

Small and Simple Things

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We need to be reminded that in total and over a significant period of time, seemingly small things bring to pass great things.

I.

My dear brothers and sisters, like you, I have been profoundly touched and edified and inspired by the messages and music and the feelings of this time together. I'm sure I speak for you in expressing thanks to our brothers and sisters who, as instruments in the hands of the Lord, have given us the strengthening effect of this time together.

I am grateful to speak to this audience on Easter Sunday. Today we join other Christians in celebrating the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the literal Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a pillar of our faith.

Because we believe the accounts in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon about the literal Resurrection of Jesus Christ, we also believe the numerous scriptural teachings that a similar resurrection will come to all mortals who have ever lived upon this earth. That resurrection gives us what the Apostle Peter called "a lively hope" (1 Peter 1:3). That lively hope is our conviction that death is not the conclusion of our identity but merely a necessary step in our Heavenly Father's merciful plan for the salvation of His children. That plan calls for a transition from mortality to immortality. Central to that transition is the sunset of death and the glorious morning made possible by the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior that we celebrate on this Easter Sunday.

II.

In a great hymn whose words were written by Eliza R. Snow, we sing:

*How great, how glorious, how complete
Redemption's grand design,
Where justice, love, and mercy meet
In harmony divine!*¹

In furtherance of that divine design and harmony, we assemble in meetings, including this conference, to teach and encourage one another.

This morning I have felt to use as my text Alma's teaching to his son Helaman, recorded in the Book of Mormon: "By small and simple things are great things brought to pass" (Alma 37:6).

We are taught many small and simple things in the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to be reminded that in total and over a significant period of time, these seemingly small things bring to pass great things. There have been many talks on this subject by General Authorities and by other respected teachers. The subject is so important that I feel to speak of it again.

I was reminded of the power of small and simple things over time by something I saw on a morning walk. Here is the picture I took. The thick and strong concrete sidewalk is cracking. Is this the result of some large and powerful thrust? No, this cracking is caused by the slow, small growth of one of the roots reaching out from the adjoining tree. Here is a similar example I saw on another street.

The thrusting power that cracked these heavy concrete sidewalks was too small to measure on a daily or even a monthly basis, but its effect over time was incredibly powerful.

So is the powerful effect over time of the small and simple things we are taught in the scriptures and by living prophets. Consider the scripture study we've been taught to incorporate into our daily lives. Or consider the personal prayers and the kneeling family prayers that are regular practices for faithful Latter-day Saints. Consider attendance at seminary for youth or institute classes for young adults. Though each of these practices may seem to be small and simple, over time they result in powerful spiritual uplift and growth. This occurs because each of these small and simple things invites the companionship of the Holy Ghost, the Testifier who enlightens us and guides us into truth, as President Eyring has explained.

Another source of spiritual uplift and growth is an ongoing practice of repenting, even of seemingly small transgressions. Our own inspired self-evaluations can help us see how we have fallen short and how we can do better. Such repentance should precede our weekly partaking of the sacrament. Some subjects to consider in this process of repentance are suggested in the hymn "Have I Done Any Good?"

*Have I done any good in the world today?
Have I helped anyone in need?
Have I cheered up the sad and made someone feel glad?
If not, I have failed indeed.
Has anyone's burden been lighter today
Because I was willing to share?
Have the sick and the weary been helped on their way?
When they needed my help was I there?²*

Surely these are small things, but surely they are good examples of what Alma taught his son Helaman: "And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by very small means the Lord ... bringeth about the salvation of many souls" (Alma 37:7).

President Steven C. Wheelwright gave an audience at Brigham Young University–Hawaii this inspired description of Alma's teaching: "Alma confirms for his son that indeed the pattern the Lord follows when we exercise faith in Him and follow His counsel in small and simple things is that He blesses us with small daily miracles, and over time, with marvelous works."³

President Howard W. Hunter taught that “frequently it is the commonplace tasks ... that have the greatest positive effect on the lives of others, as compared with the things that the world so often relates to greatness.”⁴

A persuasive secular teaching of this same principle comes from former Senator Dan Coats of Indiana, who wrote: “The only preparation for that one profound decision which can change a life, or even a nation, is those hundreds and thousands of half-conscious, self-defining, seemingly insignificant decisions made in private.”⁵

Those “seemingly insignificant” private decisions include how we use our time, what we view on television and the internet, what we read, the art and music with which we surround ourselves at work and at home, what we seek for entertainment, and how we apply our commitment to be honest and truthful. Another seemingly small and simple thing is being civil and cheerful in our personal interactions.

