

Take Upon Yourself the Whole Armor of God

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I am pleased to be with you today. This is a very humbling moment. I can assure you that I have given much thought and prayer to this assignment so that I could say a few words that would be of benefit to you this morning.

It has been my pleasure and honor to be at this great university for the past 40 years. My interaction with the students has been mostly as a coach. I did, however, spend seven-and-a-half years as a bishop and high councilor in a student ward and stake, which I consider the most enjoyable and rewarding Church assignments of my life.

In the Doctrine and Covenants it reads:

Wherefore, lift up your hearts and rejoice, and gird up your loins, and take upon you my whole armor, that ye may be able to withstand the evil day, having done all, that ye may be able to stand.

Stand, therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace, which I have sent mine angels to commit unto you;

Taking the shield of faith wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked;

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of my Spirit, which I will pour out upon you, and my word which I reveal unto you. [D&C 27:15–18]

We have all seen pictures of Moroni dressed in his armor including the breastplate and helmet. It is a little like a football player dressed in full uniform with all the required pads, shoes, and helmet. They are both dressed for protection from their adversaries. The football player has to withstand the blocks, tackles, and other hits he will take while practicing or playing a game. The Lord has offered us protective armor to use in our battles, and that is what I would like to discuss today.

As the scripture states, we should have our “loins girt about with truth.” As members of the Church, we must seek truth in all areas, be it spiritual, educational, scientific, or in the social and moral settings of society. If we don’t seek truth, we will not find it or recognize it. Probably the most profound search for truth was Joseph Smith’s search for the true church. Just think where we would be today if he had not had that hunger for truth.

To recognize truth, to be truthful, and to be honest with others, we first have to be honest and truthful with ourselves. Self-deception is deadly. Deceiving ourselves leaves us open to

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Satan's ways—such as blaming others for our poor choices, justifying a little white lie, and cheating on a test. However, being honest with ourselves allows us to learn who we are and what we are all about. It helps our minds and hearts be open to further truth and inspiration. In a First Presidency message, Spencer W. Kimball said, "If men are really humble, they will realize that they *discover*, but do not *create*, truth" ("Absolute Truth," *Ensign*, September 1978, 34; emphasis in original).

We all know of the two plans of salvation presented to God by His sons Lucifer and Jehovah. A great battle commenced between their followers, and even though Lucifer was cast out, the war between the forces of good and evil has continued to this day. The temptations of these evil forces are greater today than ever before, but truth can make us free of Satan's deceptions.

The scripture continues with "having on the breastplate of righteousness." Being righteous means being upright, moral, and virtuous. It is something we have to work on every day. We have to keep progressing or we will regress. We have to continue studying, praying, and trying to live the Lord's teachings and commandments to gain and maintain a life of righteousness. I believe righteousness also includes service to others. A righteous person is aware of others' needs and acts on that awareness through service.

We are in an era of dot-coms, computers, and the Internet. It is easy to get caught up in all these wonderful inventions and let them control our lives, forgetting about the world and humanity around us. Our human interaction and having compassion and concern for each other are far more important than technology in trying to live Christlike lives.

A friend shared with me this profound creed that says it well:

*Remember to be gentle with yourself and others.
We are all children of chance, and none can say*

*why some fields will blossom while others lay
brown beneath the August sun.*

*Care for those around you. Look past your
differences. Their dreams are no less than yours,
their choices in life no more easily made.*

*And give. Give in any way you can, of
whatever you possess. To give is to love. To
withhold is to wither. Care less for your harvest
than for how it is shared, and your life will
have meaning and your heart will have peace.*
[Kent Nerburn, *Letters to My Son: Reflections
on Becoming a Man* (San Rafael, California: New
World Library, 1993), 211–12]

This is a beautifully stated philosophy and one that I believe we should incorporate into our lives as we continue our quest for righteousness.

The next phrase of the scripture is "and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace." Preparation brings peace as it frees us to pursue our goals. In this era of violence in every medium, peace is a treasured feeling and one we want to keep with us as much as possible.

To me, preparation is the key to success in any endeavor. I have often heard the phrase "He [or she] has a great will to win." What it should say is, "He [or she] has a great will to prepare." The greatest athletes are not always the fastest, strongest, or most gifted athletically. The greatest players are those who have the ability to recognize their potential and prepare themselves to meet that potential.

