

# *Life: The Great Test*

K. FRED SKOUSEN

I have always wondered where the marvelous introductions for devotional and forum speakers came from—now I know. Thank you, President Bateman, for reading that introduction just like my mother wrote it!

You have to be careful about believing everything in introductions. A speaker at a business conference was introduced as a man who had recently made \$10 million in the oil fields of Texas. The man began his remarks by stating, “It wasn’t in oil, it was in coal; it wasn’t in Texas, it was in Pennsylvania; and I didn’t make \$10 million, I *lost* \$10 million.”

I appreciate your attendance this morning. I realize that coming to hear from the dean of the Marriott School of Management, an accountant at that, may not be at the top of your priority list. And talk about anticlimactic: last week we were privileged to hear from our prophet, President Hinckley, and next week we get to hear from President Faust. Wow! We have such wonderful leaders. We will do well to follow our prophets.

Some of you have taken the introductory accounting course at BYU or are in the accounting program and have studied out of my textbooks. You are, no doubt, really going the extra mile in being here today. However, my kids do tell me that my accounting texts are valuable:

they say that they can put them to sleep just about anytime, anywhere!

On a serious note though, for me this is a real opportunity to speak to you today. I sincerely hope and pray that something I say today will be of worth to you.

Today I’d like to talk to you about life. I hope you are happy to be alive. I hope you are grateful for the wonderful blessings that Father in Heaven gives you during this earthly existence.

Each of us have, no doubt, reflected on:

- Where we came from;
- Why we are here; and
- Where we are going.

Flippantly, and with a very short-range perspective, some may say, “Well, I just came from the Tanner Building or the library or from my dorm. And I’m here because President Bateman has encouraged us to attend the devotionals or because that cute girl in my history class was coming or because I want to see if this business guy can possibly shed any light on how we integrate the sacred and the secular

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*K. Fred Skousen was the dean of the BYU Marriott School of Management when this devotional address was given on 11 November 1997.*

at BYU. As to where I'm going, I'm going to lunch. I'm starved. I sure hope this speaker doesn't talk too long."

From a more serious, longer-term, and eternal perspective, we know that we come from a pre-earthly existence where we lived as spirit children of our Heavenly Father. We know that the great plan of salvation was presented to us and that our Elder Brother agreed to make the plan effective through his atoning sacrifice. We know that we "shouted for joy" at the opportunity to come to earth (Job 38:7). We are here to gain a body and to keep the commandments so that we might grow and develop. Eventually we hope to live with our Father in Heaven and our families throughout eternity.

Today I'd like to concentrate my remarks on the purpose of this life. Specifically, I'd like to consider life as "The Great Test." And I'd like to frame my remarks in an academic setting that each of us here at BYU can perhaps relate to.

Have you ever had (or perhaps you now have) a class that you just loved, a class that taught you so much, a class that really made a difference? What was it that made that class so special? Perhaps it was a clearly written syllabus, an excellent text, an outstanding teacher, or meaningful learning assignments. Maybe you thought the final exam was fair and adequately covered the concepts learned in the course. Maybe your special course combined all of these positive elements.

To me life is just such a course. What a great opportunity and privilege to be enrolled in Life.

The objective of this course is clearly stated: "To bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man" (Moses 1:39). The course may be titled The Plan of Redemption. The instructor is the Master Teacher, our Elder Brother, the Savior of the World, Jesus Christ. He is assisted by loving parents and by living prophets and inspired Church leaders. The text is fantastic; it is called the scriptures.

The pedagogy for this course emphasizes experience-based learning. There are some

important lectures and case studies that we can learn from, and there are many examples we can read about in the text (scriptures), but the greatest growth and development come from our personal experiences in trying to apply the principles that the Master Teacher has taught us and that he has shown us by his perfect example.

There are three basic and related concepts in this course that we must understand. They are

- Agency,
- Accountability, and
- Consequences.

### Agency

In our premortal state, as spirit children, we were given the great gift of agency—the ability to discern between good and evil and the freedom to choose between the two. We made a correct decision in choosing to support our Elder Brother's defense of agency and the plan of salvation. Satan and a third of the hosts of heaven were cast out for seeking to destroy the agency of man (see Moses 4:1–3).

In mortality, this gift of agency was continued through Adam and Eve and their posterity, which includes you and me. We continue to have this marvelous gift of agency. God will not force anyone to do good, nor can a person be forced by Satan to do evil.

A veil of forgetfulness has been placed over our eyes and minds. We cannot remember our premortal existence. We must live by faith, exercising our agency in striving to live the commandments.

Sometimes it seems that circumstances are thrust upon us that take away our freedom to choose. Consider the case of the late Viktor Frankl. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl describes his experience as a prisoner in the German concentration camps during World War II. There he suffered every imaginable affliction: fear, hunger, cold, brutality, the loss of his entire family (except for a sister), and all

his possessions. But he still considered himself free.

Frankl says this:

*Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, of independence of mind, even in such terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. . . .*

*. . . Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.* [Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), p. 86; emphasis in original]

The point is that we cannot always choose what happens to us, but we can choose how we react and how we handle the trials and situations that we are asked to face. Our beloved President Rex E. Lee and his wife, Janet, are great examples. In their book *The Marathon of Faith*, written with Jim Bell, the Lees express gratitude to their Father in Heaven for the almost nine-year extension to President Lee’s life and describe that period as among the most challenging, yet rewarding of their lives. The trials, the pain, and the suffering President Lee went through did not keep him from exercising his agency to be positive, enthusiastic, and productive to the very end of his earthly life.

Similarly, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, in his April 1997 conference address, helps us understand “from whom all blessings flow.” In that brief, but touching address, Elder Maxwell explains that “mortal experience points evermore to the Atonement of Jesus Christ as the central act of all human history” (“From Whom All Blessings Flow,” *Ensign*, May 1997, p. 12). Elder Maxwell refers to Alma 7:11–13. In verse 11 we read: “He shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind.” In verse 12: “And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death.” And in verse 13: “The Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people.” Elder Maxwell states:

*Jesus knows how to succor us in the midst of our griefs and sicknesses precisely because Jesus has already borne our griefs and sicknesses. . . . He knows them firsthand; thus His empathy is earned. Of course, we do not comprehend it fully any more than we understand how He bore all mortal sins, but His Atonement remains the rescuing and reassuring reality.* [“From Whom All Blessings,” p. 12]

### **Accountability and Consequences**

The companion principles to agency are accountability and consequences of decisions. President Wilford Woodruff said: “By virtue of this agency you and I and all mankind are made responsible beings, responsible for the course we pursue, the lives we live, the deeds we do in the body” (*Millennial Star* 51, no. 41 [14 October 1889], p. 642).

Having the ability and opportunity to choose for ourselves makes us accountable for those choices. Samuel the Lamanite, in preaching to the Nephites, stated:

*And now remember, remember, my brethren, that whosoever perisheth, perisheth unto himself; and whosoever doeth iniquity, doeth it unto himself; for behold, ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free.*

*He hath given unto you that ye might know good from evil, and he hath given unto you that ye might choose life or death; and ye can do good and be restored unto that which is good, or have that which is good restored unto you; or ye can do evil, and have that which is evil restored unto you.* [Helaman 14:30–31]

Charles W. Penrose, an early Church leader, made the same point with these words:

*Here [Moses 4:2–3] we read that that power of choice, the gift, the ability to understand right from wrong, to understand light from darkness, was given to the spirit of man by the Lord and He gave*

*to him that agency, power in himself to choose the good and refuse the evil, to choose the light or the darkness as he willed. So because of that, man can be brought to judgment for the deeds that he performs, for he is not forced to do evil, neither is he forced to do right. The power of volition is in the spirit man and he brings it with him when he is born into the earthly sphere, and so we can do good or do evil as we elect, and therefore we will be brought to judgment and every man will be judged according to the deeds done while in the body; according to his works, so will his future be determined.* [CR, October 1914, p. 40]

Recognizing that there are consequences of decisions is an important part of this course of life. The consequences may be immediate or deferred for a time; they may be reversible or permanent; and they may be of little consequence or of great magnitude.

To illustrate, the decision to not eat breakfast and lunch probably means you will be pretty hungry by suppertime. For golfers, the decision (consciously or unconsciously) to leave a putt “short” *always* means the ball cannot go in the hole. The decision of our children when they were teenagers to not meet a negotiated, mutually agreed upon be-at-home time meant a meeting early the next morning with Dad to set an appropriate consequence, generally the dreaded “You’re grounded.” More applicable to your current situation, a decision to stay up late watching a movie and to not study for tomorrow’s quiz will generally mean a lower score on that quiz. For you or your parents, a poor investment decision will likely lead to a low or perhaps no return on a particular investment. While on your mission, your decision to work hard and contact *lots* of people will lead you to a few wonderful people that the Lord has prepared to hear the gospel. For you recently returned elders, the decision to continue “contacting” *lots* of attractive young ladies will likely lead to your finding a special young lady to be your eternal compan-

ion—or *this isn’t BYU!* The list of examples, some humorous and some serious, could go on and on.

The first significant consequence of a decision impacting all of us took place in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were told by Father in Heaven that if they partook of the forbidden fruit, they would be cast out of the Garden and would “surely die.” Adam and Eve partook of the fruit, and as a consequence physical death (mortality) came into the world.

In this regard it is instructive to observe the pattern of the Lord and how he carefully links the concepts of agency, accountability, and consequences. A careful reading of Moses 3:15–17 shows that the Lord first gives us a stewardship: “And I, the Lord God, took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden, to dress it, and to keep it.” Then the Lord gives us clear instructions so that we can understand what is expected: “And I, the Lord God, commanded the man, saying: Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat, But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it.” But the Lord also gives us our agency and then makes us accountable, having an understanding of the consequences of our decisions: “Nevertheless, thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee; but, remember that I forbid it, for in the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

It is also important to note that Adam and Eve voluntarily partook of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, understanding the consequences of that decision. They knew they would be cast out of the Garden of Eden, but they also knew it was better to experience the sorrows of life in order to have joy and happiness with their posterity.

We read in the Pearl of Great Price:

*And in that day Adam blessed God and was filled, and began to prophesy concerning all the families of the earth, saying: Blessed be the name of God, for because of my transgression my eyes are*

*opened, and in this life I shall have joy, and again in the flesh I shall see God.*

*And Eve, his wife, heard all these things and was glad, saying: Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. [Moses 5:10–11]*

Another significant consequence of a decision that has had far-reaching impact in our lives is the result of a simple, yet great principle found in James 1:5: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally.” In the spring of 1820 Joseph Smith applied this principle and had the marvelous experience of being instructed by Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. Subsequently, as the Prophet Joseph Smith continued to make righteous decisions, he became the instrument in the Lord’s hand to bring about the restoration of the gospel in these latter days.

All consequences of the positive decisions relating to the restoration of the gospel are too numerous to mention here, but they include the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, now numbering more than \$10 million members; the restoration of priesthood authority to the earth; the building of temples throughout the world where eternal ordinances can be performed; the calling of living prophets to direct us; and almost 60,000 full-time missionaries working to bless the lives of the peoples of the earth. And certainly not the least of these consequences is the fervent testimony that you and I can have of the truthfulness of this great work and of our role in building the kingdom.

The scriptures give us many additional examples of the consequences of important decisions. To name but a few, the decision to live the Word of Wisdom brings the promise that we will receive health and find wisdom and “shall run and not be weary, and shall walk and not faint” (D&C 89:18–21). The deci-

sion to pay our tithes and offerings brings the promise that the windows of heaven shall be opened and the blessings of heaven showered upon us (see Malachi 3). The decision to magnify the priesthood brings with it the wonderful promise that we may be sanctified by the Spirit and receive *all* that our Father has, as a part of the oath and covenant of the priesthood (see D&C 84:33–41).

The Prophet Joseph Smith received several revelations pointing out the positive consequences (i.e., the rewards) that come from choosing the right. We read in the Doctrine and Covenants: “Fear not to do good, my sons, for whatsoever ye sow, that shall ye also reap; therefore, if ye sow good ye shall also reap good for your reward” (D&C 6:33). “For the power is in them, wherein they are agents unto themselves. And inasmuch as men do good they shall in nowise lose their reward” (D&C 58:28). “But learn that he who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his reward, even peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come” (D&C 59:23).

The general rule, then, is that poor decisions lead to unfavorable consequences—whether of a physical, economic, or spiritual nature. Good decisions lead to positive consequences, even eternal life.

But we don’t always make good decisions. Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes we sin by not following the commandments. Fortunately, in this course of life, our Master Teacher has both the ability and the willingness to intercede in our behalf. And because of him, we can *always* rectify our mistakes through the repentance process.

The consequence of Christ’s decision to voluntarily lay down his life for us to atone for our sins is that he has prepared the way for us to live again with him and our Father in Heaven. We all will be resurrected, and those who choose to repent and to keep the commandments and endure to the end can have



eternal life because of Jesus Christ and the great plan of redemption.

The quizzes, the smaller tests in life, will come in a variety of different forms. Each must be answered with individual integrity and with a firm grasp of the basic concepts and values taught by the Master.

As one example, I'd like to relate a brief story entitled "Appointment with Love."

*Six minutes to six, said the clock over the information booth in New York's Grand Central Station. The tall, young Army lieutenant lifted his sunburned face and narrowed his eyes to note the exact time. His heart was pounding with a beat that shocked him. In six minutes he would see the woman he had never seen, yet whose written words had sustained him unflinchingly.*

*Lieutenant Blandford remembered one day in particular, the worst of the fighting, when his plane had been caught in the midst of a pack of enemy planes.*

*In one of his letters, he had confessed to her that he often felt fear, and only a few days before this battle, he had received her answer: "Of course you fear . . . all brave men do. Next time you doubt yourself, I want you to hear my voice reciting to you: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me." He had remembered, and it had renewed his strength.*

