

The Plan of Salvation: The Gospel Paradigm

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In 1962, Thomas Kuhn published a book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, in which he set forth his view that development in scientific knowledge did not progress in a linear, continuous fashion but rather through periodic radical changes in the framework through which scientific questions are considered. Kuhn called these radical changes “paradigm shifts.”¹ While the validity of Kuhn’s theory has been extensively debated in the last fifty years, there is little dispute that his book brought the terms *paradigm shift* and *paradigm* into popular culture.

Today, dictionaries broadly define a paradigm as “a philosophical or theoretical framework.”² It is a set of principles or ideas that provides a particular way of interpreting events. One textbook explains:

A paradigm is . . . a way of thinking about or viewing the world. . . .

*A paradigm is like the lens on a pair of glasses. . . . If you put on red glasses, everything looks red. If you put on pink glasses, the world looks pink. If you put on yellow glasses, everything around you looks more yellow.*³

All of us view events through particular paradigms or lenses. If the lenses are accurate, the paradigm enhances our understanding and knowledge. If they are distorted, we sometimes make mistakes, which causes a paradigm shift. Let me illustrate with a short video. [The video portrayed a conversation between two men over a ship radio arguing who will change course. The ship’s captain insists the other change his course to avoid collision, only to find out the other voice is speaking from a lighthouse.⁴] Now that is what you might call a paradigm shift.

There have always been competing paradigms in every discipline and, more important, in the overall cultures in which we live. This is especially evident in today’s society, in which people can view the same event and reach dramatically different conclusions, not only as to what the event means but even as to what actually happened.

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on January 9, 2018.

Given the confusion that these competing paradigms seem to engender, we are blessed to live in a time and situation in which we have modern-day revelation to provide a more complete and accurate framework in which all our lives' events, both individually and globally, can be better understood. While these latter-day revelations in one sense have effectuated a remarkable paradigm shift in religious understanding, in another sense they are really a restoration of a paradigm or framework that God provided to His children from the beginning of time—a framework for understanding all the events in the world, from before its creation and extending through its future millennial season into the eternities. This framework or paradigm has various names. "In the scriptures God's plan is called a merciful plan, the plan of happiness, the plan of redemption, and the plan of salvation."⁵

As explained by Elder Dallin H. Oaks at the April 2017 general conference, this plan—God's plan for His children—is quite simple, yet very profound. It answers humanity's deepest questions and provides a framework for finding answers to our more individualized questions, both great and small. As Elder Oaks stated:

Questions like "Where did we come from?" "Why are we here?" and "Where are we going?" are answered in what the scriptures call the "plan of salvation," the "great plan of happiness," or the "plan of redemption."

Elder Oaks then explained the simple principles that constitute this remarkable paradigm.

As spirit children of God, in an existence prior to mortality, we desired a destiny of eternal life but had progressed as far as we could without a mortal experience in a physical body. To provide that opportunity, our Heavenly Father presided over the Creation of this world, where, deprived of our memory of what preceded our mortal birth, we could prove our willingness to keep His commandments and experience and grow through the other challenges of mortal life. But in the course of that mortal experience, and as a result of the Fall of our first parents, we would suffer spiritual death by being cut off

from the presence of God, be soiled by sin, and become subject to physical death. The Father's plan anticipated and provided ways to overcome all of those barriers [through the Atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ].⁶

Notice five simple points in Elder Oaks's description of the plan:

1. We lived with Heavenly Father before this earth life.
2. He provided a plan for us to become like Him.
3. The world was created for that purpose.
4. The Fall of Adam and Eve was part of that plan; it allowed us to gain a body and experience mortality, both of which allow us to progress.
5. Christ, through His great and infinite atoning sacrifice, makes the plan fully operative, bringing to pass the Resurrection and making available the cleansing, healing, and sanctifying power that in the eternities can perfect us.

Most of us have heard this plan so many times that we may not fully appreciate how deep and significant it is. Moreover, when encountering our day-to-day experiences and trials, we too often take off the clarifying gospel lenses that these truths provide and then complain because the resulting distorted image does not seem correct.

Similarly, we sometimes view the gospel through the paradigm of our fields of study without considering the benefits of doing the reverse. Failure to view our fields of study through the gospel paradigm can distort our understanding of both the gospel and our fields of study.

As we begin a new year, let me make a suggestion—no, a promise—that if you will view all your experiences and questions, even academic questions, in light of God's plan for us through the lenses of the gospel paradigm, three things will happen. First, you will more clearly understand gospel principles and the subjects you study. Second, you will respond more positively to life's daily ups and downs. And, third, you will increase your ability to act courageously when challenges seem difficult, if not impossible. Let me expound on these three blessings.

Blessing 1: You Will More Clearly Understand Gospel Principles and the Subjects You Study

First, looking at life through the lens of the gospel paradigm helps you more clearly understand gospel principles and the subjects you study.

