

Living on the Lord's Side of the Line

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For someone who bleeds blue, it is wonderful to be back on this campus. I love BYU. But as much as I love this university, I love you more. For me, you embody the vitality of this magnificent Church. You are living, breathing evidence that righteousness *will* prevail in a cynical, seductive world. Every time I am in a gathering of men and women your age, I have the sense that I am surrounded by spectacular spiritual potential. I wonder how many future mission presidents, bishops, Laurel advisors, and Primary presidents are in this room. How many children will be reared in righteousness because of your devotion as mothers and fathers? Who in this audience will help unlock a nation or a people to the gospel? Who will develop technologies to spread our message more effectively? Who will stand up in communities and schools and countries for values essential to the stability of an intact society? In short, I can't help but wonder what place in this latter-day battlefield each of you will occupy, for of this I am sure: Every one of you has a unique mission to fulfill. It is about standing where you have been foreordained to stand that I would like to speak today.

When I was a student here, I took a year off from my studies to tour with a USO group that entertained at military bases around the world.

One trip took us to the Far East, and before we left, my father gave me a strong warning. "I am worried about this trip," he said. "Be careful. Don't go anywhere you shouldn't go." His words caught my attention, but, frankly, as our adventure in the Orient began, I forgot about his caution.

One day we were scheduled to perform at a base near the Demilitarized Zone that separates North and South Korea. Our escort officer asked if we would like to go into the DMZ and visit Panmunjom, where the peace treaty ending the Korean War had been signed. It was a place of great historical significance. Relations between the two Koreas were strained at the time, and we asked if it was safe. The officer assured us it was, but then promptly furnished waivers we were to sign that absolved the military of responsibility in the event of accident or death. I suddenly remembered Dad's warning: "Be careful. Don't go anywhere you shouldn't go." But not wanting to be the killjoy, and

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being a little curious myself, I shrugged off my worry, signed the waiver, and headed into the DMZ, where we were no longer under the protection of the U.S. armed forces.

That reality was immediately evident as we drove past rows of somber North Korean soldiers sporting machine guns. “Don’t look them in the eyes,” we were warned. “Anything can set them off.” As we joked about our bodies never being found, my stomach started to churn and my father’s warning played in my mind in digital, Dolby sound. I knew that I had indeed gone somewhere I shouldn’t have gone. The experience was nerve-racking. I felt as though I was behind enemy lines. And, as fascinating as the excursion was for a history major, I couldn’t wait to get out of there. It wasn’t until we crossed the border back into South Korea that I again felt safe. And, as it turns out, for good reason. Later that week three Americans were shot and killed in the Demilitarized Zone.

With this experience in mind, consider these words from George Albert Smith when he was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve:

*There is a division line well defined that separates the Lord’s territory from Lucifer’s. If we live on the Lord’s side of the line Lucifer cannot come there to influence us, but if we cross the line into his territory we are in his power. By keeping the commandments of the Lord we are safe on His side of the line, but if we disobey His teachings we voluntarily cross into the zone of temptation and invite the destruction that is ever present there. Knowing this, how anxious we should always be to live on the Lord’s side of the line. [“Our M.I.A.” *Improvement Era*, May 1935, 278]*

I repeat, “If we live on the Lord’s side of the line Lucifer cannot come there to influence us.” What an offer of safety and security in a world that Lucifer has turned into enemy-occupied territory; a world where his enticements are more provocative and enslaving than ever; a

world where he will resort to any tactic to lure us to his side of the line, where we are no longer under the influence and protection of the Holy Ghost. Fortunately, Satan can’t *make* us do anything. Said the Prophet Joseph: “As well might the devil seek to dethrone Jehovah, as overthrow an innocent soul that resists everything which is evil” (HC 4:605). The only power the adversary has is power we give him when we sin or break our covenants. And we have not been left to withstand the wiles of the adversary alone, for the power of Jesus Christ is stronger than the power of the devil. Hence we have the promise that Lucifer cannot influence us when we stay on the Lord’s side of the line. No wonder we are counseled, “Pray always lest that wicked one have power in you, and *remove you out of your place*” (D&C 93:49; emphasis added). No wonder we have been admonished, “Stand ye in holy places, and *be not moved*” (D&C 87:8; emphasis added).

