

# *“Lay Hold upon the Word”: The Power of Wholehearted Living*

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When I was fifteen years old, I worked on a sod farm located close to where the Payson Utah Temple now stands. To cut the sod, we used a harvester that weighed about fourteen tons.

One day I was assigned to work with my high school classmate on the back of the harvester. We were moving the harvester from one end of the field to another. I was walking alongside the slow-moving harvester, and I attempted to jump up onto the platform to sit next to my friend. I misjudged my jump and landed only partway on the platform. I lost my balance and fell in front of the double set of dual wheels underneath the platform.

I immediately tried to scurry out of the path of the wheels, but the big, knobby tires caught my high-top sneakers, and the wheels started to roll up my leg, throwing me to the ground. I quickly realized I was in quite a predicament. I was now lying feet first directly in the path of the wheels that were going to roll over the entire length of my body, starting with my feet and ending with my head.

I felt my right leg break under the immense weight. The wheels continued to roll, crushing my pelvis. I have never felt anything so excruciatingly painful in my life. My back and ribs were the next to break in multiple places as the wheels climbed up my stomach and chest. Then the machine mercilessly twisted me onto my back, with the knobby

treads passing over my shoulder and the side of my face and neck, miraculously missing most of my head.

By the time the fourteen tons finished their devastating work, I had lost consciousness. The first thing I remember when I opened my eyes was the inconceivable pain. I couldn't breathe. It felt like I was underwater. I was trying to breathe, but things weren't working the way they were supposed to work. I couldn't speak. I couldn't cry out, even though I frantically wanted to cry for help. Everything hurt. I quickly grasped the fact that I was about to die. Honestly, the pain was so extreme that I wanted to die. I just wanted it to stop.

I later learned that I had suffered a traumatic pneumothorax, or, in simple terms, my lungs had collapsed. If there is a puncture in your lung due to trauma, the air escapes from the lung to the area outside of your lungs inside the chest cavity. As a result, your lungs push together like a wet paper sack. The air inside your chest cavity is unable to escape, and the pressure keeps the lungs from expanding. This can lead to cardiac arrest or respiratory failure.

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*McKay Christensen, managing director of Alumni and External Relations, delivered this devotional address on May 9, 2017.*

Everything in my body was screaming for oxygen. In my desperation to breathe, I had to expand my chest cavity to gather air. The pain of my broken ribs and back from even the slightest movement was more than I could possibly endure.

In a matter of minutes the farm manager, Stan, arrived out of breath. He could sense I was deep in shock and on the verge of death. He asked if I could move my legs. I couldn't respond. He knelt on the ground, took my head in his hands, and gave me a priesthood blessing. For whatever reason, his words reached through my panic and pain. He told me I was strong. He blessed me that I would live.

Before that moment it had never entered into my mind that I was going to live. The only thought I had up until that moment was how long the pain would continue until I could die and make it go away.

Stan continued, "McKay, I bless you that you will walk again."

I started to believe.

He told me I would go on a mission, hold positions of leadership, marry, go to school, and become a father.

These words had a profound effect on my thinking. It was as if there was a tremendous tug-of-war going on inside me. On the one end of the rope were panic and pain pulling me toward closing my eyes and giving in. On the other end was the hope that Stan's words were giving me. In spite of all that was going on around me, I could picture in my mind what Stan was saying to me. And I started to lay hold upon his words. I started to believe.

In reflecting on that moment, I imagine some of you question whether you can endure at times. Can you recover from a spiritual injury or from sin? Can you persevere despite challenges? Maybe you have felt like giving up at times here at school. If so, please know you can lay hold upon words that will lift and save you.

It would be more than fifteen minutes—which seemed like fifteen years—before the ambulance would arrive. The hospital ordered the insertion of a chest tube, which meant they would cut through

my chest cavity and insert a tube to evacuate the excess air from inside my chest. It hurt so bad I couldn't cope, but soon the pain in my chest diminished and I could breathe a little better.

It took a long time for me to recover. Much of that time I spent flat on my back in bed. I had to learn to walk again. Walking was something I wasn't sure I would ever be able to do again. It took some time, but, as you can see, I do walk; I even run.

Through this experience I learned the power of words. I learned that when you lay hold upon the word, it is quick—full of life—and powerful. The word can lead you and bless your life for good.

