

Raising Your Ebenezer: A Monument to Remember

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One of my favorite religious hymns was written in 1757 by Robert Robinson. The melodic stanzas of the song “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing” bring a certain reflective feeling that prompts me to ponder the love that God has for His children. Each time I hear this hymn I find myself humming the tune throughout the day with the words playing in my mind.

I have always found the first phrase of the second verse to be particularly curious: “Here I raise my Ebenezer; Hither by Thy help I’ve come” (“Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Come_Thou_Fount_of_Every_Blessing).

“Here I raise my Ebenezer”? What is the meaning behind this phrase? Certainly it is not a reference to the resurrection of the lead character in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*—Ebenezer Scrooge. But admittedly that was my only reference to the word.

It is in the Old Testament that we gain further understanding of what it means to “raise my Ebenezer.” In 1 Samuel 7 we read that the Israelites were under attack by the Philistines. Outnumbered and in fear for their lives, they pled with the prophet Samuel to pray for God’s help. Samuel offered a sacrifice and prayed

for protection. In response the Lord smote the Philistines, and they retreated to their territory. This victory is recorded in verse 12: “Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”

In Hebrew the word *ebenezer* means “stone of help.” This raised stone was a reminder to the Israelites of what the Lord had done for them. This Eben-ezer quite literally was a monument set to remember the great help that God granted the one raising the stone. The Old Testament is replete with examples of the children of Israel forgetting the many miracles and spiritual experiences given to them by the Lord.

In an address given to religious educators, President Spencer W. Kimball said that *remember* could be the most important word in the dictionary (see “Circles of Exaltation,” BYU summer school devotional address, 28 June 1968, 8). This is a strong statement that

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gives us pause to reflect on why a modern-day prophet would make such a deliberate and specific reference to the importance of one word. Today my comments will be centered on this very principle—more specifically, on the importance and value of remembering our own spiritual experiences and recognizing that these experiences, given to us by the Lord, have brought us to where each of us is today. In other words, by remembering we are raising our own Ebenezer.

Raising My Own Ebenezer

One such experience in my life took place nearly thirty years ago when I was a young missionary serving in southern Chile. On a warm summer evening in a small Chilean village filled with humble homes linked by dirt roads, my companion and I were engaged in routine missionary activities. Tucked in my pocket was a trifold organizer that contained our calendar for the week. On this particular evening we were scheduled to teach the second discussion to a newly contacted family. We artfully dodged the barefoot children who were playing soccer in the streets. The smoke-filled air was evidence that most people were cooking their evening meal.

As we approached the small house, the children ran to alert their parents that we had arrived. We entered the humble home, and the family gathered for our lesson. In those days the second discussion was the plan of salvation—one of my favorites. As the lesson progressed I made eye contact with the mother and the father and shared my testimony of the truthfulness of this plan. The normally energetic children sat quietly on the knees of their parents. We spoke about how they had lived before coming to earth and about God's plan for how they could return to live with Him and their family forever.

As my companion gave his portion of the discussion, I had a profound experience. The Spirit touched my heart in a way I had never

felt before. At that very moment I could see with great clarity that this family had divine potential. I was overcome with the Spirit and remember feeling that the Holy Ghost was bearing witness to me in a very personal way that the work I was engaged in was true and that God was the author of this plan of salvation.

I did not know at the time if this family was having the same experience, but my feelings were undeniably from God. The sweet witness was profound and clear. At the conclusion of the discussion I felt an urgency to get back to my apartment and record this special experience in my journal. I did not want to forget one detail.

That evening I carefully wrote about my experience, making special note of the spiritual confirmations I had received. I concluded my journal entry that night with the following sentence: "If someday in the future I ever find myself questioning my faith, please read this journal entry!" This experience is an example of a monument that I raised to help me remember what Heavenly Father had done for me.

"What Mean These Stones?"

I remember as a child that each year during the month of April our family would gather around the television on Sunday evenings and watch the annual showing of Cecil B. DeMille's 1956 production of *The Ten Commandments*. Visions of Charlton Heston standing on the mountain with his arms raised high above his head, holding the stone tablets as the wind blew his silver-white hair and red robes, are still present in my memory. Keep in mind that this was before VCR and DVR machines; there was no pausing and no rewinding. It was only during the commercial breaks that we had time to grab a snack or run to get a blanket. Somehow this immediacy made the movie even more exciting to watch. After all, if you missed something you would have to wait another year before you could see it again.

