

Seek and Attain the Spiritual High Ground in Life

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What a joy it is to be with you tonight and share my testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ. With you, I give thanks for gospel principles that give us an eternal perspective and teach us how to have joy in this life and in the life to come.

After I was set apart in the Salt Lake Temple as an Assistant to the Twelve Apostles, Elder LeGrand Richards, who was 46 years my senior, put his arms around me and whispered into my ear, “Oh, to be a boy again and have my whole life ahead of me.” To be a boy again? I was 42 years old! The reason I say that is because tonight I’m going to talk to you as though you were a little bit younger than what you may think you are. So, my dear brothers and sisters, as I look into your eyes, I see the youth of Zion. You are a royal army with a noble heritage. You stand as living examples for future generations. As the hymn says, “Shall the youth of Zion falter . . . ? No! . . . Faithful and true we will ever stand.”¹

Tonight I would like to talk to you about how we can stand “faithful and true” always. I suggest to you that we will only be able to stand “true to the faith” as we seek, obtain, and retain spiritual *high ground* in our lives.

What Is High Ground?

It is interesting that prophets of all dispensations sought inspiration in the tops of the mountains. For example, Moses “saw God face to face” on “an exceedingly high mountain” (see Moses 1:1–2). Nephi “went up into the mountain, and cried unto the Lord” (see 1 Nephi 17:7–8). The brother of Jared saw the premortal Christ—a profoundly sacred experience—on the mount Shelem (see Ether 3:13). Isaiah and Micah of the Old Testament prophesied that “in the last days . . . the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains” (Isaiah 2:2; see also Micah 4:1; 2 Nephi 12:2).

Our Savior also went to the mountains often to seek spiritual guidance and to teach His disciples. Christ was transfigured before Peter, James, and John on “an high mountain apart” (see Matthew 17:1–2; Mark 9:2; see also Luke 9:28). One of His greatest discourses—the Beatitudes—comes from the great Sermon on the *Mount* (see Matthew 5:1). On another

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occasion He went up into a mountain above the Sea of Galilee, and when the multitudes came, He blessed and healed all those who were afflicted (see Matthew 15:29–31).

From such high ground ancient prophets and the Lord Himself received direction and power to keep the commandments and serve others. To seek spiritual high ground is to rise above the world and its temptation and to follow our Savior. Tonight I would like to share with you a particular story in the scriptures which demonstrates the importance of seeking—and staying—on the high ground.

The Importance of High Ground

Lehonti, in the Book of Mormon, teaches us an important lesson about seeking and maintaining the high ground (see Alma 47). Lehonti took his followers to a high place atop a mountain and built a fortress for safety, security, and protection. The Lamanite king sent his army, led by the Nephite dissenter Amalickiah, to conquer Lehonti and his people. But Amalickiah was “a very subtle man to do evil” (Alma 47:4), and he wanted to “gain favor with the armies of the Lamanites” so that he could overthrow the king “and take possession of the kingdom” (Alma 47:8).

Three times Amalickiah sent a message to Lehonti, asking him to come down to the valley to meet with him. Three times Lehonti refused to leave his safety on high ground. But Amalickiah was persistent. The fourth time, Amalickiah came near Lehonti’s camp and said to Lehonti, in effect, “Just step outside of your fortress—and bring your guards with you. I will meet you there” (see Alma 47:12).

This time Lehonti accepted Amalickiah’s invitation and left the security of the mountaintop. Now Amalickiah presented his devious plan, tempting Lehonti with victory and power. Lehonti was invited to bring his men down from the mountain in the middle of the night and surround the Lamanite army as they slept. Amalickiah promised that he would sur-

render to Lehonti, giving Lehonti command of the entire Lamanite army—as long as Lehonti made Amalickiah second in command.

The plan was executed as Amalickiah had outlined. The Lamanite army surrendered, and Lehonti became their chief. But then Amalickiah had his servants slowly poison Lehonti. With Lehonti dead, Amalickiah took command of both armies, gained control of Lehonti’s people, and returned victorious to the king of the Lamanites, whereupon Amalickiah completed his evil plan by killing the king and becoming ruler of the Lamanites.

