

Watchful unto Prayer Continually

(Alma 34:39; Moroni 6:4; Luke 21:36)

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Constant vigilance is required to counteract complacency and casualness.

I earnestly pray for the assistance of the Holy Ghost for you and for me as we rejoice and worship together.

In April of 1976, Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke specifically to the youth of the Church in general conference. In his classic message entitled “Spiritual Crocodiles,” he described how during an assignment in Africa he observed well-camouflaged crocodiles waiting to prey on unsuspecting victims. He then likened the crocodiles to Satan, who preys on unwary youth by camouflaging the deadly nature of sin.

I was 23 years old when Elder Packer gave that talk, and Susan and I were anticipating the birth of our first child in just a few days. We were impressed with the content of his message about avoiding sin and the masterful way he used the ordinary behavior of animals to teach an important spiritual lesson.

Susan and I also have traveled to Africa on many assignments. And we have had opportunities to see the magnificent animals that live on that continent. Remembering the impact of Elder Packer’s talk in our lives, we have tried to observe and learn lessons from the behavior of African wildlife.

I want to describe the characteristics and tactics of two cheetahs Susan and I watched hunting their prey and relate some of the things we observed to the daily living of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Cheetahs and Topis

Cheetahs are the fastest land animals on earth and reach running speeds as high as 75 mph (120 km/h). These beautiful animals can accelerate from a standstill position to running as fast as 68 mph (109 km/h) in less than three seconds. Cheetahs are predators that sneak up on their prey and sprint a short distance to chase and attack.



Susan and I spent almost two hours watching two cheetahs stalking a large group of topis, Africa's most common and widespread antelopes. The tall, dry grass of the African savanna was golden brown and almost totally obscured the predators as they pursued a group of topis. The cheetahs were separated from each other by approximately 100 yards (91 m) but worked in tandem.

While one cheetah sat upright in the grass and did not move, the other cheetah crouched low to the ground and slowly crept closer to the unsuspecting topis. Then the cheetah that had been sitting upright disappeared in the grass at exactly the same moment that the other cheetah sat upright. This alternating pattern of one cheetah crouching low and creeping forward while the other cheetah sat upright in the grass continued for a long time. The stealthy subtlety of the strategy was intended to distract and deceive the topis and thereby divert their attention away from the approaching danger. Patiently and steadily, the two cheetahs worked as a team to secure their next meal.

Positioned between the large group of topis and the approaching cheetahs were several older and stronger topis standing as sentinels on termite mounds. The enhanced view of the grasslands from the small hills enabled these guardian topis to watch for signs of danger.

Then suddenly, as the cheetahs appeared to be within striking distance, the entire group of topis turned and ran away. I do not know if or how the sentinel topis communicated with the larger group, but somehow a warning was given, and all the topis moved to a place of safety.

And what did the cheetahs do next? Without any delay, the two cheetahs resumed their alternating pattern of one cheetah crouching low and creeping forward while the other cheetah sat upright in the grass. The pattern of pursuit continued. They did not stop. They did not rest or take a break. They were relentless in following

their strategy of distraction and diversion. Susan and I watched the cheetahs disappear in the distance, always moving closer and closer to the group of topis.

That night Susan and I had a memorable conversation about what we had observed and learned. We also discussed this experience with our children and grandchildren and identified many valuable lessons. I now will describe three of those lessons.

Lesson #1—Beware of Evil’s Beguiling Disguises

To me, cheetahs are sleek, alluring, and captivating creatures. A cheetah’s yellowish-tan to greyish-white coat with black spots acts as a beautiful disguise that makes these animals almost invisible as they stalk their prey in the African grasslands.



In a similar way, spiritually dangerous ideas and actions frequently can appear to be attractive, desirable, or pleasurable. Thus, in our contemporary world, each of us needs to be aware of beguiling bad that pretends to be good. As Isaiah warned, “Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!”¹

In a paradoxical period when violating the sanctity of human life is heralded as a right and chaos is described as liberty, how blessed we are to live in this latter-day dispensation when restored gospel light can shine brightly in our lives and help us to discern the adversary’s dark deceptions and distractions.

“For they that are wise and have received the truth, *and have taken the Holy Spirit for their guide, and have not been deceived*—verily I say unto you, they shall not be hewn down and cast into the fire, but shall abide the day.”²

Lesson #2—Stay Awake and Be Alert

For a topi, a brief moment of carelessness or inattentiveness could invite a swift attack from a cheetah. Likewise, spiritual complacency and casualness make us vulnerable to the advances of the adversary. Spiritual thoughtlessness invites great danger into our lives.