Who could forget the most glorious scene of the movie, when Moses raised his staff and parted the Red Sea? The special effects that were used are impressive even today. With age, my understanding of the story increased, and I began to wonder how the children of Israel could forget so many amazing miracles and return to wickedness.

A lesser-known—but equally meaningful—story of the children of Israel takes place on the banks of the River Jordan. In Joshua 3 we read that, after many years of wandering through the wilderness, the children of Israel were poised to enter the promised land. With Joshua as their leader, the Israelites experienced yet another miracle.

The Lord spoke to Joshua: “This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee” (Joshua 3:7).

As the children of Israel approached the banks of the River Jordan, Joshua was commanded that twelve men—one from each tribe of Israel—should carry the ark of the covenant, which housed the Ten Commandments, into the River Jordan. Verse 17 gives a description of what happened as these men walked into the river: “And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan.”

Once again the Lord miraculously parted the waters for the children of Israel. However, this time the Lord had additional instructions. After the children of Israel had crossed over Jordan, the Lord spoke to Joshua and commanded him that a representative of each tribe pick up a large stone from the dry river bed and stack the stones as a memorial to remember what God had done for them.

And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones?

Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land.

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red sea, which he dried up from before us, until we were gone over. [Joshua 4:21–23]

It seems the Lord recognized the tendency of the natural man to quickly forget his God. Perhaps this monument would help the Israelites remember the Lord and turn their hearts to Him. I also find it particularly significant that this scripture references that this monument, built by the Israelites, would also stand as a witness to their children, who might ask of its meaning.

This story has great application for us even today. Each experience that we have with the Spirit can be like placing a stone on our own personal monument, reminding us of God’s hand in our lives. These monuments can also serve to strengthen others as we share our experiences.

Some of us may have large, stable monuments that are continually built and fortified with great personal spiritual experiences that acknowledge God. Others may believe that their monuments are small or insignificant—maybe even eroding. If you have these feelings, I invite you to do two things.

First, look to your past and reflect upon your life. You will see the divine guidance of our Heavenly Father and how He has brought you to where you are today.

Second, earnestly seek opportunities and environments in which the Spirit can touch your heart.

Reflect upon the Past

As we look to our past we gain insight. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard proclaimed: “Life must be understood backwards. But . . . it must be lived forwards” (journal entry, 1843). Understanding life by looking

backward invites us to reflect upon our past. As we do this with a proper spiritual perspective, we can more clearly see that perhaps seemingly insignificant experiences from our past have set us on a specific path.

Each of us was born into this world with the Light of Christ, and most of us have been given the gift of the Holy Ghost. At some point you have felt the presence of God. Maybe it was through a small prompting to make a particular decision, or maybe you felt a simple witness when someone bore testimony. By recognizing these experiences you are building your own monument. If we do not reflect upon these moments, then we risk forgetting that they ever happened—like the children of Israel did. Allow me to share a personal experience of how an almost-forgotten event in my past suddenly had new meaning.

In my current role as a teacher I have the opportunity to work with students over the course of several years. Through these prolonged associations I have the chance to get to know these students on a more personal level. It is with the permission of one such former student that I share the following story.

In most ways Julie was a typical student. She was bright and articulate, and she enjoyed all the blessings of being raised in the restored gospel. I knew a little of her family background. Her parents were former mission presidents and her siblings were strong in the faith. Julie married a wonderful man who had also been raised in the gospel. I was surprised that they didn't choose the temple to make their marital covenants, nor did they embrace the gospel in their new life together. I often thought of Julie and her husband and would occasionally see them around town with their growing family. I wondered how they were doing and if they would once again embrace the gospel.

Several years ago I spent an extended amount of time in Nauvoo. I enjoyed visiting the historical sites of the Church and was particularly touched as I stood on the property of

one of my ancestors, a pioneer of the Church—James Sawyer Holman. I marveled at the roster that showed the date when he received his temple endowments in the Nauvoo Temple. It became very clear to me that the unwavering faith of James Sawyer Holman and other ancestors had provided me with the blessings of the restored gospel. In my mind's eye I could see that I was the last link in the chain of a long line of faithful members of the Church. I pondered how different my life would be if one of those ancestors had made different choices. Suddenly it occurred to me that my responsibility was to remain strong in my faith not only for my sake but also for the sake of my children and my posterity. In a new way I understood that my decisions didn't just affect me.