Amalickiah’s deception shows just how Satan works in our lives. His temptations are incessant invitations to leave our high ground and spiritual safety. And he will—with great patience—wait for us to give in to his enticements. Lehonti did not respond the first time a messenger came from Amalickiah, nor the second, nor even the third time. But on the fourth visit, Lehonti stepped just below the safety of the high ground, succumbing to the false promises of power and glory. Of course Lehonti’s demise was not immediate. Perhaps for a few days he gloried in his status as commander in chief of the Lamanite army, and he probably thought that leaving the mountaintop fortress was worth it. But like Amalickiah’s treachery, the enticements of the adversary are always short-lived—and poisonous. Whenever we leave the high ground, we succumb to spiritual illness.

Why Stay on High Ground?

Can you see how important it is to stay on high ground? Just as the Savior called His disciples to come to Him on a mountain so that He could ordain them with priesthood power (see Mark 3:13–15), He invites all of us, as His disciples today, to come to Him. Those who hearken to that invitation will receive blessings not available anywhere else.

In this life we will be constantly tried and tested to see if we will keep the command-

ments of God. But all the trials of this probationary period called mortality are here to make us stronger, not to pull us under and defeat us! As the Lord taught the Prophet Joseph Smith: “All these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 122:7).

*Thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;
And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high.* [D&C 121:7–8]

Sometimes we forget who we are: we are children of God, and we are striving to achieve exaltation! We want to live eternally on the *highest* ground—in the presence of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. It is called exaltation. But sometimes, like Lehonti, we put ourselves in compromising circumstances by choosing to step down even just a little from the safety of living the commandments. We then become vulnerable to Satan and the enticements of the world.

Staying on High Ground Together

Keep in mind that Lehonti wasn’t the only one who suffered from the consequences of his choices. So many times you and I think that when we compromise our standards “it can’t hurt anyone but me,” but in reality so many depend on us to be obedient, to be worthy, to be true, and to be chaste. Just think—there are our friends, our parents, our brothers and sisters, and, most importantly, our eternal companion and our children. Even if you are not married yet, your future companion and those children are interested in your spiritual well-being. Your choices now may determine whether or not you will be worthy of them in the future.

There may be some who won’t be married. May I say to you, the most important thing you have to remember is to stay on the high ground and make sure that you are worthy, because we are told that there will be many blessings in the

eternities to come that will be rightfully yours. So do not get that discouraged. The most important thing is to stay worthy and true and on the spiritual high ground.

When Lehonti came out of the fortress and succumbed to temptation, all of his people suffered. Amalickiah brought them back into captivity, and many were killed in battle later on. As converted followers of the Savior, we are commissioned to strengthen those around us. We get on high ground not just to save ourselves from the adversary but also so that we can lift others to safety.

Good friends help keep us on the high ground. Good friends strengthen us and help us live the commandments when we are with them. True friends will not make us choose between the Lord’s ways and their ways (see Isaiah 55:8). If your present friends are taking you off the strait and narrow path and taking you from the high ground, depart from them *now!* Do not let the mocking from those who have chosen the “great and spacious building” shame you into leaving spiritual safety (see 1 Nephi 8:25–28).

Choose your friends carefully. When I was a little boy, my mother took me down to a pond, and we fed bread to the swans. She was a great teacher. She would say to me, “Do you see any vultures or birds of prey among those beautiful, peaceful swans? There are only swans because birds of a feather flock together!” The message was simple. Your friends will reflect what kind of a person you are and who you feel comfortable being around in your life. It is from your friends that you will ultimately choose your eternal companion, and it is your friends who help you stay on the strait and narrow path and be true and faithful.

At the same time we must ask ourselves “What kind of a friend am I?” Be a good example; be a light unto the world; lead and guide those around you on the path of righteousness. They are depending on you to lift and strengthen them.