Very simply, our physical and spiritual safety lies in never even getting close to the line that separates light from dark, good from evil. Jesus Christ showed us how to deal with the adversary. When Satan tempted Him, there was no clever repartee, no battle of wills, just immediate dismissal—“Get thee behind me, Satan. . . . Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Luke 4:8, 12). If the omniscient Jehovah wasn’t willing to debate the adversary, how quickly ought we to run for our lives—our eternal lives—when confronted with even the slightest hint of evil.

You’re smart. You’re even exceptional. President Gordon B. Hinckley has stated repeatedly that you are the finest generation this earth has ever seen. But that prophetic endorsement notwithstanding, you’re not *that* smart. You are not resilient enough to tangle with the adversary. You can *never* match his cunning or his talent for deception and diversion. He will outsmart, outmaneuver, and outlast you every time you willingly consent to a duel. Lucifer is like the ultimate carnival

barker: “Step right up. Come on in. Don’t miss the greatest show on earth.” But as soon as he has you inside his tent, he will leave you to twist in agony and isolation and darkness.

Happily, the choice about which side of the line we stand on is ours, for we “are free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator . . . , or to choose captivity and death, according to the captivity and power of the devil” (2 Nephi 2:27). The choice is ours. If we will allow Him to, Jesus Christ will shield and deliver us from Lucifer, who because of his rebellion and arrogance and thirst for power forfeited his inheritance and is now bent on jeopardizing ours. How crucial it therefore is that we become steadfast and immovable on the Lord’s side of the line, where we are not only protected but ultimately sealed up unto the Lord (see Mosiah 5:15).

The principle of being steadfast and immovable reminds me of the North Carolina Tar Heels. I am a basketball junkie, and as a product of the great basketball state of Kansas, I have watched many a ball game between the University of Kansas Jayhawks and the Tar Heels. Do you know what the Tar Heels’ mascot represents? During the Civil War those tough Carolina farm boys refused to concede ground to the Union army, and it was said that they stood as though they had tar on their heels. They would not budge.

Being steadfast and immovable with our heels in tar on the Lord’s side of the line is the only strategy that works long-term against Lucifer. Some of his enticements are blatant and cause those who succumb to take giant leaps into his territory. *Any* breach of morality is immorality. Anything that isn’t honest is dishonest. Any exposure to pornography, drugs, alcohol, and even excessive materialism moves us to the adversary’s side of the line.

But if he can’t get us to succumb to blatant evil, the adversary tries to coax us onto his side of the line by resorting to strategies that slowly wear us down, weaken our resolve, and dim

our memory of who we are. See if any of these sound familiar. Lucifer whispers that it doesn’t matter what we do now, that there is plenty of time later to get our spiritual act together. It is the Sin Now, Pay Later Plan. He feeds our vanity with promises of popularity, power, and prosperity. He tells us what we want to hear: that life is supposed to be easy and fun and that if we experience pain or undeserved difficulties the gospel must not be working. He always promotes shortcuts, though there are no shortcuts to anywhere worth going.

He wants us to compare ourselves to others and then to criticize and judge one another. He numbs us to a sliding scale of morality so that we eventually embrace behaviors that repulsed us earlier. He wants us to believe that anything short of blatant immorality is just sport—no harm, no foul. He wants us so absorbed with school, dating, and careers that we don’t have time to really *live* the gospel—to learn how to receive answers to prayer, to immerse ourselves in the scriptures, and to go to the temple. He rejoices in even small breaches in our integrity because he knows that unless checked they will ultimately lead us “away *carefully* down to hell” (2 Nephi 28:21; emphasis added).