Several days later, while sitting in my apartment, I continued to ponder this personal revelation. Suddenly the name of this former student—Julie—came to my mind. It had been years since I had seen Julie and her husband or had even thought about them. The thought came to my mind that I should share these thoughts with them, that I should tell them they are links in their own chain for their own posterity. At first I pushed aside these feelings, but as they persisted I followed through and began to write a thoughtful letter. I admit I questioned if what I felt was truly a spiritual prompting or just my own thoughts. I finished the letter and reluctantly sent it, not knowing if I had overstepped my bounds. I received no response.

Several years have passed since I sent the letter, and the original circumstances are now far from my memory. A few months ago my wife came home from the grocery store and said that she had bumped into Julie while shopping.

During their conversation Julie said, "Please tell your husband thank you for the letter he wrote many years ago about being a strong link in our chain. He should know that my husband

and I are now married in the temple. My husband is the elders quorum president in our ward, and I am serving in the Young Women organization. We now have an eternal family.”

At first when I was told this I didn’t recall writing the letter, but upon further reflection I did remember the strong feelings many years ago that resulted in my writing the letter. For me this experience is a stone added to my personal monument—one that helps me remember the importance of following the promptings of the Holy Ghost.

Actively Seek to Feel the Spirit

Elder Steven E. Snow of the Quorum of the Seventy said:

When it comes to our own gospel progression, we cannot rely alone on our long-term memory. That is why in all our remembering we must remember to renew. Our testimonies must be continually fed with new spiritual experiences. [“Remembering and Renewing,” audio, BYU–Idaho devotional address, 12 September 2006]

If my testimony is based upon one spiritual experience I had thirty years ago on my mission, then my testimony is at risk and my monument is in danger of eroding. We must actively seek opportunities and place ourselves in environments where we can feel of the Spirit.

The following example illustrates the importance of choosing to participate in activities and be in environments where the Spirit can be present. Not too long ago my teenage daughter had an opportunity to attend a routine Church fireside on a Sunday evening. I am sure that you will not be surprised when I tell you that this teenager was not excited about getting dressed up again to go to “yet another” Church meeting. However, with constant prodding from her mother and me, she decided to attend.

When she returned home I asked, “So how was the fireside?”

She replied, “It was *so* good. I am really glad that I went.”

She enjoyed the blessings of the Spirit because she placed herself in an environment where the Spirit could be present. Had she not attended the fireside she would have missed an opportunity to build her faith. Choosing to attend your church meetings, attend the temple regularly, read the scriptures, and even attend university devotionals makes it more likely for you to have spiritual experiences. After all, it is hard for the Spirit to bear witness to us of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon if we aren’t reading it.

The inspired document “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” states that “successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities” (*Ensign*, November 1995, 102). As parents, our favorite part of this statement is “forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, [and] work.” However, our kids really like the “recreational activities” part.

Over the years we have enjoyed some very exciting and fun family vacations. In an effort to add value and excitement to the vacation, we have often made the actual announcement of the vacation an event itself. For example, when we traveled to Florida to visit Disney World, we cut out magazine pictures of things like palm trees, the Everglades, and alligators. Each week during family home evening we would present one of these pictures, and the children would try to guess where we were going. Prior to a family vacation to New York we gave the children “I Love New York” T-shirts and had them put them on while in the dark. Then, on the count of three we turned on the lights to reveal the summer vacation plans. It was a thrill to see the excitement in the faces of our children when they discovered where we were headed.

This summer we decided our vacation would be different. Rather than just take a

vacation, we wanted to have an experience. We applied to be in the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York. As parents, we knew that this would be a wonderful experience for our family and an opportunity for them to feel of the Spirit as they portrayed the sacred stories of the Book of Mormon on the very hill where the gold plates had been buried. We also knew that it might not sound as exciting as Disney World or New York City, so we intentionally decided to just let these vacation plans slip out in casual conversation.

My conversation with my fourteen-year-old son went something like this: “Hey, by the way, your Mom and I are so excited that our family has been accepted to be part of the Hill Cumorah Pageant this summer. We will be spending seventeen days in Palmyra, New York. Isn’t that great?”

I curiously awaited his response. As expected, the plans did not elicit the normal outburst of excitement. All I got was a blank stare.

