

# Cliff Walking

S. OLANI DURRANT

It is a wonderful opportunity to address BYU students in this setting, but it is also very intimidating. I am aware of the competition for your time, and I sense a great responsibility to make the time we spend together this morning very worthwhile.

I am not quite certain why I have been asked to occupy this position. I know this is the month that the General Authorities take their vacations, but there are about a thousand or so of my colleagues who could do this much better. I have concluded that someone confused me with one of the more famous Durrants. I am not Stewart, George, Devin, Bill, Snoz or any other of the Durrants you may have heard of. I am simply an obscure engineering professor who loves BYU and the association of wonderful students and faculty. I am both flattered and humbled to have received this invitation. I have earnestly sought the influence of the Spirit, for I know, as do you, that this hour can only be meaningful if we share that bond.

My wife, Gayle, and I are both alumni of this great university. I was a Stover Rover and she lived in Merrill Hall. We met in the Cannon Center and courted over breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Neither of us had a car, and we walked the ramp hand in hand through rain, sunshine, sleet, and snow. We went to the library, but fre-

quently distracted each other from our studies. I have observed that many of you can relate to that.

I mention these things so you may know I have a deep kinship with BYU students. I sense many of your dreams, your frustrations and anxieties. I know the joy of acing an exam and the deep loneliness that one can often experience among twenty-five thousand of the “friendliest students in the world.” BYU is a special place and this is a uniquely significant period in your lives. These paths you now follow will not be trod again. Your experiences here will provide an anchor for the rest of your existence, mortal and immortal. Because of the brevity of this experience, you cannot afford too many detours. Nor can you afford to carry excess baggage of any sort: emotional, physical, or spiritual. It is with these and similar thoughts uppermost in my mind that I have prepared this talk. Because of the setting, my remarks are directed toward the spiritual, but experience has taught me that it is hard to get

---

*S. Olani Durrant was an associate dean of the College of Engineering and Technology at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 10 July 1984.*

the other aspects of life in order if the spiritual is suffering.

### **Poised at the Edge of the World**

Some time ago I saw an imposing photograph. It was a picture of a mountain climber in a spectacular mountain setting. There were rugged mountains in every direction, rising thousands of feet above the valleys. In this particular photograph the climber was standing at the very edge of a high and very sheer cliff. As I viewed the picture, it had an emotional impact on me. I do not like heights. Anything over about ten feet makes my head swim. Yet this particular hiker could apparently tolerate thousands of feet, standing there with his toes nearly over the edge. I presume many of you have seen similar pictures. I am certain that the climber I describe had a great sense of excitement, poised as he was at the edge of the world. I am just as certain that his thrill was accompanied by an acute sense of the potential danger of his circumstances—staring death, so to speak, in the face.

With this visual image in mind, I have entitled my remarks, *Cliff Walking*.

### **An Analogy**

Each generation of missionaries has certain characteristics which distinguish it from the others. During my missionary days, a quarter of a century ago, I and my companions in the Hawaiian islands were noted for our straw hats, our underarm saddlebags and our I.P. books. I do not wish to comment further on the hats and the saddlebag—your imaginations will have to do. It is the I.P. book to which I call your attention.

I.P. books were little black six-ring binders that missionaries filled with gospel-oriented poems, proverbs, and favorite quotations. Some missionaries would spend hours collecting and swapping their little treasures. I remember one of my contemporaries even mimeographed thirty or forty pages of his I.P.

book and distributed them among the rest of us with a solemnity befitting miniature gold plates.

I should mention that I.P. stood for Instant Preparation—suggesting that if one had a well-organized volume, he or she was instantly prepared for any request to speak or to teach, regardless of the shortness of the notice. All you had to do was let your I.P. book fall open and begin to read—elaborating as seemed appropriate. While I have never, then or since, had the courage, or perhaps the foolhardiness, to try that approach, I still recall some of the little ditties that found their way into my I.P. book, rather abbreviated as it was. One was a poem regarding people who like to venture near to the edges of cliffs.