Staying on High Ground: Desire and Faith

How then do we get to high ground and stay there? First, we must desire and seek to always be faithful to gospel teachings, commandments, and covenants. We must seek for the blessings which come from such obedience. We do this by cultivating an atmosphere in which the Spirit can always abide with us. Once on high ground, we stay there through obedience to the commandments, study and prayer, living principles of provident living and self-reliance, preparing for and honoring temple covenants, and building strong marriages and families.

To reach the high ground, we must first have the desire to be in the kingdom of God and above the things of the world. Faith is the principal element of that desire. The scriptures explain that faith is “not a perfect knowledge,” but even if we “can no more than desire to believe,” we can develop faith by experimenting upon the word (Alma 32:26–27)—or in other words, as we keep the commandments, our faith grows.

Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the first principle of the gospel and the cornerstone of our eternal salvation. As we exercise our faith in our Savior and apply His teachings in our life, we will be strengthened and we will not fear the world or heed its enticements. The Lord’s admonition to trust Him is clear: “Look unto me in every thought; doubt not, fear not” (D&C 6:36).

We can be like Joseph Smith, whose service to the Lord began with a boy’s simple faith in a scripture verse: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5). Joseph’s sincere prayer was answered with the First Vision, and from that time he followed the Lord’s instructions. Like Joseph did as he matured, we will also faithfully grow in gospel service. We will become more like our Savior in our actions of caring, giving, and testifying as we rely on the Holy Ghost to lead and guide us in all we do.

Having the Spirit to Be with Us

As we exercise our faith, relying on the Spirit helps us to reach high ground. At baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Ghost by the laying on of hands by one having authority, just as the Savior promised His ancient Apostles that He would leave a Comforter with them (see John 14:26). I marvel that even though the Apostles were ultimately killed for their faith, all of them—other than Judas—remained true to the Savior to the end.

The Holy Ghost will also give us guidance, courage, and strength to stay on high ground. Through the influence of the Holy Ghost we can receive revelation in answer to our prayers, maintain strong testimonies of the Savior throughout our lives, endure to the end, and attain eternal life.

None of us are immune from the temptations of the adversary. That is why we are here in mortality. It is a test. We all need the fortification available through the Holy Ghost. How important it is during troubled times when we are tested that we do not do anything to lose the Holy Ghost’s comfort, peace, and direction! Companionship with the Spirit will give us the strength to resist evil and, when necessary, to repent and return to the strait and narrow path that leads to eternal salvation.

I believe we cannot go far from the high ground if we always have the Spirit with us. Each Sabbath day we have an opportunity to renew our baptismal covenant by partaking of the sacrament. In doing so, we promise the Lord that we are willing to take His name upon us, always remember Him, and keep His commandments (see D&C 20:77). If we are willing to do this, we are given the great promise that we will always have His Spirit to be with us.

In the Book of Mormon, King Benjamin explained why our willingness to take upon ourselves the name of the Savior is so important:

There is no other name given whereby salvation cometh; therefore, I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives.

And it shall come to pass that whosoever doeth this shall be found at the right hand of God, for he shall know the name by which he is called; for he shall be called by the name of Christ. [Mosiah 5:8–9]

As we strive to take upon us the name of Christ, to become Christians, we put Him and His work first in our lives. We sanctify ourselves and try to become like Him by seeking His will and faithfully serving others. As we follow the promptings of the Holy Ghost in this manner, we reach spiritual high ground.

Obedience

Obedience to Christ's teachings keeps us on high ground. As the Psalmist wrote:

*Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? . . .
He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.*
[Psalm 24:3–4]

We keep our hands clean and our hearts pure through obedience.

In the premortal existence we were blessed with agency—the ability to choose. We maintain that agency in this life by being obedient. Such obedience keeps us free from the bondage of Satan. If we are faithful and obedient, he cannot dominate or control us. I think what we have to remember is that if we have the Spirit with us, we have light, and Satan, who is the prince of darkness, cannot stand light. Therefore, with that light, if we tell him to depart, he must depart.

