

## *Stepping-Stones and Stumbling Blocks*

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**D**uring the westward migration, early pioneers encountered landmarks that marked the progress of their journey west. Prominent rock formations such as Chimney Rock and Independence Rock are examples of such landmarks.

Such features have special prominence in our own Church history. Rocky Ridge and Rock Creek Hollow have deep meaning for the handcart pioneers who struggled across the high plains of Wyoming in early snowstorms that terrible winter of 1856.

Hole-in-the-Rock and Dance Hall Rock bring to mind the tenacious faith of those called to settle southeastern Utah. Their expedition stymied by towering cliffs overlooking the Colorado River, these courageous settlers built a road through a cleft in the cliff wall, which even today seems to defy possibility.

My remarks today involve other kinds of rocks. I would like to speak of the stepping-stones and stumbling blocks that define our own spiritual journey through life.

On October 19, 1856, nearly two weeks before the terrible days at Martin's Cove, the Martin Handcart Company faced the prospect of making their last crossing of the Platte River. Extremely low on food and supplies, they also faced the prospect of crossing the

icy river during a fast-approaching storm. Because of the weakness of the teams that pulled wagons accompanying the handcart company, all of the sick who were able to walk were required to enter the icy water. Thomas Durham recorded, "All the sick that could walk at all had to get out of the wagons and walk through the river, some of them falling down in the river several times, not being able to stand up in it being so weak" (Thomas Durham journal, 1854–1871, 15).

While the place of crossing was a known location to ford the river, the freezing water was at least waist deep to most of the 200 to 300 souls who waded and swam the river.

Josiah Rogerson recalled the experience years later by writing, "I rolled up my trousers and waded that cold river, six or eight rods wide, slipping betimes off the smooth stones and boulders into deeper water" ("Strong Men, Brave Women and Sturdy Children Crossed the Wilderness Afoot," in *Salt Lake Tribune*, 4 January 1914, n.p.).

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Between the last crossing of the Platte River and the arrival of the advance party of rescuers, fifty-six members of the handcart company perished. Many more lost their lives during those horrible days at Martin's Cove as they waited for the main rescue party.

Because of the horrible suffering experienced by the Willie and Martin handcart companies, a few of the survivors lost their faith and left the Church. But to many who suffered, this experience proved to be the refiner's fire.

Forty-eight years later, in a Sunday School class in Cedar City, Utah, class members were offering criticism of the Church and its leaders for permitting the handcart companies to cross the plains so poorly equipped and so late in the season. Francis Webster, now an old man, listened as long as he could and then stood and said the following:

*I ask you to stop this criticism for you are discussing a matter you know nothing about. . . . Mistake to send the handcart company out so late in the season? Yes. But I was in that company and my wife was in it. . . . We suffered beyond anything you can imagine and many died of exposure and starvation. But did you ever hear a survivor of that company utter a word of criticism? . . . Every one of us came through with the absolute knowledge that God lives, for we became acquainted with him in our extremities. . . .*

*Was I sorry that I chose to come by handcart? No. Neither then nor one moment of my life since. The price we paid to become acquainted with God was a privilege to pay, and I am thankful that I was privileged to come to Zion in the Martin Handcart Company. [William R. Palmer, "Pioneers of Southern Utah: VI. Francis Webster," *Instructor*, May 1944, 217–18; see also David O. McKay, "Pioneer Women," *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1948, 8]*

How can there be such different responses from individuals who undergo difficult and trying circumstances in this mortal existence?

Why do some wander off and become lost? Why are some ashamed and fall away into forbidden paths and become lost? (See 1 Nephi 8:23, 28.) Others, however, like Francis Webster, find their faith strengthened and their devotion increased.

How do we turn adversity into a stepping-stone and not a stumbling block? How can we make a bad experience become a learning experience? Part of the answer lies in perspective. How we choose to lead our lives and how we make faith part of our lives ultimately helps us face the challenges that come to everyone in this earthly existence.

In Hebrews 11:1 we read: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

The Joseph Smith Translation gives us further insight into this scripture. The Prophet teaches us that faith leads to an assurance. This assurance begins with a belief, or, as Alma described it in the Book of Mormon, a "desire to believe" (Alma 32:27). In order for belief to become assurance, it requires action on our part. Every missionary knows an investigator must take action before obtaining a testimony, even if that investigator has a strong desire to believe. Someone who hears the gospel for the first time must not just believe but must take action for there to be a witness or assurance. For a new investigator this means study, prayer, and attending Church. Only after making commitments and acting upon them does an investigator obtain a testimony of the restored gospel. These actions become a series of stepping-stones leading to a testimony.

The pattern is the same with those of us who have been in the Church for many years. We must continue to step forward on the stepping-stones that will increase our faith. As our study and prayer continue, we accept new callings in the Church that cause us to stretch and grow. We serve others through home or visiting teaching. We prepare for and keep covenants made in the temple. As we

continue on this path of learning, serving, and growing, we touch on the stepping-stones that strengthen our faith and ultimately lead us to an assurance or witness of truth.

From this spiritual growth we are then more prepared to face and overcome the adversity that is part of our mortal probation.

President Boyd K. Packer has said:

*[Today's children] will see many events transpire in the course of their lifetime. Some of these shall tax their courage and extend their faith. But if they seek prayerfully for help and guidance, they shall be given power over adverse things. Such trials shall not be permitted to stand in the way of their progress, but instead shall act as stepping-stones to greater knowledge. ["Do Not Fear," Ensign, May 2004, 77]*

So, in a marvelous way, by using the stepping-stones of faith, prayer, study, and service, we prepare ourselves to overcome the challenges and trials life undoubtedly holds in store.