Not wanting to offend you with missionary poetry, I didn't take the time to locate my crumbling I.P. book. At least it was crumbling the last time I saw it. It may be ashes by now. Suffice it to say that the poem to which I refer suggested there are two ways society might protect those who would like to walk along the edges of cliffs from peril of their chosen path: either by placing a fence at the top or providing an ambulance down below—the first to prevent a fall, the second to assuage the effects thereof.

Obviously, the fence is the better solution. But the trouble with fences is that the thrill of the experience, at least for the more daring, is unquestionably lost.

You no doubt have perceived by now that there is an analogy between the cliff in the little poem and the temptations that we endure in this life. Like the view from the cliff, which draws the hiker ever nearer to the edge, Satan's fables entice us ever neared to the brink of his carefully prepared abyss.

### **Our Wayward Spiritual Brother**

When one mentions Satan, I often sense that many of us subconsciously say, "Oh yes, ho hum, him again. That wayward spiritual

brother of mine—bit of a rascal at times. But nothing I can't handle!"

But Satan is not just a bothersome imp. He is the one who disrupted the peace and tranquility of our home on high, when in a bold and evil move he sought to wrest the power and glory from our Father and take it to himself. Having yielded to his own unmitigated ego, he not only wanted the praise and adulation of the rest of us, he wanted the throne of God! From Isaiah we read:

*How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground. . . .*

*For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascent into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God. . . .*

*I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. [Isaiah 14:12–14]*

When his evil plan was rejected, he flew into a blind and jealous rage. He brought the bitterness of hell into our celestial home. The ensuing conflict has been referred to in the scriptures as a war. "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels" (Revelation 12:7)—not an argument, not a skirmish, but a war—suggesting an all-out conflict of momentous proportions. You and I were to be the pawns, as far as Satan was concerned, in his great conquest. Oh yes, he promised us eternal life, guaranteed—a real *no cut* contract. That should have placated us! But our happiness was not his goal. We were to be his stepping-stones to the throne. From the very outset, Lucifer, who despised his elder brother, Jehovah, tried to bend the circumstances for his own benefit. Is it any wonder that the Prophet Joseph Smith stated that Satan "was a liar from the beginning" (D&C 93:25)?

### **They Have Turned Their Hate upon Humanity**

But you and I were not about to become pawns in this evil scheme. Our brother, Michael, standing at the side of Jehovah, rallied us to the cause that eventually held the day, and which led to one-third of our spiritual brothers and sisters being expelled from the presence of God forever. We all know the story, but we fail so often to appreciate the bitterness and the hatred of our lost relatives. Having been cast away from the presence of God and Jehovah, unable ever to obtain their primary goal of the throne of God, Lucifer and his hoard have turned their hate upon their other lost opportunity—humanity. Being unable to obtain bodies, they have vowed to destroy you and me and, by so doing, rob God of his kingdom. Satan's goal is thus shared by his "angels." There is no compromise, no proposed point of truce, no 38th parallel, for those of you old enough to remember the Korean War. There is only the persistent, unrelenting drive born of intense hate. Hate as deep and as abiding as is the contrasting love of Christ, for Satan desires "that all men might be miserable like unto himself" (2 Nephi 2:27). He is the chief antagonist of every righteous cause.

### **The Hawaiian Sham Battle**

Having been born in Hawaii, I have often enjoyed reading histories of those great islands and the people who lived there. One of the things that I have often found intriguing about the ancient Hawaiian men and their form of battle was the method they used to train for spear warfare.

The Hawaiian warriors used, among other weapons, a long spear made from very hard wood. They did not have metal from which to make tips; otherwise, they were about the size and weight of the javelin used in track and field events. As preparatory exercises for war, the men would engage in sham battles. Now, while a sham battle was, as the name implies, a

mock or pretend combat, it could become training of a very deadly sort. After dividing the warriors into two groups, arrayed on opposite sides of an open meadow, the sham battle began with each group hurling their spears at the other. The object of the game was not just to keep from getting killed, but rather, after having hurled one's spear at the "enemy," to catch the incoming spears barehanded and return them as well. For, you see, once you had thrown your spear, you were unarmed. You rearmed yourself by catching another as it came toward you.

