



A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell

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The story behind the writing of this book really began in 1976, when Elder Maxwell invited me to take a leave from Brigham Young University and work for two years under his daily direction in the new Correlation Department at Church headquarters. In later years, when I was an administrator and a teacher at Ricks College and then at BYU, I saw him often in Church Educational System meetings, where he was a key figure on the Church Board of Education. In 1996 I was called to the Seventy and assigned to an Area Presidency in Australia, where I remained until returning to Utah in August of 2000. Like so many other Church members, my wife, Marie, and I were stunned by the news of Elder Maxwell's leukemia in late 1996, and we worried and prayed about his health. During October conference 1999, he invited me to come by his office. As we talked, he indicated he was not certain about his condition. He said he was receiving an experimental treatment but "one of these days" the leukemia just might fully return. That was the main reason, he said, why he'd finally yielded to prodding from others that he allow the writing of his biography. I thought a book on his life story would be wonderful until he asked if I would write it. As honored as I felt, I honestly thought my doing this was not a good idea. I believed that he, his family, and the Church deserved thorough research and writing, and the work needed to be done at once to maximize the possibility of being published during his lifetime. He shared those hopes. But given the frightening uncertainty about his health; given that acceptable biographies can take years to document and write; given that he hadn't kept a personal journal, which would necessitate additional months of original research; and given that I was half a world away on a Church assignment I replied that someone who could give this project immediate and full-time attention was needed. Nonetheless, after more visits with Elder Maxwell and with others, within a few days I had agreed to begin the project and to move as quickly as possible. In the weeks that followed, I worried about having committed myself to something as unreachable as this task seemed. As I would awaken to hear the colorful birds that rule those fresh Australian mornings, I would sometimes wonder if indeed, I would hope that I had agreed to write Elder Maxwell's biography only in a dream. Then the reality would hit me again. At times I would remember Nephi's words about the Lord preparing a way for people who have a work to do.

A Disciple's Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell Details

Date : Published April 1st 2002 by Deseret Book Co

ISBN : 9781570088339

Author : Bruce C. Hafen

Format : Hardcover 631 pages

Genre : Biography, Christianity, Lds, Religion, Nonfiction, Church

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Stephen says

This is a fantastic biography of one of my heroes. Bruce Hafen is a masterful writer, and even the boring parts are easy to read. The beginning and end definitely have the most meat, but the whole book paints a beautiful portrait of a man with a singular goal, to become a true disciple.

Michelle says

You become a better person by reading about great people. This book made me a better person, learning about the life of someone who made it his life's mission to be a disciple of Christ. He inspires me in so many ways. Some of his talks during my high school and college days were so impactful at the time that they lifted and encouraged me often. One of my favorite Maxwell quotes is "Moments are the molecules that make up eternity." He was a man who made the most of each moment. This is a book I would recommend to anyone!

Shawn says

Ironical that a man so incredibly unique and unquestionably authentic is probably viewed by much of the world as a quaint Christian blindly following the religious crowd. We learn from Neal A. Maxwell, however, that many ironies will ultimately be realized by humanity, such as the beautiful truth that the meek followers of Christ who submit to God's will can experience the greatest peace and joy in this life and will eventually receive "all that God hath."

Elder Maxwell's struggles with, for example, impatience and "not suffering fools" provides useful context for his personal path of discipleship and offers hope to individuals who are beset by weaknesses and failings impeding their own walk of faith. People can change. Positive character traits that are not innate can be developed through concerted effort and, most importantly, reliance on the Lord.

The narrative is so fluid that potentially dry topics such as the Church's Correlation Department (which Elder Maxwell was instrumental in guiding) were actually quite fascinating to read about. Anyone that has an interest in 20th century developments within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the role played by one of the Church's foremost orators, mediators and examples of true discipleship should read this biography.

Meleece says

Such a good biography! Having the chapters and sections organized topically instead of progressing through the book chronologically made it such a good read for me. But that was not its main attraction. This was an important work, a significant read, and life-changing.

I remember hearing the news that Elder Maxwell had passed away. I was kneeling on the floor in my dad's office one early morning, turning on the radio. I heard the news just then and I began to cry. I didn't get up for a long time. I remember feeling just a tremendous loss. I had never met him, but I think everyone could tell that he was special.

It surprised me greatly to learn, when reading the beginning of the book, that Elder Maxwell was once an impatient and intellectually elitist young man. That is to say, he was normal. I guess I too falsely believed in what Bruce C. Hafen described as "General Authorities being born in suits and ties." Elder Maxwell had so many gifts and talents, like his use for words and his very quick and sharp mind. He had foibles too. But his whole life he used discipline and self-mastery (which turned into discipleship) to grow his talents, create good characteristics that he didn't have, and eradicate his weaknesses. The last chapter talked about the price of discipleship, and Elder Maxwell paid that price, by giving up all worldliness and battling with leukemia so that he could draw closer and be more like Christ. It wasn't an easy road but that specialness we all felt from Elder Maxwell was the result from his life efforts. It was inspiring to read about such a life, to feel that perhaps becoming such a good person and disciple is possible.

Doug says

I'll admit to a certain bias in my review - i follow the same faith tradition as Neal Maxwell and I've admired his writing for years. With that said, I really enjoyed reading this biography. It's a long one and definitely took me a while (interspersed with other reading :)) but I enjoyed coming back to it each time. I would definitely recommend it.

Jonathan Plowman says

Phenomenal biography of one of my all-time favorite speakers and teachers.

Mike Day says

This book was amazing. Everything about Elder Maxwell makes me want to be a better person. He served in the war, and he served a mission. He is an inspiration to me on every level. The story of what he went through on the islands with the war with Japan was inspiring. I also loved this book because I love his talks and he never talks about himself, so this was a great opportunity for me to get to know him. I named my fourth son after him - Maxwell.

Mark says

At times I have wondered how participation in war prepared one for significant service as a spiritual leader, so this part of his life was the focus of my reading. In reading this and many other biographies, the answer to my wonderment has never been made clear. This biography does not portray any significant epitome foxhole near-death experience that changed the course of Neil's life.

Heather says

This is a remarkable book about a wonderful man! I learned so much about Elder Maxwell and the growth of the Church during his lifetime, as well as the church organization and structure. It's fascinating to see how the Church operates and grows and adapts and how the work is hastened in the Lord's time and with the help of humble and willing instruments and individuals. I am inspired by Elder Maxwell's life and example and this unique time period and growth for the Church. It's so neat to see how he was always ready to do what the Lord needed Him to do.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell's life was all about discipleship – coming to know the Savior and being true to Him. It was about self mastery, humility, openness, hard work, compassion, empathy, service, sacrifice.

Elder Maxwell learned from his father's example to work hard when he was young. He was down-to-earth. He was inspired to serve his country and volunteered as a part of the "greatest generation" and at the peril of his life he came to know God, in a fox hole in Okinawa (p. 116). Afterwards he went on to serve as an incredible missionary in Canada. He came home and lead gospel discussions in college. He was a good conversationalist and had a clever way of expressing his ideas. He was visionary and saw what needed to be done and would focus on the most important strategies to get there.

He was smart and asked thoughtful questions and wanted to understand truth, but he "never worried that the findings of science or other disciplines would challenge the gospel, because he always believed, and then his experience consistently confirmed, that 'the lessons from secular history buttress gospel principles' more than they challenge them." For him, every dimension of 'the gospel is relevant to every social problem (p. 164).'" Gospel scholarship was important to him and he lived and believed that the gospel encompasses all truth.