The importance of placing all gospel principles in the light of the plan of salvation is illustrated in the Book of Mormon. When Ammon exhibited extraordinary courage and physical prowess by single-handedly saving King Lamoni's servants and flocks from marauding robbers, it caused the king to have questions about Ammon and who he was. Specifically, the king asked Ammon, "Tell me by what power ye slew and smote off the arms of my brethren that scattered my flocks."⁷

If I were in Ammon's shoes, I might have thought to answer by explaining my awesome self-defense skills, my knowledge of sheep, or the behavior of bullies. Or, maybe in a more enlightened moment, I might have simply said, "God gave me power to do that work." But Ammon didn't do any of those things. Instead, after establishing what the king knew about God—what the king's paradigm was, so to speak—Ammon provided a framework, or a new paradigm, that allowed him to answer the questions at a deeper and more accurate level.

Ammon . . . began at the creation of the world . . . and told [the king] all the things concerning the fall of man. . . .

But this is not all; for he expounded unto them the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world; and he also made known unto them concerning the coming of Christ, and all the works of the Lord did he make known unto them.⁸

In short, Ammon explained God's plan for us—a plan prepared before the foundation of this world to help God's children become like Him; a plan that included the creation of this world, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the coming of Christ to make the plan fully operative in a perfect way. Understanding this framework or paradigm, the king was then in a position to fully understand both the answers to the questions he had posed

and also the other key principles and commandments Ammon would share with him.

By establishing an overarching paradigm before explaining specific principles or commandments, Ammon was following a pattern⁹ set by Heavenly Father with Adam and Eve. The prophet Alma the Younger noted, "God gave unto [Adam and Eve] commandments, *after having made known unto them the plan of redemption.*"¹⁰

Once we understand the overall plan, it is easier to understand and obey the commandments. Without that larger clarifying paradigm, commandments can too often be seen as arbitrary rules or regulations that confine and restrict us. With that framework in place, however, we see more clearly and come to understand that God's commandments are designed to enable us to expand our souls in ways that permit us to become like Him, which is the ultimate goal of His plan for us.¹¹

As a simple example, some may wonder why we pay tithing. One response is to explain it as a financial commandment whose primary function is to teach us good budgeting principles and provide funds for the Church. However, while those may be secondary benefits of our adherence to the commandment, its primary purpose, like that of all commandments, is to help us implement God's plan in our lives.

I once heard President Henry B. Eyring describe what he called "the Lord's law of finance."¹² The first principle is simple. God owns everything. However, He deposits much of His goods in bank accounts He creates with each of us. He does so for a specific purpose: to help us become like Him. Paying tithing increases our faith and trust in Him and His promises, and it helps us become more concerned with others rather than with ourselves—both of which help us become more like God.

The clarity that comes from viewing commandments through the gospel lens extends beyond the law of tithing to other important gospel teachings and current topics, such as the nature of the Godhead¹³ and the definition and purpose of marriage,¹⁴ as Elder Oaks has explained in recent

talks. When we encounter questions about these or other issues—questions from others or questions from ourselves—the best way to find a good answer is to begin, as did Ammon, with a review of God’s eternal plan of happiness.

Blessing 2: You Will Respond More Positively to the Ups and Downs of Daily Life

Second, viewing events through the lens of the gospel paradigm not only sheds clarifying light on the teachings and policies of the Church but also helps us respond more positively to the ups and downs of daily life that each of us inevitably face. When Laman and Lemuel encountered such challenges, they murmured. In 1 Nephi 2:12 we read that they murmured so much “because they knew not the dealings of that God who had created them.” They did not view events in their daily life as part of God’s plan for them. Without an understanding of the plan, even life’s smallest inconveniences can lead to deep discontent and grumbling.

On the other hand, viewing life’s events through the gospel paradigm can change the entire nature of unpleasant events. Let me illustrate with an experience shared by President Henry B. Eyring about his father, Henry Eyring.

To appreciate this story, you have to realize that it occurred when [my father] was nearly eighty and had bone cancer. He had bone cancer so badly in his hips that he could hardly move. . . .

Dad was the senior high councilor in his stake with the responsibility for the welfare farm. An assignment was given to weed a field of onions, so Dad assigned himself to go work on the farm.

Dad never told me how hard it was, but . . . [one man who was there] said that the pain was so great that Dad was pulling himself along on his stomach with his elbows. . . . The pain was too great for him to kneel. Everyone who has talked to me [about that day] has remarked how Dad smiled and laughed and talked happily with them as they worked in that field of onions.

