

## *“The Small but Important Things”*

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*This address was given Friday, May 1, 2015 at the BYU Women’s Conference*

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I would like to begin by sharing the parable of the caramel apples. There were two young sisters. One Saturday morning their mother gave the two sisters a task. The mother had bought a large bag of apples and several bags of wrapped caramels, and she desired that her two young daughters make caramel apples. It didn’t matter to her when they made them, as long as the task was completed before their bedtime that night.

The young sisters had helped their mother make caramel apples before, so the mother and her daughters were confident that they could do this task without her help. Well, the young sisters waited until it was about bedtime to begin making the caramel apples. They were confident that it would only take them a little while.

However, they soon realized that they were mistaken. First of all, it took a very long time to unwrap all of the caramels. Then, after putting the caramels into a double boiler, it took a very long time for them to melt, and they were not melting as they should. The result was a potful of thick pasty caramel.

The sisters tried dipping the apples into the caramel as they had seen their mother do, but the caramel was not sticking to the apples as it had when their mother had dipped apples. The two sisters soon realized that there was no way that that pasty caramel was going to stick easily to the apples. The only way they could make the caramel stick was by spooning up globs of the caramel paste and applying it with the spoon onto the apple, sometimes using their fingers to get the caramel off the spoon and onto the apples.

One of the problems they faced was that as soon as the caramel was out of the warm pot, it quickly began to cool, making matters worse. What a mess! Instead of looking like the beautiful caramel apples with the smooth creamy finish that they had helped their mother make, their caramel apples were lumpy and uneven.

The younger sister was becoming very tired and miserable. She felt terrible. She just wanted to go to bed and forget about this caramel-apple business. She wanted to cry, and probably did, but, tears or no, she knew that they had to finish. And it seemed like it would take forever. She believed the caramel apple nightmare would never end. But finally, and to her great relief, they were finished and were able to go to bed.

The next morning their mother saw all of the lumpy-looking caramel apples. She commented on how long it must have taken them to complete. She thanked her daughters and then said, “You know, I believe it would have been a great deal easier for you if you had added water to the caramels.” And the sisters were so amazed. It was such a seemingly minor detail, but a very important detail indeed.

I have never forgotten this experience of making caramel apples with my older sister. It is, as trivial as it may seem, my first recollection of a real trial in my life. The memory of making those caramel apples is so poignant that, to this day, whenever I find myself in the middle of a difficult, seemingly endless situation, my family will hear me utter these two words: *caramel apples*.

This experience, like a parable, is a nice story. And, like a parable, over the years it has taken on a much broader, deeper meaning for me. In fact, the experience has taught me several important lessons. From this experience I learned that no matter how difficult and trying an experience may be, even if it may be a lifelong challenge, we can still be happy and have joy. I also learned that while we are going through those difficult times, if we pay careful attention we will notice the tender mercies from our Heavenly Father. For example, in the case of my dreadful caramel-apple experience, even though I was so tired and miserable, I did, after all, have all the delicious caramels I could possibly want to eat.

But the most important lesson I learned is that we should never forget to do the small and simple things. If we had remembered to add the two tablespoons of water to the caramels—a very small but important ingredient in the caramel-apple recipe—the caramel would have easily adhered to the apples and the entire situation would have been much better. Similarly, in our challenging life experiences, if we will do the simple but important things, such as daily scripture study, daily prayer, and regular service, our lives will be better.

In my mind the water in the parable is a lot like covenants in our lives. They may seem simple and routine and we may sometimes overlook the need for them, but they are the things that hold everything else together in trying times. Without covenants, things fall apart—just as the caramel did without the water. With covenants, things come together, in large part because covenants connect us to Heavenly Father, the One who can make “all things work together for [our] good” (Romans 8:28). Covenants truly connect us to God and to the powers of heaven. This knowledge has brought great comfort and peace to me.

I recently asked a friend what she thought it meant to be connected to Heavenly Father through making and keeping covenants. She immediately thought of Matthew 11:28–30, which states:

“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me . . . : and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

When we make covenants with our Heavenly Father, we become connected to Him through allowing Him to help us by taking His yoke upon us. When we are connected or yoked to Him, He is able to make our burdens lighter because we are not relying solely on our own power but on His infinite power as well.

My friend pointed out that when we connect ourselves with Heavenly Father by making covenants with Him, we form a partnership with Him. When we are keeping our covenants, we are able to receive personal revelation from Him as our partner. Many times through personal revelation we are guided to help other people. We are guided to serve. Heavenly Father will call on us through the Holy Ghost to carry out His purposes in ways that also bless our lives.

My friend related an experience that she had in which she was inspired or guided to help another person. She shared this experience in a letter to one of her children who was at the time serving a mission. She wrote:

“The highlight of my week . . . was a spontaneous visit to [a neighbor] who is not doing too well physically. On my busiest day of the week, as I was jotting down all of the things I needed to do, I thought I ought to visit her. So I wrote it down on my list, but in prioritizing tasks, I recognized that I would have to visit her at another time.

“[Later that day], as I was delivering fliers [on] her street [for an upcoming neighborhood event], I had the thought come to mind again to visit [my neighbor]. I decided to be brave and to just act on my thought. So I [hesitatingly] knocked on her door. [I felt a little awkward coming by unannounced, without anything to offer. Her husband answered the door. I] was invited in and found that my visit was the very thing she needed in that moment. She was feeling incredibly discouraged. She was lying down on a little cot close to the floor and could hardly move. She had tears come to her eyes as she told me how much she needed my visit that day. We visited for just a short time, but as I left, I felt thankful for and a bit in awe at the promptings I had received that led me to her. It was a witness of a loving Heavenly Father who is acutely aware of the needs of each of His children. In that moment I felt in a small way that I had been His hands and voice to [my neighbor]. I am thankful for that experience and hope to be in tune enough with the Spirit to never miss an opportunity to be on God’s errand.”

