

Good morning. I've been asked to speak to you all about personal conversion.

A very good quote from someone's therapist once circulated the internet until it found me. It says, when something unexpected happens, what you think FIRST is what you've been conditioned to think. Your SECOND thought reflects more accurately the person you truly are or are trying to become.

When I was asked to speak about personal conversion, my first thought was that I must base my talk on myself having been personally converted.

Having been.

My second thought was a correction of this first thought, as I remembered that there is no such thing as having been converted only in the past tense.

"Conversion is not a singular event. It is a process that occurs over a period of time and involves a willingness to change, to learn, to repent, to be patient, and to be persistent." - Sister Linda K. Burton

In the next few minutes I hope to paint a picture of my desire for continuous conversion. I wish to refute and condemn Satan's idea that we are static people who cannot change. And I want to do as Alma described, and sing the song of redeeming love, and testify of Jesus Christ.

****Excerpts from "Spiritual Treasures" by Russell M Nelson, October 2019****

The Lord instructed Emma Smith to expound the scriptures, to exhort the Church, to receive the Holy Ghost, and to spend her time "learning much." Emma was also counseled to "lay aside the things of this world and seek for the things of a better" and to hold fast to her covenants with God. The Lord concluded His instruction with these compelling words: "This is my voice unto all."

*****This is a powerful and difficult instruction given to Emma, and by extension, to all members of the church. Lay aside the things of this world and seek for the things of a better? One verb - seek - is the word that sticks out the most to me. It carries the reminder that we are required to walk by faith and not by sight. God compels us to look beyond what we can see. He requires us to stretch our spirits to find Him. But this instruction is not given alone. He tells Emma she must seek for things of a better world AND HOLD FAST TO HER COVENANTS WITH GOD. *****

*****The capacity to look beyond what we see around us, to feel outward, to question, to *seek,* is enlarged when we keep our covenants. This Seeking is mortally exhausting at times. As a church body that tends to rely a little too much on surety, this invitation to lay aside the things of this world should not be ignored. We cannot operate on the assumption that the things

of the world exclusively exist outside those church doors. We are called to question and examine each and every facet of our salvation.*

***** Jesus Christ is our perfect example. As one of His disciples, I study His life and words to seek for things of the better world; things that He brought with Him. I used to wish He would just tell us exactly and clearly what we all need to do; what needs to change, what's coming, what we need to build next, what needs to be discarded. But I've learned to appreciate that He has purposely left room for us to have to figure it out ourselves. Our own conversion is between ourselves and the Savior. Come, He says. Let us reason together.*****

President Nelson continues, "Sometimes we speak almost casually about walking away from the world with its contention, pervasive temptations, and false philosophies. But truly doing so requires you to examine your life meticulously and regularly. As you do so, the Holy Ghost will prompt you about what is no longer needful, what is no longer worthy of your time and energy."

Alma understood the power of questions, and posed a beautiful set of questions that each of his listeners is meant to ask themselves.

"And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren [and sisters] of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14)

I have read Alma chapter 5 many times throughout my life. And as someone who chronically forgets to do important things, this passage has always hit me with the same kind of flavor as,

Have ye written your thesis? Have ye contacted the important people? Have ye submitted the proper forms before the due date?

I pictured Alma holding up a clipboard when he asked me these questions about conversion. After all, there are other passages in the Book of Mormon reminding me that this life is the time for me to prepare to meet God. I don't know when the due date is, but the chronic procrastinator in me is worried at all times, about time slippage and missed opportunities, and things I'm not remembering because they're out of sight and out of mind.

Luckily, years bring wisdom, and I am starting to read this passage in a different way. In my heart, it's now coded more like the following questions:

Have you ever been camping, and turned your face up toward the night sky, and just been enveloped in wonder and love as you marvel at the millions of stars that extend in all directions? Have you thought about your ancestors and wished you could ask them for advice? Have you ever felt chills when listening to music?

So here's the same passage again, this time understood with my heart instead of my head.

