

Cairns on the Path of Mortality

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Last summer my wife and I had the pleasure of backpacking in the High Uintas with our oldest son, Justin, and three of his friends. We had a wonderful time fishing, camping, and simply observing God's creations. Of course a large portion of the trip involved hiking.

As many of you know, hikers or backpackers encounter a variety of trail conditions. On any given trek, flat, straight, and easy to locate trail segments can quickly become steep, rocky, and obscure.

When trails become difficult to find, considerate hikers often place markers on the path to map the way for those who follow. These markers are built by stacking several rocks to form what is called a cairn. Cairns are spaced so that a hiker standing near one can readily see the next. By walking from cairn to cairn, a backpacker can successfully traverse the previously unseen path and reach the goal.

Significantly, cairns only have meaning for those who recognize them for what they are. For some, cairns are nothing more than a pile of rocks. For others they are helpful markers on a trail. And yet for others, willing to examine in further detail, cairns can provide even more specific directions. For example, a stack of rocks with a small stone to the right of the stack indicates that the trail heads to the right.

Similarly, a rock on the ground to the left of the cairn indicates that the trail heads to the left. A basic understanding of these structures makes it possible to obtain the final goal, but by being more informed about the nature of cairns, the journey can be made even smoother.

During our backpacking trip, each time my wife and I reached a cairn, we stopped to look for the next stack of rocks. When we didn't immediately find it, a sense of being lost was quick to enter our minds, but that feeling instantly vanished when we located the next small, simple landmark.

This experience using cairns caused me to reflect on the journey through mortality. Things can be going so easily—life is smooth, goals seem obtainable, and the path is clear. When life feels like this, it nearly always changes—new challenges arise, goals dangle out of reach, and the path seems unclear. It is during these moments of confusion that we need to refocus on the single goal of coming unto Christ.

Heavenly Father has provided a plan for us to accomplish this goal, and Christ has made it

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possible for each of us to obtain it through His atoning sacrifice and our obedience to His commandments. To clearly mark the difficult path through mortality and help us obtain this goal, Christ has placed markers along the path that leads back to the presence of the Father. The second verse of the hymn “I Believe in Christ” reads:

*I believe in Christ, who marked the path,
Who did gain all his Father hath,
Who said to men: “Come, follow me,
That ye my friends, with God may be.”*
[Hymns, 1985, no. 134]

A Church publication describing temples states that “prophets, scriptures, and temples help guide Latter-day Saint youth” (“Beacons of Truth,” *Temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999], 78).

Prophets, scriptures, and temples are three spiritual cairns that can successfully guide us through life.

First, let’s consider the scriptures. The scriptures act as a cairn by helping us find answers to our questions and by giving us comfort in times of distress. When lost on the trail to Heavenly Father, we can look to the scriptures for voices of warning, for the glorious promise of eternal life, for the example of a perfect life, for answers to our questions, for comfort from our trials, and for the law that we must keep to obtain eternal life. President Howard W. Hunter stated:

Obedience requires that we search the scriptures to know the law. In order to be obedient to the law of the gospel and be obedient to the teachings of Jesus Christ, we must first understand the law and ascertain the will of the Lord. This is accomplished best by searching and studying the scriptures and the words of the prophets. [The Teachings of Howard W. Hunter, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 24]

This mortal life occupies a short period of time in relation to our eternal existence, and it should be emphasized that it is simply one part of our eternal trail. A long trail can be composed of many segments of varying terrain. Two long and easily identified segments can be connected with a short portion that is obscure and difficult to traverse. If we keep to the first long segment, we will eventually reach the short segment that is difficult to follow. If we fail to keep on the short, connecting segment by following the cairns along the way, we will be unable to find the final path that leads to our eventual goal and will be lost forever.

This, of course, relates to our eternal existence. We have all been successful in following our premortal trail and have reached this earth life, where we will be for a very short but important period of time. During this mortal life we will encounter cairns that, if followed, will lead us back to our heavenly home.

I remember coming across my first cairn on the path to eternal life when I was a 17-year-old member of another faith. A high school friend I had known for three years came over to my house to obtain help on his trigonometry. While working through his homework, we began talking about typical high school topics including girls, car stereos, jobs, and, eventually, our personal beliefs in the nature of the Godhead. I described to him my beliefs that God the Father and Jesus Christ were separate and distinct beings and that they had bodies much like ours. I explained that these were my own views and not those of the church I occasionally attended.

My friend, my eternal friend, smiled and reached into his book bag and extracted a small book that he said I should read. He indicated that his church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, believed in the Godhead that I had described. The book he had given me was the Pearl of Great Price. Although this book is not typically used as a missionary tool, in this case it was extremely effective. I read the entire

book that very night and followed that cairn, which led to many others. If we follow the cairns while here on earth, we will remain on the path that leads to eternal life.

In Lehi's vision of the tree of life, a path that represents mortality runs along the bank of a river. Mists of darkness envelop the path and symbolize our individual trials and temptations. An iron rod, which signifies the word of God, runs parallel to the path and through the mists of darkness. Individuals entering this life from their premortal existence find themselves at the beginning of the path that runs the length of the river from where they stand to the tree, or eternal life.

When Lehi was looking for his family to partake of the tree's fruit, he found that the head of the river and the beginning of the iron rod were not far off. In other words, even though it is of utmost importance to make it from the beginning of this mortal life back to the presence of our Heavenly Father, the journey is not very long. In 1 Nephi 8 we read:

And I looked to behold from whence it came; and I saw the head thereof a little way off. . . .

And I beheld a rod of iron, and it extended along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood. [1 Nephi 8:14, 19]

We later learn that those who held firmly to the iron rod were able to travel from the head of the river through the mists of darkness and arrive safely at the tree.

And they came and caught hold of the end of the rod of iron; and they did press their way forward, continually holding fast to the rod of iron, until they came forth and fell down and partook of the fruit of the tree. [1 Nephi 8:30]

On the other hand, the numberless concourses of people who did not hold to the iron rod were lost and were unable to stay on the path to eternal life.

And it came to pass that they did come forth, and commence in the path which led to the tree.

And it came to pass that there arose a mist of darkness; yea, even an exceedingly great mist of darkness, insomuch that they who had commenced in the path did lose their way, that they wandered off and were lost. [1 Nephi 8:22–23]

Those who successfully made their way to the tree of life did so because of their reliance on the word of God. The counsel Alma gave to his son Helaman in Alma 37 summarizes the necessity of holding fast to the word of God:

For behold, it is as easy to give heed to the word of Christ, which will point to you a straight course to eternal bliss, as it was for our fathers to give heed to this compass, which would point unto them a straight course to the promised land.

And now I say, is there not a type in this thing? For just as surely as this director did bring our fathers, by following its course, to the promised land, shall the words of Christ, if we follow their course, carry us beyond this vale of sorrow into a far better land of promise. [Alma 37:44–45]

This mortal life is our path to the tree of life, which is but "a little way off." Although our journey in mortality is short, Lehi helps us understand that mists of darkness can cause us to lose our way and reward if we don't catch hold of the word of God and hold fast to it while pressing forward through mortality.

Recall that cairns are placed close enough together that an observer standing near one can view the next. Due to a visual impairment I've had since birth, it isn't possible for me to stand next to a cairn and see the next. Fortunately, I hike with my wife, who helps me along the way by giving me audible directions and warnings of potential pitfalls. This assistance is similar to the words of a prophet, which help individuals find and stay on the straight and narrow way. A prophet is the second spiritual cairn I wish to discuss today.

President Joseph Fielding Smith identifies these prophets:

All Saints should be prophets. Every man who can say knowingly that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world and the Only Begotten Son of God, is a prophet. . . .

A president of a stake has a right to revelation in his stake, and for the guidance of it; a bishop, in his ward; and likewise a missionary in his mission field. Every other member of the Church who is called to an office has the right to the inspiration and the guidance of the Spirit of the Lord in that which is given him to do. If he is so inspired, he is a prophet. [Doctrines of Salvation, comp. Bruce R. McConkie (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954), 1:185–86]

These prophets are entitled to inspiration and revelation for “that which is given him to do” and not for individuals or groups outside of their stewardship. President Gordon B. Hinckley is “the prophet,” the only individual currently entitled to receive revelation for the entire Church. His stewardship includes not only members of Christ’s church but every individual on earth.

Many people hold offices in the Church for short periods of time. Those who lead today will be followers tomorrow, and those who follow today are tomorrow’s leaders. The lives of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ clearly teach this principle.

The Bible teaches that as John the Baptist’s mission progressed, he became very popular among the believers. After baptizing the Savior, John’s disciples came to him with a concern: “And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him” (John 3:26).

Now, these disciples were concerned because their master was losing prestige or influence, but John the Baptist understood that his time was coming to an end and the Savior’s

mission was beginning. He replied: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Jesus Christ also recognized that there was a time to teach and a time to learn. At the time of the Passover, Jesus’ family traveled to Jerusalem. Upon finishing their business, they returned to Nazareth. After traveling for a day, Joseph and Mary noticed that Jesus was not in their company. After three days they finally found him in the temple teaching and answering questions of those who were astonished at his learning. Jesus returned with his earthly family to Nazareth, and, as stated in Luke 2:52, he “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.” This experience illustrates that Jesus, in addition to being a master teacher, also understood that there were things to learn from his association with parents and family.

At some points along our mortal path we are followers and at others we are leaders. We lead those within our stewardship and follow those entrusted with our care. When we act in positions of leadership, it is exactly that, leadership—not “draggership” or “pushership” but leadership. We should lead and guide, not drag and push individuals to Christ. Although directed at those holding the priesthood, I am sure section 121 of the Doctrine and Covenants applies to all. In verse 41 we read: “No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned.”

We find another example of appropriate behavior as a leader in the hymn “I Am a Child of God”:

*Lead me, guide me, walk beside me,
Help me find the way.
Teach me all that I must do
To live with him someday.
[Hymns, 1985, no. 301]*

While in positions of leadership, we should be guiding, accompanying, and helping others.