When we succumb to the adversary’s tactics, we experience what I did that day in the DMZ—fear and anxiety—because with all of his cunning, the adversary cannot duplicate joy or peace. That is why there is such safety on the Lord’s side of the line, where the power of the priesthood and the Holy Ghost protect us.

So how do we stay on the Lord’s side of the line? How do we stand in holy places and be not moved? In this the year 2000 there is a great deal we can learn from Helaman and his 2,000 stripling warriors. You know the story. Two thousand righteous young men stepped forward to fight in the stead of their fathers, who had made a covenant to never again shed the blood of their brethren (see Alma 24:18). These young men were ultimately victorious

against a larger, more experienced Lamanite army for several reasons:

1. Before the sons of Helaman began their campaign, they entered into a covenant “that they never would give up their liberty, but they would fight in all cases to protect the Nephites and themselves from bondage” (Alma 53:17). It is the same with us. The first step toward consecration and total commitment to the Lord is making covenants with Him. That is what we do at baptism. That is what we do again, later, with powerful spiritual ramifications, when we enter the house of the Lord.

There is *power* in making covenants. Weekly, as we renew our covenants and promise to take upon ourselves the name of the Son, to always remember Him, and to keep His commandments, we receive in return a transcendent promise, one filled with heavenly power: that we “may always have his Spirit to be with [us]” (Moroni 4:3). Having the Holy Ghost with us—and learning to hear His voice—is a key, perhaps the single most profound key, to remaining steadfast and immovable on the Lord’s side of the line. And it all begins by making a covenant.

2. The 2,000 stripling warriors not only made covenants, they kept them. “They were men who were true at all times in whatsoever thing they were entrusted” (Alma 53:20). Very simply, they did what they said they would do. They weren’t always looking for ways to straddle the line between right and wrong.

After President Hinckley was interviewed by Mike Wallace for *60 Minutes*, I had occasion to talk with Mr. Wallace about their conversation. Do you know what Mike Wallace seemed most impressed with? That President Hinckley had done everything in connection with the interview that he had promised to do. When I later offered to show Mr. Wallace how I intended to quote him in President Hinckley’s biography, he replied, “That’s not necessary. You’re a Mormon. I trust you.” Do you really think this seasoned journalist believes every

member of our Church is trustworthy? Sight unseen? He is not that naïve. But his expression was not a reflection of me, it was a reflection of his experience with President Hinckley. In effect, he was saying, “If you are associated with *that* man, then I assume that you, too, will do what you have said you will do.”

Are we true at all times to the things with which we have been entrusted? Do we tell the truth? Are we true to those who have trusted us with their love and their confidence? Are we true to the knowledge that we are sons and daughters of God with an eternal future? Are we true to the whisperings of the Spirit? Are we true to our temple covenants? Are we doing what we promised we would do before we came here and promised again when we were baptized and endowed?

The stripling warriors not only kept their covenants, but they performed “every word of command with exactness” (Alma 57:21). In other words, they kept their covenants with precision. A half-hearted effort to keep the Sabbath day holy or be morally clean or tell the truth or dress modestly is really no effort at all. Joseph Smith didn’t say that we *sort of* believe in being “honest, true, chaste, benevolent, [and] virtuous” (Articles of Faith 1:13). On Mount Sinai the Lord didn’t declare, “Thou shalt not steal—unless you’re in a real bind.” He didn’t say, “Thou shalt *rarely* covet.” He didn’t say, “Thou shalt not commit adultery—very often.” He said, “*Thou shalt not*,” clearly delineating lines we are not to cross—lines that represent breaches in integrity or morality or virtue so serious that they drive the Spirit away and lead ultimately to the destruction of our souls; lines to stay away from lest we lose control of our thoughts, our motives, or our actions and step into Lucifer’s territory where we come under his control.

Men and women who sell their birthright for a mess of pottage will tell you that their demise began with something small, with some seemingly insignificant breach of integ-

urity that escalated. The little things *do* matter. It is not possible to profess righteousness while flirting with sin. Believe me, Lucifer wants you of the noble birthright. He wants your minds and your bodies and your souls. I daresay there is no greater smirking in the underworld than when he gets his chains around one of you.

It is as we keep the commandments and our covenants with exactness that the Lord strengthens us. The supreme example is the Savior Himself. In Gethsemane, after He renewed His covenant, saying, “Not my will, but thine, be done,” “there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him” (Luke 22:42–43) so that He could endure what lay ahead. On the cross when He uttered the words “It is finished, thy will is done” (JST, Matthew 27:54; see also John 19:30), He became the greatest example in time or eternity of keeping covenants. There would have been no Atonement had the Lord not kept His covenant precisely as He promised. It is the same with us. As we recommit ourselves, the Lord strengthens us to withstand any temptation.

Living as Latter-day Saints is not easy. But it is easier than the alternative. The cost of discipleship, as high as it may be, is less than the price of sin—less costly than having the Holy Ghost withdraw or losing self-respect or jeopardizing eternal life.

3. The stripling warriors were believers. Their faith in Christ was active and dynamic. They believed that He could move mountains—not to mention battalions of bloodthirsty Lamanites bent on their destruction—if they had faith in Him. Thus, when asked to put their lives on the line, they responded without hesitation, “Our God is with us, and he will not suffer that we should fall; [so] let us go forth.” They believed that “if they did not doubt, God would deliver them” (Alma 56:46–47).

There is a reason that faith is the first principle of the gospel, because it is our willingness to believe Christ, to believe that He will do what He has said He will do, that activates the

power of the Atonement in our lives. The Lord has promised “to do *all things* . . . for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him” (1 Nephi 7:12; emphasis added).

As our faith increases, we come to understand the magnificent promises He has made to those who live on His side of the line. He promised to heal our broken hearts and to set at liberty them who are bruised (see Luke 4:18, Jacob 2:8); to give power to the faint and to increase the strength of those who have no strength (see Isaiah 40:28–29); to help us bear our burdens with ease (see Mosiah 24:15); to succor us or come to our aid if we will seek after Him (see Alma 7:12); and to allow the devil no power over us if we will build our lives on His rock (see Helaman 5:12).

No doubt most of us here believe the Lord can do these things. But do we believe that He *will*? That He will heal our broken hearts and help us bear our burdens? The Lord has said that if we only “desire to believe,” we should let this desire work in us and experiment upon His words (see Alma 32:27). Can’t you almost hear the Savior pleading, “Try me. Put me to the test. See if I won’t do for you what I have said I will do.”

My testimony is that He will, and that He does. But we must first believe, as did the sons of Helaman, who hadn’t been trained in warfare but who had been taught the things of the Spirit. Consequently, they “fought as if with the strength of God; yea, never were men known to have fought with such miraculous strength; and with such mighty power” (Alma 56:56).

Not only was their faith in the Lord strong at the beginning of their march, but it remained strong throughout their ordeal. Every one of these young men was wounded, and at one point they nearly starved to death (see Alma 57:25, 58:7). Yet instead of wavering, they turned to the Lord and pled for strength—which they received (see Alma 58:10–12). Having faith didn’t make their challenges disappear. It didn’t make marching in Helaman’s

army easy. It didn't disqualify them from pain. But their faith did enable them to draw upon the power of God, which sustained them through their test and ultimately delivered them.

We will not win the battle in which we are engaged if we do not fight as with the strength of God, for the voices of Satan are noisy, relentless, and celebrated. The gap between the way men and women of God and the way men and women of the world live will only grow wider. But that's okay, as long as we, as the Lord's covenant people, feel confident about who we are.

We have every reason to, for when Nephi foresaw the latter-day Church, he beheld

the power of the Lamb of God, that it descended upon the saints of the church of the Lamb, and upon the covenant people of the Lord, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth; and they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory. [1 Nephi 14:14]

Nephi was seeing you and me. We may be small numerically, but the influence of those armed with righteousness and the power of God in great glory will be felt far beyond our numbers. We can't win this battle alone, but we aren't required to, for it is in the strength of the Lord that we can do all things (see Alma 26:12). And that process begins with our faith.

4. The stripling warriors' faith began at home, where "they had been taught by their mothers, that if they did not doubt, God would deliver them" (Alma 56:47). Not only did those righteous, faithful, dedicated mothers teach their sons the gospel, but the stripling warriors listened, which almost certainly prepared them to follow the prophet Helaman into battle when the time came for them to do so. The lesson for us is clear: Choose carefully who you listen to, and then listen. Choose carefully who you will follow, and then follow. With rare exceptions, no one cares more about your welfare than do your parents. Listen to them with confidence. But also listen to prophets, seers,

and revelators whose counsel is motivated only by their desire to teach truth and by their belief in your divine potential—not because they want your money or your vote or your support. If we don't listen to the prophet, we might as well not have one.

Satan tries to confuse us about voices and heroes and role models. He encourages us to worship the bright and beautiful—regardless of their values or motives. He makes the lives of the rich and famous look intoxicating when in reality many are just intoxicated. Just because someone can shoot a ball through a hoop or record a hit song or launch a billion-dollar IPO doesn't mean that he or she deserves our respect, and it *certainly doesn't mean* their lives should be patterns for our lives. Jesus Christ gave us the one sure pattern. If we are wise, we will follow only those who lead us closer to Him. That is the litmus test for evaluating anyone's motives.

5. Happiness and lasting joy come only from living the gospel. Said Helaman after leading his 2,000 into battle, "I was filled with exceeding joy because of the goodness of God in preserving us" (Alma 57:36). Joy and righteousness are inseparably connected—though Satan would have us believe otherwise, that joy and worldly pleasures are one and the same. But they are not. Likewise, Satan would have us believe that happiness cannot be found in obedience, which he portrays as confining rather than liberating. But that is a lie.

Here is just one example. In today's world, where immorality is celebrated on nearly every world stage, succumbing to moral temptation is depicted as being easier and even more desirable than maintaining moral purity. But it isn't. The moment of sexual transgression is the last moment immorality is easy. I have never known anyone who was happier or who felt better about themselves or who had greater peace of mind as a result of immorality. Never.

As someone who has remained unmarried two-and-a-half decades beyond a traditional marriageable age, I know something about the

challenge of chastity. It is not always easy, but it is far easier than the alternative. Chastity is much easier than regret or the loss of self-respect, than the agony of breaking covenants, than struggling with shallow and failed relationships. This is not to say there are never temptations. Even at forty-six, having long ago decided how I wanted to live my life, I have to be careful all the time. There are things I simply cannot watch, cannot read, cannot listen to because they trigger thoughts and instincts that drive the Spirit away and that edge me too close to the moral line. But those supposed sacrifices are well worth it.

It is so much more comforting to live with the Spirit than without, so much more joyful to have relationships of trust and true friendship than to indulge in a physical relationship that would eventually crumble anyway. Whereas Satan's lies lead only to enslavement, the Savior's promise is that if we will seek the riches our Father wishes to give us, we "shall be the richest of all people, for [we] shall have the riches of eternity" (D&C 38:39). In other words, we shall have joy in this life and a fullness in the life hereafter. Righteousness begets happiness.

There are many other lessons we could learn from the sons of Helaman. We could talk of service and selflessness, of obedience and consecration and endurance. But I turn now to the final and, perhaps for our purposes here today, most compelling point.

6. In this account in the book of Alma, it was the rising generation who bolstered and strengthened the body of the Church and who stepped forward to save the day. When their help was needed, these young men were ready, worthy, and willing to respond. Again and again they came to the rescue, often reinforcing the older Nephite army who tended to wear down as the battle wore on. The stripling warriors were like the cavalry in those old Westerns who arrived in the nick of time to save the day.

