

“In the Multitude of Counsellors There Is Safety”

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The author of Proverbs observed, “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.”¹ This sounds like a common-sense admonition to pay attention to good advice from others. And it is that. But I believe there are deeper and greater truths contained in this seemingly simple verse about counsel and counseling.

The term *counsel* is both a verb and a noun. The verb *counsel* is defined as “to give or offer . . . advice.”² The noun *counsel* is defined as both “to take counsel” and the “interchange of opinions.”³ Thus, counseling involves both giving and taking advice, and it connotes an interchange of ideas. Counseling with counselors is not simply taking advice; it is a form of two-way communication that is different from merely talking to one another.

But even these definitions do not fully capture the depth and breadth of the truths contained in this verse because counseling is not just an enhanced form of two-way communication designed to help us in this mortal life. I believe it is a skill set that is central to eternal life and the plan of salvation.

I first started thinking about the eternal significance of counseling in a serious way, I am somewhat embarrassed to admit, because of basketball. I have a lifelong love of basketball. While I fell far short of my dream of playing in the NBA when my career ended in junior college, I continue to be a fan of the game to this day.

A number of things have changed in the game since I played competitively. There was no three-point shot in those days, the uniform shorts were shorter (sorry about that), and it was illegal to dunk during a game (that is my current

excuse for why I never dunked in a game; there may have been other reasons). However, one of the things that has changed the most from my long-ago playing days is what the head coach does when a time-out is called.

When I played, we were instructed that when a time-out was called, we should run to the bench area immediately so that the coach could give us as much instruction as possible during the sixty-second time-out period. This was the coach's chance to gain a measure of control over the sometimes chaotic events that were occurring on the court. This was his opportunity to have our undivided attention so that he could give us the instructions he had been trying (usually unsuccessfully) to convey through various means during the game.

With such a limited time period available, and with so much information to convey, the coach usually began speaking to the players as soon as they arrived at the bench area, and he kept talking for the full minute—in fact, usually beyond that time period, with the referee typically having to break up the huddle. The coach wanted to spend every precious second of that short time with the players so that he could provide as much direction and exert as much control as possible.

A few years after I finished playing competitively, I began to notice a change in a coach's routine during a time-out—a change that has now become the norm. Rather than immediately addressing the players who have quickly gathered at the bench area, coaches now first huddle with the other coaches. When I first noticed this, it made me a bit nervous. I thought to myself, “What are those guys doing? They have sixty seconds to give instruction to their players, and they are off chitchatting with each other about where to go for pizza after the game. Why are they wasting that time?”

I soon realized that the head coach did not gather his other coaches around him to discuss dinner plans but rather to ask each of them what they were seeing and to get their views on what were the most important things he should convey to the players at that stage of the game. It was a lively and highly productive form of two-way communication that occurred at a much higher level than a casual conversation about food. It was counseling. On some occasions the head coach will spend almost half of the time-out talking with the assistants before addressing the players, having concluded that it is more important to spend a considerable amount of that precious time getting the perspective, advice, and direction that comes from counseling than to simply go off on his own to address the players.

As I said, it is a bit embarrassing to confess that it was only when I realized that taking and giving counsel led to better results in basketball that I began to think that I might have underestimated the power and importance of counseling in other contexts, including in the most important context of all: the plan of salvation.

However, once I started to consider the matter from that perspective, it became increasingly clear to me that counseling with others—and learning how to take and give counsel—is not just something we can use in this mortal existence to make our temporal activities more productive. It is an eternal skill set, one that we used in our premortal existence and that we will likely use in the next sphere of our existence if we are to be exalted.

Modern revelation makes it clear that counseling took place in our premortal life. We know from that source that there was a Grand Council in Heaven before this world was created in which our Father in Heaven’s plan for our exaltation was presented, discussed, and accepted by those willing to follow the Savior rather than Satan.⁴ But the process of counseling did not end once we had agreed to embrace the plan of salvation. The book of Abraham makes it clear that the counseling continued throughout the process of creating the world. Consider the following verses from chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Abraham:

*And the Gods took **counsel among themselves** and said:
Let us go down and form man in our image, after our likeness.*

. . .

*And the Gods said among themselves: On the seventh time we will end our work, **which we have counseled**; and we will rest on the seventh time from all our work **which we have counseled**.*

*And the Gods concluded . . . that . . . they would rest from all their works which they (the Gods) **counseled among themselves** to form. . . . And thus were their decisions at the time that they **counseled among themselves** to form the heavens and the earth.⁵*

Counseling is mentioned five times in three verses. It is abundantly clear from these verses that counseling was a key part of our premortal existence.

There is also evidence that God continues to use counseling even in His exalted state—thereby suggesting that if we are exalted in the celestial kingdom, we too will rely on that skill.

For example, in describing Himself to Enoch in Moses 7:35, God identified Himself by referring to three attributes. He first stated, “Man of Holiness is my name.” Later He stated, “Endless and Eternal is my name, also.” We understand these well. He is God because He is holy, the “Man of Holiness.” He is also God because He is “Endless and Eternal.” Both of these are characteristics we readily recognize as godlike characteristics. But note that in between these two well-

known attributional titles God inserted another less well-known name by which He chose to identify Himself. The entire verse reads:

*Behold, I am God; Man of Holiness is my name; **Man of Counsel is my name;** and Endless and Eternal is my name, also.*⁶

I think it is significant that God would choose to describe Himself as “Man of Counsel,” selecting that characteristic as one of three attributes by which He wanted to be identified at that time.

We see something similar in the messianic prophecies of Isaiah. In terms with which we are familiar—and which many could sing—Isaiah heralded the birth of the Savior and stated, “His name shall be called Wonderful, *Counsellor*, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.”⁷ It is interesting, and I believe instructive, to note that the title of counselor is included with equal prominence alongside other more recognizable names reserved for Deity. This suggests to me that an ability to engage in counseling is an eternal skill, one that God has perfected and uses and one that we will need to perfect if we are to be like Him in the next phase of our existence.

With that understanding in mind, what seems like a simple common-sense observation in Proverbs takes on new and deeper meaning. Truly, “where no counsel is, the people fall,” not just in this life but in eternity. And truly, “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety”—in part because those who are exalted will be living in the midst of a society of perfect counselors.

But like all gospel truths, the observation that there is safety “in the multitude of counsellors” also has important significance in our mortal sphere and in our immediate circumstances. Thus we may profitably ask, Who are those we might count among “the multitude of counsellors” with whom we should counsel and from whom we should take counsel in this life? There might be any number of those who fall into this category, but let me focus on three.

First, our families can be part of “the multitude of counsellors” who can help us find and stay on the safe path. Indeed, at times our close family members, and especially our spouses, can be the most valuable counselors we have. This is illustrated well by an incident I once heard from Elder Monte J. Brough, who served so faithfully as a member of the Seventy for a number of years. For some of that time Elder Brough was in the presidency of the Asia Area. The Broughs were living in Hong Kong during that assignment when President Gordon B. Hinckley and his wife, Marjorie, came to visit. The Hinckleys were in the Brough home one evening. As was their custom, the Broughs gathered for family prayer, and one of their children offered the prayer. Following the family pattern, the child assigned to pray asked Heavenly Father to bless President Hinckley and the other Church leaders. As everyone arose from the prayer,

Sister Hinckley, in her own delightful way, said, “Everyone always prays for Gordon, but no one prays for me.”

Everyone chuckled at the remark, including Sister Hinckley. But then Sister Hinckley said, in a more somber tone, “I am serious. I am the only person in the world who can tell Gordon certain things. I need all the help I can get.”

Elder Brough said he realized that Sister Hinckley was correct—that she was the only person on earth who could tell her husband, a prophet, what he needed to hear. From then on the Brough family prayers included pleas on behalf of both President and Sister Hinckley.⁸

I have benefited greatly from such counsel from my wife, Peggy. Time after time she has gently, yet directly, helped me regain eternal perspective in situations in which only she can provide such perspective.

On one occasion a few years ago, my assignment at the university involved athletics, and I was focused on changes that were occurring in various athletic conferences around the country. I was spending a lot of time on the matter and became preoccupied with all the actual, potential, and rumored changes in conference membership that were occurring. Referring to meetings being held in Texas by one conference (and explaining my apparent stress), I said to Peggy, “I just wish I knew what the Big Twelve was thinking right now in Dallas.”

Without missing a beat, Peggy replied, “If I were you, I would be a lot more concerned about what the Big Twelve in Salt Lake City are thinking,” referring to a quorum and not an athletic conference. Instantly my perspective changed, and my stress level decreased considerably.

More recently, at a time when I felt almost overwhelmed by the responsibilities of my present role as president of BYU, when a series of days brought more complex and confounding challenges than I thought could fit into a twenty-four-hour period—when it did not seem possible to accomplish all that I had already committed to do, let alone the many new, unexpected events that were crowding out any opportunity to prepare for several speaking commitments that were fast approaching—I hurriedly dashed off a draft of remarks for a talk for which I had not left enough time to prepare. I expressed to Peggy my worries about my inadequacies and my concerns that things seemed to be out of control and beyond hope. I then asked her to read my draft to see if it made any sense and to help me make it at least coherent.

As usual, Peggy made a number of helpful suggestions and corrections. Later that evening I was hurriedly and gratefully reviewing her suggested changes when I came to a paragraph in the talk in which I admonished the prospective audience to look at things from God’s eternal perspective and not through the lens of our temporary mortal circumstances. Next to that paragraph—which I

had just written but clearly had not internalized—I saw a handwritten note in Peggy’s elegant penmanship. It said simply, “Very good advice, even for a president of a university.” Inspired counsel from a loving wife instantly lifted my spirits and rekindled my faith.

Sisters, please recognize the essential and life-changing counseling role you can play as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, and aunts when you provide inspired and inspiring counsel at critical times. And for those brethren in the audience, please recognize the profound and powerful wisdom offered by President Russell M. Nelson in general conference this spring: “If you truly want more priesthood power, you will cherish and care for your wife, embracing both her *and* her counsel.”⁹ In the family context, the process of giving and taking counsel can truly be celestial.

In addition to close family members, our Heavenly Father has provided Church leaders as part of “the multitude of counsellors” who can help us find our way on the safe path that leads to exaltation. As Elder Ronald A. Rasband said at the most recent general conference, “The Lord often reaches out to us through our families *and* leaders.”¹⁰ Those leaders include local Church officers acting under the direction of those with priesthood keys. But we also benefit greatly from the counsel given us by those whom we sustain as, and who are in fact, prophets, seers, and revelators. The members of the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve are particularly valuable counselors in “the multitude of counsellors” God has provided us.

There are numerous examples of the impact for good that has resulted from faithful women following prophetic counsel. One is found in the Relief Society history *Daughters in My Kingdom*. In 1868, Brigham Young counseled the sisters to save up grain and flour “against a day of scarcity.”¹¹ The effort was headed by Emmeline B. Wells, who would later become the fifth Relief Society general president. As she aligned herself with this prophetic counsel, Sister Wells was inspired to tell the sisters that their giving heed to the counsel would be “the temporal salvation of this people in case of emergency.”¹² This promise was literally “fulfilled in 1898 and 1899, when Relief Society wheat provided sustenance during a severe drought in southern Utah.”¹³

But, as is often the case when prophetic counsel is received and acted upon with faith, additional benefits ensued. In the midst of World War I, when food was needed well beyond Utah, the sisters sold the excess wheat to the government to help alleviate the emergency. At the time, Sister Wells observed:

*In all these years we have not had much need to use the grain stored away for the purpose it was designed, but with the dark cloud hovering over the world as it now does, we can see the prophetic wisdom of President Young in calling upon the sisters to save grain against a time of need.*¹⁴

But the benefits went beyond even that:

The wheat sale did more than provide food for people who were hungry. Sister Clarissa S. Williams, who served as one of Sister Wells's counselors in the presidency, recommended that the Relief Society preserve the funds from the sale in a central account and that they use the interest to finance efforts to improve the health of women and children. Later, when Sister Williams served as the sixth Relief Society general president, she oversaw the use of those funds for such purposes.¹⁵

Following prophetic counsel often blesses not just the direct recipients of the counsel but also those who are blessed by their resulting inspired actions. No wonder God uses the concept of counseling; it has a powerful multiplying effect on His actions.

