

The Will of the Father in All Things

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At a university it seems appropriate to introduce such a message with a piece of great literature—but I decided to use this verse anyway. Rudyard Kipling, eat your heart out.

*If you can smile when things go wrong
And say it doesn't matter,
If you can laugh off cares and woe
And trouble makes you fatter,*

*If you can keep a cheerful face
When all around are blue,
Then have your head examined, bud,
There's something wrong with you.*

*For one thing I've arrived at:
There are no ands and buts,
A guy that's grinning all the time
Must be completely nuts.
["Smile, Darn You, Smile"]*

I begin with a bit of humor only because the task I wish to discuss with you this morning is a sobering one—not something we can laugh off or say doesn't matter. It is not an issue limited to university-educated people, but it may be a particularly poignant one for them. It is a matter central to our salvation, and it may involve great pain. Unless we are “nuts,” we probably won't grin through it all.

“I Have Suffered the Will of the Father”

Let me take a moment to set the stage. I use the word advisedly. I want to imply divine theater. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown [them]!” (*Nature* [1836], section 1).

In the spirit of that very provocative thought, I invite you to consider another startling—and much more important scene that should evoke belief and adoration, a scene which, like the stars at night, we have undoubtedly taken too much for granted. Imagine yourselves to be among the people of Nephi living in the land of Bountiful in approximately A.D. 34. Tempests and earthquakes and whirlwinds and storms, quickened and cut by thunder and sharp lightning, have enveloped the entire face of the land.

Some cities—entire cities—have burst into flames as if by spontaneous combustion. Others have disappeared into the sea, never to be seen again. Still others are completely

Jeffrey R. Holland was president of Brigham Young University when this devotional was given on 17 January 1989.

covered over with mounds of soil, and some have been carried away with the wind.

The whole face of the land has been changed, the entire earth around you has been deformed. Then, as you and your neighbors are milling about the temple grounds (a place that has suddenly seemed to many like a *very* good place to be), you hear a voice and see a man clothed in a white robe descending out of heaven. It is a dazzling display. He seems to emanate the very essence of light and life itself—a splendor in sharp contrast to the three days of death and darkness just witnessed.

He speaks and says simply, with a voice that penetrates the very marrow of your bones, “I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world” (3 Nephi 11:10). There it is—or, more correctly speaking, there *he* is! He is the focal point and principal figure behind every fireside and devotional and family home evening held by those Nephites for the last six hundred years, and by their Israelite forefathers for thousands of years before that.

Everyone has talked of him and sung of him and dreamed of him and prayed—but here he actually is. This is the day, and yours is the generation. What a moment! But you find you are less inclined to check the film in your camera than you are to check the faith in your heart.

“I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.” Of all the messages that could come from the scroll of eternity, what has he brought to us? Get a pencil. Where’s my notebook? Turn on every tape recorder in town.

He speaks:

I am the light and the life of the world; . . . 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, . . . I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning.

That is it. Just a few lines. Only fifty-two words. “And . . . when Jesus had spoken these

words the whole multitude fell to the earth” (3 Nephi 11:11–12).

This introductory utterance from the resurrected Son of God constitutes my only text today. I have thought very often about this moment in Nephite history. I cannot think it either accident or mere whimsy that the Good Shepherd in his newly exalted state, appearing to a most significant segment of his flock, chooses first to speak of his obedience, his deference, his loyalty, and loving submission to his father. In an initial and profound moment of spellbinding wonder, when surely he had the attention of every man, woman, and child as far as the eye could see, his submission to his father is the first and most important thing he wishes us to know about himself.

Frankly, I am a bit haunted by the thought that this is the first and most important thing he may want to know about *us* when we meet him one day in similar fashion. Did *we* obey, even if it was painful? Did *we* submit, even if the cup was bitter indeed? Did we yield to a vision higher and holier than our own, even when we may have seen no vision in it at all?

One by one he invites us to feel the wounds in his hands and his feet and his side. And as we pass and touch and wonder, perhaps he whispers, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

If such cross-bearing self-denial was, by definition, the most difficult thing Christ or any man has ever had to do, an act of submission that would, by the Savior’s own account, cause him, “God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit”—if yielding and obeying and bowing to divine will holds only that ahead, then no wonder that even the Only Begotten Son of the true and living God “would that [he] might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink” (D&C 19:18)!

Even as we rehearse this greatest of all personal sacrifices, you can be certain that with

some in this world it is not fashionable nor flattering to speak of submitting—to anybody or anything. At the threshold of the twenty-first century it sounds wrong on the face of it. It sounds feeble and wimpish. It just isn't the American way.

As Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote recently,

In today's society, at the mere mention of the words obedience and submissiveness hackles rise and people are put on nervous alert. . . . People promptly furnish examples from secular history to illustrate how obedience to unwise authority and servility to bad leaders have caused much human misery and suffering. It is difficult, therefore, to get a hearing for what the words obedience and submissiveness really mean—even when the clarifying phrase, "to God," is attached. ["Not My Will, But Thine" (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), p. 1]

After all, we come to a university, at least in part, to cultivate self-reliance, to cultivate independence, to learn to think and act for ourselves. Didn't Christ himself say, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32)? Such freedom is exactly what universities are about, *especially* this one. We try very hard here to unshackle you from the bondage of ignorance and the captivity of wrong opinions. We want you to be strong and to have the most enlightened intelligence possible. We want you to be powerful and high-principled free agents.

So how do we speak of such spiritual freedom and intellectual independence in one breath only to plead with you to be submissive and *very* dependent in the next breath? We do so because no amount of university education, or any other kind of desirable and civilizing experience in this world, will help us at the moment of our confrontation with Christ if we have not been able—and are not then able—to yield, yield all that we are, all that we have, and all that we ever hope to have to the Father and the Son.

The path to a complete Christian education passes through the Garden of Gethsemane, and we will learn there if we haven't learned it before that our Father will have no other gods before him—even (or especially) if that would-be god is our self. I assume you are all far enough along in life to be learning that great discipline already. It will be required of each of us to kneel when we may not want to kneel, to bow when we may not want to bow, to confess when we may not want to confess—perhaps a confession born of painful experience that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways, saith the Lord (see Isaiah 55:8).

I think that is why Jacob says to be learned—or, we would presume, to be any other worthy thing—is good *if* one hearkens unto the counsels of God. But education, or public service, or social responsibility, or professional accomplishment of *any* kind is in vain if we cannot, in those crucial moments of pivotal personal history, submit ourselves to God even when all our hopes and fears may tempt us otherwise. We must be willing to place all that we have—not just our possessions (they may be the easiest things of all to give up), but also our ambition and pride and stubbornness and vanity—we must place it all on the altar of God, kneel there in silent submission, and willingly walk away.

I believe what I am describing here is the scriptural definition of a saint, one who will "yield to the enticings of the Holy Spirit," and "through the atonement of Christ . . . becometh as a child, submissive, meek, humble, patient, full of love, willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon him, even as a child doth submit to his father" (Mosiah 3:19).

Obedience, the First Law of Heaven

As the Great Exemplar and Daystar of our lives, is it any wonder that Christ chooses first and foremost to define himself in relation to his father—that he loved him and obeyed him

and submitted to him like the loyal son he was? And what he as a child of God did, we must try very hard to do also.

Obedience *is* the first law of heaven, but in case you haven't noticed, some of these commandments are not easy, and we frequently may seem to be in for much more than we bargained for. At least if we are truly serious about becoming a saint, I think we will find that is the case.

Let me use an example from what is often considered by foes, and even by some friends, as the most unsavory moment in the entire Book of Mormon. I choose it precisely because there is so much in it that has given offense to many. It is pretty much a bitter cup all the way around.

I speak of Nephi's obligation to slay Laban in order to preserve a record, save a people, and ultimately lead to the restoration of the gospel in the dispensation of the fulness of times. How much is hanging in the balance as Nephi stands over the drunken and adversarial Laban I cannot say, but it is a very great deal indeed.

The only problem is that *we* know this, but Nephi does not. And regardless of how much is at stake, how can he do this thing? He is a good person, perhaps even a well-educated person. He has been taught from the very summit of Sinai "Thou shalt not kill." And he has made gospel covenants.

"I was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban; but . . . I shrunk and would that I might not slay him" (1 Nephi 4:10). A bitter test? A desire to shrink? Sound familiar? We don't know why those plates could not have been obtained some other way—perhaps accidentally left at the plate polishers one night or maybe falling out the back of Laban's chariot on a Sabbath afternoon.

For that matter, why didn't Nephi just leave this story out of the book altogether? Why didn't he say something like, "And after much effort and anguish of spirit, I did obtain the plates of Laban and did depart into the

wilderness unto the tent of my father?" At the very least he might have buried the account somewhere in the Isaiah chapters, thus guaranteeing that it would have gone undiscovered up to this very day.

But there it is, squarely in the beginning of the book—page 8—where even the most casual reader will see it *and must deal with it*. It is not intended that either Nephi *or* we be spared the struggle of this account.

I believe that story was placed in the very opening verses of a 531-page book and then told in painfully specific detail in order to focus every reader of that record on the absolutely fundamental gospel issue of obedience and submission to the communicated will of the Lord. If Nephi cannot yield to this terribly painful command, if he cannot bring himself to obey, then it is entirely probable that he can never succeed *or* survive in the tasks that lie just ahead.

"I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded" (1 Nephi 3:7). I confess that I wince a little when I hear that promise quoted so casually among us. Jesus knew what that kind of commitment would entail, and so now does Nephi. And so will a host of others before it is over. That vow took Christ to the cross on Calvary, and it remains at the heart of every Christian covenant. "I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded." Well, we shall see.

In all of this we are, of course, probing Lucifer's problem—he of the raging ego, he who always took the Burger King motto too far and had to have *everything* his way. Satan would have done well to listen to that wisest of Scottish pastors, George MacDonald, who warned: "There is one kind of religion in which the more devoted a man is, the fewer proselytes he makes: the worship of himself" (C. S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* [New York: Macmillan, 1947], p. 110).

But Satan's performance can be instructive. The moment you have a self there is the

temptation to put it forward, to put it first and at the center of things. And the more we are—socially or intellectually or politically or economically—the greater the risk of increasing self-worship. Perhaps that is why when a newborn baby was brought before the venerable Robert E. Lee and the hopeful parents asked for this legendary man’s advice, saying, “What should we teach this child? How should he make his way in the world?” the wise old general said, “Teach him to deny himself. Teach him to say no.”

Often such an exercise in submission is as lonely as it is wrenching. Sometimes, in those moments when we seem to need the Lord the very most, we are left to obey *seemingly* unaided. The psalmist cries out on behalf of all of us in such times: “Why standest thou afar off, Lord? why hidest thou thyself in times of trouble?” “Why art thou so far from helping me? . . . I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, [I] am not silent.” “Hide not thy face far from me; . . . leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation.” “Be not silent [un]to me” (Psalms 10:1, 22:1–2, 27:9, 28:1).

The psalmist’s plea rings most painfully of that ultimate anguish on Calvary, the cry that characterized an act of supreme submission: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46 and Psalms 22:1). And to a lesser degree we hear the supplication from Liberty Jail: O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place? How long shall thy hand be stayed . . . ? Yea, O Lord, how long . . . ?” (D&C 121:1–3).

We know a good deal about the abuse that Joseph and his colleagues suffered at the hands of their jailors. Furthermore, we know of Joseph’s submissive spirit at that time, choosing then of all moments to pen some of the most sublime language in holy writ—the appeal to maintain influence “only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned” (D&C 121:41). What a setting in which to speak so kindly. What a brutal context in which to bring out such compassion.

But part of the story we *don’t* remember as well is that of fellow prisoner Sidney Rigdon. Sidney was actually released from jail some two months before the Prophet Joseph and the others, but Rigdon left muttering that “the sufferings of Jesus Christ were . . . fool[ish compared] to his” (HC 3:264).

Now it would not behoove us here in the security of our pleasant quarters to pass judgment on Brother Rigdon or anyone else who suffered these indignities in Missouri, but to say that Christ’s atoning sacrifice, bearing the weight of all the sins of all mankind from Adam to the end of the world, was foolishness compared to Brother Rigdon’s confinement in Liberty Jail smacks of that defiant and finally fatal arrogance we so often see in those who end up in spiritual trouble.

Professor Keith W. Perkins of our Church History Department has written that this moment marks the turning point for ill in Sidney Rigdon’s life (see “Trials and Tribulations: The Refiner’s Fire” in *The Capstone of Our Religion: Insights into the Doctrine and Covenants*, eds. Robert L. Millet and Larry E. Dahl [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989], p. 147). After this experience he was no longer the distinguished leader he truly had been in the early years of the dispensation. Soon Joseph Smith no longer felt him to be of use in the First Presidency, and after the Prophet’s death, Rigdon plotted against the Twelve in an effort to gain unilateral control over the Church. In the end he died a petty and bitter man, one who had lost his faith, his testimony, his priesthood, and his promises.

Joseph, on the other hand, would endure and be exalted when it was over. No wonder the Lord told him very early in his life, “Be patient in afflictions, for thou shalt have many; but endure them, for, lo, I am with thee, even unto the end of thy days” (D&C 24:8).

“Who are those arrayed in white before the throne of God?” John the Revelator is asked in his mighty vision. The answer: “These are they

which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

Sometimes it seems especially difficult to submit to “great tribulation” when we look around and see others seemingly much less obedient who triumph even as we weep. But time is measured only unto man, says Alma (see Alma 40:8), and God has a very good memory.

“Thou Hast Sought My Will”

Elder Dean L. Larsen writes of a Sabbath observing farmer who was troubled and dismayed to see his Sabbath-breaking neighbor bring in far better crops with a much higher, more profitable yield. But in such times of seeming injustice, we must remember that God’s accounts are not always settled in October (see “The Peaceable Things of the Kingdom” in *Hope* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988], p. 200).

Sometimes, too, we underestimate the Lord’s willingness to hear our cry, to confirm our wish, to declare that our will is *not* contrary to his and that his help is there only for the asking.

Note this example taken from Elder F. Burton Howard’s biography of President Marion G. Romney. I quote Elder Howard generously in summarizing this story.

In 1967 Sister Romney suffered a serious stroke. The doctors told then–Elder Romney that the damage from the hemorrhage was severe. They offered to keep her alive by artificial means but did not recommend it. The family braced themselves for the worst. Brother Romney confided to those closest to him that in spite of his anguished, personal yearning for Ida’s restored health and continued companionship, above all he wanted “the Lord’s will to be done and to take what he needed to take without whimpering.”

As the days wore on, Sister Romney became less responsive. She had, of course, been

administered to, but Elder Romney was “reluctant to counsel the Lord about the matter.” Because of his earlier unsuccessful experience of praying that he and Ida might have children, he knew that he could never ask in prayer for something which was not in harmony with the will of the Lord.

He fasted that he might know how to show the Lord that he had faith and that he would accept God’s will in their lives. He wanted to make sure that he had done all he could do. She continued to fail.

One evening in a particularly depressed state, with Ida unable to speak or recognize him, Brother Romney went home and turned as he always had to the scriptures in an effort to commune with the Lord. He picked up the Book of Mormon and continued where he had left off the night before.

He had been reading in the book of Helaman about the prophet Nephi, who had been falsely condemned and unfairly charged with sedition. Following a miraculous deliverance from his accusers, Nephi returned home pondering the things which he had experienced. As he did so he heard a voice.

Although Marion Romney had read that story many times before, it now struck him this night as a personal revelation. The words of the scripture so touched his heart that for the first time in weeks he felt he had tangible peace. It seemed as if the Lord was speaking directly to him. The scripture read:

Blessed art thou, . . . for those things which thou hast done. . . . And thou . . . hast not sought thine own life, but hast sought my will, and to keep my commandments.

And now, because thou hast done this . . . I will bless thee forever; and I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will. [Helaman 10:4–5]

There was the answer. He had sought only to know and obey the will of the Lord, and the Lord had spoken. He fell to his knees and poured out his heart, and as he concluded his prayer with the phrase, “Thy will be done,” he either felt or actually heard a voice which said, “It is not contrary to my will that Ida be healed.”

Brother Romney rose to his feet. It was past two o’clock in the morning, but he knew what he must do. Quickly he put on his tie and coat, then went out into the night to visit Ida in the hospital.

He arrived shortly before three o’clock. His wife’s condition was unchanged. She did not stir as he placed his hands upon her pale forehead. With undeviating faith, he invoked the power of the priesthood in her behalf. He pronounced a simple blessing and then uttered the incredible promise that she would recover her health and mental powers and yet perform a great mission upon the earth.

Even though he did not doubt, Elder Romney was astonished to see Ida’s eyes open as he concluded the blessing. Somewhat stunned by all that had happened, he sat down on the edge of the bed only to hear his wife’s frail voice for the first time in months. She said, “For goodness’ sake, Marion, what are you doing here?” He didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. He said, “Ida, how are you?” With that flash of humor so characteristic of both of them, she replied, “Compared to what, Marion? Compared to what?”

Ida Romney began her recovery from that very moment, soon left her hospital bed, and lived to see her husband sustained as a member of the First Presidency of the Church, “a great mission upon the earth” indeed (F. Burton Howard, *Marion G. Romney: His Life and Faith* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988], pp. 137–42).

We must be careful not to miss the hand of the Lord when it is offered, when it is his desire to assist. My daughter Mary made this point in a recent conversation, and I asked her permission to repeat it.

