

## “Walk in Newness of Life”

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Nothing is more beautiful than the beginning of a new life. I cried and rejoiced at the birth of each of our four children. A new baby is so beautiful, so sweet, so tender. At such moments, the veil between mortality and eternity seems almost transparent, and the love of God is unmistakable.

Likewise, I rejoice and get a little teary every time I witness a renewal of spiritual life. How beautiful, how sweet, how tender it is to see the heart changed, the lost found, and the blind restored to sight. Though we may not understand how it happens, we know why—because God loves His children (see 1 Nephi 11:17). Rebirth really is as precious as birth.

It seems fitting, then, that the Lord would use birth as a metaphor to describe the change that is made possible by the Atonement of Jesus Christ. We may smile when we read Nicodemus’s bewildered question, “How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb?” (John 3:4). But in our own way, we have all wondered the same thing: Can I really change? After all the mistakes I have made, can I really begin again? Is there hope for me—and for my loved ones?

We have all fallen short and longed for another chance, a fresh start, a new beginning. We have all wished we could rewind time and try again.

We all have weaknesses that may at times feel like unshakable parts of our nature. We hear the expression “There are no guarantees in life.” But here’s a promise, a guarantee you can count on no matter where you are or what you have done: we *can* change; we *can* “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

That is the central message of the gospel, the doctrine of salvation, the whole point and purpose of life. In fact, it could be argued that this sublime truth *is* the gospel—the “good news” that Jesus Christ came to proclaim. Whenever God speaks to man—through His prophets or directly—His main message seems to be either that we *need* to change or that we *can* change.

My purpose today is to affirm just how anxiously our Heavenly Father wants us to believe that we can change. If the Atonement of Jesus Christ is the ultimate expression of God’s love—and I testify that it is—then another equally powerful expression of that love is found in the many, varied ways in which He urges and encourages us to believe in the Atonement and access its power to change our lives.

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### **The Necessity of Change**

When the Apostle Paul encouraged the Romans, and each of us, to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4), he was speaking from firsthand experience. He knew what it was like to be born again. He was forever changed after his experience on the road to Damascus. That doesn’t mean he was perfect or that he never sinned again, but something was certainly different after that experience that could justifiably be considered a rebirth. He was a new man—still just as zealous and committed as a Christian as he had ever been as a persecutor, but now he walked with a power, light, and spirit that came from coming “alive unto God through Jesus Christ” (Romans 6:11). When he said, “Even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4), he was inviting us to walk with him in the converted newness he found in Christ.

Such references to “new life,” along with the Lord’s frequent invitations to be “born again,” suggest something of the magnitude of change He has in mind for us. This isn’t a tweak or a touch-up. The Atonement doesn’t propose some minor alterations. This is a reset. It goes even deeper than changing our actions. Our nature, our disposition, and our whole worldview and mindset can become different—deeper, higher, holier.

But the magnitude of the change required should not discourage us. Heavenly Father knew from the beginning that sending His children into mortality surrounded by opposition meant that we would slip up, fall, and sometimes fail to get it right. But He bids us to take this walk anyway because it is the only way we can continue to progress and ultimately become like Him. It was never part of God’s plan that we would stay the same. The Atonement of Jesus Christ saves us not by taking us back to where we once were but by taking us to better places that God has prepared for us. By accepting the Father’s plan and rejecting Satan’s, we recognized both the possibility that we would falter and the promise that we could progress—and we agreed with the Father that the chance of the latter was worth the risk of the former.

So you see, the rigorous change required by the gospel of Jesus Christ is not meant to be disheartening or exhausting; it is exciting and exhilarating! The plan of salvation is the ultimate adventure. Perhaps you don’t think of yourself as adventurous, but you are! Sure, you could have chosen the easy path—Lucifer’s assurance that, in exchange for your agency, he would make sure no one failed. But that was not for you! You stepped into the great unknown of mortality. You did it because you had faith in the Son of God and in the Father’s plan for your happiness. Your testimony was what helped you conquer then, and it will help you conquer now (see Revelation 12:10–11).