None of these desirable small and simple things will lift us to great things unless they are practiced consistently and continuously. President Brigham Young was reported as saying: “Our lives are made up of little, simple circumstances that amount to a great deal when they are brought together, and sum up the whole life of the man or woman.”⁶

We are surrounded by media influences and cultural deteriorations that will carry us downstream in our values if we are not continually resisting. To move upstream toward our eternal goal, we must constantly keep paddling. It helps if we are part of a team that is paddling together, like a rowing crew in action. To extend that example even further, the cultural currents are so strong that if we ever stop paddling, we will be carried downstream toward a destination we do not seek but which becomes inevitable if we do not constantly try to move forward.

After reciting a seemingly small event that had great consequences, Nephi wrote, “And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things” (1 Nephi 16:29). The Old Testament includes a memorable example of this. There we read how the Israelites were plagued by fiery serpents. Many people died from their bites (see Numbers 21:6). When Moses prayed for relief, he was inspired to make “a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole.” Then, “if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived” (verse 9). Such a small thing for such a miraculous result! Yet, as Nephi explained when he taught this example to those who were rebelling against the Lord, even when the Lord had prepared a simple way by which they could be healed, “because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished” (1 Nephi 17:41).

That example and that teaching remind us that the simplicity of the way or the easiness of the commanded task cannot mean that it is unimportant to achieve our righteous desire.

Similarly, even small acts of disobedience or minor failures to follow righteous practices can draw us down toward an outcome we have been warned to avoid. The Word of Wisdom provides an example of this. Likely the effect on the body of one cigarette or one drink of alcohol or one dose of another drug cannot be measured. But over time, the effect is powerful and may be irreversible. Remember the cracking of the sidewalk by the gradual small expansions of the root of the tree. One thing is certain, the terrible consequences of partaking of anything that can become addictive, like drugs that attack our bodies or pornographic

material that degrades our thoughts, is totally avoidable if we never partake for the first time—even once.

Many years ago, President M. Russell Ballard described to a general conference audience “how small and simple things can be negative and destructive to a person’s salvation.” He taught: “Like weak fibers that form a yarn, then a strand, and finally a rope, these small things combined together can become too strong to be broken. We must ever be aware of the power that the small and simple things can have in building spirituality,” he said. “At the same time, we must be aware that Satan will use small and simple things to lead us into despair and misery.”⁷

President Wheelwright gave a similar caution to his BYU–Hawaii audience: “It is in failing to do the small and simple things that faith wavers, miracles cease, and progress towards the Lord and His kingdom is first put on hold and then begins to unravel as seeking after the kingdom of God is replaced with more temporal pursuits and worldly ambitions.”⁸

To protect against the cumulative negative effects that are destructive to our spiritual progress, we need to follow the spiritual pattern of small and simple things. Elder David A. Bednar described this principle in a BYU Women’s Conference: “We can learn much about the nature and importance of this spiritual pattern from the technique of ... dripping water onto the soil at very low rates,” in contrast to flooding or spraying large quantities of water where it may not be needed.

He explained: “The steady drips of water sink deep into the ground and provide a high moisture level in the soil wherein plants can flourish. In like manner, if you and I are focused and frequent in receiving consistent drops of spiritual nourishment, then gospel roots can sink deep into our soul, can become firmly established and grounded, and can produce extraordinary and delicious fruit.”

Continuing, he said, “The spiritual pattern of small and simple things bringing forth great things produces firmness and steadfastness, deepening devotion, and more complete conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ and His gospel.”⁹

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught this principle in words now included in the Doctrine and Covenants: “Let no man count them as small things; for there is much ... pertaining to the saints, which depends upon these things” (D&C 123:15).

In connection with the earliest attempts to establish the Church in Missouri, the Lord counseled patience for “all things must come to pass in their time” (D&C 64:32). Then He gave this great teaching: “Wherefore, be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33).

I believe we all desire to follow President Russell M. Nelson’s challenge to press forward “on the covenant path.”¹⁰ Our commitment to do so is strengthened by consistently following the “small things” we are taught by the gospel of Jesus Christ and the leaders of His Church. I testify of Him and invoke His blessings on all who seek to keep on His covenant path, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