But just like in the scripture story of Lehonti and Amalickiah, the adversary is so clever in his temptation. He entices us to choose a momentary lapse in judgment, to come down from the high ground. In the process we can

lose all of the blessings that are in store for us if we are faithful. I want so much for you to understand that you do not want to live your life regretting poor decisions or disobedient actions. I am reminded of Whittier's words:

*For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: "It might have been!"²*

There is nothing sadder than spending your life in the present plagued by the decisions of the past. And what you have to remember about repentance is that an element of repentance is to forgive yourself, to let go of it, and the Lord will not call it to mind. Just remember there is nothing you have done that will stop you from putting it behind you.

If such a moment of weakness should come, please understand that through the Atonement of our Savior Jesus Christ there is a way back through repentance so that we can return to Them with honor. Even if we are already feeling the effects of evil's poison, there is an antidote. We can be restored to full spiritual health and happiness. Mercy can satisfy the demands of justice as we repent and return to the Father in our prayers and our conduct. Repentance and obedience to the commandments, faithfulness, and honoring our covenants will enable us to once again be worthy of eternal blessings.

Study and Prayer

Another important way we stay on the high ground is through faithful and thoughtful study and prayer. We can learn so much from our Savior. When He was tempted by Lucifer, He prayed to His Heavenly Father for strength and said, "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Luke 4:8).

You have to understand that you have a mortal body because you made a decision to come to this world to have a mortal experience, but Satan will never have a body, nor will his followers. And when you tell him to depart, he must depart. Once you understand that, you

begin to understand who you are as a child of God.

What would have happened if Lehonti had prayed for guidance as Jesus did? Had he done so, I feel he would not have succumbed to Amalickiah's request to come down from the safety of the mountaintop. I am sure the Spirit would have warned Lehonti of the dangers to him and his people. I am grateful for the scriptures because I can learn from those who were examples of faithfulness and courage and can avoid the mistakes of those who were not faithful. I am grateful that I can seek guidance in prayer and follow the Spirit's promptings.

I am also grateful for the opportunity we each have to learn from the study and observation of others, especially our families. My mother was a great influence on me. I never would have done anything that would have caused her any heartache and pain. I also loved my father. Dad didn't preach to me. He quietly set a good example and led by gentle persuasion and kind expectations. As the youngest in our family, I also learned from my older brother and sister—I would say to myself, "Boy, I don't want to do that one!" It's very interesting. If you can learn from the scriptures, and if you can learn from those around you and not have to experience it yourself, it really helps. But the greatest influence on me is my eternal companion. The most important decision that we make in our lives is whom we will marry, and I am so grateful for my sweetheart—for the example that she has been for over 50 years, tenderly guiding me and our family along the strait and narrow path.

Spiritual and Temporal Well-Being

In addition to faith, the gift of the Holy Ghost, study, and prayer, the Lord has given us some other important principles for our spiritual and temporal well-being so that we can stay on high ground.

The Lord's storehouse is both spiritual and temporal. Through faith and obedience to the

commandments, we build a spiritual reservoir of strength to meet life's challenges. But we must replenish it all the time. It's a little like the story in the Old Testament about the manna. The Israelites had to get new manna each day, so they would have to be faithful to have it replenished. That's the way spiritual power is. Similarly, we should follow wise principles of provident living and self-reliance to build temporal resources to meet our needs and serve others.

Provident living means not coveting the things of this world. It means using the resources of the earth wisely and not being wasteful, even in times of plenty. Provident living means avoiding excessive debt and being content with having that which is sufficient for our needs.

For example, one element of provident living is to obtain an education and vocational training to prepare us for a profession that will sustain us and our families. Then we must give a full day's effort for a full day's pay. Such a work ethic, coupled with the qualities of integrity, character, and trustworthiness, qualify each of us as a "laborer . . . worthy of his hire" (D&C 31:5).