We should be teaching them what to do to remain on the path that leads back to their eternal goal. On our hiking trip I was unable to see the cairns that were intended to keep me on the path. Fortunately my wife understands what it means to be a leader; she guided me, walked beside me, and helped me find the way. With her help I was able to traverse the obscure path and reach our destination. By leading others in this fashion we become cairns on the path through mortality.

When we don't follow the cairns established by a forest service official or by caring hikers, we run the risk of being lost. We must follow the prophets whether through our parents, home teachers, bishops, stake presidents, or general authorities.

Often small children and inexperienced hikers do not understand the usefulness of cairns and are tempted to knock them down. Without malice—they simply give no thought to why someone might have stacked rocks up—they topple the cairn with a good kick and a thud of satisfaction. How often do we as young and inexperienced members of Christ's church innocently kick down or dismantle the individuals that are serving in offices of responsibility? When we speak evil against the Lord's anointed, we break down the Lord's cairns and potentially obscure the path for those who follow. We must recognize the need and usefulness of prophets and make every attempt to sustain, build up, and support the men and women who serve in the Church to keep us on the path to our heavenly home.

Finally, we come to the third spiritual cairn—the temple. There is power in the temple that gives each of us direction and dispels the feelings of being lost. Members of the Church and friends of other faiths come by the thousands to participate in temple open houses. Young children look to the temple as a place where they will one day marry for eternity. Worthy youth visit the temple to participate in the sacred ordinances

of proxy baptism and confirmation. And worthy adults obtain their own endowments, are sealed, and perform these ordinances for those who are deceased and unable to perform them for themselves. The temple gives us direction by helping us set goals of staying or becoming worthy to enter the temple and perform sacred ordinances for ourselves and others. Brigham Young explained the importance of receiving these sacred ordinances:

Your endowment is, to receive all those ordinances in the House of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels. [JD 2:31]

Although this is of utmost importance, there are additional ways in which the temple helps us remain on the correct path.

The temple's teachings help each of us better understand our relationship to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, and they help us understand our mission here on earth. These truths aid us in finding our way in a confusing world. In *Temples of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* we are told that "in a turbulent world of conflicting values and mixed moral messages, Latter-day Saint youth know that the temple—like a compass—points the way to eternal truth" ("Beacons," 78).

The truths shared in the temple often include personal teachings and revelations intended to answer personal prayers and provide feelings of peace and comfort. President Howard W. Hunter taught:

Personal blessings come from temple attendance. And we again emphasize the personal blessings of temple worship and the sanctity and safety that are provided within those hallowed walls. It is the house of the Lord, a place of revelation and of peace. [Teachings of Howard W. Hunter, 238]

President Gordon B. Hinckley added:

The temple is also a place of personal inspiration and revelation. Legion are those who in times of stress, when difficult decisions must be made and perplexing problems must be handled, have come to the temple in a spirit of fasting and prayer to seek divine direction. Many have testified that while voices of revelation were not heard, impressions concerning a course to follow were experienced at that time or later which became answers to their prayers. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Salt Lake Temple,” *Ensign*, March 1993, 6]

The temple stands as a cairn for all members of the Church. Worthy members of the Church should attend the temple in whatever capacity they are entitled. If members are not worthy to attend, they should take whatever measures are necessary to become worthy. As we attend the temple we will be blessed and gain the knowledge and testimony necessary to keep us on the path back to our heavenly home. In addition, we may receive personal revelations and inspirations that will not only help us reach our eternal goal but will make this life more bearable and enjoyable.

Cairns are placed on trails to guide us across trail segments that are unclear and difficult to find. I have described three spiritual cairns today that can help guide you safely through mortality: scriptures, prophets, and temples.

Keep in mind that while hiking you must actively seek out the next cairn—you cannot

simply hope or wish to be further down the trail. You must walk, step, and strive. I challenge each of us to actively pursue spiritual cairns. Don’t simply read your scriptures—hold fast to them, search them, and use them in your life to solve problems and acquire answers. Follow the prophets, seek counsel from your parents, home teachers, bishops, and other local and general authorities. Sustain your leaders and help them perform their work by helping others understand the importance of their callings. Look to the temple, live worthily to enter its walls, attend often to perform sacred ordinances, and gain personal revelation and inspiration to assist you in reaching your mortal and eternal potential.

Following these cairns will make your life here on earth easier and more fulfilling, and, most important, following them will help you stay on the eternal path that leads to your Father in Heaven.

Our Heavenly Father lives. He loves us and has provided a plan by which we can return to Him. Jesus Christ lived on this earth, atoned for our sins, and lives today. If we are obedient to the Lord’s commandments, we can use Christ’s atoning sacrifice and live again in the presence of our loving Heavenly Father. He has provided us help along our mortal journey in the form of the holy scriptures, our beloved prophet Gordon B. Hinckley, and the temples scattered throughout the earth.

I testify of these things in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.