Hope in Christ is at the heart of meaningful change. Our relationship with God is one of separation and restoration, of estrangement and reconciliation, of wandering and returning, of picking ourselves up when we have fallen, of accepting the heavenly power of the Savior’s love and Atonement, and of trying again to live in harmony with higher ideals rather than lower impulses.

President Ezra Taft Benson counseled:

*We must be careful, as we seek to become more and more godlike, that we do not become discouraged and lose hope. . . .*

*. . . Hope is an anchor to the souls of men. Satan would have us cast away that anchor. In this way he can bring discouragement and surrender. But we must not lose hope. The Lord is pleased with every effort, even the tiny, daily ones in which we strive to be more like Him. Though we may see that we have far to go on the road to perfection, we must not give up hope.<sup>1</sup>*

And let us remember that true conversion—walking in newness of life—is a lifelong process. Paul was not done after his transformative experience; even he had to stay with it, day after day, striving in righteousness. The Atonement works within each of us over time, little by little, day by day. This is why, in his loving mercy, the Lord commanded us to take the sacrament weekly. He knew that we would regularly need to repent, remember, and renew our covenants. Indeed, the walk in newness of life is a lifelong journey for all of us.

Elder David A. Bednar explained it this way:

*Spiritual rebirth . . . typically does not occur quickly or all at once; it is an ongoing process—not a single event. Line upon line and precept upon precept, gradually and almost imperceptibly, our motives, our thoughts, our words, and our deeds become aligned with the will of God. This phase of the transformation process requires time, persistence, and patience. . . .*

*. . . Our souls need to be continuously immersed in and saturated with the truth and the light of the Savior’s gospel. Sporadic and shallow dipping in the doctrine of Christ and partial participation in His restored Church cannot produce the spiritual transformation that enables us to walk in a newness of life. Rather, fidelity to covenants, constancy of commitment, and offering our whole soul unto God are required if we are to receive the blessings of eternity.<sup>2</sup>*

Rebirth, then, is not so much a moment as a mindset, an ongoing experience of the heart, or the gradual accumulation of countless righteous choices built up over a lifetime. It is a daily decision to sincerely accept the Lord’s invitation to discipleship: “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The path of discipleship becomes clearer the longer we stay on it; it is a process that takes patience. Our efforts and desires are known to the Lord; He sees our steps of faith and obedience and perseverance—however small and imperceptible they may seem at times. He knows our hearts, and we know enough of His heart to know that He loves us perfectly and continuously.

God often refers to us as His “little children,”<sup>3</sup> and He will patiently work with us as we falteringly try to emulate Him, just as we work patiently with our own children. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell lovingly reminded us:

*Our perfect Father does not expect us to be perfect children yet. He had only one such Child. Meanwhile, therefore, sometimes with smudges on our cheeks, dirt on our hands, and shoes untied, stammeringly but*

*smilingly we present God with a dandelion—as if it were an orchid or a rose! If for now the dandelion is the best we have to offer, He receives it, knowing what we may later place on the altar. It is good to remember how young we are spiritually.<sup>4</sup>*

The purpose of life is to grow up—physically and spiritually. To do this, we must be tutored, identify our shortcomings, make course corrections, and get back more fully on the upward path of discipleship. Speaking of heaven, our post-mortal estate, President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said:

*Remember: the heavens will not be filled with those who never made mistakes but with those who recognized that they were off course and who corrected their ways to get back in the light of gospel truth.<sup>5</sup>*

Of course, our Heavenly Father would prefer that we not commit sin in the first place, and the scriptures contain many warnings against seeking happiness in wickedness.<sup>6</sup> But He also knew that we would make mistakes and would need a Savior. He knows how great the distance is between where we are and where He is, and for that reason He wants us to believe we can really change.

So the question is not whether we will trip and fall, falter and stumble, but rather how we will respond when we do. Will we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and try again? Or will we give in to despair and disillusionment? Will we recognize our need for the Savior, for renewal and redemption from this fallen state, or will we surrender to the pull of the world and the allurements of the adversary?