You can well imagine the scene that such a melee would produce. King Kamehameha was observed in one such battle to catch three spears in his right hand, fend off a fourth with the spear in his left hand and sidestep a fifth, all in one continuous motion.

#### **Our Fight Against Satan Is No Sham Battle**

Now I bring up the Hawaiian sham battle because it is helpful in drawing parallels with our fight against Satan. But there are some differences—important differences. The sham battle was a game, of sorts. You could be severely injured, or even killed, but that was not the object, nor the intent of the game.

On the other hand, the spears of the adversary are not thrown with any thought that they may be harmlessly caught or skillfully dodged. Satan is not engaged in a sham battle where he expects his efforts to be thwarted. He carefully plans, with great wealth of knowledge, the formation of each battle, having little interest in the evenly and fairly dispersed combatants. No, not Satan—his cunning and perverse plans are intended to home in his fiery darts with swift accuracy, separating us, as Nephi warned, from the iron rod (see 1 Nephi 15:23–24). You and I may think the War in Heaven is over, but, as far as Satan is concerned, that was merely the initial battle. He continues with a hate-driven vengeance that you and I, filled with the Spirit of Christ, can-

not even begin to envision. He has devised schemes without number to gain men's souls.

Satan first sought out Adam and Eve in the Garden; he has not rested one moment since. He was there to combat with exhibitions of evil sorcery the attempts of Moses to gain the freedom of the children of Israel. He was there to tempt Christ during his forty-day fast, trying to thwart the Atonement. "Worship me," he cried to Jesus, after proffering all the kingdom of the earth (see Matthew 4:9). He was there in the woods where Joseph Smith sought the Lord in humble prayer, pressing down upon the young lad until he thought himself nearly destroyed. He haunted the early missionaries of this dispensation at almost every turn. Of those times, Heber C. Kimball recounts the following experience from his mission to the British Isles:

*About daybreak, Elder Isaac Russell. . . , who slept with Elder Richards in Wilford Street, came up to the third story, where Elder Hyde and myself were sleeping, and called out, "Brother Kimball, I want you should get up and pray for me that I may be delivered from the evil spirits that are tormenting me to such a degree that I feel I cannot live long, unless I obtain relief."*

*I had been sleeping on the back of the bed. I immediately arose, slipped off at the foot of the bed, and passed round to where he was. Elder Hyde threw his feet out, and sat up in the bed, and we laid hands on him, I being mouth, and prayed that the Lord would have mercy on him, and rebuked the devil.*

*While thus engaged, I was struck with great force by some invisible power, and fell senseless to the floor. The first thing I recollected was being supported by Elders Hyde and Richards, who were praying for me. . . .*

*Elders Hyde and Richards then assisted me to get on the bed, but my agony was so great I could not endure it, and I arose, bowed my knees and prayed. I then arose and sat up on the bed, when a vision was opened to our minds, and we could distinctly see the evil spirits, who foamed and gnashed*

*their teeth at us. We gazed upon them about an hour and a half. . . . We were not looking towards the window, but towards the wall. Space appeared before us, and we saw the devils coming in legions, with their leaders, who came within a few feet of us. They came towards us like armies rushing to battle. They appeared to be men of full stature, possessing every form of feature of men in the flesh, who were angry and desperate; and I shall never forget the vindictive malignity depicted on their countenances as they looked me in the eye; and any attempt to paint the scene which then presented itself, or portray their malice and enmity, would be vain. I perspired exceedingly, my clothes becoming as wet as if I had been taken out of the river. I felt excessive pain, and was in the greatest distress for some time. I cannot even look back on the scene without feelings of horror; yet by it I learned the power of the adversary, his enmity against the servants of God, and got some understanding of the invisible world. We distinctly heard those spirits talk and express their wrath and hellish designs against us. However, the Lord delivered us from them and blessed us exceedingly that day. [Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1888), p. 143–145]*