"And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren [and sisters] of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances? Have ye experienced this mighty change in your hearts?" (Alma 5:14)

"And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren [and sisters], if ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?" (Alma 5:26)

I believe Alma's purpose in this passage is to call our attention to what we have experienced thus far in each of our lives, and urge us to look forward with a desire for repentance - and when I use the word repentance, I always want to define it - repentance is change. To repent means to turn, and not just turn anywhere. Repentance is turning toward the Savior.

My grandma Linda, about a decade ago, was remarried to a man named Frank. Frank, a widower in his eighties, met with the missionaries and was baptized, and that is how he and my grandma met. She phoned him up to say welcome to the ward and before we all knew it, they were getting married. Their connection was magnetic and they loved each other very much.

Shortly after Grandpa Frank passed away a few years ago, I had the opportunity to talk to my grandma about how she was feeling in her grief. She expressed concern that Frank would not understand things in heaven, because he was still very new in the gospel when he died, and in his old age, had trouble remembering simple things, like who Nephi was, or pieces of the Plan of Salvation. She worried he would be distressed because he only had a few short years of gospel learning, and that the learning was slow and laborious.

The thought came to me, and I expressed it, that when we are in our bodies, our intellect is limited. But in the spirit world, we can recall everything. We can look at our entire lives and ponder all our experiences. Frank lived a very full life; he served in the Navy, travelled the world, had children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. In the spirit world he would have uninhibited recollection of all the answered prayers. All the blessings and the guidance. He would be able to see clearly all the things that testified of Christ within his earthly experience, and he would be surrounded by that peace and love that fosters greater learning. What he is doing there now is completely up to him, but I believe he is doing just fine.

I believe that Alma was a prophet who intimately examined and reexamined his life, because he understood how vital this practice is to the process of conversion. He preached and warned of having a "bright recollection" of all our guilt at the last day, because he himself was plunged into a spiritually formative experience in his youth, when an angel of the Lord came to rebuke him and his friends for seeking to destroy the church of God. He was placed in a space where he was alone with the complete contents of his life, and that, to him, was torment, in the purest sense of the word.

Alma was given the opportunity to experience what eternity would feel like without the Savior's Atonement. For three days, in this catatonic state, in this out-of-body experience, he wished he

could stop existing altogether. Until he remembered what he had heard his father preach - about a Savior who would come to take upon Himself the sins of the world. Alma cried out to this Savior for mercy, and experienced an immediate remission of his sins. Joy to outmatch the depths of what his sorrow had been. When he awoke from this state, he testified that he had been born of God.

I wish to touch on this maternal phrase - to be born of God. I want each of you to think about when you were born. Was it hard? Did you have to work really hard to be born? What did it entail on your part? Did you do a good job at being born? Do you have any tips for future babies?

Recognize and remember that being born of God is not something we can do for ourselves. This maternal metaphor should always remind us that, like our mothers, Jesus Christ delivers us. There is not a single thing we can do to aid or contribute to our own deliverance. Like a helpless infant, we can accept this gift, and we can be eternally grateful, recognizing where we are because of our Deliverer, and where we would be without the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

For years, I have been fascinated by the concepts of Creativity and Entropy. For those unfamiliar with the universal law of Entropy, I'll explain it as best I can. Matter consistently and continuously moves from a state of order toward a state of disorder - that's the textbook definition. In real life, it looks like this: if no creative force is at work, things just get continuously messier. A glass of water is sitting on a table. There are a hundred and one possible events that can cause the water to spill from that glass, or cause the glass to break, or both. The laws of the universe are pushing, urging that glass to move from a state of order to a state of disorder. And once that happens, and the glass is broken on the floor, there are no forces of nature that will act upon that glass to return it to the way it was before.

The opposite of Entropy is Creativity. Anyone who has taken care of a home, especially a home with little ones, is very familiar with the law of Entropy. But I don't think most homemakers see themselves as a Creative force when they move laundry from a disordered state to an ordered state. Most parents don't think of it as Creativity when they read to their children, when they fill their minds and hearts with goodness, when they break up fights and give parental counsel. They just know that if they don't do these things, jungle living ensues. The next time Mom gets sick, pay attention and see the law of entropy at work. Watch the house dissolve into chaos in a matter of days without her Creative work to counteract it.