After college he moved to work in Washington DC. He enjoyed politics and history. I love his teachings and thoughts while there about power and meekness. He said, "Power is so attractive that only a few people can handle it....Meekness is not a common virtue (p. 211)." Meekness mattered to him. Family mattered to him. He often talked about family life as the center of society, the Church and the gospel. "Life's most demanding tests as well as life's most significant opportunities for growth in life usually occur within marriage and the family (p. 219)." He had a good wife who was always serving and loving as well. "If Colleen isn't fasting for the garbage man, she's straightening the grocery carts (p. 240)."

The Maxwells came back to Utah from DC where Neal worked at the University of Utah. He worked in university administration and used his political and journalism interests and peacemaking skills. He was a community leader and friend in a "genuine selfless way (p. 283)." He taught leadership to others. He often asked people what they would like to be remembered by to get them thinking about how they lived and lead others. Two of his mentors were President Harold B. Lee and President Spencer W. Kimball. Even while still working at the University of Utah he was very involved in the Church organization. He had important roles in the organization of the Church Education System, correlation, leadership training, public affairs and the worldwide expansion of the Church. He was influential in the Church's expansion in Africa and Asia. He kept the handkerchief he had with him when he heard President Kimball make the announcement about the revelation on the priesthood being given to all worthy men in 1978.

Elder Maxwell did a lot to build bridges – with non-member friends and associates at the University of Utah

and with leaders of nations. He knew the issues and wasn't afraid to discuss difficult topics. He led interfaith discussions. He worked hard in public affairs to be sure we were telling our story and not letting others define who we were. He also encourage people to be involved in civic affairs and not just sit on the sidelines – beyond Church service we should be involved in community service.

He loved words. He loved to read and to write. He wrote many books. He read extensively. He read biographies. He enjoyed reading C.S. Lewis' religious works. He enjoyed good books, but especially the scriptures of reading and learning about and following the Savior.

Even with all of his assignments and traveling all over the world he tried to focus on being an Apostle first and thinking about his assignments second. He sought after charity and offered God his heart and his life. His life was about discipleship and he "didn't shrink" from the trials that came. He followed President Kimball's example. When President Kimball was in the hospital for treatments of his own he was often found in others rooms visiting and blessing them. Elder Maxwell faced leukemia at the end of his life and was a great support to others in his example of discipleship and facing adversity, particularly among cancer support groups.

I am grateful for Elder Maxwell's life, example and teachings. I loved this book and think everyone should read it – not just to be inspired by the life of an apostle, but to learn about the Lord's work and how it is accomplished today. I was particularly grateful for the insights it gave me into my work and life. I want to be a better disciple.

Here are a few quotes I liked, but I dog-eared almost every other page and had so many other thoughts as I read that I are hard to capture here:

"I want to play in the game. I want a jersey. On the team, on this side or that side. I don't want to sit on the sidelines (p. 19)."

"Revelation works in a natural way. There is an unmet need. As we ponder over it, the mind and experience can put forward an adequate alternative...the Lord should [not] have to do our research for us, nor should we have a feeling that revelation is a push-button kind of thing (p. 324)."

"Had he been more logically ambitious about planning his life, the path of his discipleship probably would not have developed as it did (p. 339)."

"If the Lord has your heart, you know what to do....Discipleship may keep the honors of the world from us (p. 391)."

"Anyone who knows him knows that he is an intellectual in the best sense of that word—always pushing to learn, always reading, always thinking, always using his critical faculties. And yet he has become a remarkably humble man, remarkably meek, a prototypical disciple of Christ. – Elder Oaks (p. 399)"

"When Neal spoke at Camilla Kimball's funeral, he remembered 'the authority of [her] example. President Kimball articulated and demonstrated 'lengthen your stride,' but there were actually two pairs of legs striding.' The Kimball marriage, like the Maxwell marriage, was an equal partnership. And Camilla's attributes were worth emulating: 'In her meekness she did not fully realize how extensively she had developed Christlike traits.' Disciples learn much from knowing and following other disciples (p. 423)."

"I realize, of course, that my real response to the call will come through the life that I live...My solemn

obligation is to become more like Him step by step (p. 443)."