Now, this is the joke Dad told me on himself afterward. He said he was there at the end of the day. After all the work was finished and the onions were all

*weeded, someone asked him, “Henry, good heavens! You didn’t pull **those** weeds, did you? Those weeds were sprayed two days ago, and they were going to die anyway.”*

Dad just roared [with laughter]. He thought that was the funniest thing. He thought it was a great joke on himself. He had worked through the day in the wrong weeds. They had been sprayed and would have died anyway.

When Dad told me this story, I knew how tough it was. So I said to him, “Dad, how could you make a joke out of that? How could you take it so pleasantly?”

He said something to me that I will never forget, and I hope you won’t. He said, “Hal, I wasn’t there for the weeds.”

[President Eyring concluded:] *Now, you’ll be in an onion patch much of your life. So will I. . . .*

But you didn’t come for the weeds.¹⁵

If we will view our daily experiences in the light of the gospel paradigm, we will find joy in unexpected ways and we will discover why God’s plan is called the plan of happiness.

Blessing 3: You Will Increase Your Ability to Act Courageously

Third, viewing events through the lens of the gospel paradigm—in the light of the plan of salvation—will increase our ability to act courageously when life’s challenges seem overwhelming. Let me illustrate with a personal example shared by Elder Oaks in his book *Life’s Lessons Learned*.

Elder Oaks’s father died when Elder Oaks was young, leaving his mother as a young widow with three small children. Elder Oaks described the situation this way:

[When I was seven years old my] family was happily [living] in Twin Falls, Idaho, where my father’s medical practice . . . was thriving. . . . After years of sacrifice . . . , my mother could at last contemplate a life of security as the wife of a prosperous physician. . . .

. . . In the fall of 1939 my father was diagnosed with tuberculosis and hospitalized at a TB sanatorium in Denver, Colorado. . . . He died there . . . , leaving my

mother struggling with a question that has troubled many faithful Latter-day Saints. [Why was he not healed?] During the six months of his hospitalization, my father had received many priesthood blessings containing promises of recovery. . . .

Again and again prominent priesthood leaders . . . went to my father's bedside and gave priesthood blessings that contained promises of healing. Each of these leaders rebuked the disease and commanded that my father be made whole. [But he still died.]¹⁶

Imagine how difficult that must have been for Elder Oaks's mother. But the story continues. Elder Oaks indicated that six months after his father's death, his mother,

anxious to qualify herself to earn a living for her three children, . . . left [the children] in Utah with her parents and traveled to New York City to pursue a master's degree at Columbia University. This proved to be too soon. The loneliness resulting from this separation from her family so soon after the loss of her husband, combined with the rigors of graduate study, strained her beyond the breaking point. . . . She suffered what was then called a nervous breakdown.¹⁷

If anyone had cause to murmur and complain about life's unfairness, it was Sister Oaks. But she understood God's plan and chose to view events in her life through the lens of that plan. Elder Oaks reported that "with faith and priesthood blessings . . . , [his mother soon] was able to resume her [employment] and unassisted parenting."¹⁸ And her ability to maintain an eternal perspective through all this experience made a deep impression on her young son.

As Elder Oaks put it:

My faithful widowed mother had no confusion about the eternal nature of the family relationship. She always honored the position of our faithful deceased father. She made him a presence in our home. She spoke of the eternal duration of their temple marriage and of our destiny to be together as a family in the next life. She often reminded us of what our father would like us to do so we could qualify for the Savior's promise that we could be a family forever.¹⁹

Sister Oaks's teachings were extraordinarily effective. Elder Oaks illustrated their impact on him with a personal story:

As a 12-year-old deacon, I was pleased to accompany the bishop to deliver Christmas baskets to the widows of our ward in Vernal, Utah. The backseat of his car was filled with baskets of grapefruit and oranges. . . . He waited in the car while I took a basket to each door and said, "The bishop asked me to give you this Christmas basket from the ward."

When we had delivered all the baskets but one, the bishop drove me home. There he handed me the last basket and said, "This is for your mother." Before I could reply, he drove away. . . .

I stood in front of our house, snowflakes falling on my face, holding the basket and wondering. We had been delivering baskets to widows, but I had never thought of my mother as a widow. . . . I wondered why anyone would think my mother was a widow.²⁰

Elder Oaks remembered:

[My mother] never referred to herself as a widow, and it never occurred to me that she was. To me, as a boy growing up, she wasn't a widow. She had a husband and we had a father. He was just away for a while.²¹

Elder Oaks said that his mother "always taught us that we had a father and she had a husband and that we would always be a family because of their temple marriage."²²

What a powerful example of the perspective and power that comes from viewing life's challenges through the lens of the gospel paradigm. Viewing our lives and the events around us in the light of God's plan for us will increase our understanding of gospel principles and other things we study, it will help us find joy in life's daily challenges, and it will enable us to meet the most difficult challenges, even those that seem overwhelming. That is the way God ordained it to be under His perfect plan.