Elder Bruce C. Hafen put it this way:

*If you have problems in your life, don’t assume there is something wrong with you. Struggling with those problems is at the very core of life’s purpose. As we draw close to God, He will show us our weaknesses and through them make us wiser, stronger. If you’re seeing more of your weaknesses, that just might mean you’re moving nearer to God, not farther away.<sup>7</sup>*

### **The Possibility of Change**

In some ways, however, seeing our weaknesses is the easy part. The hard part is seeing a way out of them. We can recite the scriptures that speak of a mighty change of heart (see Alma 5:14), putting off the natural man to become a Saint (see Mosiah 3:19), and weak things being made strong (see Ether 12:27), but do we really know what that means? And do we really believe it—enough to actually experience the mighty change ourselves?

Knowing of our tendency to see things only as they are and not as they could be, the Lord seems to be using every possible means to teach us, persuade us, and lovingly convince us that we can change—that no matter what road we have been walking until now, we can indeed “walk in newness of life.”

The events we celebrate at Eastertime provide an excellent example. It is surely no coincidence that the Savior’s sacrifice and Resurrection, complete with the promise of renewed physical and spiritual life, occurred during springtime. Who can witness the emergence of colorful blossoms on limbs that seemed so dead and barren all winter without marveling at the earth’s miraculous regeneration every year? The arrival of spring after a long, cold winter is a bold declaration that rebirth is always possible. It is an annual reaffirmation of our hope in new life and renewed life, a sweet and tender reassurance of hope centered in Jesus Christ. I suppose it shouldn’t surprise us that the Master Teacher uses the largest visual aid in history—the world He created—to teach us about His Atonement. Truly, “all things are created and made to bear record of” Him, including the marked change from winter to spring (Moses 6:63).

When John the Baptist was preaching in the wilderness, preparing the hearts of the people to receive the Messiah, he quoted this passage from the writings of Isaiah: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth” (Luke 3:5; see Isaiah 40:4). Why did he quote this passage? What do valleys and mountains have to do with the

Savior’s impending ministry and Atonement? It seems unlikely that John was talking only about geography or topography. Perhaps these metaphors tell us more about Jesus’s mission than we might realize. It is as if John were saying, “Change is coming. Think of something that seems permanent to you—like a mountain. That mountain can be flattened. That’s the degree of change that is possible through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Are there things in your life that seem insurmountable? They can be overcome. Does your life seem rough or unstable? Through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all of that can be made smooth. Anything can change. You can change.”

While life may be unpredictable and even unfair at times, Jesus Christ came to set it all right. Though you may have made mistakes that took you down a path you did not intend, Jesus Christ came to straighten it all out. He came to change things: darkness to light, evil to goodness, sickness to health, sorrow to joy, despair to hope.

Promises of change permeate the scriptures. Through Christ, sins that are red as blood can become white as snow (see Isaiah 1:18), death can lead to new life (see John 11:25–26), captives can be delivered (see Luke 4:18), the blind can see and the deaf hear (see Mosiah 3:5), those who mourn can be comforted (see Matthew 5:4), those who hunger and thirst can be filled (see Matthew 5:6), and the meek can be exalted and the proud made low (see Matthew 23:12).

So much of Christ’s mortal ministry reinforces the doctrine of new life and new birth. Every time He healed someone who was lame or leprous, for example, not only was He giving that person a new life, but He was also teaching us about His ability to heal us spiritually. Consider the man sick with palsy whose friends lowered him through the roof of the house where Jesus was, in hopes that the Savior would heal him. Obvious to everyone was the man’s physical ailment, but clear only to the Savior were his spiritual needs, and those were what Jesus chose to address first.

“Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” (Mark 2:5), He said, to the disturbance of the observing Pharisees, who immediately accused Jesus of

blasphemy. The Master's response revealed one of His purposes in healing the sick: "That ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, . . . I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way" (Mark 2:10–11; see also verses 5–11).

