

Three Gates to Open

THOMAS S. MONSON

It's humbling to sit here and gaze from left to right and see how many people are assembled here waiting for what they might hear from their speaker. It reminds me of a little boy in our fast and testimony meeting a couple of months ago. I watched him from the stand, and I could tell he was fidgeting, trying to get up enough courage to come up and bear his testimony. He was just a little fellow. Finally he made the move. He stood up, walked solemnly up that long aisle, passed in front of me and smiled, stepped over to the pulpit, put his hands down, looked at the audience, removed his hands, and turned around and walked back to his parents.

All I could do today would be to turn around and walk back to the arms of President Samuelson. I think he would rather I speak now than have to take over. You're my friends. I feel close to you, and it is a privilege to be with you and to speak to you today.

What a wonderful opportunity you have to attend Brigham Young University and to be taught by the fine faculty we have here. As I think of learning, I am reminded of a father and his son who went fishing one day. After a couple of hours in the boat, the boy suddenly began asking questions about their surroundings.

"How does this boat float?" he asked his father.

His father thought for a moment and then replied, "I don't rightly know, son."

The boy returned to his contemplation, then looked again at his father. "How do fish breathe underwater?" he asked.

Once again the father replied, "Don't rightly know, son."

Next the boy asked, "Why is the sky blue?"

Again, the father replied, "Don't rightly know, son."

Worried he would annoy his father, the boy said, "Dad, do you mind my asking you all of these questions?"

"Of course not, son. If you don't ask questions, you'll never learn anything."

As I have pondered what message I would wish to leave with you today, I have thought of the scripture from Ecclesiastes, or the Preacher: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven."¹ This is your time. What will you do with it? Are you where

Thomas S. Monson was First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional talk was given on 14 November 2006.

you want to be with your life? If not, what are you going to do about it?

The Prophet Joseph Smith counseled:

*Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God.*²

I have devoted considerable time reflecting on years gone by, when I was your age and facing your challenges, your objectives, your opportunities, your futures.

During my high school years, and into my first year at the University of Utah, World War II was raging in full conflict. The daily newspapers carried the news of men dying, cities being obliterated, hospitals filled with grievously burned and maimed servicemen. They faced futures altered, dreams shattered, homecomings ruined.

It didn't seem to matter that gasoline was severely rationed. This was a catalyst for double dating and carpooling. Textbooks were delayed due to paper shortages. They weren't available until midway through our courses, and yet we were expected to know everything in them by final exams.

It was the era of the big bands, and everyone enjoyed a date to the dance, although dancing then was quite different from dancing now.

Looming in the background of every thought for each young man was the inevitable call to serve one's country. Left behind were the comforts of family and home, the teachings of classrooms, and, of course, a special girl-friend. (By the way, she and I have now been married for 58 years!)

Whether speaking of your generation or of mine, there are some constancies amid the changes of the times. The past is behind—we must learn from it. The future is ahead—we must prepare for it. The present is now—we must live in it.

Years ago, I discovered a thought which is true and, in a way, prophetic. It is this: The gate of history swings on small hinges, and so do people's lives.

Today I have chosen to discuss three gates which you alone can open. You must pass through each gate if you are to be successful in your journey through mortality:

- Gate Number 1: The Gate of Preparation
- Gate Number 2: The Gate of Performance
- Gate Number 3: The Gate of Service

The Gate of Preparation

First, let us speak of the Gate of Preparation. The Lord has counseled, "If ye are prepared ye shall not fear."³ Fear is the enemy of growth and accomplishment.

It is necessary to prepare and to plan so that we don't fritter away our lives. Without a goal, there can be no real success. The best definition of success I have ever found goes something like this: "Success is the progressive realization of a worthy ideal." Someone has said that the trouble with not having a goal is that you can spend your life running up and down the field and never crossing the goal line.

Years ago there was a romantic and fanciful ballad that contained the words "Wishing will make it so; Just keep on wishing and cares will go."⁴ I want to state here and now that wishing will not replace thorough preparation to meet the trials of life. Preparation is hard work, but it is absolutely essential for our progress.

Concerning your preparation, let me share with you this time-honored advice, which has never been more applicable than it is right now: It is not the number of hours you put in but what you put in the hours that counts.