Another element of provident living is the ability to live joyfully within our means—avoiding excessive debt and not coveting the temporal things of this world. I want so much for you to understand that now at your age. There seems to be a sense of entitlement in today's culture—a feeling that we should acquire *right now* everything that our parents have acquired over many years. Debt can enslave us. When we become burdened with excessive debt, we have given away our precious, priceless agency and placed ourselves in self-imposed servitude, spending all of our time, all of our energy, and all of our means to the repayment of our debts. A mounting feeling of hopelessness from this situation builds stress, which depresses us mentally and physically, affecting our self-worth, our relationship with

our companion, and ultimately our feelings toward the Lord.

It is essential that we understand the need for and develop a spending and savings plan—a budget—and distinguish between wants and needs. I have often felt that a companionship needs not only to hear the cherished three words “I love you” but also the tender four words of caring “We can’t afford it.” When a couple makes financial decisions, they have to talk with one another. If a wife or a husband makes a large purchase without discussing it together and taking it to the Lord in prayer, it causes financial stress in a marriage. And financial stress is the number one cause of divorce! (That and, of course, immorality.) If couples are not one in temporal and financial matters, I can assure you they are not going to be one in spiritual matters.

Self-reliance is taking responsibility for our own spiritual and temporal welfare and for those whom Heavenly Father has entrusted to our care. When we are self-reliant, we can better emulate the Savior in serving and blessing others. We raise ourselves to a higher ground so that we can reach down and lift others. The reason you will have success in your life is not for self-gratification but so that you can help others. Our ability to serve is increased or diminished by the level of our self-reliance.

These welfare principles are practical guidelines to teach us a prudent lifestyle that will bring happiness in our daily lives and prepare us to meet and endure the challenges and emergencies in the tests of life. Having applied these welfare principles in our own life, we then are able to stay on high ground and reach out to others in need of help. We can also teach them how to have provident living and self-reliance in their lives.

These principles are just as important for an individual as for a family. If you are not married yet, begin practicing them yourself so that when that time comes you have already

formed sound habits. Such self-discipline will bless your family greatly in the future.

The payment of tithing and fast offerings is an important element in establishing a provident-living lifestyle. Paying our tithes and offerings develops personal righteousness and fortifies our faith to sustain us through the trials, tribulations, and sorrows in our life’s journey. It helps to quench the selfish, temporal thirst for the things of this world and turns our thoughts and actions to eternal objectives and a willingness to help others in need. If we are willing to give our tithes and offerings, we will be blessed, and we will experience a mighty change of heart—from a worldly *taking and getting* mentality to a Christlike *loving, sharing, and giving* attitude.

If we are prepared by following welfare principles, not only shall we “not fear” (D&C 38:30) for ourselves, but we will also be able to overcome our adversity and assist others in their time of need. That is the great blessing of provident living and becoming self-reliant. I hope that you will all learn it and practice it in your lives.

The Temple

Provident living also blesses us with the time and peace of mind to focus on other important aspects of staying on the high ground. The temple is the highest ground we can achieve in mortality. For us today, the temple is our mountaintop—it is the Lord’s chosen house for sacred teachings, eternal covenants and ordinances, and personal communication with the Lord. It is where we covenant with the Lord, and when we make those covenants, it’s as though we are in His presence.

The temple is a place apart from the world—dedicated and consecrated to the Lord. It is a place where we learn of the foundation of the world, the purpose of mankind in mortality, and the qualifications necessary to receive eternal blessings. In the temple, what is recorded on earth is recorded in heaven, and what is

sealed on earth is sealed in heaven for time and all eternity. The eternal covenants we make with the Lord in the temple can never be broken—except by our own disobedience. If we are obedient to these eternal ordinances and covenants, we are prepared to live eternally with God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. The temple is also a place where we can go before the Lord in prayer and pour out our desires and concerns. It is a sacred place where we can ponder and pray for strength to deal with our problems and for direction for our lives. When we are troubled or have crucial decisions that weigh heavily on our mind and soul, we can take our cares to the temple and receive spiritual guidance. I hope that you will take advantage of that in your life.

