

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles will address us. He will be followed by Elder Cecil O. Samuelson of the Presidency of the Seventy. We will then be pleased to hear from Elders Steven E. Snow and Keith K. Hilbig of the Seventy.

The choir sang "Come, Rejoice."
Elder Cree-L. Kofford offered the invocation.

The choir sang "There Is a Green Hill Far Away."

Elder Robert D. Hales

What a joy it is to stand before the priesthood and address the royal army of God. It is important that we know who we are—sons of God who hold the Aaronic Priesthood and the Melchizedek Priesthood, restored in this dispensation. It is important that we know what we are trying to achieve in life—that is, to return back into the presence of our Heavenly Father with our families. Because we are so blessed, it is also important that we learn and do our duty to God.

New Duty to God program

For many years the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have had great concerns for the welfare of our youth in our troubled times. On September 28, 2001, the First Presidency sent a letter to priesthood leaders in the United States and Canada which stated:

"In January 2000, we introduced an Aaronic Priesthood Achievement program in areas outside the United States and Canada where Scouting was not available. The purpose . . . is to help young men prepare for the Melchizedek Priesthood, the temple endowment, a full-time mission, marriage, and fatherhood. . . . [That international program remains in force and] has now been adapted for use in the United States and Canada to include the important role of Scouting in the development of young men . . . [and will be known as] *Aaronic Priesthood: Fulfilling Our Duty to God*.

"Three guidebooks—*Aaronic Priesthood: Fulfilling Our Duty to God* for deacons, teachers, and priests—explain the program. Young men who complete the requirements outlined in all of these guidebooks will receive the Duty to God Award.

"We also announce a new simplified *Young Women Personal Progress* book and a revised *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet. These materials have been updated to help youth develop greater faith and courage in today's world. In addition, we announce a *Guidebook for Parents and Leaders of Youth* to help parents and leaders strengthen our youth. This guidebook also outlines the important and supportive role of Mutual.

"We desire all young men to strive to earn the Eagle Scout and Duty to God Awards. We desire all young women to strive to earn the Young Womanhood Recognition. As youth work on these goals, they will develop skills and attributes that will lead them to the temple and prepare them for a lifetime of service to their families and the Lord.

"Copies of these materials will be sent to each stake for distribution to wards by December 2001, for implementation in January 2002." Thus ended the First Presidency's historic letter.

Importance of strengthening youth

We live in a very difficult era in the history of the world, when Satan is going

to and fro on the earth among the children of God, doing all manner of evil to thwart the desires of a righteous God. The scriptures teach us that Satan's evil designs upon the peoples of the earth will intensify as the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ draws near at hand (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1–10; D&C 10:33; 52:14; 86:3–10).

There has never been a time in these latter days like today, when the message is being brought forward so strongly by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles to have parents along with bishops and priesthood and auxiliary leaders make sure you young men understand who you are and what you can become—not only here in mortality but for the eternities that will follow.

Earning the Duty to God Award

The Duty to God Award will assist young men to meet the future challenges of life and to achieve the purposes of the Aaronic Priesthood.

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have explained, "We hope you will earn the Duty to God Award and that it will become a symbol of your preparation to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood" (*Aaronic Priesthood: Fulfilling Our Duty to God [Deacon]* [2001], 4).

As you earn the Duty to God Award, you will complete goals in the following areas:

- Be faithful in your priesthood duties and standards.
- Be involved in family activities.
- Participate in quorum activities.
- Complete a Duty to God service project.
- Accomplish personal goals in each of four categories, the center being priesthood duties: spiritual development; physical development; educational, personal, and career development; and citizenship and social development.

If you will fulfill the requirements for these priesthood duties and personal at-

tributes, you will prepare yourselves for the Melchizedek Priesthood responsibilities and future challenges in your life. I promise you that your achievement of the Duty to God Award will provide you with a living testimony that will sustain you throughout your life.

Where available, Scouting can also help you in this effort. We encourage you to participate in Scouting. Many of the Scouting requirements can fill goals and requirements of the Duty to God certificates.

Scouting is part of the Aaronic Priesthood activity program. The Duty to God Award is a priesthood award, having requirements that will help you develop spiritually and fulfill your priesthood duties.

Fulfilling your duty to God

Some of the great blessings of these programs that have been developed are that as the youth of the Church, you will have a clear understanding of who you are, you will be accountable for your actions, you will take responsibility for the conduct of your life, and you will be able to set goals so that you might achieve what you were sent to earth to achieve. Our plea is that you strive to do your very best.