Prophets continue to provide inspired counsel about important matters today, including counsel about how best to profit from prophetic counsel. President Henry B. Eyring has observed:

In our own time, we have been warned with counsel of where to find safety from sin and from sorrow. One of the keys to recognizing those warnings is that they are repeated. . . . One of the ways we may know that the warning is from the Lord is that the law of witnesses, authorized witnesses, has been invoked. When the words of prophets seem repetitive, that should rivet our attention and fill our hearts with gratitude to live in such a blessed time.¹⁶

One way to benefit most from general conference is to look for repetitive themes in the talks of members of the Quorum of the Twelve and the First Presidency as they invoke the law of witnesses. Interestingly, I have found that different people notice different themes in the same conference, as the Holy Ghost—another of “the multitude of counsellors” God makes available to us—provides individualized counseling through the law of witnesses.

In some instances, prophets, seers, and revelators provide the powerful form of counseling that results from the law of witnesses not through parallel individual references to the same topic but by formally and consciously combining together to issue a statement of counsel and direction. As one prime example I cite “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” issued more than twenty years ago.¹⁷ In that remarkable document, all fifteen of the then living prophets, seers, and revelators provided clear and direct counsel to individuals, families, communities, and nations on a topic of most importance now and eternally. We would all do well to counsel among ourselves about the meaning and application

of this remarkable counsel in our individual circumstances. Unified prophetic counsel of this type represents a particularly powerful example of counsel from a “multitude of counsellors.”

We are blessed to live in a time when that form of unified prophetic counsel is available on important matters when we need it. Five years after the family proclamation was announced, the members of the Quorum of the Twelve issued a joint, powerful testimony of Christ in a document containing not only powerful testimony but also profound counsel for those with discerning ears.¹⁸ At the October 2013 general conference, Elder Robert D. Hales explained how these two extraordinary founts of joint prophetic counsel are both timely and tailored to the needs of our era:

*The world is moving away from the Lord faster and farther than ever before. The adversary has been loosed upon the earth. We watch, hear, read, study, and share the words of prophets to be forewarned and protected. For example, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” was given long before we experienced the challenges now facing the family. “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles” was prepared in advance of when we will need it most.*¹⁹

The need to focus both on families and on Christ that these two remarkable documents suggest is a form of prophetic counsel that is particularly helpful and needful in the world in which we live. Again, we would do well to counsel among ourselves as to the meaning and application of that prophetic counsel in our individual circumstances.

The focus on Christ also calls our attention to the best Counselor we have in “the multitude of counsellors,” even God Himself. He is truly *the* Man of Counsel, the source of all true and good counsel. Counsel from mortal counselors is most powerful when it leads us closer to the ultimate Counselor—the Lord. Indeed, their divinely appointed role as mortal counselors is to do that, above all else. As Elder Rasband noted, “The Lord often reaches out to us through our families and leaders, inviting us to come unto Him.”²⁰

So the best counsel I can give is that given by Alma to his son Helaman in Alma 37:37: “Counsel with the Lord in all thy doings, and he will direct thee for good.” However, we should recognize that counseling with God differs in some significant ways from counseling with our families and even our leaders. God does want us to engage in a high-level, two-way communication with Him, and He wants us to express our thoughts and feelings openly to Him in prayer, but, ultimately, the desired end is for us to align our will with His. As explained in the Bible Dictionary:

*Prayer is the act by which the will of the Father and the will of the child are brought into correspondence with each other. The object of prayer is not to change the will of God, but to secure for ourselves and for others blessings that God is already willing to grant, but that are made conditional on our asking for them.*²¹

Thus, the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob counseled:

*Seek not to counsel the Lord, but to take counsel from his hand. For behold, ye yourselves know that he counseleth in wisdom, and in justice, and in great mercy, over all his works.*²²

Because He has greater knowledge, greater love, and greater foresight than all mortal beings combined, we need to always remind ourselves that His counsel is superior to that of any other counsel we can receive, which requires that we pay attention and respond to His counsel in an enhanced manner.

In several places in the scriptures the Lord described the way we should respond to His counsel by using the word *hearken*.²³ Indeed, *hearken* is the first word in the Doctrine and Covenants²⁴—the first word in what the Lord calls His “preface”²⁵ to the rest of the teachings of that book.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *hearken* means “to apply the mind to what is said”²⁶ and “to hear with attention . . . ; to . . . learn by hearing.”²⁷ That same source notes that the word was originally spelled *h-a-r-k-e-n* but now is spelled *h-e-a-r-k-e-n*, with the explanation that “the preference for the latter spelling is probably due to association with *hear* . . . by the analogy of *heart* and *hearth*.”²⁸ Thus, to hearken to the Lord’s counsel is to apply our mind, our attention, and our heart to the task of learning from what is said.

Our willingness to “hearken” to the Lord’s counsel in this wholehearted and whole-minded manner may be one of the most important factors that determines our eternal destiny. In Moses 4:4 the Lord noted that Satan would lead into captivity “as many as would not hearken unto [the Lord’s] voice.” In that light, those of us involved in the process of so-called higher education may pay particular attention to the warning found in 2 Nephi 9:28–29:

*O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men!
When they are learned they think they are wise, and they
hearken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside,
supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is
foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.
But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of
God.*

Learning to hearken unto God’s counsel is of critical importance. Harkening to God’s counsel may make us uncomfortable, and it may stretch us in ways that at times are painful. But as I recently heard a sweet sister who had experienced many trials in her life explain, “The Lord is more interested in our progress than in our comfort.” C. S. Lewis put it this way:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.²⁹

I testify that God loves us immensely and intensely in ways we do not fully appreciate or comprehend. One way He manifests that love is by providing us with a “multitude of counsellors” who help us find and stay on the path that leads back to Him. As we engage in that counseling process ourselves, we not only continue on that path but also acquire celestial skills that will, through the power of Christ, prepare us to become like Him. He is the ultimate Counselor. As we hearken unto His counsel, we will be eternally blessed, I so witness in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Proverbs 11:14.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “counsel” (v.), oed.com/view/Entry/42605?rskey=C68pY3&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid.
3. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “counsel” (n.), oed.com/view/Entry/42604?rskey=C68pY3&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid.
4. See Moses 4:1–4; Abraham 3:22–27; see Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2nd ed., revised (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 6:308; see also “The Grand Council,” chapter 1 of M. Russell Ballard, *Counseling with Our Councils: Learning to Minister Together in the Church and in the Family*, revised edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2012), 36–37.
5. Abraham 4:26, 5:2–3; emphasis added.
6. Moses 7:35; emphasis added.

7. Isaiah 9:6; see also 2 Nephi 19:6; emphasis added; scripture used as lyrics in George Frideric Handel, “For unto Us a Child Is Born,” *Messiah* (1741).
8. My thanks to Sister Lanette Brough for graciously confirming the story and for allowing me to share it in this context.
9. Russell M. Nelson, “The Price of Priesthood Power,” *Ensign*, May 2016; emphasis in original.
10. Ronald A. Rasband, “Standing with the Leaders of the Church,” *Ensign*, May 2016; emphasis added.
11. Brigham Young, “Remarks,” *Deseret News Weekly*, 13 May 1868, 3; quoted in *Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Work of Relief Society* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 52, note 31.
12. Emmeline B. Wells, “Sisters Be in Earnest,” *Woman’s Exponent*, 15 October 1876, 76; quoted in *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 54, note 35.
13. *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 54.
14. Emmeline B. Wells, “The Grain Question,” *Relief Society Bulletin*, September 1914, 1–2; quoted in *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 66, note 9.
15. *Daughters in My Kingdom*, 66–67.
16. Henry B. Eyring, “Finding Safety in Counsel,” *Ensign*, May 1997.
17. See “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign*, November 1995.
18. See “The Living Christ: The Testimony of the Apostles, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *Ensign*, April 2000.
19. Robert D. Hales, “General Conference: Strengthening Faith and Testimony,” *Ensign*, November 2013.
20. Rasband, “Standing.”
21. Bible Dictionary, s.v. “prayer,” 752–53.
22. Jacob 4:10
23. See, e.g., D&C 1:1; D&C 103:5.
24. D&C 1:1.
25. D&C 1:6.
26. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “hearken” (definition 3), oed.com/view/Entry/85056?redirectedFrom=hearken#eid.
27. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “hearken” (definition 4), oed.com/view/Entry/85056?redirectedFrom=hearken#eid.
28. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “hearken” (etymology), oed.com/view/Entry/85056?redirectedFrom=hearken#eid.
29. A George MacDonald analogy used by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 160 (book 4, chapter 9, paragraph 10).