As with Helaman's young army, *you are the cavalry*, here to carry on the work of the Lord at

an intense and vital stage of the battle—a battle that began with the War in Heaven and that rages to this very day. Helaman told Moroni that his "little force" had given the Nephite army "great hopes and much joy" (Alma 56:17). As compared with Helaman's 2,000, today there are nearly 2,000,000 of you in this Church between the ages of 18 and 25. Nevertheless, compared with the world's population and its escalating depravity, you are a "little force." But also, as in Helaman's day, we of older generations rejoice in your strength and in your goodness. You bring great hope and much joy to the body of the Church. You are latter-day reinforcements prepared during aeons of premortality to face the enemy, reinforcements who must now step forward to strengthen the body of the Church and help us keep moving forward—as President Hinckley often says, "without ever a backward step."

During the last four months Relief Society assignments have taken me to Southeast Asia and Africa, where, on two separate continents, I have witnessed a remarkable trend. In countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Ghana, and Kenya, where the Church is young but the Spirit is strong, it is young men and women your age who are recognizing the truth, joining the Church, and being called upon to lead. The district Relief Society and Young Women presidents in Phnom Penh are both scarcely twenty years old. And I will never forget a Cambodia district conference when thirty handsome young Cambodian men stood and sang, "We are as the army of Helaman. We have been taught in our youth" ("We'll Bring the World His Truth," *Songbook*, 172–73). They *are* the future of the Church in Cambodia. They will help save the day in their corner of the world—as will you, wherever your lives take you, if you live on the Lord's side of the line.

After President Hinckley's appearance on *60 Minutes*, a non-LDS viewer sent this note to CBS: "I enjoyed your Mormon segment Easter Sunday. . . . These people do provide an anchor

in a sea of ever-changing values. Fifty thousand chaste missionaries in 150 countries probably do more good for society than all the government social programs put together” (Tom Thorkelson to *60 Minutes*, 8 April 1996). Imagine then what an army of 2,000,000 chaste, honest, dedicated young men and women filled with the power of God in great glory can do—and must do! There is no greater cause. There is no greater army for righteousness than you.

The Lord needs faithful, articulate, committed men and women who are undaunted by what lies ahead and who are willing to stand up for what is right again and again; who do not doubt what the Lord will do for them; who keep their covenants with exactness; who have decided that, at all costs, they will live on the Lord’s side of the line.

My dear young friends, will you commit this very hour to be true to who you are? To plant your feet in tar on the Lord’s side of the line? I invite you to begin by going home and taking inventory. There may be clothes or CDs or videos or magazines you need to throw out. Just do it. Toss out those movies with foul language and violence and sexual innuendo. If you can’t resist adult Internet sites, unhook the Internet. No video or CD or Web site is worth crossing over into Satan’s territory. No enticement is worth losing your exaltation. You will love how this kind of spiritual spring cleaning feels. But that is just part one, the easy part. Part two involves taking an inventory of your language, your integrity, your dedication, your virtue, and the way you treat others. One by

one, will you begin to throw out thoughts and behaviors and habits that pull you toward enemy territory? I’ll take the challenge. Will you? The Lord will help us, for if we will humble ourselves before Him and really believe in Him, He will bless us with strength we have never had before. He will help us turn our weakness into strength (see Ether 12:27). And every small victory over the natural man will be a victory over Satan and yet more evidence of the grand, sweeping, redemptive power of Jesus Christ. Let’s begin today.

Make no mistake about it, you are the latter-day army of Helaman! You have been taught in your youth. The restored gospel will cover this earth. The battle will be rigorous, but the Lord will not concede and His kingdom will not fail. His power and glory will exceed anything we have ever seen in terms of dramatic finishes—and that is at least partly because of you who have been saved for this spectacular, culminating millennium. For each of you, then, only this question remains: Will you stand steadfast and immovable on the Lord’s side of the line? The Lord will be on your side if you will stay on His, for He has promised: “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88).

Jesus is the Christ. This is His work. Every one of us was foreordained to stand where we stand in His kingdom. May we stand in holy places—on the Lord’s side of the line—and *be not moved*. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.