Of course, the Savior was interested in alleviating physical suffering, but He knew well that this was not His greatest power or His most important mission. What He wanted most was to offer spiritual renewal, the transformation of the inner man and woman. He saw acts of physical healing as a way to impress upon our minds that He has power to heal us spiritually, to give us new life. Everything the Savior said or did—all of the changes He wrought—leads to the most important change of all: the one that occurs when a human soul "putteth off the natural man and becometh a saint" (Mosiah 3:19).

If you ever doubt that God can continue to love you when you have stumbled and made mistakes, if you ever question whether it is truly possible that God knows you individually, follow the example of Nephi, who said, "I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things" (1 Nephi 11:17). It is enough to know—and trust—that Heavenly Father and our Savior love us. The love of God is the most powerful force in the universe. Our Father loves us with a perfect, constant, and encompassing love. If we allow it to, his love will transform us.

Elder Russell M. Nelson summed it all up with this powerful witness:

*We can change our behavior. Our very desires can change. How? There is only one way. True change—permanent change—can come only through the healing, cleansing, and enabling power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. He loves you—each of you! He allows you to access His power as you keep His commandments, eagerly, earnestly, and exactly. It is that simple and certain. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a gospel of change!*<sup>18</sup>

### **Allow Others to Change**

Most of us are familiar with Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. In this classic tale of redemption,

the ghost of Jacob Marley, weighed down by the chains of selfishness he forged in life, visits his former business partner, the mean-spirited Ebenezer Scrooge, to warn him about the consequences of his miserly ways. Because Marley sets in motion a series of ghostly visitations, all is not lost for Scrooge, who sees his past, present, and future and undergoes a change of heart. This heartwarming story resonates with us because it reminds us so powerfully that anyone can change—even a callous old man who literally defines grumpy selfishness. If there is hope for Scrooge, there is hope for all of us.

But there is a tragic aspect to this story that never fully gets resolved. When you hear the word *scrooge*, what do you think of? Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines *scrooge* as "a miserly person"<sup>9</sup>—not a person who was once miserly but who, when given a second chance, chose to reform his life and share his wealth with those less fortunate. Just "a miserly person." Even though everyone knows how Scrooge's story ends, his name has nevertheless entered our consciousness (and our dictionary) as the embodiment of what he once was—not what he ultimately became. The poor Scrooge is immortalized for his abandoned past, not his reformed future.

Perhaps the way we remember fictional characters in Christmas stories is of little consequence; however, the way we think of our friends, neighbors, and family members is vital. Do we sometimes define people in terms of who they have been rather than who they are or who they can become? Our ability to accept change in our own lives is tied, I believe, to our ability to accept it in the lives of others.

Sometimes we stubbornly hold on to the past and refuse to let others change and grow. Perhaps it is just a very human tendency to remember people as we once knew them. When Jesus instituted the sacrament among the Nephites, He taught His disciples that they should not cast out the unworthy or even the unrepentant. With encompassing love and an eternal perspective, the Lord exhorted His disciples to pray for those people and continue to minister to them, "*for ye know not but what*

they will return and repent, and come unto me with full purpose of heart, and I shall heal them" (3 Nephi 18:32; emphasis added). We just don't know what the future can bring and how lives can change for the better. The final chapter is not yet written on anyone's life.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland urged:

***Let people repent. Let people grow. Believe that people can change and improve. . . . If something is buried in the past, leave it buried. Don't keep going back with your little sand pail and beach shovel to dig it up, wave it around, and then throw it at someone, saying, "Hey! Do you remember **this**?" Splat!***

*Well, guess what? That is probably going to result in some ugly morsel being dug up out of **your** landfill with the reply, "Yeah, I remember it. Do **you** remember **this**?" Splat.*

*And soon enough everyone comes out of that exchange dirty and muddy and unhappy and hurt, when what God, our Father in Heaven, pleads for is cleanliness and kindness and happiness and healing.<sup>10</sup>*

Let us emulate the attitude of our patient, loving Father, described so beautifully by Elder Richard L. Evans:

*Our Father in heaven is not an umpire who is trying to count us out. He is not a competitor who is trying to outsmart us. He is not a prosecutor who is trying to convict us. He is a Loving Father who wants our happiness and eternal progress . . . and who will help us all he can if we will but give him, in our lives, the opportunity to do so with obedience and humility and faith and patience.<sup>11</sup>*

Not long ago I was at the temple when an ordinance worker approached me to say hello. He said, "You don't recognize me, do you?"