Helaman 3:29–30 reads:

*Yea, we see that whosoever will may lay hold upon the word of God, which is quick and powerful, which shall divide asunder all the cunning and the snares and the wiles of the devil, and lead the man of Christ in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery which is prepared to engulf the wicked—*

*And land their souls, yea, their immortal souls, at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven.*

### **Lay Hold upon the Word**

I have pondered on two words in particular from this verse: "lay hold." What does it mean to "lay hold upon the word"?

As a freshman here at BYU, I attended mission prep on Sunday mornings at 7:00 a.m. Our teacher was Herschel Pedersen, center on the BYU basketball team from 1953–56 and former mission president in New Zealand. One Sunday, Herschel quoted Doctrine and Covenants 84:61 and shared his testimony. As he did, I read along in my scriptures, and the Spirit spoke to me. I knew then that I wanted to serve a mission for my Savior Jesus Christ. I laid hold upon those words. They inspired me to serve. Those words changed my heart and my life.

Most of you at some time have experienced what it is like to lay hold upon the word. When you lay hold, you take it to heart, follow it, taste it, acquire it, make it your own, identify with it, fully give yourself to it, follow it with real intent,

and let it change you. When you lay hold upon the word, it becomes “an anchor of the soul.”<sup>1</sup>

The word can come to us in many forms: scripture, testimony, blessings, priesthood and Relief Society lessons, and class discussions here at BYU. As I entered graduate school, I was married and working and needed to get good grades. One day my professor said something that caused me to lay hold.

He asked, “Do you want to do well in school? Do you want to know the secret? Do two things each day: first, study your scriptures before you study anything else; and second, don’t go home until your homework is done.”

It was like a lightbulb had turned on inside of me. I took his words to heart. From then on I carried my scriptures in my backpack, and when I would sit down to study, I studied my scriptures first. And I would stay in the library—where there was no TV and no distractions—each evening until my homework was done. As a result, the following two years were the only years I earned straight As in my classes.

The scriptures include excellent examples of people who laid hold upon the word. Enos said the words of his father “sunk deep into [his] heart.”<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith said, “Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart.”<sup>3</sup>

What happens when we lay hold upon the word? Like Enos and Joseph, we connect deeply with the word, and it often leads to personal change and spiritual growth.

Of all the blessings we receive, do you not think that the majority come by way of the word? Yes, God can change circumstances, soften hearts, and even heal sickness. But in my life, most of the blessings I have received have come by way of the word.

I believe that Heavenly Father loves to bless us through His word. I suspect we only lay hold of a fraction of the word that He sends to bless our lives. I imagine He prepares the word like wrapped gifts for us, places them within our

reach, and waits for us to lay hold upon them. Sometimes we do and sometimes we don’t. Perhaps this is why Moroni beckoned us to “come unto Christ, and lay hold upon every good gift.”<sup>4</sup> And perhaps this is why Alma said the word of God is “liberal unto all.”<sup>5</sup>

If Heavenly Father sends His word to us liberally, then why don’t we lay hold upon it more frequently?

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf said:

*Part of our challenge is, I think, that we imagine that God has all of His blessings locked in a huge cloud up in heaven, refusing to give them to us unless we comply with some strict, paternalistic requirements He has set up. But the commandments aren’t like that at all. In reality, Heavenly Father is constantly raining blessings upon us. It is our fear, doubt, and sin that, like an umbrella, block these blessings from reaching us.*<sup>6</sup>

### Centering

In addition to fear, doubt, and sin, I would like to add one additional reason why we don’t lay hold upon the word more often: we are distracted. I believe that one of the most significant obstacles to our laying hold upon the word is our inability to fully immerse ourselves in the word or other worthwhile things—our inability to fully focus on them.

I call this concept “centering.” Centering means you center your attention and effort on what is currently before you. It means you do that thing “with all your heart [your feeling and passion], might [your energy], mind [your focus and attention] and strength [your physical will].”<sup>7</sup> If you are reading scriptures, give them all your heart and mind. If you are in class, give that all your mind and strength. Centering means to be wholehearted—totally invested and engaged.

When I taught business strategy at the Marriott School, I was amazed to see that wholehearted students got so much from my class and that halfhearted students took away so little. Both types of students attended class for the same amount of time and both were present for the same

discussions, but some left enriched and others left indifferent.