Temple covenants and worship are critical to staying on high ground. If we have not yet received sacred temple covenants, we must set our sights on going to the temple to receive the Lord’s promised blessings. After we have been to the temple, we should faithfully and frequently return to worship and perform sacred ordinances for others.

Many of you are preparing to be sealed as eternal companions with a choice son or daughter of Heavenly Father. Some of you have already attained that blessing and are preparing to fulfill your responsibilities as parents. Whether these blessings come in this life or in the next, they will come to all who are faithful. If you have been born to parents who were sealed in the temple, thank them and our Heavenly Father for this great blessing. If not, be grateful to your parents and all who have helped you stand today on the high ground of the gospel. Commit yourself to be sealed in the temple and to raise *your* children in the covenant. The blessings of a temple marriage that you enjoy in this life and the next will bless you and your posterity throughout eternity.

Building Strong Marriages and Families

As we strive to keep our temple covenants and build strong marriages and families, we fortify ourselves with a shield of faith to protect us from the fiery darts of the adversary.

Knowing that temple ordinances and covenants are necessary for us to enter into the highest degree of the celestial kingdom, I have often wondered why some who have taken upon themselves sacred temple covenants and reached the high ground would ever break them and come down from the high ground. Such unfaithfulness, in turn, breaks the hearts of their companions and children, who desire to be an eternal family.

I have observed over the years many, many couples who have maintained strong and vital marriages as they have remained true to their temple covenants. In conclusion tonight, let me share with you what I have seen these successful couples do. These seemingly “little” things have fortified and strengthened these families.

First, couples who build strong marriages and families know who they are. They know that they are a son or daughter of God. They set eternal goals to once again live with our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. They strive to leave the ways of the natural man behind.

Second, they know the doctrines of the gospel and the importance of temple ordinances and covenants. They know that keeping their covenants is necessary to achieve eternal goals.

Third, they choose to obtain the eternal blessings of the kingdom of God rather than the temporal and temporary possessions of the world. They seek high ground and stay there.

Fourth, such couples realize that when they are sealed for time and all eternity, they have chosen an eternal companion. There is no need to look any further. Their courting days are over.

Fifth, these couples think of one another before self. They grow together, and not apart, as they serve one another, love one another, care for one another, and communicate together with the Lord in prayer. They converse often with one another, thereby never letting little things become big things. They talk early about the “little hurts” with little fear of offending. In this way they avoid big explosions of bitter feelings. It is so much better to let off a little steam before the top blows off the pressure cooker! These couples seek one another’s good and avoid selfishness, which suffocates spiritual sensitivity. They do not nag, ridicule, or speak ill of one another to others. They know that such language and behavior damages the eternal potential of their relationship. They are willing to change their hearts, to repent, to apologize, and to ask forgiveness if they have hurt the one they love. They work *now* to improve their relationship, knowing that they are not suddenly going to become nicer when they die! They cultivate a thoughtful, considerate spirit and love one another always. In so doing, they lift each other to high ground and strengthen one another in their determination to stay there together.

Conclusion and Testimony

My brothers and sisters, I hope that you can see the importance of seeking and maintaining spiritual high ground in our lives and of bringing others to the high ground with us. My hope and prayer is that you will truly understand who you are and conduct your life in such a way as to always have the Spirit to be with you. As you do, you will attain the spiritual high ground that will qualify you and your posterity for all of the eternal blessings that are rightfully yours.

May the Lord’s choicest blessings be with you, the rising generation. You are the royal army that will lead you, your families, your friends, and those you serve to the high ground. I testify that those who make seeking and maintaining the high ground their lifelong quest will be blessed to one day stand on the highest ground—in the presence of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. That we may all live our lives to be worthy of attaining such celestial blessings through our obedience in keeping sacred covenants is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “True to the Faith,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 254.
2. John Greenleaf Whittier, “Maud Muller” (1856), stanza 53, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Whittier* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1894), 48.