I glanced at his name badge, and memories started to form. He reminded me that he "was a rebel in high school." I began to remember him. I went to junior high and high school with him. I had not seen him since high school graduation decades earlier.

With some chagrin, he acknowledged that he had been "wild and wayward" during those adolescent years. But now, here he was, nearly forty years later, an ordinance worker in the temple. He had a spiritual glow and warm happiness about him that inspired me and touched my heart. I thought, once more, how grateful I am for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of change and rebirth that empowers and enables us to "walk in newness of life."

President James E. Faust, in an article prepared shortly before he passed away, gave this encouraging counsel:

*Each one of us has been given the power to change his or her life. As part of the Lord's great plan of happiness, we have individual agency to make decisions. We can decide to do better and to be better. . . .*

*Each new day that dawns can be a new day for us to begin to change. We can change our environment. We can change our lives by substituting new habits for old. We can mold our character and future by purer thoughts and nobler actions. . . .*

*. . . Let us remember that the power to change is very real, and it is a great spiritual gift from God.<sup>12</sup>*

Truly, nothing is more beautiful than seeing new life and renewed life. That hope and promise is centered in the Savior's encompassing love, and it is the sweetest, the most tender, and, I think, the most beautiful principle of the gospel.

May the Easter season reaffirm to our hearts and minds that lives can change, that people can change—that they can even be reborn. Every time we see a spring flower, every time we read of the miracles of the Savior, every time we witness or participate in an ordinance of the gospel, and every time we see the miracle of spiritual rebirth in a loved one, let us receive the message our loving Heavenly Father is trying to send us: He wants us to change, He knows we can change, He has prepared the way for us to change, and He will help us "walk in newness of life," every step of the way.

## Notes

1. Ezra Taft Benson, "First Presidency Message: A Mighty Change of Heart," *Ensign*, October 1989, 5.
  2. David A. Bednar, "Ye Must Be Born Again," *Ensign*, May 2007, 21.
  3. See, for example, John 13:33; D&C 50:40–41; 61:36; 78:17.
  4. Neal A. Maxwell, *That Ye May Believe* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992), 100.
  5. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "A Matter of a Few Degrees," *Ensign*, May 2008, 60.
  6. See Psalm 32:10; Isaiah 57:21; Alma 41:10; Helaman 13:38; Mormon 2:13.
  7. Bruce C. Hafen, "The Atonement: All for All," *Ensign*, May 2004, 97.
  8. Russell M. Nelson, "Decisions for Eternity," *Ensign*, November 2013, 108; emphasis in original; see also Mosiah 5:2; Alma 5:12–14; Ether 12:33–34; Moroni 8:17; D&C 138:4; Articles of Faith 1:3.
  9. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed., s.v. "scrooge."
  10. Jeffrey R. Holland, "'Remember Lot's Wife': Faith Is for the Future," BYU devotional address, 13 January 2009; emphasis in original; see also Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Best Is Yet to Be," *Ensign*, January 2010, 26.
  11. Richard L. Evans, in *Conference Report*, October 1956, 101.
  12. James E. Faust, "The Power to Change," *Ensign*, November 2007, 122, 124.
- This talk is also published in *Our Savior's Love: Hope and Healing in Christ*, ed. Alonzo L. Gaskill and Stanley A. Johnson (Provo: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 103–21.
- For more talks from the BYU Religious Studies Center Easter Conference, visit [rsc.byu.edu/easterconference](http://rsc.byu.edu/easterconference).

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