Talk by Rodger Dean Duncan

On Friday, July 27, 1962, I was baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was 18 years old and recently graduated from high school.

When I was a young child I attended various evangelical protestant churches with my parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins. This sometimes included tent revivals.

In the summers I participated in Vacation Bible School. As a teenager I attended the Baptist church and Baptist youth camp.

I always felt a kinship with Jesus. I understood, at least in the most rudimentary way, that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

That He died for our sins.

And that He promised you and me and all of us that we will someday be resurrected after our time on earth.

But it was not until I was introduced to the Mormon missionaries that my understanding of important spiritual things began to come into clear focus.

Over the years Rean and I have maintained a good friendship with Blair Garff, one of the missionaries who taught me the gospel those 52 summers ago.

Earlier this year we visited with Blair and his wife Sue at their summer home in the mountains. Blair pulled out his missionary journal from five decades ago and showed me some entries:

**Sunday, 24 June, 1962** – “After dinner we taught Rodger Duncan the 1st discussion. He really accepted it quite well.”

**Tuesday, 26 June, 1962** – “I gave Rodger Duncan a 2nd discussion. He is really eager to learn.”

**Thursday, 28 June, 1962** – “In the evening we gave Rodger Duncan a 3rd discussion. He really ate it up and gave us a real strong testimony.”

**Tuesday, 3 July, 1962** – “[I] gave Rodger Duncan a fourth discussion. He really ate it up. He said he had some questions so I said ‘shoot,’ and [then] he started giving me a fifth discussion. So I went out to the car and got [the discussion material] and gave it to him. That was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life.”

Without reservation, I was open and receptive to the message of the missionaries. Boyd K. Packer once told me that I have a "believer's heart."

The missionaries answered questions about things I really wanted to understand. In addition, they answered important questions that I hadn't even thought to ask.
They taught me true doctrine about needs I didn’t yet realize I had. They taught me about the wondrous blessings of the restoration.

Over these past 52 years I’ve continued to learn. Much of my learning has come through service. I was ordained as a seventy at the age of 23 and as a high priest at the age of 25.

Through the years I’ve been honored to serve on multiple stake high councils, twice as bishop, as stake president as stake mission president, and in special assignments from the First Presidency, both in the U.S. and in other countries.

But until now I have never served as a full-time missionary. In the vernacular of the teenager, I’m “pumped.”

Five weeks after my baptism in the summer of 1962 I enrolled as a freshman at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Baylor was then, and is now, the largest Baptist university in the world. In addition to receiving a great undergraduate education at Baylor, I received four years of excellent tutoring by the wonderful members of the Waco Ward.

I learned that the best way to demonstrate commitment to the Lord is to “live” action verbs like trust, obey, and serve.

I learned that proactivity, reliability and follow through are the hallmarks of effective priesthood service.

I learned that faithful—and focused—home teaching is a marvelous blessing to both the teacher and the taught.

I discovered that—if we’re receptive—the promptings of the Spirit can be triggered by something as simple as a young child’s humble testimony.

I learned that the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is the antidote to every societal poison. The comfort for every fear. The encouragement for every doubt. The strength that enables endurance in every trial. The leavening context that provides joy even—and sometimes especially—in seasons of challenge.

During my time at Baylor, the Waco Ward was a relatively small congregation, affiliated with the Dallas Stake 90 miles to the north.

Today the Waco Stake has a brand new stake center, and there are thriving stakes in several other cities in that part of central Texas that had no church presence at all 50 years ago.

Rean and I were prepared to serve anywhere that we were sent. So where were we called?

Exactly where we hoped to be: To the Texas Fort Worth Mission, assigned as the first senior missionaries ever to serve in Waco, Texas.

Many of my professional colleagues and friends of other faiths have offered their congratulations on our mission call—which some of them refer to as our “mission trip”... not realizing that for Latter-day Saints, a mission is more than a "trip" and can involve anywhere from six to 36 months of full-time service.

Web sites, as you know, often have a section called FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions.

Here’s the FAQ I’ve used with my friends:

**Question:** You’ve had a successful career and you’re at the peak of your earning power. Why would you quit now?
**Answer:** We’re not quitting anything. We’re merely shifting gears. Besides, we know that every temporal and spiritual blessing we have or ever will have comes from a loving and generous God. Without Him, we are nothing.

Consecration is a covenant we gladly made many years ago, so we’re pleased to serve whenever and wherever we’re called.

**Question:** Aren’t Mormon missionaries always younger people?

**Answer:** When I get that question I usually point out that most people on planet earth are younger than I am.

Our church now has more than 88,000 full-time volunteer missionaries. Many of them are college-age men and women who consecrate 18 to 24 months in the service of the Lord.

There are also thousands of “senior” couples who serve, also at their own expense.

Rean is not too fond of being referred to as a "senior," so I simply remind her that she’s not old, she’s "seasoned."

**Question:** Doesn’t anybody in your church get paid for their service?

**Answer:** The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not have a paid clergy.

We are lay people, ready and willing to serve wherever and however we’re called.

A local congregation’s bishop may be a lawyer, a dentist, a truck driver, an accountant, or even an author or business consultant. It matters not.

In a typical Latter-day Saint congregation dozens of people serve as teachers, librarians, and youth leaders, and in many other capacities.

We don’t designate where we will serve. We serve where we are designated. In our Sunday worship services, there is no seminary-trained pastor.

The talks delivered from the pulpit are given by members of the congregation who are invited to expound on the blessings of living the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Just as in ancient times recorded in the New Testament, we "are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God."

We are all amateurs in the sense that our service is not compensated with money.

But you may be sure that a covenant-keeping Latter-day Saint is blessed with spiritual currency that is literally out of this world.

**Question:** Why are you going to Texas? Don’t missionaries usually go to places like Africa and remote locations where people haven’t heard about God?

**Answer:** When I’m asked this question I usually respond with a story. Many years ago Rean and I decided to take a spontaneous trip. We flew to New York, rented a car, and drove up through New England to enjoy the beautiful colors of autumn. As we approached a small village in western Massachusetts, we noticed a sign on the side of the road. It read: "Please drive carefully. We have no children to spare."

Our church has more than 400 missions in dozens and dozens of countries, including troubled areas of the world like Nigeria, where our friend Blair Garff served as mission president.
The Savior’s challenge was clear and specific: “Go ye therefore, and each all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. ... Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is needed by ALL of God’s children in every part of the world. Including Liberty, Missouri, and Waco, Texas.

The message of the restoration has universal application. Our Father in Heaven has no children to spare.

**Question:** Central Texas is the middle of the Bible belt. What can your church offer that the people down there don’t already have?

**Answer:** For people who are not yet Christian, we of course first introduce them to Jesus Christ as the only begotten son of our Father in Heaven.

We teach them about the role of Jesus as the Savior of the world.

For people—like I was in 1962—who already accept Jesus as Savior, we teach the wonderful plan of salvation.

We teach about the church that Jesus established during his earthly ministry.

We teach about the apostasy that occurred after the Savior’s crucifixion, resulting in a world without priesthood authority, a world with religious doctrines that were corrupted by the philosophies of men mingled with scripture.

We teach about the restoration of the church of Jesus Christ in these latter days—a church with apostles and prophets as prescribed in the New Testament’s Book of Ephesians and elsewhere in the scriptures.

We teach the wonderful principles of love, redemption, grace, and mercy that have been clarified by modern revelation.

We teach faith, repentance, baptism, and the incomparable Gift of the Holy Ghost.

In other words, we are happy to work with fellow Christians and deepen their understanding of the Savior and of his plan for all of us.

**Question:** Does the Book of Mormon compete against the Bible?

**Answer:** Not at all. Latter-day Saints revere the Bible as the word of God, as far as it is translated correctly.

There are some translations that seem more focused on political correctness and bending to current social trends than in conveying the original intent of the biblical records.

We prefer the King James version. The Bible is always listed first among our scriptures.

We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God. The subtitle to the Book of Mormon says it all: “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.”

The Book of Mormon—translated from ancient records by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost—is a wonderful history of a people who steadfastly followed the teachings of Christ, who believed in his atoning sacrifice, and who faithfully lived their lives in obedience to his commandments.

The Book of Mormon testifies over and over of Jesus Christ. It witnesses of His divinity, His life, and His atonement.

When I was first introduced to the Book of Mormon 52 years ago I did something very simple: I read it. Then I accepted the
challenge found in Moroni 10:4—“And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.”

I did not ask ill-informed anti-Mormons what they thought.

I did not go to the library to confer with long-ago discredited speculation about the book’s origin.

I simply did what Moroni challenged: With a sincere heart and with real intent—prepared to do something—I asked God in the name of Christ if the book is true.

The fact that I’m standing here today is testament to the answer I received.

Question: Some people seem to think that Mormons are not Christians. What’s that all about?

Answer: I would simply say that anyone who alleges that Mormons are not Christians is either sadly misinformed or deliberately intent on spreading an almost laughable falsehood.

First, consider the name of the church: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In this context, “Saints” simply means followers of Christ.

Every thing that is done in this church is done in the name of Jesus Christ.

