working and waiting. Let me give you some advice about how to do it. It all follows from what we've said about the law of increasing returns, about planting and tending late crops. But it's not just theory. I got these hints from

watching people who are the best I've seen at working and waiting on late crops. As the ads say, "This product has been proven in clinical tests."

All these hints have to do with where you focus your eyes. Two are things you ought to notice about the present, while you're working and waiting and not getting much yet in return. And the last two are ways to look at the glorious future you're working and waiting for.

Present Humor

First, keep your eyes open for humor in the present. The people I know who are good for the long haul all seem to smile easily. It's not hard for me to understand, for instance, that the Prophet Joseph Smith, who marched triumphantly through trouble, would describe himself as having a "cheerful disposition." You can't just get yourself a cheerful disposition, but you could keep your eyes open for something to smile at.

It's not hard. That's because the best humor springs from seeing the incongruity in your own predicament. Who's got more predicament than someone giving lots with small result? And who's more apt to laugh easily at himself than someone who has ultimate faith that the predicament will end? So look for the chance to smile.

I've had some experience in the chain-saw business. One joke keeps reappearing with new variations. The father of them all goes like this. A customer bought his first chain saw. He was told how many trees he'd be able to cut an hour. He came back to the dealer complaining. He couldn't cut a tenth that many trees. The saw was checked and found perfect. He was reassured that practice and time would solve the problem. He kept coming back as many times as you want to extend the story to make it funny.

Finally, in desperation, the dealer said, "Let me take you out to the forest and show you." They got there, the dealer pulled the cord, the

engine roared, and the customer said, “What’s that?”

Now, you laughed slowly or not at all. But try that story on a woodcutter. He pictures quickly that poor man sawing on a tree with a chain saw with the motor not running. You’ve got to know how heavy they are. You need to have cut down a tree. If you have, you roar. Why? Because it’s funny to think of yourself flailing away. They even have an expression for it, when they’re trying to persuade you of something and failing: “Well, I’m swinging the axe, but no chips are flying.”

Most returned missionaries and most married couples here tonight have swung the axe and seen no chips flying. You could top, those of you who have been there, any funny story I’d try to tell. And if we were in a small group, you’d try. That’s not because we are humorists. And it’s not because missions or marriage or dedicated service are not serious. But, the incongruities of giving more than you seem to get guarantee the chance to smile at yourself. I hope you will. All it will take is to keep your eyes open. And I think it’s a key to endurance.

Present Blessings

The second place to focus your eyes is on the blessings you are getting, now while you wait. When you are trying hard to give, knowing the rewards will be delayed, it’s terribly easy to overlook other blessings. Not all blessings are delayed. The early harvest is all around you. King Benjamin suggested you start by noticing that you are breathing. He also said, as you likely remember:

And secondly, he doth require that ye should do as he hath commanded you; for which if ye do, he doth immediately bless you; and thereafter he hath paid you. [Mosiah 2:24]

Some results may be delayed to allow you to strengthen your faith. But other blessings come immediately. And King Benjamin valued

those so highly compared to what we give that he said, “Mark your whole bill ‘Paid in full.’” I know that’s hard to do if you are struggling under a heavy load. It’s easy to see your load and to pine for the delayed rewards. But King Benjamin taught us that we’re already abundantly paid, both with free gifts—such as life, for which we gave nothing—and with other blessings which have followed immediately upon our faithful service.

Just that focus of the eyes might save your marriage someday. I’ll guarantee you one thing. You won’t contract a great marriage; you’ll build one. Now that’s not saying that some contracts to build aren’t a lot better than others. But it will take effort and time. Maybe a lot of time. And millions of men and women every year, or day, or hour must mutter, “What am I getting out of this? If it weren’t for the children—” Hold it right there: “The children.”

The other day, Elizabeth, age two, saw the picture of her father in the paper. She said, “That’s Dad. He wants to change with me.” That doesn’t mean much to you. In fact, it might even confuse you because you might not know she means help her father change, not get changed herself. It means a lot to me because I’m the guy who sits on the floor when she says, “You sit here.” I’ll tell you something. All she has to do is hand me those shoe trees one time and then say, “Let me kiss your head” (which, as you can see, is easy to hit), and you can mark anything owed me on the marriage account “Paid in full.”

I recognize that’s easy for a father to say. Mothers invest so much more in children that a kiss from a little girl still leaves a lot for the future. Men and women working outside the home deal mostly with early crops and with the law of diminishing returns. In the home, they spend far more on late crops and the law of increasing returns. It’s important to remember that. It could help a woman understand why arguments for a career and little time spent rearing children are so tempting.

And it might help a man understand why a child trampling on the teachings of the home may tear at his wife even more than at him. His paycheck comes often. Hers may come a few times in her life. And now perhaps, because of the choice of a child, one check may not come at all.