Our lives are subject to these universal laws, in a way that is so much more expansive. We live here on earth. We're weak. We're proud. We get hurt. We hurt others. We misunderstand. We get anxiety. We blunder. We neglect. Others perpetuate the confusion, and add to the hurt. It continues. Without the ultimate Creative force, which is the Atonement of Jesus Christ, entropy pushes us toward the fate that Satan so dearly wants for us - an existence of turmoil and chaos, miserable like unto himself.

Satan subscribes to the law of Entropy. He wants us to believe that we are incapable of change, or that the only way we can change is just to get worse.

But Jesus Christ is The Creative force. He took matter unorganized and formed it into a world so delicately balanced that life could flourish here, on this tiny rock, this relative pinprick in a cold, chaotic universe. He healed the sick, gave the blind their sight, and raised the dead. He expertly cut into a church led by Pharisees, expounding doctrine with perfect responses, correcting with justice and mercy. He took the sins, the chaos, the damage, the wounds of the whole world - billions of us - and erased them. Paid in full. No longer part of the equation.

"Therefore, if ye have felt the desire to repent, ye are called of God to repentance." (Alma 5:27)

Creativity does more than reverse the effects of Entropy. We did not peak in the preexistence. We did not exist in a prior perfect state, with our destiny being to return to that state. Our destiny is not reversal of sin only, nor is it to get to heaven and say, thank goodness that's over.

Our destiny is conversion.

When Jesus Christ said, Come, Follow Me, he meant forward.

We speak often of going back to live with our Heavenly Parents again, but let's remember that that only refers to being in their presence. We can't go back to the way things were before. We are children of God, and children must do what children do - we grow.

Alma speaks of a "mighty change of heart" and we are left to determine what that means - what that feels like. I always used to picture it as a sudden event, like an earthquake or a lightning strike. Those are mighty changes, observable in nature. An earthquake can alter an entire landscape. But, so can a glacier. A glacier takes a thousand years to move a few miles. Freezing and thawing, it breaks apart rocks, it carries megatons of sediment, it alters the climate. But these changes are unobservable to human eyes because they happen so slowly.

Conversion is invisible to everyone else. No one can look at you and know what's in your heart. There might be outward clues, that may or may not point to what is actually there, but no one truly sees all of you except the Savior.

No one can choose conversion for you. Alma was careful to use the word "unto" when he wrote that he "labored without ceasing, that [he] might bring souls unto repentance" because he understood how important it was that each individual make the choice for themselves. He had tasted the fruit of redemption, and he brought it to everyone he possibly could, in eagerness, "that I might bring them to taste of the exceeding joy of which I did taste; that they might also be born of God, and be filled with the Holy Ghost." (v. 24) He labored for the rest of his life bringing this beautiful fruit to others, but he could not make them eat. But when touched by Alma's longsuffering love and his heartfelt testimony, many people did choose conversion.

D&C 19:16-19

For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent;

But if they would not repent they must suffer even as I;

Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit - and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink-

Nevertheless, glory be to the Father, and I partook and finished my preparations unto the children of men.

Jesus Christ made the ultimate sacrifice for us, knowing that we might not choose to partake of it, that we might choose to continue on with hard hearts, bringing upon ourselves needless suffering, confusion, and pain.

Conversion is our choice to partake of the fruit of redemption, and the subsequent changes in us are like alchemy of the soul. Ezekiel prophesied of the beautiful effects that will take place in us as we become converted to Jesus Christ -

Ezekiel 36:26-28

A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements, and do them.

And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

I pray that we each feel empowered to take the reins of our own conversion. Working in tandem with Jesus Christ and no one else, we can act on even the smallest particle of faith. Your conversion is intimate and personal. I invite you to ponder and study in your closets and in your quiet moments. I have faith, and there are many things that I believe, but my belief and my testimony is independent of yours.

I have felt the beautiful blessings of redemption and conversion. The feeling is a balm and a strength to me. You can feel it too.

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen