

Hold Tight to the Iron Rod

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I am so grateful to be here today! You look so wonderful to me—so full of life and promise. I am grateful for the Spirit I feel coming from you. You have come with open minds and open hearts. It is my prayer that we will learn together as the Spirit works within us.

This morning I would like to talk about our purpose in life—my purpose and your purpose. This is a good time of year to do this, don't you think? We usually pause at the beginning of a new year to take stock of where we are in our lives and where we are going. Then we make determinations about what is really important to us and what we need to do.

In order to better understand our purpose in life and start this process of self-evaluation, I would like to refer to the account in the Book of Mormon of Lehi's vision of the tree of life. Picture this with me. You will remember that he saw a beautiful tree. The tree bore wonderful fruit. The fruit was white and sweet and desirable to make one happy. He also saw a path, a narrow path, leading to the tree. The path came across a large and spacious field. Along the path was a rod of iron. There was also a river running along the path. And on the other side of the river there was a large and spacious building filled with people dressed in the finery of the world. Occasionally a mist

of darkness arose from the river and covered the path. He saw people traveling the path. It appeared that their objective was to reach the tree, but many were distracted or lost. (See 1 Nephi 8.)

Nephi, Lehi's son, desired to understand his father's vision, and so he went to the Lord, asking to know the meaning of it. The Lord answered Nephi's prayer and in so doing not only explained the vision but explained the purpose of our life here on earth as well. (See 1 Nephi 11.)

We learn from Nephi's account that the "tree" or the "tree of life" is actually a representation of Jesus Christ. The pure, white fruit that comes from the tree is more desirable than any other fruit to make mankind happy. The fruit represents the Atonement of the Savior. The straight and narrow path leading to the tree is the path that we must follow to come unto the Savior. It is paved with the covenants and commandments of the Lord. The rod of iron is the word of God. This rod runs directly parallel and uninterrupted along the path

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and is designed to bring whoever is holding securely to the rod to the tree.

Other parts of the vision represent the opposition we all experience in this life. The large and spacious field is the world in which we live. We all have to pass through it in order to regain the presence of Heavenly Father and the Savior. The river running closely by the path represents the depths of hell. It is ever present, waiting to claim any who are careless or rebellious. Often this river sends up mists of darkness, which are the temptations of the devil. These mists obscure our vision and make the path seem a little slippery and unsure. On the far side of the river rises a large and spacious building. This too represents the temptations of the devil, because it is the pride of the world. The building, the mocking people inside, and the obvious worldly wealth all beckon to the natural man within each of us.

In the vision Lehi reaches the tree and partakes of the wonderful fruit. Then, more than anything, he wants his family and others to come and partake of it as well. He wants them to find the joy that he has experienced. He wants them to come to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. So he beckons to them to enter into the way and follow the path. Some pay no heed, thinking they know a better way. They are lost in the large field. Others start on the path and then get lost in the mist of darkness, falling into the river. Others grasp the rod of iron and carefully follow it through all the distractions and make it to the tree. They partake of the fruit but then lose faith—heeding the call of the world and wandering off to the great and spacious building. But there are others who take hold of the rod and diligently and faithfully follow it along until they reach the tree and partake of the fruit. They experience the joy and the blessings of partaking of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, and they never look back.

This vision represents the love of God for us. It is Heavenly Father's plan for us to come

to this earth; gain our bodies; prove ourselves by accepting the gospel and living righteously; and then, through the Atonement of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, return to Him. Again, the vision is a representation of His love for us. It is a representation of Heavenly Father's and Jesus Christ's love for us. It also gives us a wonderful and clear purpose to our lives.

Now these images that I have suggested to you today may seem very common. You have heard about them since you were in Primary. But they are basic. They are essential for us not only to know but to understand. We must clearly understand what they mean for us—how important they are to us and where we need to go with this understanding. May I also suggest that this understanding is very individual. Not one of us will get to heaven on someone else's coattail. Each must have their own knowledge and their own testimony and make their own application of these truths. In addition, each of us is at a different place in our lives. We are where we are as a direct result of our own actions and choices and the actions taken upon us. But the bottom line is that we are where we are. That means that from today on we each have our own starting place along the path. In addition, we each will experience our own distractions and "mists of darkness." Satan knows us, and he wants us. He will do everything in his power to divert us from our goal. He wants to destroy our purpose.

In order to help us really understand where we are in relationship to the purpose our Heavenly Father has laid out for us, let's take a few minutes to consider some questions. Each of us must answer these questions for ourselves, and then we will know how we need to adjust our lives. I invite you to write down the thoughts that come into your mind, because that will be personal revelation coming through the Spirit just for you.

The first question: Where am I along the path that leads to the Savior? Am I even on it? Do I have both feet firmly planted, or is

one foot on and one foot off? Elder Maxwell described it this way: that some people know they should have their primary residence in Zion, but they still hope to keep their summer cottage in Babylon (see Larry W. Gibbons, “Wherefore, Settle This in Your Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 102; see also Neal A. Maxwell, *A Wonderful Flood of Light* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990], 47). Now remember, the path consists of making and keeping covenants. It includes the ordinances of the gospel and faithfully keeping the commandments. There are no shortcuts, no easy routes. We all must just place one foot in front of the other over and over again until we have traveled the whole distance. Being born into this world is one of the greatest blessings we have ever been given. In fact, it is absolutely necessary to our continued progression. But being in this world is also our greatest danger. There is only one way to make it through. That is to stay on this straight and narrow path.

Chances are that you have made quite a lot of progress along the path at this point in your lives. You have most likely been baptized. Most of you young men have received the priesthood. You may have served missions. Many of you have been endowed in the temple and many have been married there for time and all eternity. So you have made the covenants. Making them is the first step. Now, how well are you keeping them? Just remember, taking the first step is not of much value without the second: keeping our covenants.

For example, are you as worthy to renew your covenants of baptism as you partake of the sacrament each week as you were to be baptized in the first place? Are you as worthy to hold and use the priesthood as you were when you received it? This is where the iron rod comes in handy. It keeps us on the path. Because the iron rod is the word of God, it helps strengthen us to stay true to the covenants we have made. It helps us set righteous patterns, and keeping the commandments is

easier if we have these righteous patterns of behavior. I am talking about the simple things: morning and evening prayer, reading our scriptures, fasting, attending the temple, going to all of our church meetings faithfully, keeping the Sabbath day holy, honoring our parents, having honesty and integrity, and being modest and chaste—all righteous patterns. If we stay true—being responsible, working hard, and repenting—these righteous patterns become a way of life.

By suggesting that these patterns of righteous living are simple, I am not necessarily suggesting that they are easy. It is a continual process of trying, stumbling a little, picking ourselves up, making corrections in our lives, and trying again. Coming to the Savior requires continual coming.

Here is the next question I would like each of us to ask: What are my mists of darkness?

Satan knows each of us well. He knows each of our strengths and he knows our weaknesses. Satan knows how to press our mortal buttons. And believe me, he is doing it at every opportunity. The way he tries to get me may be different from the way he tries to get you. But he is very good at finding our weak spots and hitting hard. What is it for you? Maybe it is discouragement or self-doubt. Maybe it is laziness. Or it could be influencing you to let a healthy curiosity lead you to doubting your own convictions. Maybe the mist is procrastination. Or it could be anger. It could be allowing Satan to gain power over you through horrible addictions to substances or pornography.

Satan also uses the voices from the “great and spacious building” to try and distract us from our chosen course. What voices do you hear calling to you? Is it pride or a love of worldly things and worldly pleasures? Is it encouragement to compromise your standards “because everyone is doing it” or is it that “no one will know”? Or is it a voice telling you that you can do something wrong today and

still get blessings by repenting tomorrow. Do you ever hear a little voice in your head saying, “It’s no big deal”? These are most certainly voices that come from the world. They are voices that want to make us act beneath ourselves. They are voices that come at us incessantly, ever trying to pull us off course. Think about what your mists are. What are the voices of the world that seem to be the hardest for you to ignore? Identifying them will help you to recognize when Satan is attempting to influence you. And be assured, you do not have to battle him alone. You have a better voice to listen to. It comes as a gift from Heavenly Father. It is the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost is not a loud voice, but it will pierce your very soul if you let it. It will tell you all things you should do. It will help you discern between the voices of the world and the voices of righteousness in your lives. It will help you clearly see through the mists of darkness. Live worthy to always have the Holy Ghost with you. He will help you hang onto that rod of iron.

This leads us to the next question: How tight is my grip on the iron rod? We already know that the iron rod is the word of God. We find the word of God in the scriptures, and we hear it from our latter-day prophets. We also know that it is by holding onto that word of God—or the rod of iron—that we are able to withstand the temptations of Satan and stay on the path that leads to the Savior and to eternal life.

Now this is all pretty important, and so is this question: How tight is my grip? This is not just a casual, run-my-hand-along-it-to-keep-my-balance kind of thing. We have to hang on as though our lives depended on it, because in fact our eternal lives do. We may begin the process of holding to the rod at a very young age when, hopefully, our hands are placed there by those who love us. But in reality we begin whenever we begin to make decisions for ourselves. We begin as we learn the truths of the gospel and begin to feel the stirrings of the Spirit witnessing to us. We

continue as we learn and grow, as we make covenants of baptism, receive the priesthood, receive our endowment, and marry in the temple. We do these things as we make sure that the words of the Lord—the scriptures and the words of the prophets and the whisperings of the Spirit—have a greater place in our lives than any other influence. And then we can be safe. We just have to hang onto that rod, literally—because if we ever let go, thinking, “I’m not very far away, it’s just right over there,” we might find that we are on a very slippery slope or someone may be hanging onto our ankles or we might be too tired or too weak. We might be farther away than we realize. No, we cannot grasp it casually. We have to hold tight—determined to never let go.

Let me show you a picture of the hand of my 93-year-old mother. She never let go of the rod. Just a few weeks before she passed away—when she was unable to stand or walk or really do anything for herself—her one desire was to have the bishop come to her bedside so that she could renew her temple recommend because hers had expired. She received that recommend. You can see that her hand naturally curved around the rod. It had grown that way over many years of practice. I hope that one day my hand will look just like hers. And I believe that we can actually get to the point that we no longer grasp the rod out to the side. Instead, that rod of iron will run right through us, keeping us upright—strong and safely secured.

This next question has everything to do with how well we stay connected to the rod and the path. This is it: How do I feel about being strictly obedient? If our purpose in life is to stay on the path that leads us back to the Savior and ultimately back to our Father, then we are going to have to come to terms with the principle of obedience.

First we must understand that Heavenly Father did not give us the commandments in order to control us. He gave them to us so

that we might remain free from the bondage of Satan. Every commandment is designed to bring us happiness and the blessings of heaven. We can see that over and over again as we read the scriptures. Whenever Heavenly Father gives us a commandment in the scriptures, there is always a promised blessing. For example, in Mosiah 5:15 we read:

I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, may seal you his, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life.

Here is the commandment: Be steadfast and immovable in good works.

Here is the promise: The Lord will seal you His, bring you to heaven, and give you salvation and eternal life.

Heavenly Father will bless us as we are obedient to His commandments. I know that this is true. So what it comes down to is whether or not we will give ourselves over to Him and be obedient. It is our choice. President Ezra Taft Benson said, “When obedience ceases to be an irritant and becomes our quest, in that moment God will endow us with power” (quoted in Donald L. Staheli, “Obedience—Life’s Great Challenge,” *Ensign*, May 1998, 82).

Brothers and sisters, let us learn to love obedience and its rewards.

Our next question is important because it is directed at helping us do these things: How can I strengthen my ability to “hold to the rod”? We have to somehow take what we know in our heads, sink it deep in our hearts, and then express it through our actions. It takes a lot of faith to do this. It takes faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have to really know in our hearts that He is the redeemer of the world. We have to know that to come to Him is the goal and purpose of our lives. We have to know that He lives. We have to know these things way down, deep in our hearts.

Then we have to have hope. Now, hope is trusting that all that Jesus Christ did for the world applies to each of us individually. Or, in other words, that it will work for me. We have to trust that He knows us, that He loves us, that He will help us, and that His Atonement was made for us individually. Hope also means that we have to believe that we are worth it. It means that we understand that we each have great value because we exist—we are our Heavenly Father’s children. We can disappoint our Heavenly Father and the Savior, and we are held accountable for our actions, but They still love us. It is as simple as that. And because of that love, we can trust that the Atonement will work for us. That is what it means to have hope: hope that we can start where we are, repent if we need to, and get back on the path that leads to the Savior. We have to have hope that we can make it.

Faith and hope give us strength. They give us the power and confidence to keep on going—to keep holding on—even when things get hard. You know, everyone’s life is hard. Some days are harder than others, but life is hard. It was meant to be that way so that we would have to rely on the Lord. It was designed to make us strong and determined.

When we have faith and hope, we can hold fast to the rod, and if we find that we have become distracted or have lost our grip, we can repent and grasp it again. The iron rod, the word of God, the pathway back to the Savior, will never move. We may move, but we can know that we can always return because it will always be there for us—the Savior will always be there for us. And then if our faith and hope are genuine, we cannot keep them contained. We cannot keep them to ourselves. We reach out to others with the same love we are receiving from the Father and the Son. The expression of our faith and hope, then, becomes charity.

And all of this—faith, hope, and charity—is what brings joy into our lives. It is what gives us the strength to stay on the path, to stay

connected to the iron rod. And the journey back to our Father, back to the Savior, Jesus Christ, becomes joyful. Learning about what Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ want us to do, working hard to hold to the rod, making and keeping covenants, faithfully living righteous lives, facing hard times as trials come, serving others, repenting for our mistakes, and feeling ourselves draw ever nearer to the Lord—these all can become joyful. All of these things are fruits of the living tree. They are the blessings of the Atonement offered to us from the Father through the Son. And the ultimate blessing is eternal life and exaltation—living with our Heavenly Father forever. We each have to reach this place individually. We all hope to have a companion by our side who is making the same journey with the same destination in mind. But we each have to make it.

The last—and possibly most important—question is this: Will I do it? Am I willing to do all that is necessary to return to Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father? We have our agency. We decide whether or not we will hold fast to the iron rod and stay on the path that leads back to the Savior. But we must remember that ultimately we will all be brought to kneel before the Savior. At that point He will be our judge as well as our Savior. If we have been faithful in this life, we will be blessed. But he has also told us that if we are not faithful and obedient, we will have

to enjoy that which [we] are willing to receive, because [we] were not willing to enjoy that which [we] might have received.

Then the Lord goes on to say:

For what doth it profit a man if a gift is bestowed upon him, and he receive not the gift? Behold, he

rejoices not in that which is given unto him, neither rejoices in him who is the giver of the gift. [D&C 88:32–33]

When we kneel before the Savior, will we kneel in fear and sorrow and regret because we did not live to receive His greatest blessings? Or will we kneel before Him with great joy and gratitude in our hearts? Will we accept of His great love and look forward with great anticipation? The gift has been given. It lies before us. Will we receive it?

What is required of us might seem overwhelming to many of us. It may look too hard to do—at least consistently. But we can do hard things. And when we do, we find that they become delightful to us, and what once was hard becomes easier in the doing. Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ want us to succeed. They will help us every inch of the way. Through the Spirit, They will lead us along. They will strengthen us. Jesus Christ will be our advocate with the Father. And after all we can do, He will make up the difference. Don't be discouraged if you have made mistakes. The Atonement was made for us because the Lord knew that we would need it. We all would need it! He wants us to use it to repent, to find comfort, to reach peace, to be strengthened.

Brothers and sisters, the plan has been laid out clearly for us. The Savior has trod the very path He asks us to follow. He stands before us beckoning us to come to Him. And I know that we can do it! He truly lives. He loves us. He is our Savior and Redeemer. Hold tight to that rod of iron! Be true to everything that you are and everything you can become. It is so worth it. It will bring you joy and happiness now and forever. It will bring you full circle back to Him. I know that this is true! In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.