

“Remember Lot’s Wife”

JEFFREY R. HOLLAND

You all look so good. Sister Holland walked in and said, “I think I’m going to cry.” You have to understand: Give yourselves 20 or 30 years—then you’ll know how we feel coming back here.

We love this campus. We’re thrilled to be with you on it, and we love you personally with all our hearts.

You have had, will have, and now have better university presidents than I was, but you’ll never have one who loves you and loves this university more than I do. Thank you for serving here, and thank you for being in attendance on a bright, clear, January morning.

We are grateful to President and Sister Samuelson for their kindness and their leadership at this university. We actually know something about their jobs and what they entail. You and we are very lucky to have them at the helm of this special school, and we praise them publicly for the time they spend, the success they are having, and the strength that they bring. I loved every word of their counsel to you last week, and I pray that my remarks to you today are consistent with their messages about light, about trust, and about the privilege it is to have the gospel of Jesus Christ enhance our study at BYU. President and Sister Samuelson, we do

love you. You have our prayers, our gratitude, and our support.

The start of a new year is the traditional time to take stock of our lives and see where we are going, measured against the backdrop of where we have been. I don’t want to talk to you about New Year’s resolutions, because you only made five of them and you have already broken four. (I give that remaining one just another week.) But I do want to talk to you about the past and the future, not so much in terms of New Year’s commitments per se, but more with an eye toward *any* time of transition and change in your lives—and those moments come virtually every day of our lives.

As a scriptural theme for this discussion, I have chosen the second-shortest verse in all of holy scripture. I am told that the shortest verse—a verse that every missionary memorizes and holds ready in case he is called on spontaneously in a zone conference—is John 11:35: “Jesus wept.” Elders, here is a second option, another shortie that will dazzle your

Jeffrey R. Holland was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 13 January 2009.

mission president in case you are called on two zone conferences in a row. It is Luke 17:32, where the Savior cautions, “Remember Lot’s wife.”

Hmmm. What did He mean by such an enigmatic little phrase? To find out, I suppose we need to do as He suggested. Let’s recall who Lot’s wife was.

The original story, of course, comes to us out of the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the Lord, having had as much as He could stand of the worst that men and women could do, told Lot and his family to flee because those cities were about to be destroyed. “Escape for thy life,” the Lord said, “*look not behind thee . . .*; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed” (Genesis 19:17; emphasis added).

With less than immediate obedience and more than a little negotiation, Lot and his family ultimately did leave town, but just in the nick of time. The scriptures tell us what happened at daybreak the morning following their escape:

The Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven;

And he overthrew those cities. [Genesis 19:24–25]

Then our theme today comes in the next verse. Surely, surely, with the Lord’s counsel “look not behind thee” ringing clearly in her ears, Lot’s wife, the record says, “looked back,” and she was turned into a pillar of salt.

In the time we have this morning, I am not going to talk to you about the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, nor of the comparison the Lord Himself has made to those days and our own time. I am not even going to talk about obedience and disobedience. I just want to talk to you for a few minutes about looking back and looking ahead.

One of the purposes of history is to teach us the lessons of life. George Santayana, who should be more widely read than he is on a

college campus, is best known for saying, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (*Reason in Common Sense*, vol. 1 of *The Life of Reason* [1905–1906]).

So, if history is this important—and it surely is—what did Lot’s wife do that was so wrong? As something of a student of history, I have thought about that and offer this as a partial answer. Apparently what was wrong with Lot’s wife was that she wasn’t just *looking* back; in her heart she wanted to *go* back. It would appear that even before they were past the city limits, she was already missing what Sodom and Gomorrah had offered her. As Elder Maxwell once said, such people know they should have their primary residence in Zion, but they still hope to keep a summer cottage in Babylon (see Larry W. Gibbons, “Wherefore, Settle This in Your Hearts,” *Ensign*, November 2006, 102; also Neal A. Maxwell, *A Wonderful Flood of Light* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1990], 47).

It is possible that Lot’s wife looked back with resentment toward the Lord for what He was asking her to leave behind. We certainly know that Laman and Lemuel were resentful when Lehi and his family were commanded to leave Jerusalem. So it isn’t just that she looked back; she looked back *longingly*. In short, her attachment to the past outweighed her confidence in the future. That, apparently, was at least part of her sin.

So, as a new year starts and we try to benefit from a proper view of what has gone before, I plead with you not to dwell on days now gone, nor to yearn vainly for yesterdays, however good those yesterdays may have been. The past is to be learned from but not lived in. We look back to claim the embers from glowing experiences but not the ashes. And when we have learned what we need to learn and have brought with us the best that we have experienced, then we look ahead, we remember that *faith is always pointed toward the future*. Faith always has to do with blessings and truths and events that will *yet* be efficacious in our lives.

So a more theological way to talk about Lot's wife is to say that she did not have faith. She doubted the Lord's ability to give her something better than she already had. Apparently she thought—fatally, as it turned out—that nothing that lay ahead could possibly be as good as those moments she was leaving behind.

It is here at this moment in this little story that we wish Lot's wife had been a student at BYU enrolled in a freshman English class. With any luck, she might have read, as I did, this verse from Edwin Arlington Robinson:

*Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
And he had reasons.*

*Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.*

*Miniver sighed for what was not,
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And Priam's neighbors. . . .*

*Miniver cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the medieval grace
Of iron clothing. . . .*

*Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.*
[*Miniver Cheevy* (1910), stanzas 1–3, 6, 8]

To yearn to go back to a world that cannot be lived in now; to be perennially dissatisfied with present circumstances and have only dismal views of the future; to miss the here-and-now-and-tomorrow because we are so trapped

in the there-and-then-and-yesterday—these are some of the sins, if we may call them that, of both Lot's wife and old Mr. Cheevy. (Now, as a passing comment, I don't know whether Lot's wife, like Miniver, was a drinker, but if she was, she certainly ended up with plenty of salt for her pretzels.)

One of my favorite books of the New Testament is Paul's too-seldom-read letter to the Philippians. After reviewing the very privileged and rewarding life of his early years—his birthright, his education, his standing in the Jewish community—Paul says that all of that was nothing (“dung” he calls it) compared to his conversion to Christianity. He says, and I paraphrase: “I have stopped rhapsodizing about ‘the good old days’ and now eagerly look toward the future ‘that I may apprehend that for which Christ apprehended me.’” Then comes this verse:

This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. [Philippians 3:13–14]

No Lot's wife here. No looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah here. Paul knows it is out there in the future, up ahead wherever heaven is taking us where we will win “the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.”

At this point, let me pause and add a lesson that applies both in your own life and also in the lives of others. There is something in us, at least in too many of us, that particularly fails to forgive and forget earlier mistakes in life—either mistakes we ourselves have made or the mistakes of others. That is not good. It is not Christian. It stands in terrible opposition to the grandeur and majesty of the Atonement of Christ. To be tied to earlier mistakes—our own or other people's—is the worst kind of

wallowing in the past from which we are called to cease and desist.

I was told once of a young man who for many years was more or less the brunt of every joke in his school. He had some disadvantages, and it was easy for his peers to tease him. Later in his life he moved away from his community. He eventually joined the army and had some successful experiences there in getting an education and generally stepping away from his past. Above all, as many in the military do, he discovered the beauty and majesty of the Church and became very active and happy in it.

Then, after several years, he came back to the town of his youth. Most of his generation had moved on, but not all. Apparently when he returned quite successful and quite reborn, the same old mind-set that had existed before was still there, waiting for his return. To the people in his hometown he was still just old “so and so”—you remember the guy who had the problem, that idiosyncrasy, this quirky nature, and did such and such and such and such. And wasn’t it all just hilarious?

Well, you know what happened. Little by little this man’s Pauline effort to leave that which was behind and grasp the prize that God had laid before him was gradually diminished until he died about the way he had lived in his youth. He came full circle: again inactive and unhappy and the brunt of a new generation of jokes. Yet he had had that one bright, beautiful midlife moment when he had been able to rise above his past and truly see who he was and what he could become. Too bad, too sad, that he was again to be surrounded by a whole batch of Lot’s wives, those who thought his past was more interesting than his future. Yes, they managed to rip out of his grasp that for which Christ had grasped him. And he died even more sadly than Miniver Cheevy, though as far as I know the story, through absolutely no fault of his own.

That happens in marriages, too, and in other relationships we have. I can’t tell you

the number of couples I have counseled who, when they are deeply hurt or even just deeply stressed, reach farther and farther into the past to find yet a bigger brick to throw through the window “pain” of their marriage. When something is over and done with, when it has been repented of as fully as it can be repented of, when life has moved on as it should and a lot of other wonderfully good things have happened since then, it is *not* right to go back and open up some ancient wound that the Son of God Himself died trying to heal.

Let people repent. Let people grow. Believe that people can change and improve. Is that faith? Yes! Is that hope? Yes! Is it charity? Yes! Above all, it is charity, the pure love of Christ. If something is buried in the past, leave it buried. Don’t keep going back with your little sand pail and beach shovel to dig it up, wave it around, and then throw it at someone, saying, “Hey! Do you remember *this*?” Splat!

Well, guess what? That is probably going to result in some ugly morsel being dug up out of *your* landfill with the reply, “Yeah, I remember it. Do *you* remember *this*?” Splat.

And soon enough everyone comes out of that exchange dirty and muddy and unhappy and hurt, when what God, our Father in Heaven, pleads for is cleanliness and kindness and happiness and healing.

Such dwelling on past lives, including past mistakes, is just not right! It is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is worse than Miniver Cheevy, and in some ways worse than Lot’s wife, because at least there he and she were only destroying themselves. In these cases of marriage and family and wards and apartments and neighborhoods, we can end up destroying so many, many others.

Perhaps at this beginning of a new year there is no greater requirement for us than to do as the Lord Himself said He does: “Behold, he who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more” (D&C 58:42).

The proviso, of course, is that repentance has to be sincere, but when it is and when honest effort is being made to progress, we are guilty of the greater sin if we keep remembering and recalling and rebashing someone with their earlier mistakes—and that “someone” might be ourselves. We can be so hard on ourselves, often much more so than with others!

Now, like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies of the Book of Mormon, bury your weapons of war, and leave them buried. Forgive, and do that which is harder than to forgive: Forget. And when it comes to mind again, forget it again.

You can remember just enough to avoid repeating the mistake, but then put the rest of it all on the dung heap Paul spoke of to those Philippians. Dismiss the destructive and keep dismissing it until the beauty of the Atonement of Christ has revealed to you your bright future and the bright future of your family and your friends and your neighbors. God doesn't care nearly as much about where you have been as He does about where you are and, with His help, where you are willing to go. That is the thing Lot's wife didn't get—and neither did Laman and Lemuel and a host of others in the scriptures.

This is an important matter to consider at the start of a new year—and every day ought to be the start of a new year and a new life. Such is the wonder of faith and repentance and the miracle of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We started this hour with a little verse remembered from one of my BYU English classes. May I move toward a close with a few lines from another favorite poet whom I probably met in that same class or one similar to it. For the benefit of all BYU students in the new year of 2009, Robert Browning wrote:

*Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand*

*Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be
afraid!"*

[*Rabbi Ben Ezra* (1864), stanza 1]

Sister Holland and I were married about the time both of us were reading poems like that in BYU classrooms. We were as starstruck—and as fearful—as most of you are at these ages and stages of life. We had absolutely no money. Zero. For a variety of reasons, neither of our families was able to help finance our education. We had a small apartment just south of campus—the smallest we could find: two rooms and a half bath. We were both working too many hours trying to stay afloat financially, but we had no other choice.

I remember one fall day—I think it was in the first semester after our marriage in 1963—we were walking together up the hill past the Maeser Building on the sidewalk that led between the President's Home and the Brimhall Building. Somewhere on that path we stopped and wondered what we had gotten ourselves into. Life that day seemed so overwhelming, and the undergraduate plus graduate years that we still anticipated before us seemed monumental, nearly insurmountable. Our love for each other and our commitment to the gospel were strong, but most of all the other temporal things around us seemed particularly ominous.

On a spot that I could probably still mark for you today, I turned to Pat and said something like this: “Honey, should we give up? I can get a good job and carve out a good living for us. I can do some things. I'll be okay without a degree. Should we stop trying to tackle what right now seems so difficult to face?”

In my best reenactment of Lot's wife, I said, in effect, “Let's go back. Let's go home. The future holds nothing for us.”

Then my beloved little bride did what she has done for 45 years since then. She grabbed me by the lapels and said, “We are not going

back. We are not going home. The future holds *everything* for us.”

She stood there in the sunlight that day and gave me a real talk. I don’t recall that she quoted Paul, but there was certainly plenty in her voice that said she was committed to setting aside all that was past in order to “press toward the mark” and seize the prize of God that lay yet ahead. It was a living demonstration of faith. It was “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). So we laughed, kept walking, and finished up sharing a root beer—one glass, two straws—at the then newly constructed Wilkinson Center.

Twenty years later I would, on occasion, look out of the window of the President’s Home across the street from the Brimhall Building and picture there on the sidewalk two newlywed BYU students, down on their money and down even more on their confidence. And as I would gaze out that window, usually at night, I would occasionally see not Pat and Jeff Holland but you and you and you, walking that same sidewalk. I would see you sometimes as couples, sometimes as a group of friends, sometimes as just a lone student.

I knew something of what you were feeling. Some of you were having thoughts such as these: Is there any future for me? What does a new year or a new semester or a new major or a new romance hold for me? Will I be safe? Will life be sound? Can I trust in the Lord and in the future? Or would it be better to look back, to go back, to go home?

To all such of every generation, I call out, “Remember Lot’s wife.” Faith is for the future. Faith builds on the past but never longs to stay there. Faith trusts that God has great things in store for each of us and that Christ truly is the “high priest of good things to come.”

My young brothers and sisters, I pray you will have a wonderful semester, a wonderful new year, and a wonderful life all filled with faith and hope and charity. Keep your eyes on your dreams, however distant and far away. Live to see the miracles of repentance and forgiveness, of trust and divine love that will transform your life today, tomorrow, and forever. That is a New Year’s resolution I ask you to keep, and I leave a blessing on you—every one of you—to be able to do so and to be happy, in the name of Him who makes it all possible, even the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.