Best-selling author Anthony Robbins said:

*One reason so few of us achieve what we truly want is that we never direct our focus; we never concentrate our power. . . . In fact, I believe most people fail in life simply because they **major in minor things**.<sup>8</sup>*

Centering helps us concentrate our power. Imagine that you have several important tasks to complete today and that during the time you have set aside to do each task, you do it with all your heart, might, mind, and strength. No distractions. No text messages. No Instagram. You give each task your whole heart. Would you get more out of your day? Would you lay hold upon more truth? Would you learn more? Yes, of course.

Perhaps some of you undervalue the power of centering. You think you can multitask your way through school and gospel life. But the truth is that you cannot multitask important things.

Let me give you a simple example. I would like you to raise your right foot two inches off the floor. Go ahead. Now, using your knee as the hinge, rotate your lower leg and foot clockwise in a circular motion. Keep rotating. As you rotate your lower leg and foot, hold out one hand, making a flat surface like a piece of paper, and take your index finger on your other hand like a pencil. Keep rotating your leg and foot clockwise in a circle, and with your index finger write the number six on your hand.

You see, when we are distracted, we lose power and willpower. When we focus wholeheartedly, we move in the right direction—and, I believe, in a more inspired direction. It is in the depth of things that you are inspired to lay hold upon the word in ways that can change you and change your life.

So how can you begin to center when you are not yet good at it? Centering is just like building a muscle. The next time you study the scriptures, turn off social media; give the scriptures your full attention. In your next class don't surf the Internet; instead, listen and participate. In your

next sacrament meeting, listen with all your heart. Soon you will notice the power within you to give things your whole heart. It will become a habit.

### **Blessings of Centering**

There are other blessings that will come to you if you are centered. Centering will help you lay hold upon your purpose in life, even your major. Some of you struggle, wondering if you have chosen the right major. At times you may even wish for a sign that it is right for you, hoping that then you will be able to ignite that passion inside of you for what you are studying.

What if you gave all you had to your major? What if you gave your whole heart? What if you jumped in with both feet, focused on it, spoke highly of it, and became an expert in it? You would soon find your passion. You may even start to see that your major and your classes are more captivating than you thought.

In my last semester at BYU, one of my professors was Steve Albrecht. If students in his class were married, he asked that their spouse attend class with us.

In his class one day, he taught us a simple principle. He said, "As you leave BYU and start earning money, except for a home and education, don't buy anything unless you can pay cash for it."

After class that day, my wife and I talked about this principle of money management. We felt his words were inspired. We laid hold of them, and we promised to follow them.

Not long after graduation we moved to Cincinnati. Excited to be earning a salary, we rented a townhome and went shopping for a washer and dryer. At the appliance store I remember standing in front of a new, shiny, white washer-and-dryer set. They were beautiful! Of course we didn't have the cash to pay for them. If we were going to buy them, we would have to use credit. As we stood there, Jennifer looked at me and I looked at her, and we both knew we couldn't buy them unless we paid cash.

So, heads hanging low, we drove down to the secondhand store. There we bought a used green washer and a yellow dryer for \$25 a piece. We

made a pact that as soon as they stopped working, we would buy that new washer-dryer set. Wouldn't you know it, but that old washer and dryer worked for ten years! Because we laid hold upon Professor Albrecht's words, we have lived debt free ever since. What a tremendous blessing has come to us as a result.

### **Power to Change Lives**

If we study and pursue goals in a more centered way, we are given this promise by President Spencer W. Kimball:

*We shall experience the Holy Ghost broadening our understanding, find new insights, witness an unfolding pattern of all scripture; and the doctrines of the Lord shall come to have more meaning to us than we ever thought possible.*<sup>9</sup>

Many of you have served missions. As a missionary you tried to share the word with other people, hoping they would lay hold upon it. Why did some people lay hold and others did not? You knew that if they would give you their attention and begin to center on your message, the likelihood of them laying hold upon the word of the gospel was significantly higher. How did you feel when they would not lay hold?

Could it be that Heavenly Father feels the same about us? He knows that if we will just give His word our wholehearted attention, we will likely lay hold of it and it will bless our lives. The amazing thing is this: when we lay hold upon the word, we actually open ourselves up to receive more of His word and to lay hold of it in greater ways.

Alma taught:

*And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.*<sup>10</sup>

When my mother was sixteen, one Sunday her Sunday School teacher taught about the concept

of love. She invited all the youth in the class to go home and tell their parents that they loved them.

My mother listened and laid hold upon the words of her teacher. After the class ended, she waited for her classmates to leave and then said to her teacher, "I can't do what you asked me to do. I can't tell my father I love him."

You see, at the time her father was a mechanic on an army base. He wasn't active in the Church. And he was often rough, gruff, and mean, just as you might expect from an army mechanic. At that time, "I love you" was not something they said to each other in their family.

"Well," the teacher said, "you have to do it. Your father—especially your father—needs to hear those words from you. He deserves your unconditional love."

So my mom went home. All week the words of her teacher stayed with her. Finally, on Saturday night, knowing she would be facing her teacher the next day, my mom found her courage.

Her father had just walked into the kitchen to put out his cigarette. My mom got up her courage and blurted out the words "Dad, I have something to tell you. I love you."

With those words, her father turned around with his back toward my mom and leaned against the fridge with his head bowed down. My mom thought he was angry. He just stood there, back turned and head down.

Then my big, burly grandfather turned around, and he was weeping. My mom hesitated, and then she stepped over to him. He wrapped his arms around her and said, "I love you."

As long as she could remember, this was the first time that he had hugged her and said those words to her.

It was then, with those words, that my grandfather's heart began to soften. Years later, when I would visit my grandfather, the first thing he would do was hug me and tell me he loved me. When I knew him, he was a faithful member of the Church. I wonder what would have happened if my mother had not laid hold upon the words of her Sunday School teacher.

When my mother laid hold upon the word and acted on it, my grandfather did the same: he laid hold upon her words. And that opened the door for other significant blessings in their life.

Laying hold upon the word is quick and powerful. As the psalm pleads, “Quicken me, O Lord, according unto thy word.”<sup>11</sup>

When you lay hold of the word, it can guide you. It can give you a new view of things. It can quicken your understanding. It is able to change you. It is able to protect you.

Paul called the word “the word of . . . grace,” a gift, a favor, a privilege that “is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.”<sup>12</sup>

When you leave here today, look for ways you can lay hold upon the word. By doing so you will lay hold upon every good gift that our Heavenly Father has prepared for you. By continually laying hold upon the word, you will come to know the Word, even Jesus Christ, “for he was the Word, even the messenger of salvation.”<sup>13</sup>

Elder Gary L. Pocock said:

*As we “lay hold upon the word of God,” it lays hold upon us, guiding our thoughts, words, and deeds, drawing us ever closer to the Great Source of those inspiring words.*<sup>14</sup>

When I came to BYU, my goal was to get a master’s degree in business administration and work for the best marketing company in the world: Procter & Gamble. It took a lot of sleepless nights, sacrifice, and my own money to earn my degree. Because of BYU, I got the job.

I remember my first day of work. I parked my car down the road and across the freeway from P&G’s headquarters in Cincinnati. I can’t describe the feeling of accomplishment I had as I walked across the overpass bridge to my new job. I had done it. I was about to start a career for which I had struggled and sacrificed.

But suddenly my thoughts changed. Do you know what I noticed? I noticed that I was walking. And I remembered my accident and I remembered the words of that blessing when Stan said, “I bless you that you will walk again. I bless you that you will hold positions of leadership and make a difference in the world.” There I was, dressed in my new suit, headed to my first day of professional work, and crying like a baby as I walked into my new life.

I know what happens when you lay hold upon the word. Get centered, immerse yourself in the word of God, listen, and give your whole heart to what is here in front of you at BYU, and I testify you will rise to become exactly what God wants you to be. By so doing you will come to know yourself, your purpose, and your Savior. In the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

#### Notes

1. Hebrews 6:19.
2. Enos 1:3.
3. Joseph Smith—History 1:12.
4. Moroni 10:30.
5. Alma 6:5.
6. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Living the Gospel Joyful,” *Ensign*, November 2014.
7. D&C 4:2.
8. Anthony Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 21; emphasis in original.
9. Spencer W. Kimball, “First Presidency Message: Always a Convert Church: Some Lessons to Learn and Apply This Year,” *Ensign*, September 1975.
10. Alma 12:10.
11. Psalm 119:107.
12. Acts 20:32.
13. D&C 93:8.
14. Gary L. Pocock, “Lay Hold upon the Word of God,” *Ensign*, July 2007.