But for men and women, obsessed as they should be with the eternal results that take so long, it helps to see the blessings already in hand. The prettiest flowers I've ever seen were among rocks near the tops of mountains. That must have been partly because I worked so hard to get there, for something else. And then, suddenly, there they were. By forcing yourself to look at them, at the blessings around you, it will be easy to do what King Benjamin suggested: "O how you ought to thank your heavenly King!" (Mosiah 2:19).

Among the reasons we ought to be thankful is that it will improve our vision. And with an eye on today's blessings you'll have more staying power for the distant goal.

The Distant Goal

Now, let me suggest how to keep your eye on the distant goal. What will a successful mission look like? How can I picture a great marriage? That's hard to see before you get there. And it's hard to persevere without some picture.

I've never forgotten the sacrament talk of an Englishman who had spent four years in a Japanese prison camp. Two missionaries had found and baptized him just before the capture of Singapore. He lost all his possessions save a photograph of the two missionaries. And that he kept hidden from his captors. He survived, he said, largely by finding moments, sometimes hidden under a blanket, when he could look at the picture and imagine himself talking to the elders again. So vivid is that evening sacrament meeting to me that I remember now, thirty-five years later, that he finished his testimony and sang "The Holy City."

You rarely can have a photograph of that future for which you now sacrifice, but you can get pictures. Years ago, near the time of that sacrament meeting, it occurred to me that I would sometime perhaps have a family. I even joked about them, calling them "the red heads." My mother's hair had been red when she was young. I certainly didn't think the idea of red heads was inspiration, just an idea. But more than once that picture was enough to make me work, and wait.

If all my four sons were here tonight, you would see two blond heads and two red ones. In a kitchen chat one evening, one of them said to me he'd not mind exchanging red hair for beach-boy blond. I just smiled. All dads may think their sons are handsome, but I would not exchange his red hair, nor my early vision of it, for spun gold.

It's not wise to daydream, and I'm not recommending it. If you girls dream too much about a house or a car, some poor man will someday have to get it for you. But I recommend a little thought, not about things or places but about people. All the late crops, all the assignments God will reward in the long run that I can think of, involve serving someone else.

For example, now and then I try to think of my children as parents, perhaps older than I am now, perhaps at the end of life.

I learned something about the end of life from watching my father at the end of his. He talked a lot about his father. His father was kind. His father believed in him. His father liked to be with him so much that he got him a horse to ride the range with him before my dad could walk. That's what he talked about at the end, when priorities got very clear. Perhaps much of what he did, in science, in serving God, was possible because of what his father did.

Just that little vision of the future makes me eager when the younger boys ask, "Dad, can we go to the Deseret Gym tonight?" and the

older ones say, “Let’s hit a few tennis balls.” It’s not quite the same as riding with your son on the Piedras Verdes, the way Grandpa did. But I hope it has just half the results.

I suppose those pictures are really visions. And you’d have to pray for them, or take them as gifts. But at least watch for them. You may catch glimmers. I have had a few. And they help.

Delayed Blessings

Now, finally, it’s important to look carefully at those delayed blessings to notice that they are of at least two kinds. Some you can see and touch, and maybe even spend. You remember them:

For keeping the Sabbath day, long enough, the promise is:

Verily I say, that inasmuch as ye do this, the fulness of the earth is yours, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, and that which climbeth upon the trees and walketh upon the earth. [D&C 59:16]

There are many promises of tangible things. And you and I know of instances where faithful performance seems not to have yet produced the blessings. But for all sacred performances in serving God, there is another promised blessing. You couldn’t touch it or spend it, and you can only see it with special vision. But I commend developing the skill to see it.

A man named Helaman had such skill. He was struggling, under great uncertainty about what was ahead. He was working and waiting. Here’s what he said happened:

Yea, and it came to pass that the Lord our God did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls, and did grant unto us great faith, and did

cause us that we should hope for our deliverance in him. [Alma 58:11]

If you learn how to see it, you can know that many people have had that peace spoken to their souls. There are men and women undergoing trials and tests of faith that might lead you to say, “Their faith will break.” But it doesn’t break, and they do take it. And if you will look carefully, you will soon realize that peace has been spoken to their souls and faith in deliverance increased. If you notice that, it will make it more likely that you will feel that peace. I bear you my testimony that you can.

I pray that you won’t let the world nudge you toward spending your futures now. There are some things you should work for and expect results now. But along with getting early harvests, I hope you’ll work and wait for the late ones. That will take seeing the law of increasing returns as an opportunity, not just a test. Delayed blessings will build your faith in God to work, and wait, for him. The scriptures aren’t demeaning when they command, “Wait upon the Lord.” That means both service and patience. And that will build your faith.

It may help you to watch both for the chance to smile and the blessings around you on the way. And it may help to picture both the future of the people whom you serve for God and his promise of peace in this life.

I bear testimony that there is a God, that the chance to serve and be blessed by him is vastly multiplied by the restoration of the gospel, and that faith exercised is strengthened, and finally rewarded. And I bear you my testimony that to his faithful servants God speaks peace to their souls, builds their faith, and gives them hope for rewards glorious enough to wait for. I bear you that testimony and pray God’s blessings upon you in your working and your waiting. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.