As a result of that experience, my friend felt a connection to Heavenly Father; she felt a partnership with Him. Through her willingness to act upon a prompting from the Holy Ghost, my friend was able to help another person feel Heavenly Father’s love, and she felt His love for her as well.

My friend expressed the happiness that she felt as a result of this experience. She was reminded of what a blessing it is to be able to serve, and she also felt a real connection to Heavenly Father.

Not only can we feel the blessing of happiness through covenant keeping, we can also feel and experience the power associated with it. Doctrine and Covenants 82:10 states, “I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say.” He promises to help us, and that is powerful help.

The knowledge that keeping our covenants brings us happiness and that we have His promise to help us throughout our lives increases my desire to keep the covenants I have made. This does not, however, exempt us from challenges, but it is comforting to know that our burdens will be made easier because we are yoked to Him. He promises us that.

As I think about the ways in which I can better enable myself to keep covenants, I think about athletes and musicians. You may wonder what these two groups of people have to do with covenant keeping and the blessings and power that come from covenant keeping. I will explain.

I enjoy watching athletic events. I also enjoy listening to beautiful music. Because I am not an athlete or a musician, I probably do not fully appreciate the efforts of those who perform, but I do know that before any performance there is a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes. For example, athletes spend hour after hour, day after day, going through grueling workouts. They lift weights, they do push-ups, they do pull-ups, and they do sit-ups. They run sprints, and they run great distances. They run up stairs, and they run down stairs. They run up hills. They do drills.

I asked my daughter, who played basketball on her high school team several years ago, what part of practice was the most difficult for her. She said it was the ladder drill that they performed on the football field. I asked her what this drill consisted of. Many of you may already know, but for those who do not, I will explain. They start on the goal line, run as fast as they can to the five-yard line, and then run back to the goal line as fast as they can. Then they run as fast as they can to the ten-yard line and then back to the goal line as fast as they can. Then they run as fast as they can to the twenty-yard line and then back as fast as they can to the goal line. (I am getting a workout just explaining this to you!) This drill goes on and on until they have reached the goal line on the other side of the field—100 yards away. Sounds like great fun!

I recently asked a former football player what part of practice was the most difficult for him. He told me that it was conditioning. You may already know what this is, but just in case you do not, I will explain. Conditioning is the part of the practice that follows the structured practice. He described it as the part where you “empty your tank.” It is when you expend any energy you may have left. This is the time when you run wind sprints. I looked up *wind sprint* in the dictionary. It is described as “a sprint performed as a training exercise to develop breathing capacity especially during exertion” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, s.v. “wind sprint,” [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wind%20sprint](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wind%20sprint)). In other words, you work as hard as you can until you have no energy left. What is the purpose of this? It is to make you stronger and better.

Musicians also spend hour after hour, day after day, going through their own grueling practices. I asked a friend who is an accomplished pianist what part of practicing is the most difficult for her. She said it is staying focused. What she meant is that when you are practicing a piece of music, you have to practice it correctly, and playing a piece of music correctly every time can be a slow and tedious process. You have to think hard and try hard. She said it is mentally exerting. And sometimes it is very difficult to think and stay focused. The purpose of all the tedious and mentally exerting practice is to ensure that when it is time to perform, the performance will be perfectly executed.

I asked my daughter, the former football player, and the accomplished pianist what it was that made them keep coming back time after time for more difficult practicing. They each gave me a similar response. Surprisingly, it wasn't just that they knew that this strenuous effort would pay off at performance time. The bottom line was that being able to accomplish these difficult things made them happy, even before the performance. They pushed themselves to the limit in part because the very striving brought them happiness.

I am not an athlete or an accomplished musician, but in a small way I understand what they mean. I have done strenuous exercise and I have had the opportunity of tackling a difficult piano piece. I have felt the joy and sense of accomplishment that comes from hard work—and that makes me happy.

When we exercise or exert ourselves mentally, our bodies release chemicals called endorphins. Endorphins produce an increased sense of well-being and are described as having a “much greater analgesic potency than morphine” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, s.v. “beta-endorphin,” [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beta-endorphin](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beta-endorphin)). In other words, endorphins make you feel good—they make you happy. Feeling the effects of endorphins may be one of the reasons that athletes and musicians remain committed to their difficult practice. They have an increased desire to feel the happiness that comes from hard work.

If doing difficult physical and mental things gives us the benefits of physical endorphins, then perhaps exercising our faith and keeping our covenants may help us experience the benefits of what I would call “spiritual endorphins.” Elder Richard G. Scott reminded us:

“We were taught in the premortal world that our purpose in coming here is to be tested, tried, and stretched. . . . Despite all of the negative challenges we have in life, we must take time to actively exercise our faith. Such exercise invites the positive, faith-filled power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ into our lives” (“Make the Exercise of Faith Your First Priority,” *Ensign*, November 2014).

As we continually exercise our faith and keep our covenants, we can experience joy—we can experience the benefits of “spiritual endorphins”—even in the times of stress and striving. Thus, keeping our covenants helps us through both the daily conditioning and the more dramatic challenges that we confront.

The more we experience the blessings and power that come through exercising our faith and keeping our covenants, the more our desire will increase to make and keep sacred covenants. I am grateful for the blessings of covenants. I know that covenants connect us to our Heavenly Father and to the powers of heaven. I know that as we keep our covenants and exercise our faith, Heavenly Father will guide us to carry out His purposes—not only blessing our lives but the lives of others. As we connect ourselves to Heavenly Father through covenant keeping, He will make our burdens lighter and we will experience the happiness and joy that He desires for us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.