"The image of the Church will improve in direct proportion to the degree to which we mirror the Master in our lives. No media effort can do as much good, over the sweep of time, as can believing, behaving and serving members of the Church (p. 493)."

"We have to love our neighbor because he is there....He is the sample of humanity which is actually given us. Precisely because he may be anybody his is everybody. – G.K. Chesterton (p. 541)"

"The true disciple develops from accepting to appreciating, to adoring, and then to emulating Christ.... "If we are serious about our discipleship, Jesus will eventually request each of us to do those very things which are most difficult for us to do." (p. 547)."

Heather says

This was a very well written biography of Neal A. Maxwell. I've always been impressed with him and his talks during General Conference but loved learning more about the man and his discipleship. He was also a great writer and has many books which I'm now thinking I'd like to read. I really feel inspired to be a better person just from reading this book.

Dlora says

A Disciple's Life written by Bruce C. Hafen is a marvelous biography that shows Neal A. Maxwell's personality and accomplishments but also includes his weaknesses and struggles. It doesn't make the mistake of some general authority biographies that try to whitewash a life and paint it too good to be true. But what is even more appealing in this biography is the inclusion of Bruce Hafen's marvelous insights and thought processes in addition to Neal Maxwell's fascinating personality and life. Another bonus is that the Maxwell family history encapsulates the history of the church during the last half of the 20th century. If you like biographies, church history, or just a fascinating story about an amazing man and his biographer, I recommend this book. It was great.

Josh says

I really enjoyed the spiritual insights and some of the interactions and opinions of and between the apostles. I learned quite a bit about more recent church history. However the book probably could have been about 2/3 as long; there was a lot of commentary and scene-setting that could have been reduced.

Nat Harward says

Can't say enough about the life of this man.

Kami says

- This was my third attempt to read this book, and I finished this time!! Woo!! Elder Maxwell was my favorite speaker as a teen, and it has always been a goal of mine to finish this book. I DID IT!
- This book was part text book, part biography, part BYU history, part church history, and part uplifting. I wish it had been mostly biography and uplifting. I really didn't need all the BYU history and church history. Those parts were tedious to read.
- I was really moved by Elder Maxwell's obedience, especially during World War II.
- I like that the author didn't sugarcoat the horrors of war. The chapters about World War II were some of my favorite. It was thrilling to read about, and I loved how Elder Maxwell's faith got him through.
- I love how highly Elder Maxwell praises his wife. They supported and loved each other, and they were true companions and partners. It is nice to read about marriages like that.
- A lot of Elder Maxwell's university days read like a textbook. It was very boring, and I didn't really understand much of it.
- I liked finding similarities between Elder Maxwell and myself. I also get bored in church and start reading my scriptures, I am having to learn empathy, and I'm often impatient and in a hurry to get things done.
- I love how the author addressed the way Neal Maxwell spoke. It was very interesting to read how he developed his cadence of speech. His love for language and words was fun to read about, and I love the quotes from the other apostles about Elder Maxwell's speech.
- Elder Maxwell was an incredible man, and he accomplished so much in his life. Even though I struggled through some of the book, I'm really glad I read it. His story is inspiring.

Joshua Guest says

It took me 5 years to get through the first two-thirds and about 5 hours to get through the final third of this biography by former BYU Law School Dean Bruce Hafen. I really don't remember too many stories from Neal Ash Maxwell's life, but I will remember his habits and his transformation. My favorite quality of his was his reading style, he liked to go digging for gems of wisdom in periodicals, histories, speeches and biographies. "Neal Maxwell is a nugget hunter. He writes the same way he reads, and for him a book is a 'good read' if it has even a few memorable images and specific insights." By Maxwell's own standard, then, this is a good read. I appreciate his Aristotelian approach to the gospel. He was true to its principles, but he showed extraordinary awareness of the practical implications of Mormon ideology. This made him a great example of being a builder between the LDS Church and political institutions, media outlets, and members of the Church who don't fit the traditional conservative-Republican Mormon stereotype.