On a Saturday afternoon in the filled stadium with the excitement of the band, the cheerleaders, and the crowd, a player can have all the desire or will to win in the world, but it will be for naught if he hasn't prepared. The same is true in our personal lives. We can have the desire to do something well, even to gain a strong testimony of the gospel, but it will be for naught if we are not willing to work, study, and prepare. Every one of us has the potential to successfully achieve

our goals in life, but most goals won't be realized without effort on our part.

The next item of protection in the armor of God is "taking the shield of faith." In the Book of Mormon, the warriors used shields to protect them from the swords, spears, arrows, and other weapons of their foes. In football, the quarterback has an offensive line that forms a pocket in front of him to shield him from the opponents. Faith is our shield, our pocket of protection. It is our shield from the many weapons that Satan bombards us with every day, such as despair, indecisiveness, procrastination, depression, and anger. Faith lifts us up, gives us hope, and makes seemingly insurmountable challenges possible to overcome.

Life can be discouraging, and it isn't always fair. But with faith and an eternal perspective, we can make it through the hard times. We tend to think that we are the only ones with problems; in reality, everyone has problems, even President Hinckley. He said, "My life has been rich because it has been filled with problems to solve and associations to savor" (Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something* [New York: Times Books, 2000], xi).

Sean Covey is the son of Stephen R. Covey of "seven habits" fame and grew up in our ward. He and the other members of his family had those seven habits stamped across their foreheads from the day they were born. And they knew how to succeed. They are a marvelous family. Sean was a great high school football player and led his team to the state championship. He was very highly recruited. It came down to us and Stanford. Sean elected to come to BYU because he wanted to lead us to another national championship.

His freshman year he did well with the junior varsity squad, and then he left on a mission. When he came home, he was excited and eager to resume his football career. He worked hard, prepared himself physically and mentally, and halfway through his sophomore

year became our starting quarterback. After winning all but one of the last few games we played that season, everything looked like it was right on track for him.

The next year, his junior year, he was named the starting quarterback but sustained a concussion against Wyoming in the first game. He came back the next game, and we beat a nationally ranked Texas team. But then he had shoulder and knee problems throughout the year. The team suffered a little bit, and he had to have surgery after the season, which prevented him from going through spring practice.

At the time we had a young freshman quarterback named Ty Detmer, who had an outstanding spring. It became evident that he might be the better of the two, but because Sean was the starter the previous year, we wanted to give him a good chance to fight for the starting position when they returned in the fall. After fall camp, it was evident that Ty was the better quarterback of the two.

Before any announcement was made, I brought Sean into the office and explained our decision to him. He didn't speak for a couple of minutes, but finally he said, "Coach, I don't think this is fair. I've worked hard, prepared well, and done everything I was supposed to do to return as the starting quarterback. This is going to be a much better team than the others that I've played on."

I had to agree with Sean.

After a moment, he continued, "Coach, this isn't fair, but I want you to know that I will be at every practice. I will be at every meeting, and I will prepare myself every week as if I were the starting quarterback. I will be ready whenever you need me."

He did just that. Unfortunately for Sean, Ty went on to have a great year—the greatest of any sophomore quarterback in NCAA history. Sean rarely got in a game again.

Life, in this instance, was not fair to Sean, but he chose to do his very best and

to contribute to the success of the team in any way he could. He was, and is, a young man of faith, of righteousness, and of prayer, with an eternal perspective on life. These attributes help him to make the right choices and to use the difficulties he encounters as stepping-stones to progress.

The scripture continues: “And take the helmet of salvation.” Can you imagine how it would be to play a game of football without a helmet? It is the same as trying to live in this world of turmoil without the plan of salvation. Our understanding of this plan gives meaning to our lives, a knowledge of why we are here, and hope for where we can be in the next life. The promise of exaltation and eternal families gives us a constant goal to strive for—thus protecting us from and helping us to avoid much of the evil that is out there in the world.

Think of the amazing sacrifice the Lord made for each of us that we might have salvation from Adam’s transgression and from our own sins. Think of the intense suffering He bore in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross to fulfill His mission on this earth. Think of the overwhelming love He must have for us to have completed the earthly part of His ministry in such a way. It is the greatest gift that will ever be given, and we must use it daily to repent, to make wise choices, to always have that eternal perspective, and to work toward exaltation.