Have discipline in your preparations. Have checkpoints where you can determine if you're on course. Study something you like and which will make it possible for you to support a family. While this counsel would apply almost certainly to every young man,

it also has relevance to young women. There are situations in life which we cannot predict which will require employable skills. You can't get the jobs of tomorrow until you have the skills of today. Business in the new economy, where the only guarantee is change, brings us to serious preparation.

Make certain as you prepare that you do not procrastinate. Someone has said that procrastination is the thief of time. Actually, procrastination is much more. It is the thief of our self-respect. It nags at us and spoils our fun. It deprives us of the fullest realization of our ambitions and our hopes.

In academic preparation, I found it a good practice to read a text with the idea that I would be asked to explain that which the author wrote and its application to the subject it covered. Also, I tried to be attentive in any lecture in the classroom and to pretend that I would be called upon to present the same lecture to others. While this practice is very hard work, it certainly helps during test week!

It is hazardous in the extreme to count on a situation typical of one I read about some years ago pertaining to a large, ecclesiastically oriented college in the eastern part of America, where every student had to enroll in a class called Religion 101. The professor of that particular class had been there many years and loved the writings and teachings of the Apostle Paul. He loved them with such vigor that that is about all he taught in Religion 101. Consequently, he would tell the class at the beginning of the semester, "I will not give any examinations during the semester except the final. The result of the final examination will determine your grade for the course."

Now, that would be kind of overwhelming, except that every semester for 21 years he had given the same examination in every class of Religion 101. The examination consisted of one question. And for all those years, the question had been the same. Can you believe it? What a snap class! The question had always been:

Describe the travels and teachings of the Apostle Paul.

Some young people would come to class the first day and get their name on the record. That was about it until the final examination. Then they would come, having boned up on an answer to that question.

One particular semester, three young men who had followed that practice of registering and then absenting themselves until the end of the semester sat with their pencils poised as the professor went to the chalkboard and said, "I shall place on the board the question on which your entire grade will depend." To their great astonishment he did not write the usual question. Instead, he wrote, "Criticize the Sermon on the Mount."

One of the three young men said, "I don't even know what book it is in." He closed his test book and left the room.

The second young man thought for a moment. He didn't know anything about the Sermon on the Mount because he had prepared for a different test question. He left the room, anticipating a failing grade.

The third one of this trio stayed in the class. He wrote line after line and page after page. His friends were outside in the hallway, looking through the door window, wondering what he was writing. They knew that he had no more knowledge of the Sermon on the Mount than did they, that he had prepared for the question that was not asked. They wondered what he was writing in that test book.

He didn't tell them until the day the papers were examined and returned. They all huddled around to see what grade he had received. He had an A on the test and therefore an A in the course. As he opened the cover of the exam book, there was the question: "Criticize the Sermon on the Mount." And here is what this enterprising young man had written: "I will leave it to someone far more knowledgeable and experienced than I am to criticize the greatest sermon from the greatest life ever

lived. As for me, I would prefer to describe the travels and teachings of the Apostle Paul.”

May I now turn to the Gate of Performance. Like the Gate of Preparation, you alone can open it.

The Gate of Performance

The Apostle Paul provided sound counsel to guide our performance: “Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”⁵

Remember that the mantle of leadership, my brothers and sisters, is not the cloak of comfort but the robe of responsibility. Accountability is not for the intention but for the deed. You must continue to refuse to compromise with expediency. You must maintain the courage to defy the consensus. You must continue to choose the harder right, instead of the easier wrong. The poet John Greenleaf Whittier expressed this truth when he wrote these lines:

*For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: “It might have been!”*⁶

Don’t forget: One of the saddest things in life is wasted talent.

*It is a good idea to be ambitious, to have goals, to want to be good at what you do, but it is a terrible mistake to let drive and ambition get in the way of treating people with kindness and decency. The point is not that they will then be nice to you. It is that you will feel better about yourself.*⁷

Whenever we are inclined to feel burdened down with the blows of life, let us remember that others have passed the same way, have endured, and then have overcome. When we have done all that we are able, we can rely on God’s promised help.

You, my brothers and sisters, have access to the lighthouse of the Lord. There is no fog so dense, no night so dark, no mariner so

lost, no gale so strong as to render useless the lighthouse of the Lord. It beckons through the storms of life. It seems to call, “This way to safety; this way to home.”