After a long pause he gave me a thoughtful and respectful response. “Dad, no offense,” he said, “but this kind of reminds me of being in second grade, when the teacher comes into class all excited about a field trip to a museum and we just have to slap a smile on our faces and pretend we’re excited as well.” He finished up the conversation by saying, “Are you sure that you and Mom aren’t just wanting to relive your performing glory days?”

I assured him that was not our intent. Quite the opposite, our hope was that our participation in the pageant would place our children in an environment in which they would have an opportunity to have their very own personal and meaningful spiritual experiences. It would be a way for them to build their own testimony and place a stone in their own monument that they would always remember.

The day we arrived at the pageant was particularly hot and humid. We gathered for instructions on how the event would unfold.

Within moments we were alive with the idea of portraying the stories of the Book of Mormon on the Hill Cumorah. The children were excited as they received their roles, tried on costumes, and began rehearsals. Those seventeen days were filled with opportunities to feel of the Spirit as we reenacted scenes from the Book of Mormon, visited the Sacred Grove, and relived details of the restored gospel.

“Remember, and Perish Not”

Each night as I watched the production unfold from backstage under a starlit sky, I was reminded how much of the turmoil and strife in the Book of Mormon was the result of the people not remembering. Even though Laman and Lemuel had seen angels and had had other heavenly manifestations, they seemingly forgot them and constantly murmured against their father and their brother. In their case the inability to remember resulted in an entire nation turning from God.

Former Church historian and recorder Elder Marlin K. Jensen emphasized the importance of remembering. He said:

*If we pay close attention to the uses of the word **remember** in the holy scriptures, we will recognize that remembering in the way God intends is a fundamental and saving principle of the gospel. This is so because prophetic admonitions to remember are frequently calls to action: to listen, to see, to do, to obey, to repent. When we remember in God’s way, we overcome our human tendency simply to gird for the battle of life and actually engage in the battle itself, doing all in our power to resist temptation and avoid sinning. [“Remember and Perish Not,” *Ensign*, May 2007, 36]*

When we think of remembering, it is easy to conjure up an image of an aged man in a rocking chair recalling events of the past. Elder Jensen reminded us that remembering is not enough. Those memories must propel us to

action and to continually seek to do the will of our Heavenly Father.

In the book of Mosiah, King Benjamin gave a warning:

But this much I can tell you, that if ye do not watch yourselves, and your thoughts, and your words, and your deeds, and observe the commandments of God, and continue in the faith of what ye have heard concerning the coming of our Lord, even unto the end of your lives, ye must perish. And now, O man, remember, and perish not. [Mosiah 4:30]

These final words—“remember, and perish not”—underscore the plea of prophets both modern and old that if we do not want to perish, we must remember. On a personal level this means that our memories of God’s hand in our lives are not only monuments to God but also living testaments that He loves us and is aware of each one of our personal needs.

One of the final scenes of the pageant is the portrayal of the destruction of the Nephite nation. With bodies strewn about the stage and smoke filling the air, Mormon hands the plates to Moroni. Later there is a final plea from Moroni:

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust? [Moroni 10:27]

A week ago today we returned from the pageant. My once-skeptical son is now earnestly asking if we could please do this again. As we traveled home we all exchanged our favorite quotes from the now-memorized script and spoke of the memories that we would carry with us. We all felt a renewed commitment to nurture future spiritual experiences. In an effort to follow Moroni’s exhortation “to remember

these things,” we took time together as a family to write down in our journals what we had experienced and how we felt. These delicate, precious memories deserved all our efforts to preserve them. After all, it is possible that the very recollection of these moments at a yet undetermined time in the future might provide much-needed strength. This experience certainly served as a very large stone in each of our monuments to remember.

As Robert Robinson penned the last verse of “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” he noted the tendency of man forget God:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.*
[“Come Thou Fount”]

The author of this song died in 1790. It is believed that he had also wandered from the God he loved. A widely told but unverifiable story relates that while he was riding in a stagecoach, a lady passenger sitting next to him was humming the tune of this now well-known hymn. Robinson turned to the lady and responded, saying, “Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then” (see Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories: The Inspiring True Stories Behind 101 Favorite Hymns* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1982], 52).

Brothers and sisters, I testify that as we seek opportunities to feel of the Spirit and make efforts to reflect often upon those experiences, we will raise our own Ebenezers—our own stones of remembrance—that will enable us to see God’s hand in our past and will give us assurance and faith that He will provide for us in the future.

I share these things with you in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.