The last part of the protective equipment the scripture mentions is “the sword of my Spirit.” The most powerful part of our protective armor, the most powerful weapon we have against evil, is the Spirit of the Lord. He has promised us that we will have His Spirit with us if we are trying to do as He has asked. With the Spirit we know better how to use the rest of our armor to full advantage. As we do that, we can then feel the Spirit even stronger and exercise its power on a daily basis. Elder Loren C. Dunn expounded on this:

*We keep the commandments and teachings of the gospel in order to condition us spiritually. It is not a matter of how many laws we keep and how many we do not keep. We keep the commandments because they are the laws that govern the Spirit. The Spirit in turn will sanctify us, condition us spiritually, and eventually prepare us to live in the kingdom where God is. [“The Spirit Giveth Life,” *Ensign*, May 1979, 70–71]*

In Ephesians 6:18, the armor includes “praying always.” In the wars described in the Book of Mormon, it took a long time for the soldiers in the field to communicate with their leaders back at headquarters when they were in trouble, needed supplies or guidance, or even wanted to tell of triumphs and victories. We, on the other hand, can have constant and instant communication with our leader, the Lord, through prayer. Prayer is the stabilizing weapon we have against Satan. The more constant our prayers, the less opportunity there is for him to find a crack in our armor.

Prayer is a special one-to-one, soul-to-soul communication with our Heavenly Father, a time when we can ask for help in our battles, small and large. It is also a time to thank Him for His help as we safely come through each struggle, as He helps us keep our armor intact, as He blesses us while we try to keep progressing. One thing I had to learn the hard way was that prayer shouldn’t be a last resort. Too often we depend only on our own skills or the help of others when prayer should be a part of every solution. Perhaps when we need Him, He won’t recognize our voice, as in this anonymous poem variously known as “Answered Prayer,” “Cowboy’s Prayer,” “Cowboy Story,” or “Wyoming Cowboy Poetry”:

*Jake, the rancher, went one day to fix a distant fence.
The wind was cold and gusty and the clouds rolled
gray and dense.*

*As he pounded the last staples in and gathered
tools to go,
The temperature had fallen and the snow began
to blow.*

*When he finally reached his pickup, he felt a
heavy heart.
From the sound of that ignition, he knew it
wouldn't start.*

*So Jake did what most of us do if we would have
been there.
He humbly bowed his balding head and sent aloft
a prayer.*

*As he turned the key for the last time, he softly
cursed his luck.
They found him three days later, frozen stiff in
that old truck.*

*Now Jake had been around in life and done his
share of roamin',
But when he saw Heaven, he was shocked—It
looked just like Wyomin'!*

*Oh, there were some differences, of course, but
just some minor things.
One place had simply disappeared—the town they
called Rock Springs.*

*The BLM had been shut down, and there weren't
no grazin' fees,
And the wind in Rawlins and Cheyenne was now
a gentle breeze.*

*The Park and Forest Service folks—they didn't
fare so well.
They'd all been sent to fight some fire in a wilderness
called Hell.*

*Though Heaven was a real nice place, Jake had a
wondering mind,
So he saddled up and lit a shuck, not knowin' what
he'd find.*

*Then one day up in Cody, on a cold fall afternoon,
He saw St. Peter coming, and he knew he'd be there
soon.*

*Of all the saints in Heaven, his favorite was St. Peter.
Now, this line, it ain't needed, but it helps with
rhyme and meter.*

*So they set and talked a minute or two, or maybe it
was three.
Nobody was keepin' score—in Heaven time is free.*

*"I've always heard," Jake said to Peter, "that God
will answer prayers,
But one time I asked for help, well, He just plain
wasn't there.*

*"Does God answer prayers of some, and ignore
the prayers of others?
That don't seem exactly square—I know all men
are brothers.*

*"Or does He randomly reply, without good rhyme
or reason?
Maybe it's the time of day, the weather, or the season.*

*"Now I ain't tryin' to act smart; it's just the way
I feel,
And I was wonderin', could you tell, What the
heck's the deal?"*

*Peter listened very patiently, and when ol' Jake
was done,
There was a smile of recognition, and he said,
"So, you're the one!*

*"That day your truck, it wouldn't start, and you
sent your prayer a-flying,
You gave us all a real bad time, with hundreds of
us a-trying.*

*"A thousand angels rushed to check the status of
your file,
But, you know, Jake, we hadn't heard from you in
quite a while.*

*“And though all prayers are answered, and God ain’t got no quota—
He didn’t recognize your voice, and started a truck in North Dakota.”*

It’s not always easy to recognize the Lord’s blessings or His answers, but our faith and the Spirit can help us do so. Each of us has our own individual journey to make in life, and it isn’t always a smooth ride. But prayer can make it bearable and give us the strength to keep moving. President Hinckley likes to use a wonderful quote from the newspaper editor and columnist Jenkin Lloyd Jones:

Anyone who imagines that bliss is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed.

Most putts don’t drop. Most beef is tough. Most children grow up to be just people. Most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration. Most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. . . .

Life is like an old-time rail journey—delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed.

*The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride. [“Big Rock Candy Mountains,” *Deseret News*, 12 June 1973, A4]*

I would like to add one more item of protection to help us foil the adversary: surrounding ourselves with good people. Remember those special young men, the sons of Helaman, who had been taught by their mothers to have total faith in the Lord and came to the aid of their people in war? We never know when we are going to have a chink in our armor and need stripling warriors there who will help us, who will lift us, who will help us repair that crack.

One of the most famous runs that Steve Young made with the 49ers was in the game where he lost his helmet. Did he stop to pick

it up? No, he kept running down field full bore, leaving himself open to serious injury. Steve had a couple of little chinks in his football armor. One, he didn’t appreciate the wisdom of the slide, often playing like a blocker—taking on linebackers and trying to flatten them. And sometimes—actually a lot of times—his shield, his pocket, was shattered, and he was flattened by a 300-pound lineman. Fortunately Steve had good people around him to help him back up, to help him replace his chinks, to help him evaluate and repair his body, and to help him make wise decisions—like that of retiring. We all need our stripling warriors—family, friends, and leaders who have high values, who are loyal and fearless in their righteous desires, who know truth, and who have immense faith. I hope we can all be stripling warriors for others as they discover the cracks in their armor.

When we take upon ourselves the whole armor of God, it is much like the football player going into the game with all of his protective gear on. It gives him self-confidence and a freedom to play to his full ability. Take off his helmet or his pads, and he will become tentative in his playing and will render himself ineffective.

The struggle to find ourselves is very real, and that is why God has given us this armor: that we might recognize truth and understand ourselves, that we might have faith because of the gift of salvation, that we might attain righteousness to help us overcome the evils of life. If we don’t use this armor we’ve been given, we will, like the football player, become tentative in our choices and decisions and leave ourselves open to the adversary.

As a high school and college coach for close to 50 years, I have seen this tendency evidenced as we place limitations on ourselves—more so than those imposed by others. It may be because of fear, lack of self-confidence, or a lack of eternal vision. We were placed here on the earth to be successful in all our chosen endeavors. I have a plaque in my office that says “Success

is a journey and not a destination." We don't become successful and then just stay there. We either move forward or backward. True success is measured by what we choose to do with our lives, not by how many yards we gain running the ball or how rich we are or if we have a powerful position. Such measuring sticks are not eternal and can put chinks in our armor. They always have a negative effect on the way we perceive ourselves and our worth. President Hinckley said, "The course of our lives is not determined by great, awesome decisions. Our direction is set by the little day-to-day choices which chart the track on which we run" ("Watch the Switches in Your Life," *Ensign*, January 1973, 91).

The armor of God we've been given is far more powerful than any earthly armor. I think of the story of David and Goliath. Goliath was not only huge in stature, but he was equipped with every conceivable armor then known. David, however, was armed only with the armor of God and a slingshot. He was ridiculed by his opponent.

Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied.

This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand; . . . that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. [1 Samuel 17:45–46]

We face intimidation in many ways during our life. It may be the bully in the neighborhood as a child or the powerful corporation as we strive to make our way in the business world. It may be through peer pressure: to be popular is to go along with

the crowd; to really show your love, you have to give your all; to be competitive, you have to take steroids. It may be our neighbor's money and power and our lack of them. The armor of God can help us bring down any intimidator, no matter what weapons he is using. The armor of God gives us eternal perspective, the strength of faith, truth, prayer, and the promise of salvation. We need never be afraid to stand up for ourselves and our God if we are protected with His armor.

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.
[Ephesians 6:12–13]

It is my prayer that we will all put on the whole armor of God, that we will work at maintaining that armor through good choices, faith, prayer, study, service, and relying on the Spirit. I pray that each of us will come to truthfully know ourselves and our potential in the Lord's sight, and that through that insight we will find joy, peace, and success in our lives.

It has been my great pleasure to be at this great university, to have a lot of things happen to us that we never really expected. It has been great, but the true blessings that I have in my life have always been and will always be the testimony that I have of the gospel of Jesus Christ; my wife, Patty; and my children. These are my most important possessions. I bear testimony to you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.