Will you remember to select your friends carefully, for you will tend to be like them and to be found where they choose to go. Consider the love your parents have for you and that you have for them. Instead of simply asking them, “Where are the keys to your car?” you might add, “I’ll be a bit late tonight.” Often the clock ticks more loudly and the hands move more slowly when the night is dark, the hour is late, and a son or a daughter has not yet come home. A telephone call—“We’re okay; we just stopped for something to eat. Don’t worry; we’re fine”—is an indication of true love of parents and of the training of a Latter-day Saint home.

Let me relate another example. At the funeral service of a noble General Authority, H. Verlan Andersen, a tribute was expressed by a son. He related that, years earlier, he had a special school date on a Saturday night. He borrowed from his father the family car. As he obtained the car keys and headed for the door, his father said, “Remember, tomorrow is Sunday. The car will need more gas before then. Be sure to fill the tank before coming home.”

Elder Andersen’s son then related that the evening activity was wonderful. Friends met, refreshments were served, and all had a good time. In his exuberance, however, he failed to follow his father’s instruction and add fuel to the car’s tank before returning home. He simply forgot.

Sunday morning dawned. Elder Andersen discovered the gas gauge showed empty. The son saw his father put the car keys on the table. In the Andersen family the Sabbath day was a day for worship and thanksgiving, and not for purchases.

As the funeral message continued, Elder Andersen’s son declared, “I saw my father

put on his coat, bid us good-bye, and walk the long distance to the chapel, that he might attend an early meeting." Duty called. Truth was not held hostage to expedience.

In concluding his funeral message, Elder Andersen's son said, "No son ever was taught more effectively by his father than I was on that occasion. My father not only knew the truth, but he also taught the truth and lived the truth."

Youth need fewer critics and more models to follow. Your own personal performance in all aspects of your life, including reading the scriptures regularly and following their teachings, will help you to become such models. Then the Gate of Performance will open before you as you proceed to Gate Number 3—the Gate of Service.

The Gate of Service

Albert Schweitzer, the noted theologian and missionary physician, declared: "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

May I share with you an experience I had with a dear friend of mine, Louis McDonald. Louis never married. Because of a crippling disease, he had never known a day without pain nor many days without loneliness. One winter's day, as I visited him, he was slow in answering the doorbell's ring. I entered his well-kept home; the temperature in save but one room—the kitchen—was a chilly 40 degrees. The reason? Insufficient money to heat any other room. The walls needed papering, the ceilings needed to be lowered, the cupboards needed to be filled.

I was troubled by Louis's needs. A bishop was consulted, and a miracle of love, prompted by testimony, took place. The members of the ward—particularly the young adults—were organized and the labor of love begun.

A month later, my friend Louis called and asked if I would come and see what had happened to him. I did and indeed beheld a miracle. The sidewalks which had been uprooted by large poplar trees had been replaced, the porch of the home rebuilt, a new door with glistening hardware installed, the ceilings lowered, the walls papered, the woodwork painted, the roof replaced, and the cupboards filled. No longer was the home chilly and uninviting. It now seemed to whisper a warm welcome.

Louis saved until last showing me his pride and joy: there on his bed was a beautiful plaid quilt bearing the crest of his McDonald family clan. It had been made with loving care by the women of the Relief Society. Before leaving, I discovered that each week the Young Adults would bring in a hot dinner and share a home evening. Warmth had replaced the cold, repairs had transformed the wear of years, but, more significantly, hope had dispelled despair, and now love reigned triumphant.

All who participated in this moving drama of real life had discovered a new and personal appreciation of the Master's teaching "It is more blessed to give than to receive."⁸

The holy scriptures are replete with examples of service by the servants of the Lord and by Jesus Himself. Of Him it is recorded: "[He] went about doing good, . . . for God was with him."⁹ He caused lame beggars to walk and blind men to see. He cleansed the lepers and healed the centurion's servant. He restored to the widow at Nain her dead son, who through Him now lived. He raised Lazarus from the tomb. He forgave the woman taken in adultery. He atoned for the sins of all of us. He died that we might eternally live.

As we go about our daily lives, we discover countless opportunities to follow the example of the Savior. When our hearts are in tune with His teachings, we discover the unmistakable nearness of His divine help. We are on the Lord's errand, and when we are on the Lord's errand, we are entitled to the Lord's help.

Through the years, the offices I have occupied have been decorated with lovely paintings of peaceful and pastoral scenes. However, there is one picture that always hangs on the wall which I face when seated behind my desk. It is a constant reminder of Him whom I serve, for it is a picture of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. When confronted with a vexing problem or difficult decision, I always gaze at that picture of the Master and silently ask myself the question “What would He have me do?” No longer does doubt linger, nor does indecision prevail. The way to go is clear, and the pathway before me beckons. Such will also work for each of you as you focus on what the Lord would have you do.

The noble King Benjamin counseled his many subjects, after a lengthy but powerful sermon on the subject of service: “When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God.”¹⁰

At times we may think that no one cares—but someone *always* cares! Your Heavenly Father will not leave you to struggle alone but stands ever ready to help. Most often such assistance comes quietly, at other times with dramatic impact. Elder Marion D. Hanks, some years ago, related an account of one who received such assistance. He told of a young divorced woman, the mother of seven children then ranging in ages from five to 16. One evening she went across the street to deliver something to a neighbor. She indicated later that as she turned to walk back home, she could see her house lighted up. She could hear echoes of her children as she had walked out of the door a few minutes earlier: “Mom, what are we going to have for dinner?” “Can you take me to the library?” “Mom, I have to get some poster paper tonight.” Tired and weary, she thought of all of those children who were home waiting for her to come home and meet their needs. She said that at that moment her burdens felt very heavy on her shoulders.

She recalled looking through tears toward the sky, and she said, “O my Father, I just can’t handle things tonight. I’m too tired. I can’t face it. I can’t go home and take care of all those children alone. Could I come to You and stay with You for just one night? I’ll come back in the morning.”

She didn’t really hear the words of reply, but she heard them in her mind. The answer was, “No, little one, you can’t come to me now, for you would never wish to return. But I can come to you.”

Seek heavenly guidance one day at a time. The help you need may not come just as you envision, but it will come. When we remember that each of us is literally a child of God, we will not find it difficult to approach Him.

Seek heavenly help also to know how to serve others. There is no feeling so gratifying nor knowledge so comforting as knowing that our Father has answered the prayer of another through you.

I close with a tender yet simple experience. Each time I would visit Mattie, a dear friend and an older widow whom I had known for many years and whose bishop I had been, my heart grieved at her utter loneliness. One of her sons lived many miles away, halfway across the country, but he rarely visited her. He would come to Salt Lake, take care of business matters, see his brothers and sisters, and leave for his own home without visiting his mother. When I would call to see this mother, she would make an excuse for her boy and tell me just how busy he was. Her words did not carry power or conviction. They simply masked her disappointment and grief.

The years passed. The loneliness deepened. Then one afternoon I received a telephone call. That special son was in Salt Lake City. A change had occurred in his life. He had become imbued with a desire to help others, to adhere more faithfully to God’s commandments. He was proud of his newfound ability to cast off the old man and become new and

useful. He wanted to come immediately to my office that he might share with me the joy in service that he now felt. With all my heart I wanted to welcome him and to extend my personal congratulations. Then I thought of his grieving mother, that lonely widow, and suggested, “Dick, I can see you at four o’clock this afternoon, provided you visit your dear mother before coming here.” He agreed.

Just before our appointment, a call came to me. It was that same mother. There was an excitement in her voice that words cannot adequately describe. She exuded enthusiasm even over the phone and declared proudly, “Bishop, you’ll never guess who has just visited me.” Before I could answer, she exclaimed, “Dick was here! My son Dick has spent the past hour with me. He is a new man. He has found himself. I’m the happiest mother in the world!” Then she paused and quietly spoke: “I just knew he would not really forget me.”

Years later, at Mattie’s funeral, Dick and I spoke tenderly of that experience. We had

witnessed a glimpse of God’s healing power through the window of a mother’s faith in her son.

Today I pray earnestly that all of us may open wide the three gates of which I have spoken—the Gate of Preparation, the Gate of Performance, and the Gate of Service—and walk through them to our exaltation. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Ecclesiastes 3:1.
2. *Teachings*, 255–56.
3. D&C 38:30.
4. “Wishing (Will Make It So),” words and music by Buddy DeSylva.
5. 1 Timothy 4:12.
6. John Greenleaf Whittier, *Maud Muller* (1856), stanza 53.
7. Robert Solow.
8. Acts 20:35.
9. Acts 10:38.
10. Mosiah 2:17.