She was speaking of this ironic tendency to fear and avoid the very source of our help and deliverance, to retreat from rather than go toward our safety. She recalled the account in the fourteenth chapter of Matthew, when a storm arose on the Sea of Galilee and the ship containing the disciples was “tossed with waves: for the wind was contrary” (Matthew 14:24). In the midst of their anxiety, the disciples looked toward the shore and a being, a ghost, an apparition, was seen walking directly toward them.

This only increased their panic, and they began to cry out in fear. But it was Christ walking on the water toward them. “Be of good cheer,” he called out. “It is I; be not afraid” (Matthew 14:27). He was coming to help in their moment of need, and they, misunderstanding, were fleeing.

“This miracle is rich in symbolism and suggestion,” writes Elder James E. Talmage.

By what law or principle the effect of gravitation was superseded, so that a human body could be supported upon the watery surface, man is unable to affirm. The phenomenon is a concrete demonstration of the great truth that faith is a principle of power, whereby natural forces may be conditioned and controlled. Into every adult human life come experiences like unto the battling of the storm-tossed voyagers with contrary winds and threatening seas; oftentimes the night of struggle and danger is far advanced before succor appears; and then, too frequently the saving aid is mistaken for a greater terror. As came unto Peter and his terrified companions in the midst of the turbulent waters, so comes to all who toil in faith, the voice of the Deliverer—“It is I; be not afraid.” [Jesus the Christ (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints, 1916), p. 337]

Our Part in This Human Drama

With that image of Christ again appearing in grandeur before us, let me conclude this drama where I began. We are taught that each one of us will come face-to-face with Christ to

be judged of him, just as the world itself will be judged at his dramatic Second Coming.

I close with an adaptation of an account by C. S. Lewis entitled “The World’s Last Night,” which I have commandeered and changed for our purposes here this morning. The metaphor and most of the language is Lewis’s, but the application is my own.

In *King Lear* (III, vii) there is a man who is such a minor character that Shakespeare has not even given him a name: he is simply called “First Servant.” All the characters around him—Regan, Cornwall, and Edmund—have fine long-term plans. They think they know how the story is going to end, and they are quite wrong. The servant, however, has no such delusions. He has no notion how the play is going to go. But he understands the present scene. He sees an abomination (the blinding of old Gloucester) taking place. He will not stand for it. His sword is out and pointed at his master’s breast in an instant. Then Regan stabs him dead from behind. That is his whole part: eight lines all told. But, Lewis says, if that were real life and not a play, that is the part it would be best to have acted.

The doctrine of the Second Coming teaches us that we do not and cannot know when Christ will come and the world drama will end. He may appear and the curtain may be rung down at any moment—say, before we have filed out of the devotional this morning. This kind of not knowing seems to some people intolerably frustrating. So many things would be interrupted. Perhaps you were going to get married next month. Perhaps you were to graduate this spring. Perhaps you were thinking of going on a mission or paying your tithing or denying yourself some indulgence. Surely no good and wise God would be so unreasonable as to cut all that short. Not *now*, of all moments!

But we think this way because we keep on assuming that we know the play. In fact, we don’t know much of it. We believe we are on

in Act II, but we know almost nothing of how Act I went or how Act III will be. We are not even sure we know who the major and who the minor characters are. The Author knows. The audience, to the extent there is an audience of angels filling the loge and the stalls, may have an inkling. But we, never seeing the play from the outside (as Sister Holland has just suggested), and meeting only the tiny minority of characters who are “on” in the same scenes as ourselves, largely ignorant of the future and very imperfectly informed about the past, cannot tell at what moment Christ will come and confront us. We will face him one day, of that we may be sure; but we waste our time in guessing when that will be. That this human drama has a meaning we may be sure, but most of it we cannot yet see. When it is over we will be told. We are led to expect that the Author will have something to say to each of us on the part that each of us has played. Playing it well, then, is what matters most. To be able to say at the final curtain “I have suffered the will of the Father in all things” is our only avenue to an ovation in the end. (see “The World’s Last Night,” in *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity* by C. S. Lewis, ed. Walter Hooper [Great Britain: Fontana/Collins, 1975], pp. 76–77)

The work of devils and of darkness is never more certain to be defeated than when men and women, not finding it easy or pleasant but still determined to do the Father’s will, look out upon their lives from which it may seem every trace of God has vanished, and asking why they have been so forsaken, still bow their heads and obey. [Paraphrased from C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1961), p. 39]

That it may be so in your rich and beautiful and blessed young lives—faithful to the Father in all things and to the very end—I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.