### **Eternal Opposition**

When Satan was cast down, becoming the father of all lies, he was denied a body forever. He and his angels are sons of perdition and are in eternal opposition to all righteousness. They spend their existence tempting, enticing and encouraging you and me to leave the path of truth and walk in darkness. There is no compromise. They are the opposition to God's plan. Through their efforts, our loyalty to Jesus Christ is tested and tried. Elder McConkie has said of Satan, "[He] opposes every good thing with evil, and is the arch foe of every upright person" (*MD*, p. 25), and Peter advised, "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Overcoming the perverse enticings of Satan is an essential part of our progression and advancement. It is a very personal battle that we wage with Satan. No one can fight it for us. We can, however, strengthen and buoy each other. That is the purpose of families. It is also one reason for the programs of the Church.

### **Teetering at the Edge**

Now, returning to the cliff-walking attitude I referred to earlier, it seems that as you and I thread our way through life's little meanderings, we become confronted with Satan's detours, those opportunities to peer over the cliff. Being curious, or bold, or foolhardy, we often come perilously close to the edge; so often that we see just how far we can get from the iron rod without really letting go of our grasp—perhaps just keeping a finger still upon the rod. Then, if one of Satan's darts strikes too near the target, we slip over the edge with hardly a murmur. It was thrilling, though, while it lasted, teetering there on the brink, knowing we were so close to peril, but confident, oh, so confident, that we had things in control.

Satan doesn't care what he uses to get us—liquor, tobacco, drugs, desires for unearned wealth, dishonesty, lust. He is clever enough to use whatever is at hand. I read recently of a young man who was taunted by his friends until, teetering at the edge, he relented and became a participant in drug usage. His habit increased until the time he became involved in theft to support it. From there it was only a small step to armed robbery, a shooting, and a dead druggist. He'll never know, because of the drug-induced stupor, whether or not he was the one who fired the fatal shot, but it was he who was convicted and sentenced to a ninety-year term. All because he couldn't say no, when he knew he should, to his so-called friends.

I have a friend who, as a young man, couldn't say no to a drink of alcohol. For him it was

a special kind of poison. He became an alcoholic. It had disastrous consequences for his family, as you can well imagine, and he struggled for years to overcome his illness. Happily, he did so, and along the way he has found time to help others. On the other hand, he lost years with his young family that he can never regain. And sadder yet, he suffered an estrangement from the Church which still lingers. From all indications it appears that his past drinking has robbed him of an eternal family.

In a different vein, I recall a young couple who were having difficulty behaving themselves alone on dates. They became concerned with their actions and worried that they might become increasingly involved to the point that they would lose all they held dear. After talking things over, they decided they needed to begin each date with a prayer. That was a good plan, but their dates continued to end up with just the two of them in some secluded spot. Walking on the edge of the cliff, as it were, they repeatedly fell into the same behavior for which they had prayed for strength to overcome. The peril-filled thrill of petting had great attraction than did the calm plans made in the less secluded light of day. It was obvious that if they were going to stop flirting with danger, they would have to take steps to change their pattern of being alone. Yet it seems so human that, having once walked to the edge of the cliff, they returned so readily. The story had an almost happy ending. One of them finally realized that they lacked the determination to modify their behavior. She terminated their dating altogether, thus narrowly escaping the final slip into the abyss.

#### **Are Our Fences in a State of Disrepair?**

It really doesn't matter what the temptation is. It suits the adversary just fine, so long as it gets the job done. In ten years as a bishop and high councilor, I have participated in some thirty or more Church courts. I can testify to you that not once—no not once—had the brother or

sister, whose membership was on trial, stayed comfortably back from the edge of the cliff. Their fences, if indeed they ever built them, were in a state of disrepair. With weakened safeguards, and minds full of fantasy, they danced to Satan's tune until they stumbled over the edge.