I testify that God lives. He is literally our Father in Heaven. And He has a perfect plan of happiness for each of us. That plan is possible because of Jesus Christ. Christ is the key to the plan of

salvation, the key to the plan of redemption—that is why we call Him Savior and Redeemer. I testify that He fulfills that role perfectly in ways that will bless our lives immeasurably if we will but trust Him. I so testify in His holy name, even Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

2. Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. “paradigm.”

3. Laura Killam, *Research Terminology Simplified: Paradigms, Axiology, Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology* (Sudbury, Ontario, Canada: Laura A. Killam, 2013), 5, chapter 1, Google Play Books and Kindle.

4. See Silva advertisement in Duncan Macleod, “Silva Captain and the Lighthouse,” Inspiration Room, 3 December 2006, theinspirationroom.com/daily/2006/silva-the-captain-and-the-lighthouse.

5. PMG, 48. “Merciful plan,” see, e.g., 2 Nephi 9:6; see also Alma 42:15 (“plan of mercy”). “Plan of happiness,” see, e.g., Alma 42:8, 16. “Plan of redemption,” see, e.g., Alma 12:25–26, 30, 32–33; 34:16, 31; 42:11, 13. “Plan of salvation,” see, e.g., Jarom 1:2; Alma 24:14; 42:5; Moses 6:62.

6. Dallin H. Oaks, “The Godhead and the Plan of Salvation,” *Ensign*, May 2017.

7. Alma 18:20.

8. Alma 18:36, 39.

9. Ammon’s brother Aaron followed the same pattern in teaching King Lamoni’s father, the king over all the Lamanite lands. This king first came into contact with Ammon when he tried to kill Ammon. But Ammon overpowered him and spared his life only when the king agreed to let Ammon’s brothers out of prison and allow Lamoni to keep his kingdom. Thus it is not surprising that when Aaron arrived at the king’s palace, one of the things that was on the king’s mind was “the generosity . . . of thy brother Ammon” (Alma 22:3). The king naturally wondered why Ammon had been so gracious.

In response, Aaron might have said, “Oh, Ammon has always been a really thoughtful person” or “Our parents taught us to do this”

or even “Our religion teaches us to be kind to others.” Instead,

Aaron . . . began from the creation of Adam, reading the scriptures unto the king—how God created man after his own image, and that God gave him commandments, and that because of transgression, man had fallen.

And Aaron did expound unto him the scriptures from the creation of Adam, laying the fall of man before him, . . . and also the plan of redemption, which was prepared from the foundation of the world, through Christ, for all whosoever would believe on his name. [Alma 22:12–13]

10. Alma 12:32; emphasis added.

11. This same message is conveyed by the organization of *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2010). The handbook contains a somewhat detailed set of policies and procedures to regulate the various activities and organizations of the Church. It includes instruction on such things as the length of sharing time in Primary, the kinds of fundraising activities that youth can engage in, and the type of music that should be used in sacrament meeting. If viewed in isolation, each of these may seem like simply administrative directions. However, the first section of the book begins not with any rules or regulations but rather with an explanation of the overall purpose of all Church activities. Thus section 1.1 is entitled “God the Father’s Plan for His Eternal Family.” It then outlines the key principles of the plan, including a description of the purpose of mortality, the central role of Christ and His Atonement, and the role of the family and the Church in God’s plan. With that context in mind, the policies and procedures that follow seem much more coherent and focused and make much more sense.

12. Henry B. Eyring was referring to Gordon B. Hinckley’s often-used phrase “the Lord’s law of finance” (e.g., Hinckley, “The Widow’s Mite,” BYU devotional address, 17 September 1985); see also LeGrand Richards, “The Law of Tithing,” chapter 26 in *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1958), 381.

13. See Oaks, “Godhead and Plan of Salvation.”

14. See Dallin H. Oaks, “Fundamental Premises of Our Faith,” talk given at Harvard Law School, 26 February 2010, mormonnewsroom.org/article/fundamental-premises-of-our-faith-talk-given-by-elder-dallin-h-oaks-at-harvard-law-school; see also Dallin H. Oaks, “The Plan and the Proclamation,” *Ensign*, November 2017.

15. Henry B. Eyring, “Waiting upon the Lord,” BYU fireside address, 30 September 1990; emphasis in original; see also Eyring, “Waiting upon the Lord,” in *To Draw Closer to God: A Collection of Discourses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 101–2.

16. Dallin H. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons Learned: Personal Reflections* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 5–7.

17. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons*, 10–11.

18. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons*, 11.

19. Oaks, “Fundamental Premises.”

20. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons*, 15; originally from Dallin H. Oaks, “Christmas Memory,” *Church News*, 11 December 2010, ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/60243/Christmas-memory.html#.

21. Oaks, “Fundamental Premises.”

22. Oaks, *Life’s Lessons*, 15–16; originally from Oaks, “Christmas Memory.”