

# Becoming More in Christ: The Parable of the Slope

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In the Lord's timing, it is not where we start but where we are headed that matters most.

As a young boy, I had great aspirations. One day after school, I asked, "Mom, what should I be when I grow up: a professional basketball player or a rock star?" Unfortunately, Clark "the toothless wonder" showed no signs of future athletic or musical glory. And despite multiple efforts, I was repeatedly denied admission to my school's advanced academic program. My teachers finally suggested I should just stick to the standard classroom. Over time, I developed compensating study habits. But it wasn't until my mission to Japan that I felt my intellectual and spiritual possibilities begin to emerge. I continued to work hard. But for the first time in my life, I systematically involved the Lord in my development, and it made all the difference.

Brothers and sisters, in this Church, we believe in the divine potential of all of God's children and in our ability to become something more in Christ. In the Lord's timing, it is not where we start but where we are headed that matters most.<sup>1</sup>

To demonstrate this principle, I will draw on some basic math. Now, don't panic at hearing the word *math* in general conference. Our BYU-Idaho math faculty assure me that even the beginner will grasp this central concept. It starts with the formula for a line. The intercept, for our purposes, is the beginning of our line. The intercept can have either a high or a low starting point. The slope of the line can then be positively or negatively inclined.

We all have different intercepts in life—we start in different places with different life endowments. Some are born with high intercepts, full of opportunity. Others face beginning circumstances that are challenging and seem unfair.<sup>2</sup> We then progress along a slope of personal progress. Our future will be determined far less by our starting point and much more by our slope. Jesus Christ sees divine potential no matter where we start. He saw it in the beggar, the sinner, and the infirm. He saw it in the fisherman, the tax collector, and even the zealot. No matter where we start, Christ considers what we do with what we are given.<sup>3</sup> While the world focuses on our intercept, God focuses on our slope. In the Lord's calculus, He will do everything He can to help us turn our slopes toward heaven.

This principle should give comfort to those who struggle, and *pause* to those who seem to have every advantage. Let me start by addressing individuals with difficult starting circumstances, including poverty, limited access to education, and challenging family situations. Others face physical challenges, mental health constraints, or strong genetic predispositions.<sup>4</sup> For any struggling with difficult starting points, please recognize that the Savior knows our struggles. He took “upon him [our] infirmities, that his bowels [might] be filled with mercy, ... that he [might] know ... how to succor [us] according to [our] infirmities.”<sup>5</sup>

Let me share two areas of encouragement for those facing difficult starting circumstances. First, focus on where you are headed and not where you began. It would be wrong to ignore your circumstances—they are real and need to be addressed. But overfocusing on a difficult starting point can cause it to define you and even *constrain* your ability to choose.<sup>6</sup>

Years ago I served with a group of inner-city youth in Boston, Massachusetts, who were largely new to the gospel and to the expectations of the Church. It was tempting to confuse my empathy and concern for their situation with a desire to lower God’s standards.<sup>7</sup> I eventually realized that the most powerful way to show my love was to never lower my expectations. With everything I knew to do, we focused together on their potential, and each of them began to elevate their slopes. Their growth in the gospel was gradual but steady. Today they have served missions, have graduated from college, have been married in the temple, and are leading remarkable personal and professional lives.

Second, involve the Lord in the process of lifting your slope. While serving as the president of BYU–Pathway Worldwide, I remember sitting in a large devotional in Lima, Peru, where Elder Carlos A. Godoy was the speaker. As he looked out over the congregation, he seemed overwhelmed observing so many faithful first-generation university students. Perhaps reflecting on his own path through such difficult circumstances, Elder Godoy stated emotionally: the Lord will “help you more than you can help yourself. [So] involve the Lord in this process.”<sup>8</sup> The prophet Nephi taught “that it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.”<sup>9</sup> We must do our best,<sup>10</sup> which includes repentance, but it is only through the Lord’s grace that we can realize our divine potential.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, let me share two areas of counsel for those with elevated starting points. First, can we show some humility for circumstances we may not have created ourselves? As former BYU president Rex E. Lee quoted to his students, “We have all drunk from wells we did not dig, and warmed ourselves by fires we did not build.”<sup>12</sup> He then called on his students to give back and replenish the educational wells that earlier pioneers had built. Failure to reseed the fields planted by others can be the equivalent of returning a talent without increase.

Second, focusing on a high starting point can often trap us into feeling that we are thriving when in fact our inner slope may be quite stagnant. Harvard professor Clayton M. Christensen taught that the most successful people are the humblest because they are confident enough to be corrected by and learn from anyone.<sup>13</sup>

Elder D. Todd Christofferson counseled us to “willingly [find ways] to accept and even seek correction.”<sup>14</sup> Even when things appear to be going well, we must seek out opportunities to improve through prayerful petition.