Young men, get on your knees each day and express to God the desires of your heart. He is the source of all wisdom and will give you answers to your prayers. Be humble and willing to listen to the whisperings of the Spirit. Read the scriptures daily. Strengthen your testimony. Pay tithes and fast offerings. Remember and keep the covenants you made when you were baptized, and renew those covenants each week when you partake of the sacrament. Keeping your baptismal covenants now will help you prepare for the temple covenants you will make in the future.

This is the essence of your duty to God. By fulfilling your duty to God, you

will bring blessings not only to your own life but to the lives of others.

Giving service to others is one of the purposes of the Aaronic Priesthood. As a requirement for the Duty to God Award, at least once each year you will have a service project that will provide an opportunity for significant service to your family, the Church, or the community. As you help and serve others, you will learn that the following scripture is a very essential part of the gospel: "Inasmuch as ye do it unto the least of these, ye do it unto me" (D&C 42:38).

I hope the parents, and the bishops—who are the presidents of the Aaronic Priesthood—will understand that the young men and young women for whom they have responsibility have been prepared to come to earth at this particular time for a sacred and glorious purpose. It is a great blessing to be able to qualify for and then receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. You young men have noble callings to become righteous men, to grow in strength, and to influence others for good. You young men are the future of the Church.

A decade of decision

We have all progressed since we came to earth from the presence of our Heavenly Father. Our first decade in this life was a great learning experience. We were cared for and nurtured. We learned to walk and to talk and control this mortal body. We learned about agency—that choices have consequences. Many of us were baptized at eight years of age, which the scriptures tell us is the age of accountability, when we have the ability to know right from wrong, to know who we are—children of God—why we are here on earth, and what we are trying to accomplish (see D&C 68:25, 27).

From our baptism to the age of 12, our families, priesthood and auxiliary leaders, and teachers have taught us gospel principles and standards that prepare

us to hold the priesthood. The Aaronic Priesthood is called the preparatory priesthood. This second decade of our lives is a preparatory period. It is a time in which we prepare to make the great decisions that lie ahead. We prepare to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood, to take upon us our temple covenants, and to fulfill all of our priesthood responsibilities so that we can fulfill our duty to God.

The choices you make today will directly influence the number and kinds of opportunities you will have in the future. Each daily decision will either limit or broaden your opportunities. As you make righteous decisions during this preparatory period, you will be ready to make righteous decisions in the future.

Just think, in the next decade of your life—the decade of your 20s—what decisions will be made: temple worthiness, missionary service, education, career, an eternal companion, and a family. This decade of decision is not a time to fear. It is a time to enjoy the blessings for which you have prepared. "If ye are prepared ye shall not fear" (D&C 38:30).

One of the greatest gifts you were given at baptism was to receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. With the gift of the Holy Ghost, you can have inspired guidance to make these important decisions.

During the preparatory period of your lives it is so important that you cultivate spiritual growth, physical growth, education, personal development, career preparation, citizenship, and social skills. These qualities are all part of your priesthood duties and will help in the decisions that lie ahead for the next decades of your life.

Discipleship and duty to God

An important part of fulfilling our duty to God at any age is to become a disciple of Jesus Christ, which means that we accept His invitation to "come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). To follow the Savior requires us to know who He is—the Son

of God—to take His name upon us, to remember His atoning sacrifice, and to keep His commandments. We made these covenants at baptism, and we renew our baptismal covenants each time we partake of the sacrament.

We learn from the Savior in His prayers to His Father in Heaven great lessons of discipleship and duty to God. In His intercessory prayer He teaches, *“I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do”* (John 17:4; italics added).

When Jesus Christ suffered agony in the Garden of Gethsemane for the sins of all mankind, He prayed, *“O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt”* (Matthew 26:39; italics added).

Discipleship and duty to God are shown in the lives of prophets throughout the scriptures. The lessons we learn from these prophets can be applied in our lives.

Young Joseph Smith said, *“I obeyed; I returned to my father in the field, and rehearsed the whole matter to him”* (Joseph Smith—History 1:50; italics added).

Elijah *“went and did according unto the word of the Lord”* (1 Kings 17:5; italics added).

“Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he” (Genesis 6:22; italics added).