Nephi described how in the latter days Satan would attempt to pacify and lull the children of God into a false sense of “carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and *thus the devil cheateth their souls*, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell.”³

Constant vigilance is required to counteract complacency and casualness. To be vigilant is the state or action of *keeping careful watch* for possible danger or difficulties. And keeping watch denotes the act of *staying awake* to guard and protect. Spiritually speaking, we need to stay awake and be alert to the promptings of the Holy Ghost and the signals that come from the Lord’s watchmen on the towers.⁴

“Yea, and I also exhort you ... that ye be watchful unto prayer continually, that ye may not be led away by the temptations of the devil, ... for behold, he rewardeth you no good thing.”⁵

Focusing our lives in and on the Savior and His gospel enables us to overcome the tendency of the natural man to be spiritually snoozy and lazy. As we are blessed with eyes to see and ears to hear,⁶ the Holy Ghost can increase our capacity to look and listen when we may not typically think we need to look or listen or when we may not think anything can be seen or heard.

“Watch, therefore, that ye may be ready.”⁷

Lesson #3—Understand the Intent of the Enemy

A cheetah is a predator that naturally preys on other animals. All day, every day, a cheetah is a predator.



Satan “is the enemy of righteousness and of those who seek to do the will of God.”⁸ All day, every day, his only intent and sole purpose are to make the sons and daughters of God miserable like unto himself.⁹

The Father’s plan of happiness is designed to provide direction for His children, to help them experience enduring joy, and to bring them safely home to Him with resurrected, exalted bodies. The devil labors to make the sons and daughters of God confused and unhappy and to hinder their eternal progression. The adversary works relentlessly to attack the elements of the Father’s plan he hates the most.

Satan does not have a body, and his eternal progress has been halted. Just as water flowing in a riverbed is stopped by a dam, so the adversary’s eternal progress is thwarted because he does not have a physical body. Because of his rebellion, Lucifer has denied himself all of the mortal blessings and experiences made possible through a tabernacle of flesh and bones. One of the potent scriptural meanings of the word *damned* is illustrated in his inability to continue progressing and becoming like our Heavenly Father.

Because a physical body is so central to the Father’s plan of happiness and our spiritual development, Lucifer seeks to frustrate our progression by tempting us to use our bodies improperly. President Russell M. Nelson has taught that spiritual safety ultimately lies in “‘never taking the first enticing step toward going where you should not go and doing what you should not do.’ ... As human beings we all have [physical] appetites necessary for our survival. ‘These appetites are absolutely essential for the perpetuation of life. So, what does the adversary do? ... He attacks us through our appetites. He tempts us to eat things we should not eat, to drink things we should not drink, and to love as we should not love!’”¹⁰

One of the ultimate ironies of eternity is that the adversary, who is miserable precisely because he has no physical body, invites and entices us to share in his misery through the improper use of our bodies. The very tool he does not have and

cannot use is thus the primary target of his attempts to lure us to physical and spiritual destruction.

Understanding the intent of an enemy is vital to effective preparation for possible attacks.¹¹ Precisely because Captain Moroni knew the intention of the Lamanites, he was prepared to meet them at the time of their coming and was victorious.¹² And that same principle and promise applies to each of us.

“If ye are prepared, ye shall not fear.

“And that ye might escape the power of the enemy.”¹³

Invitation, Promise, and Testimony

Just as important lessons can be learned by observing the behavior of cheetahs and topis, so each of us should look for the lessons and warnings found in the simple events of everyday life. As we seek for a mind and heart open to receive heavenly direction by the power of the Holy Ghost, then some of the greatest instructions that we can receive and many of the most powerful warnings that can safeguard us will originate in our own ordinary experiences. Powerful parables are contained in both the scriptures and in our daily lives.

I have highlighted only three of the many lessons that can be identified in the adventure Susan and I had in Africa. I invite and encourage you to reflect on this episode with the cheetahs and the topis and identify additional lessons for you and your family. Please remember always that your home is the true center of gospel learning and living.

As you respond in faith to this invitation, inspired thoughts will come to your mind, spiritual feelings will swell in your heart, and you will recognize actions that should be undertaken or continued so that you can “take upon you [the] whole armor [of God], that ye may be able to withstand the evil day, having done all, that ye may be able to stand.”¹⁴

I promise that the blessings of effective preparation and spiritual protection will flow into your life as you are watchful unto prayer vigilantly and continually.

I testify that pressing forward on the covenant path provides spiritual safety and invites enduring joy into our lives. And I witness that the risen and living Savior will sustain and strengthen us in times both good and bad. Of these truths I testify in the sacred name of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.