Regardless of whether we start in abundant or difficult circumstances, we will realize our ultimate potential only when we make God our partner. I recently had a conversation with a nationally prominent educator who was inquiring about the success of BYU–Pathway. He was bright and his inquiry was sincere, but he clearly wanted a secular response. I shared with him our retention programs and mentoring efforts. But I concluded by saying, “These are all good practices, but the real reason our students are progressing is because we teach them their divine potential. Imagine if your whole life, you were told you could never succeed. Then consider the impact of being taught that you are an actual son or daughter of God with divine possibility.” He paused, then replied simply, “That’s powerful.”

Brothers and sisters, one of the miracles of this, the Lord’s Church, is that each of us can become something more in Christ. I know of no other organization that gives its members more opportunities to serve, give back, repent, and become better people. Whether we start in abundant or difficult circumstances, let us keep our sights and our slopes pointed heavenward. As we do, Christ will lift us to a higher place. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. 1. See Clark G. Gilbert, “The Mismeasure of Man” (BYU–Pathway Worldwide devotional, Jan. 12, 2021), [byupathway.org/speeches](https://byupathway.org/speeches). In this message I explored how the world often mismeasures human potential. Even well-meaning individuals who draw on the important work of leading psychologists who advocate concepts of grit (Angela Duckworth) and growth mindset (Carol S. Dweck) underestimate real human capacity when they rely only on learned patterns and ignore our divine potential in Christ.
2. 2. See Dale G. Renlund, “Infuriating Unfairness,” *Liahona*, May 2021, 41–45.
3. 3. See Matthew 25:14–30. In the parable of the talents, each servant received a different number of talents from their master. But judgment wasn’t determined by what they received but by how it was managed. It was the *increase* that led the Lord to say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things” (Matthew 25:21).
4. 4. See Mosiah 3:19. One implication may be that our exposure to the pull of the natural man may be different given different genetic predispositions. Just as we are each endowed with different gifts, we also have different physical, mental, and emotional challenges that we must learn to manage and overcome.

5. 5. Alma 7:11–12. Christ not only helps us overcome our sins through repentance, but He knows how to comfort us in our life’s difficulties because, through the Atonement, He has felt and overcome all human suffering.
6. 6. Elder David A. Bednar reminds us that we are agents and must act for ourselves. When we define ourselves by the labels of the world, we limit our divine potential and, in so doing, limit our ability to choose. (See David A. Bednar, “And Nothing Shall Offend Them,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2006, 89–92.)
7. 7. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Love and Laws of God” (Brigham Young University devotional, Sept. 17, 2019), [speeches.byu.edu](https://speeches.byu.edu). In this BYU devotional, President Nelson teaches that *because* God and His Son love us, They have given us laws and expectations that will help us. “God’s laws reflect His perfect love for each of us. His laws keep us spiritually safe and help us to progress eternally” (page 2).
8. 8. Carlos A. Godoy, BYU–Pathway Connections Conference, Lima, Peru, May 3, 2018.
9. 9. 2 Nephi 25:23.
10. 10. My parents established an extended Gilbert family motto to “DO YOUR BEST.” Another way to frame the parable of the slope is to emphasize that if we do our best, we can trust God to step in and make up the difference.
11. 11. See Clark G. Gilbert, “From Grit to Grace” (BYU–Pathway Worldwide devotional, Sept. 25, 2018), [byupathway.org/speeches](https://byupathway.org/speeches). In this message I explore the idea that even though we must learn to work hard and develop effective patterns of discipline, to realize our true potential in Jesus Christ, we must learn to draw on His grace.
12. 12. Rex E. Lee, “Some Thoughts about Butterflies, Replenishment, Environmentalism, and Ownership” (Brigham Young University devotional, Sept. 15, 1992), 2, [speeches.byu.edu](https://speeches.byu.edu); see also Deuteronomy 6:11.
13. 13. See Clayton M. Christensen, “How Will You Measure Your Life?,” *Harvard Business Review*, July–Aug. 2010, [hbr.org](https://hbr.org). This message was originally given as a Class Day address tied to Harvard Business School graduation. In his message, Professor Christensen cautioned his students not to decouple confidence from humility, reminding them that to continue to progress throughout life, they would need to be humble enough to seek correction and learn from others.
14. 14. D. Todd Christofferson, “As Many as I Love, I Rebuke and Chasten,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2011, 97.