I have wept with friends, neighbors, and relatives as they have lost their membership in the kingdom of God. Without exception, they have permitted Satan to enter their lives and, with his clever enticings and self-serving justifications, lead them carefully to the brink of disaster, where, with just the slightest nudge, the deed was done—lives destroyed, families shattered, and blessings forfeited.

Brinkmanship may be a political weapon of the adroit statesman, but it is more dangerous than a two-edged sword when our position in the kingdom of God is at stake.

I remember one sister who had great potential, but she was less than satisfied with her husband. How often do Church leaders hear about less than satisfactory spouses? This sister's frustration was not without grounds. She didn't have a temple marriage, and her husband was not active in the Church. They had lovely children, and she said she wanted an eternal family. And I believe she did. But she had a wandering eye, and an enterprising acquaintance was more than happy to oblige her discontent. He was willing to be everything she wanted, or so he professed. And then the fairy tale began.

He convinced her of the wonderful father he would be to her children—never mind that he had already failed one marriage, irreparably wounding his own offspring.

He would walk the temple grounds with her, talking about the celestial marriage that she deserved—never mind that he was unworthy to hold a temple recommend.

And the tales continued, right from the temple grounds to the motel room where, having got what he wanted, “. . . nothing now

remained to do, but begin the game anew," to steal a line from A. E. Housman.

The result was predictable. No amount of warning could change the course of events. How we humans love to pretend, to chase dreams.

She abandoned her family, letting her husband sue for divorce, to follow her newfound lover. But then he decided he really didn't want another marriage after all, and she was left with broken promises and more shattered dreams. The only winner? Of course, Lucifer. His winnings? One family destroyed, a half-dozen lives shattered.

### **We Are Not Abandoned**

We are here, you and I, to be tried, tested and proven worthy to reenter our Father in Heaven's kingdom. We are here, as was Christ, to overcome temptation and claim our crowns on high. Although we may have forgotten all, we are not abandoned. We have the guidance of scripture, the counsel of living prophets and other inspired leaders, and, for those baptized under the hands of the priesthood of God, the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The words of Paul to the Ephesians provide eloquent advice for you and me. Said he:

*Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.*

*For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.*

*Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.*

*Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness;*

*And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;*

*Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked.*

*And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God:*

*Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints. [Ephesians 6:11–18]*

### **The Spiritual Contributions of Our Ancestors**

Now, indulge me if you will, as I make a few comments regarding my family, which you see seated before you. You won't believe it, but it seems only yesterday that I was a student at this great university. I remember well attending devotionals and wondering when all the things Church leaders said about families would pertain to my life. It all seemed so remote, so far into the future. Now here I stand, my own family at my side, acutely aware of my successes and failures as a father, a husband, and a patriarch. As I contemplate my children, they truly are the jewels Gayle and I most treasure. They may not be the most brilliant, the most spiritual, the best-behaved children in the world, but I wouldn't trade one of them for any other. They are uniquely a part of me and they are uniquely a part of my wife. They are uniquely a part of an entire ancestry.

It is interesting to note how we as individuals are situated very much like the neck of an hourglass, gathering in like a great magnifying lens all the characteristics of a great ancestry and spewing them out in ever-broadening generations of posterity. When I think of myself in that setting, I become acutely aware of the spiritual contributions of my great pioneer and subsequent faithful ancestors, and I realize that I am the only one who can bequeath that heritage to my children. There is not another soul on earth that can do that for me. There can be no vicarious transfer. That is my opportunity and my obligation alone. Furthermore, as a

parent I have to help them build their fences at the cliff's edge.

### **The Average LDS Family**

And so, as I contemplate that great challenge and responsibility, I am faced with the hope of success and the possibility of failure. But one thing I know. I am not the least bit interested in having an average LDS family. My children have a difficult time with that concept. It's unfair if Mother and I request that they not play football out in the street on the Sabbath—"all the other kids are!" It is not fair if we insist that our children be home at a specified hour—"the others don't have to be home that early!" You see, the average statistics for the LDS are that one young man in three, or thereabouts, goes on a mission. LDS youth on the average, marry about 50 percent of the time in the temple.

Consider my sons. Could you specify which of the three would go on a mission and which two would travel other paths? Will it be Jeff, whose priests quorum I advise? Or Dennis, whose Little League baseball team I coach? Or Andy, who thinks the neatest thing in all the world is to go motorcycle riding with his dad? Is there one more deserving blessing of a mission than others? Which two should turn their backs on the words of the prophet so that my boys will be average? Tell me, if you will, which two should find more important things to do.

Can you help me decide which two of my four daughters should forfeit the blessings pronounced at the altars of the temple so that we might be average? Should it be Laura and Lynita, my two BYU coeds? Or how about Jeannine, my musician? Or little Meg, who brings a smile to her dad with such little effort? Which two shall I declare unworthy? Disinterested? Unfaithful?

I find the prospects of having an average LDS family absolutely intolerable. But that is just exactly what I will get and it is just exactly

what you will get if we choose an average kind of path to follow.

Now, I realize that by calling attention to my family I am putting myself on the spot. If I, or they, fail, fingers may point. But I'm willing to take the heat. As far as I am concerned, one of Satan's greatest tools is to get you and me to become content to take the average road. To go, for instance, to R-rated movies because everyone else does, to lie a little, to cheat a little, to take a little advantage because it's the sort of thing that seems so common. It is the path by which we are led, as said Nephi, "carefully down to hell" (*see* 2 Nephi 28:21).

### **Satan's Power Is Very Real**

Now I am not perfect, and neither are you. At times I am greatly tempted and so are you. Look at Satan's potential prize if he can get me. Think how vulnerable my children then become! What's your net worth if he can get you? Think of your unborn posterity. What is their value? Can you see their faces and envision their personalities? Can Satan capture them without so much as a skirmish by getting you before they're even born? It can happen. It did in my family. My great-great-grandfather and his brother were stonecutters on the Nauvoo Temple, having come to America as immigrants from Great Britain. When the prophet said "go west," my great-great-grandfather moved out. His brother, for one reason or another, found sufficient excuse to stay in Iowa. Today my great-great-grandfather has a posterity that numbers into the hundreds, if not thousands. Many have matched his faithfulness and brought glory to his name. His brother has but a handful of living descendants, every single one out of the Church. There is not a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints within his posterity. This earth just may close out its term of existence without any trace of his bloodline having ever embraced the gospel of Christ. Truly, that is damnation.



My young brothers and sisters, I testify to you that Satan is very, very real. I have both felt and witnessed his great power and it is a frightening thing. I felt his influence as I prepared this talk. I was beset with unseemly thoughts, feelings of inadequacy, feelings of unworthiness, of confusion, which could only be driven away through earnest prayer.

It is my further testimony that Christ lives and that he provides each of us with the necessary knowledge to recognize sin and error.

**But for the Grace of God**

I mentioned earlier that I have participated in a number of Church courts. On many occasions, following the conclusion of those experiences, I have walked slowly and tearfully to my home, for I have, on other occasions, felt

the same temptations that caused my brethren to fall. Time and again the thought has entered my mind that "there but for the grace of God go I." I don't know why, but somehow the fences at the top of my cliffs were a little sturdier at just the right time. For that I have fallen on my knees and expressed eternal gratitude to my Father. I pray that I can have the wisdom to continue. I pray that my children can prepare their fences and I pray that each of you can recognize those avenues which Satan is stalking in his search for your souls and that you can likewise prepare adequate defenses.

Jesus Christ is the source of our strength. You and I need that strength if we are to turn away from evil and return to our Father. Of this I testify, in his name. Amen.