We pray in his name. We bless babies in his name. We baptize and confirm in his name. We marry in his name. We administer the sacrament in his name. We ordain in his name. We bless the sick in his name. We administer every ordinance of the temple in his name.

We dedicate graves in his name. We even end our public discourses by invoking his name.

Latter-day Saints worship Jesus Christ as the savior of the world. We believe that it is only in and through his atoning sacrifice that we can be saved from our sins.

Jesus Christ is the head of this church and the absolute center of our religion.

When Christians of other faiths join our ranks, they find a comfortable and comforting home.

Question: What will you and Rean actually be doing on your mission?

Answer: We will no doubt be doing a lot of public affairs work—building bridges of understanding with influential people in the Waco community … people in education, law, medicine, business, politics, the news media, and leaders in other faith communities.

We also expect to work closely with our fellow church members in building up the capacity to lead and to teach and to inspire people to do better and to be better.

And, of course, we will be a support to the wonderful younger missionaries as they find and teach people who want to know more about the restored gospel.

During our absence from Liberty, we will of course miss the comfort of our home, the fellowship of our friends, and the presence of our wonderful family.

But we take seriously the baptismal covenant to “stand as witness of God at all times and in all things, and in all place.”
Inconvenience does not exempt any of us from heeding the call to do our part in hastening the work of the Lord on the earth.

Yes, we are busy people.

But we’ve learned that the busier our secular and family lives become the more important it is that we exercise the childlike faith of Nephi who said: “I will go and do what the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.”

Rean and I fondly remember our Liberty friends John and Mary Pritchard. They were faithful Presbyterians, two of the most kind and generous and Christlike people we’ve ever known here.

John and Mary were instrumental in establishing the Habitat for Humanity program in the Kansas City area.

John once told us that he spent the first half of his career building second homes for rich people, and the second half of his career building first homes for poor people.

Rean and I will now devote this particular season of our lives in helping people of every circumstance discover their eternal homes.

I bear witness that Jesus is the Christ, the savior of the world. The gospel he taught and the church he organized have been restored to the earth.

I testify that it is through that gospel, and only through that gospel, that we can qualify for the blessing of returning to live with our Savior and our Heavenly Father and our families through the eternities.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Talk by Rean Robbins-Duncan

Years ago my husband Rodger and I decided to spend a day exploring without a plan.

But we couldn’t understand how to do that. One cannot go to the car without a plan or at least a beginning of one.

Finally we decided on a simple approach. We took a coin with us and each time we came to a junction in the road we flipped the coin: heads, we would turn right; tails, we would turn left.

We had a wonderful time! We saw lovely and interesting things. But as the daylight began to wane and our thoughts turned to returning home, we found ourselves lost and we had no way to find our way back.

This vacation occurred before GPS and we forgot to take a map. Either of those would have been very helpful.

We enjoyed ourselves for a time as we wandered aimlessly, but we could not find our way home.

Fortunately, we found help and eventually managed to return safely.
Our lives can be lived like that. Without a plan we may – and undoubtedly will – get lost and be unable to find our way home.

Our true home is with our Heavenly Father and Creator.

He loves us with a love that’s impossible for us to comprehend.

We love Him because he loved us first and showed His love by his actions.

He is our Father because we are his literal spirit children.

By His own words through His prophet Moses, we know that His work and His glory is to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of all of His children.

He – being our Eternal Father – knew just what we needed to experience and to grow.

Loving parents always want what is best for their children. Right? We are like our Heavenly Father in that way.

And He knew we needed bodies to experience life that was to be both challenging and rewarding.

So He made a plan for His children. It is called the Plan of Salvation.

He planned it down to the most miraculous invisible detail.

He planned a world, how He would construct it, where it would be, every detail of how it would work, down to every plant and animal.

He planned every detail down to ones like how patterns would be repeated in amazing way – an example of which I noticed years ago as I gazed out of an airplane window, noticing that the mountains seen from the air looked just like the veins of tree leaves.

Can you imagine the planning? Can you imagine the immensity of that task?

It makes city planning seem like child’s play.

It makes designing the world's tallest or most complex building seem trivial.

Can you imagine the fun He must have had?

Children must experience a similar joy when they invent and then draw an imaginary animal or plant.

Then he held a council in heaven. We were all there and He laid out the plan.

He told us about the world He had planned and shared why He had planned it.

He wanted us to have further experiences and receive bodies and to become as much like our amazing, powerful and holy Father in Heaven as were able to become.

He explained we would become human, get here by birth, and live in families.

Those who came here first would give life to those who came later, and those who came later would remember the debt we would have to our fathers and mothers.

He told we would have instruction and rules to help us negotiate our way successfully through this mortal experience.

And He asked us to trust Him and follow His plan.

He, knowing the difficulty of the experience He was planning for us, prepared a Savior for us.
He, because He was and is holy, cannot and will not be in the presence of uncleanness.

If and when we should by will or accident, err, we should need a way to be cleansed. In that great council in Heaven, all of us chose to trust Him and to follow the great plan of our Great God.

So, the plan was ready to become real.

God our Father put the plan to fruition. He organized a world. This world. He prepared it in creative periods. He called days and His plan and His work are recorded in the Hebrew scriptures – the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament.

He organized the heaven and the earth, separated the water and earth, separated the light from the darkness, calling the light day and the darkness night.

He set the moon and stars to light the night and the sun to light the day.

He made a firmament and divided the waters under the firmament from the waters above the firmament.

He gathered the waters below and let the dry land appear, caused the earth to produce grass, herbs and trees, all with seed to reproduce themselves.

He brought animal life from the water and from the earth and caused them to multiply.

And then – after all was in place – he created man and then woman.

Adam and Eve were placed in a garden where they could begin to learn how to care for the earth and how to make decisions about how they would keep the rules they were given.

The man and woman were given the gift of agency.

We had known we would receive this gift of agency – it was presented as a part of the Plan of Salvation. But a veil of forgetfulness was placed over us so we could be tested whether we would choose good or evil, right or wrong.

In order to do that, opposites had to exist.

If there was good, there had to be evil.

If beauty, then ugliness.

If truth, then falsehood.

We needed to learn to discern one from the other.

You know they made a decision that separated them from God’s presence.

They became fully mortal, lived here on earth and then died.

We are here because they made the decision to follow Father’s plan to multiply and replenish the earth.

Life here on earth is a challenge. We make decisions every day about a multitude of things.

Some of our decisions are helpful, hopeful and informed. Some are less so.

Sometimes we mess up. Sometimes we choose badly. Sometimes we make decisions that make our lives so wonderful we cannot comprehend our joy … or so terrifying we cannot function.

God our Father has given us parameters to help us negotiate our temporary lives on earth.
Those of us who are familiar with those parameters may call them commandments.

The commandments are somewhat like a roadmap, or perhaps rules of engagement. They tell us what we need to do to arrive safely and successfully to our correct destination.

In 1972 Rodger and I, with my mother, our 2-year-old daughter and our newborn son, made a road trip to Sturbridge, Massachusetts. We had never been to the city or state, and we were from the west where there were few toll roads. In fact, we had rarely even seen a toll road.

Boston Harbor and its adjoining roads were undergoing a renovation and the roads we encountered were not marked by informative signs.

We accidently entered a toll road and could not get off because we had no cash with us.

After a desperately frustrating time we found a toll booth with an attendant. We told him our plight and he, believing we were sincere, paid the toll for us.

I can't tell you what a relief that was to us. Cool water on a hot day! We have never forgotten that kindness.

When we fail to comply with the map or we get lost, we need someone or something to change before we can continue.

Sometimes we get so dangerously lost we need to be redeemed.

It's like owing a great debt to a loan shark and being in danger of death if we do not pay it. Someone comes along and pays our debt and we then owe to a different person.

Except the redeemer of our lives is Jesus Christ. And all He asks us to do is to trust Him, and undertake to keep His rules.

He never changes His agreement. He never changes the rules. He never fails us. But He insists we follow Him. And He is willing to do this every time we err and ask for His forgiveness and start again.

I tell you this today for two reasons:

One, this is the weekend before Thanksgiving.

It is a time to be thankful for turkey, thankful to the one who earned the money to pay for the turkey, thankful to the one who cooked the turkey, and thankful that we are well enough to eat the turkey.

Yes! It is a day to be thankful we live in Liberty, and in the United States of America.

But it is a day – as every day – when our thoughts should go to God our Father and Jesus Christ who have prepared this life for us and prepared a way for us to return to our heavenly home and to live in the presence of our Father in Heaven.

My second reason for telling you this is that the scriptures warn us against pride.

Pride is the antithesis of gratitude. And it's a very dangerous attitude.

When we use our agency to forget God, to ignore His commandments or worse, cease to believe in Him – indeed choose to not believe in him – and go our own ways as individuals or as a nation, we imperil our very lives.

We cease to have the blessings of God upon us. We are left alone to suffer the consequences of our actions fully.
And we can lose our very lives and our very nation because we fail to use the map or GPS that will lead us back into the presence of our loving, merciful, Father in Heaven.

Let us look carefully at our lives – and our choices.

Let us repent – apologize to and turn our hearts back to God.

Let us get the loving help we need to negotiate the roads of our lives, I urge us all.

In the name of the Holy One who has paid our debts of sin and error, Jesus Christ. Amen