*Now he was going to hear her real voice. Four minutes to six.*

*A girl passed close to him, and Lieutenant Blandford started forward. She was wearing a flower, but it was not the little red rose they had agreed upon. Besides, this girl was only about 18, and Hollis Olson had told him she was 30. "What of it?" he answered, "I'm 32." He was 29.*

*His mind went back to the book he had read in the training camp. "Of Human Bondage," it was; and throughout the book were notes in a woman's writing. He had never believed that a woman could see into a man's heart so tenderly, so understandingly. Her name was on the bookplate: Hollis Olson. He had gotten hold of a New York City telephone*

*book and found her address. He had written; she had answered. Next day he had been shipped out, but they had gone on writing.*

*For thirteen months she had faithfully replied. When his letters did not arrive, she wrote anyway, and now he believed he loved her, and she loved him.*

*But she had refused all his pleas to send him her photograph. She had explained: "If your feeling for me has any reality, what I look like won't matter. Suppose I'm beautiful. I'd always be haunted that you had been taking a chance on just that, and that kind of love would disgust me. Suppose I'm plain (and you must admit that this is more likely), then I'd always fear that you were only going on writing because you were lonely and had no one else. No, don't ask for my picture. When you come to New York, you shall see me and then you shall make your decision.*

*One minute to six. . . . He nervously paced the floor. Then Lieutenant Blandford's heart leaped. A young woman was coming toward him. Her figure was long and slim; her blond hair lay back in curls from her delicate ears. Her eyes were blue as flowers, her lips and chin had a gentle firmness. Her pale green suit made her look like springtime come alive.*

*He started toward her, forgetting to notice that she was wearing no rose, and as he moved, a small, provocative smile curved her lips.*

*"Going my way, soldier?" she murmured.*

*He made one step closer to her. Then he saw Hollis Olson. She was standing almost directly behind the girl, a woman well past 40, her graying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump; her thick-ankled feet were thrust into low-heeled shoes. But she wore a red rose on her rumpled coat. The girl in the green suit was walking away quickly.*

*Blandford felt as though he were being split in two, so keen was his desire to follow the girl, yet so deep was his longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned his own; and there she stood. He could see that her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible; her gray eyes had a warm twinkle.*

*Lieutenant Blandford did not hesitate. His fingers gripped the worn copy of "Of Human*

*Bondage,” which was to identify him to her. This would not be love, but it would be something precious, a friendship for which he would ever be and had been ever grateful.*

*He squared his shoulders, saluted, and held the book out toward the woman, although even while he spoke he felt the bitterness of his disappointment.*

*“I’m Lieutenant John Blandford, and you—you are Miss Olson. I’m so glad you could meet me. May—may I take you to dinner?”*

*The woman’s face broadened in a tolerant smile. “I don’t know what this is all about, son,” she answered. “That young lady in the green suit, she begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you asked me to go out with you, I should tell you she’s waiting for you in that restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test.”*

We, too, must pass the tests of life. But one of the best parts about this course of life is the grading—there are no grading curves. All of us can get A’s through reliance on our Master Teacher. If we do *all* we can, our Savior has promised that he will do the rest (see 2 Nephi 25:23). He’ll make up the difference in our score so that we can get 100 percent and, therefore, the top reward from the course.

Now we don’t know when our personal final exam is scheduled. Life is uncertain in that regard. So we shouldn’t procrastinate the day of our repentance. We should keep current, we should read the text (the scriptures) daily, and we should communicate daily (through prayer) with our teacher and ask for his help. And we should provide meaningful service to our fellowmen and otherwise try to emulate our Master Teacher.

The prophet Lehi, in teaching his sons, summed up the essence of this course of life in these words:

*But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.*

*Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.*

*And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.*

*Wherefore, men are free according to the flesh; and all things are given them which are expedient unto man. And they are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil; for he seeketh that all men might be miserable like unto himself.*

*And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit. [2 Nephi 2:24–28]*

I conclude with words from a beautiful song entitled “The Test,” written by Janice Kapp Perry:

*Tell me friend, I see your trials,  
Why doesn’t He who worked the miracles send  
solace to his child?  
Tell me friend, if you understand,  
Why doesn’t He with pow’r to raise the dead just  
make you whole again?  
It would be so easy for Him.  
I watch you and in sorrow question why  
Then you, my friend, in perfect faith reply:*

(Chorus)

*Didn’t He say He sent us to be tested?  
Didn’t He say the way would not be sure?  
But didn’t He say we could live with Him forever-  
more, well and whole if we but patiently  
endure?  
After the trial we will be blessed, but this life is the  
test.*

[Janice Kapp Perry, “The Test”]

I am grateful for this mortal life, for the opportunities that are mine, for my wonderful wife and family. I bear testimony that God's plan of salvation will bring us happiness if we

choose wisely. I am very grateful for a loving Father in Heaven and for my Savior. I bear testimony of them in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.