Joshua taught his people, *“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. . . . And the people said unto Joshua, The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey”* (Joshua 24:15, 24; italics added).

Alma said, *“O, remember, my son, and learn wisdom in thy youth; yea, learn in thy youth to keep the commandments of God”* (Alma 37:35; italics added).

Be a wonderful force for good

The First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles have counseled each holder of the Aaronic Priesthood:

“You live in a day of great challenges and opportunities. You have been called to make a difference in the world. As a son of God, with the power of the Aaronic Priesthood, you can be a wonderful force for good.

“You can provide service, giving of your time, talents, and energies without thought of reward. You can fulfill priesthood duties, such as [preparing, passing, and] blessing the sacrament[, gathering fast offerings, helping others,] and serving as a home teacher. You can lift others by your example. You can strengthen yourself, building faith and testimony, living the gospel while you learn it and share it.

“You have a responsibility to learn what Heavenly Father wants you to do and then to do your best to follow His will. . . .

“The Lord believes in you and has an important mission for you to do. He will help you as you turn to Him in prayer. Listen for the promptings of the Spirit. Obey the commandments. Make and keep covenants that will prepare you for the temple. Work with your parents and leaders as you set goals and strive to achieve them. You will feel a great sense of accomplishment as you fulfill your duty and prepare for the exciting challenges of the future” (*Aaronic Priesthood: Fulfilling Our Duty to God [Priest]* [2001], 4–5).

Brethren of the Aaronic Priesthood, set your goals now and start working toward earning your Duty to God Award and Eagle Scout Award. You will be blessed for your efforts.

Awaken to a sense of your duty to God

I express my love for the youth of the Church. I have great respect and admiration for the righteous choices you are making each day. You are so faithful in these troubled times despite the many challenges which face you. You are preparing yourselves to be future fathers and priesthood leaders of the Church.

It is so important that all of us understand that we live in the last dispensation of the fulness of time—that we are preparing for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and that the adversary in these last days will be able to loose more evils upon the world. Our prayers are that all the youth of the Church will have the strength to withstand the fiery darts of the adversary and that we as parents and priesthood leaders—yes, we as the shepherds—can help our children remain true and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I testify to the truthfulness of this work and the restoration of the priesthood in these latter days. I promise you that you will be blessed for your faithfulness and declare with the prophet Alma, “I have said these things unto you that I might awaken you to a sense of your duty to God, that ye may walk blameless before him, that ye may walk after the holy order of God” (Alma 7:22). That each Aaronic Priesthood holder will fulfill his duty to God and return with honor to his Heavenly Father is my prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Elder Cecil O. Samuelson Jr.

Samuel's fulfillment of his duty to God

As a young man I was impressed with the Old Testament story of Samuel, whose life had been dedicated to God by his grateful mother, Hannah. While still a lad, he went to live and serve in the temple. One night he was called three times by the Lord and each time answered, “Here am I,”¹ thinking that he had been summoned by his high priest teacher, Eli. Wise Eli, knowing that little “Samuel did not yet know the Lord, neither was the word of the Lord yet revealed unto him,”² understood that the Lord had called the young boy. He, therefore, taught Samuel how to respond, and when he was next called by the Lord, Samuel answered, “Speak; for thy servant heareth.”³

As we follow the life of Samuel, we recognize that he did fulfill his duty to God and that “Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground.”⁴ As a result, Samuel himself became a great prophet and leader.

Resources to help fulfill your duty to God

I hope you young men of the Aaronic Priesthood today understand that, as

Samuel, you also have a sacred duty to God. Samuel had a sainted mother, Hannah, and a great priesthood leader, Eli. Most of you young men, likewise, have wonderful parents and inspired priesthood leaders who care for you and stand ready to assist both you and your parents in your quest to fulfill your duty to God.

President Gordon B. Hinckley has said this of you and your generation of young people:

“I have . . . great love for the young men and young women of this Church. . . . How we love you and pray constantly for the genius to help you. Your lives are filled with difficult decisions and with dreams and hopes and longings to find that which will bring you peace and happiness. . . .

“ . . . I make you a promise that God will not forsake you if you will walk in His paths with the guidance of His commandments.”⁵

With this promise of the prophet in mind, let me remind you, as was mentioned by Elder Hales and the letter from the First Presidency, of Church resources that are being made available to assist you in fulfilling your duty to God. The Aaronic Priesthood purposes help you to: