

Bishop Keith B. McMullin

Life is a homeward journey

My dear brothers and sisters, as this general conference draws to a close, my thoughts turn to those who feel lonely, afraid, or who have lost their way. If you or someone you know is "out there . . . in the shadows" (Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, Apr. 1997, 68; or *Ensign*, May 1997, 48), please listen!

Mortal life is like unto the traveler on a homeward journey. The miles seem long, the minutes slow, the events of the day protracted and tedious. Eventually, however, familiar scenes come into view. They may be hills or valleys, country landscapes or towering buildings, a teeming thoroughfare or a quiet neighborhood street. Whatever the scene, its familiarity quickens the traveler's step, invigorates his wearied soul, and restores sweet feelings of anticipation and peace. At long last he is home again.

Select the path carefully

In our mobile, bustling world, this experience of the homeward journey is repeated daily in the lives of millions of people. If we look closely, we can learn much about mortality from such a common occurrence. One thing is certain—we make a colossal mistake if we approach this mortal journey frivolously or take whatever path presents itself without thought as to where it leads. As one beloved Apostle has observed: "Truly, of all the errors mortals could make, God's plan of salvation is the wrong thing to be wrong about! No error could be more enormous or more everlasting in its consequences!" (Neal A. Maxwell, in Conference Report, Apr. 1984, 30; or *Ensign*, May 1984, 22).

The successful traveler understands and acts correctly on four things, namely:

the eternity of life, the nature of sin, the beauty of repentance, and the power of the Atonement.

Life is eternal

Life is more than biology. Before we came to this earth, we lived in the presence of God. His heaven was our home. Each of us is His spirit offspring, and He is our Heavenly Father (see Abraham 3:23–25; Job 38:4–7; Jeremiah 1:5). Because of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we know that birth is divinely appointed and an essential step in our eternal journey. In the words of the Lord's prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley: "*The fact of all life is that it is eternal.* That's the great salient truth. We have come into the world for a purpose under a divine plan and when we conclude this life we will go on to something that will be better, if we live worthy of it" (priesthood leadership session, Charlotte North Carolina regional conference, 24 Feb. 1996, 5; italics added).

The nature of sin

The nature of sin, however, makes this mortal journey anything but an easy task. Wrote the Apostle Paul:

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

"For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,

"Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good,

"Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;

"Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: *from such turn away*" (2 Timothy 3:1–5; italics added).

Because of our frailties and vulnerabilities, sin becomes a part of every traveler's journey. It is the consequence of being in the crucible of law, opposition, and agency (see Alma 12:31-34; 42:17-24; 2 Nephi 2:11, 15-16, 25-27). "To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (James 4:17).

Furthermore, no matter how well-intentioned or watchful we are, the journey causes us to suffer temptation. Not even the Savior escaped it, and the temptations He suffered at the outset of His ministry typify those that beset us. Speaking of these temptations—to turn stones into bread, to cast Himself from the temple's pinnacle, and to sell His soul for earth's treasures (see Matthew 4:2-10)—Elder David O. McKay said, "Classify them, and you will find that under one of those three nearly every given temptation that makes you and me spotted . . . comes to us as (1) a temptation of appetite; (2) a yielding to the pride and fashion and vanity of those alienated from the things of God; or (3) a gratifying of the . . . desire for the riches of the world, or power among men" (in Conference Report, Apr. 1911, 59).

The gift of conscience and repentance

When temptation besets us, we experience pain of conscience. A sensitive conscience is the evidence of a healthy spirit. The pain or guilt we feel is the spirit's reaction to temptation, imperfection, or sin. Conscience is the companion of every traveler (see Moroni 7:16-19); it can also make the trip very uncomfortable, since "all have sinned" and "the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance" (Romans 3:23; D&C 1:31). Thanks be to God for this supernal gift, for it can lead us to repentance and peace of conscience (see Mosiah 4:1-3).

Heavenly Father knew the grave dangers we would face on our journey through life, but He remains resolute in His desire to have each and every one of

His children return home. Therefore, He gave us time—time to work out our mistakes, time to overcome our sins, time to prepare for reunion. "There was a space granted unto man in which he might repent; therefore this life became a probationary state; a time to prepare to meet God" (Alma 12:24).

Atonement makes our return possible

But Heavenly Father knew that even if we exerted every ounce of energy, we could not make it home without divine help. Therefore, He promised, "We will provide a Savior for you!" (see 1 Nephi 10:4; 13:40; 2 Nephi 25:23; Moses 1:6).

In fulfillment of this promise, Jesus Christ came during the meridian of time, the Only Begotten Son of God, the Eternal Father, in the flesh. He walked the paths and byways of mortality so He could "know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities" (Alma 7:12; see also v. 11; Ether 12:27; D&C 20:22; 62:1). There is not one vexation, anxiety, or suffering unfamiliar to Him. Though He is without sin, yet knows He each and every one of our griefs that He might be able to help us (see Isaiah 53:3-6).

Christ bridged the gulf between the mortal and immortal. The grave no longer holds its captives; justice can be satisfied through mercy; the wondrous Atonement, infinite and eternal in scope, is in place (see Alma 34:8-10, 14-16). Christ is the resurrected Lord, our Savior and Redeemer. Therefore, do not wait any longer (see Alma 13:27; 34:33-35).

Have faith in Christ, trust Him, come unto Him, follow Him (see 3 Nephi 27:13-16; Moroni 10:32-33). Make a mental list of those things you know you ought not to be doing. Stop doing today at least one such thing, and replace it with what you ought to do. Pray to Heavenly Father for forgiveness and for the strength to complete this journey. As you overcome one obstacle and move on to

another, I promise that step by step the way will unfold before you until, as the wearied traveler, you are back where you belong.

A man finds his way back to the Church

Thomas (that is not his real name) was one who had lost his way. We became acquainted at a special fireside attended by members one doesn't normally see on Sunday. He was then 35 years old and had not been active in the Church for some 20 years. The day before, Thomas's father had invited him to attend the fireside. Thomas said, "I'll think about it." I quote now from a letter written by his father:

"Thirty minutes before the fireside, [Thomas] called and asked me to pick him up. I can't explain the anticipation I felt as we walked into the room [to join] you and about 40 others. There was a special feeling and spirit there that touched [Tom's] heart and he went home determined to read again the passages in the Book of Mormon that you had outlined.

"This led to a reading of the whole book and the beginning of his payment of tithing. He began to see his life in a different light. . . . He stopped using drugs and caffeine. He continued to read, not only the Book of Mormon, but also the Doctrine and Covenants. He started to attend sacrament meetings and . . . literally began to be a different person. In fact, we jokingly asked him, 'What have you done with our son?'

"The great blessing to us was when he was interviewed by the bishop . . . to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. This has truly been an answer to prayers which have been offered in his behalf for almost 20 years" (personal letter, 1 Aug. 1997).

This account recalls to our minds the words of another parent: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:24).

Prepare now to return to God's presence

Said President Brigham Young: "There is no spirit but what was pure and holy when it came here from the celestial world. Our Father in heaven . . . is the Father of our spirits; and if we could know, understand, and do His will, every soul would be prepared to return back into His presence. And when they get there, they would see that they had formerly lived there for ages, that they had previously been acquainted with every nook and corner, with the palaces, walks, and gardens; and they would embrace their Father, and He would embrace them and say, 'My son, my daughter, I have you again;' and the child would say, 'O my Father, my Father, I am here again'" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 4:268).

With all the power of which I am capable, I bear witness to the truthfulness of these things. Come in out of the shadows! Step fully into the light of the gospel. Enjoy the sweet fruits of repentance, the peace of conscience, and the comfort of the Holy Ghost. Let this journey take you back where you belong. Recalling a familiar phrase, I leave with you this testimonial:

"O my Father, thou that dwellest
In the high and glorious place,"
I do yearn to once again be
With Thee, and behold Thy face.
Then shall I, in adoration,
Bow before my Savior dear,
Thank Him for His great Atonement,
Wash His feet with many tears.
And with grateful heart a-swelling,
Seeing I am not alone,
Will feel Thy love and hear Thy greet-
ing—
"Sons and daughters, welcome home!"
[Adapted from Eliza R. Snow, "O My
Father," *Hymns*, no. 292]

In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.