The scriptures often refer to these challenges and trials as stumbling blocks. In Isaiah we read: "Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way, take up the stumblingblock out of the way of my people" (Isaiah 57:14).

As we contemplate the straight and narrow path that returns to the presence of our Heavenly Father, invariably that path will contain stumbling blocks that can, if ignored, become trials, even crises in our lives. Now, please understand: the trail of life is strewn with stumbling blocks placed there to test us and to try us. Sometimes it seems we are literally stumbling through life as we deal with the challenges and trials of this mortal existence. The stumbling blocks of which I speak are those that we can avoid if we are obedient, plan ahead, and remain vigilant.

My list is only a short one and does not begin to include the many stumbling blocks the adversary has stored in his quarry of sin

and misery. The ways he can trip us up are limited only by our imaginations. Nonetheless, here is a list of stumbling blocks you will want to avoid.

First, beware of the stumbling block of pride. While we are proud of you and we hope you take pride in your accomplishments, it is important to not be prideful.

Pride can blind us from danger. If we are caught up in ourselves and our own well-being, we become more susceptible to the enticements of the adversary. Pride prevents us from serving and giving and causes us to become self-centered and demanding. Pride interferes with relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and loved ones. No one cares to be around a truly selfish person.

Nephi wrote:

*And the Gentiles are lifted up in the pride of their eyes, and have stumbled, because of the greatness of their stumbling block, that they have . . . put down the power and miracles of God, and preach up unto themselves their own wisdom and their own learning, that they may get gain and grind upon the face of the poor. [2 Nephi 26:20]*

Nephi taught 2,500 years ago that the prideful forget the poor, fail to serve, and only seek gain.

In our time, Elder Neal A. Maxwell wrote:

*Meekness helps us to surmount the stumbling blocks so that we are prepared to receive a deeper and wider view. Obviously, Philip had such meekness when he recognized Jesus as the Messiah of whom Moses had spoken. (John 1:45.) Obviously, Paul had the broad view when he described Moses as having, by choice, forgone life in Pharaoh's court for a life of service to Jesus. (Hebrews 11:24–27.) Nevertheless, the stones of stumbling are real. In fact, these offending rocks prove insurmountable unless we have the attribute of meekness. [Meek and Lowly (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 76]*

Second, be aware of the stumbling blocks of negativity and pessimism. While there are challenges and difficulties we all face, it is important to maintain an eternal perspective. Life is sometimes hard because it is supposed to be. The great plan of happiness provides for a mortal existence in which we can come to learn to overcome hard things. If we tend to focus on only those things in our lives that do not go as we intend, we will miss the marvelous blessings we otherwise would enjoy.

Be optimistic. The glass really is half full. President Gordon B. Hinckley said it best: "Save your fork. The best is yet to come!"

The story is told of a traveler in the Ozarks who passed by a general store. A hound dog was sitting out front howling his head off. The traveler stopped and asked, "Why's that ol' hound dog howling so much?"

The man standing by the store said, "Because he's sitting on a thistle."

The traveler asked, "Well, why doesn't he just sit somewhere else?"

The man answered, "Because he'd rather howl."

Don't howl and whine. Choose to be optimistic. Being optimistic is good for you. Dr. Martin E. P. Seligman, a psychologist from the University of Pennsylvania, did more than a quarter-century of research on this subject. Among his conclusions: Optimistic people are happier, healthier, and more successful than those with a negative outlook on life. Optimism results in less depression, higher achievement, and a stronger immune system.

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches these same principles. When we say, "It's impossible," the Lord says, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God" (Luke 18:27).

When we say, "I'm too tired," the Lord says, "I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28; see also verses 29–30).

When we say, "Nobody really loves me," the Lord says, "I love you" (see John 13:34).

When we say, "I can't do it," the scriptures teach us, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13).

When we say, "It's not worth it," the Lord reminds us it will be worth it: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

When we say, "I'm not smart enough," the scriptures remind us that God gives us wisdom (see 1 Corinthians 1:30).

When we say, "I can't forgive myself," we are reminded that He does forgive us (see 1 John 1:9).

When we say, "I don't have enough faith," He reminds us in scripture, "God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Romans 12:3).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the "good news." It is for good reason we often refer to the plan of salvation as the plan of happiness. In spite of the challenges and trials of life, we must look forward with hope. As members of the Church of Jesus Christ, we have within us the hope Peter refers to in the New Testament: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15).

So choose to be optimistic. Choose to look on the bright side. As you go about your day's activities, expect the best.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the following anecdote.

A little boy was overheard talking to himself as he strode through his backyard, baseball cap in place and toting ball and bat. "I'm the greatest baseball player in the world," he said proudly.

Then he tossed the ball in the air, swung, and missed. Undaunted, he picked up the ball, threw it into the air, and said to himself, "I'm the greatest player ever!"

He swung at the ball again, and again he missed. He paused a moment to examine the

bat and ball carefully. Then once again he threw the ball into the air and said, "I'm the greatest baseball player who ever lived."

He swung the bat hard and again missed the ball. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "What a pitcher!"

Choose to look on the bright side.

Before I move on, let me leave a word of caution and advice. Today's events have focused a great deal of attention on the Church. The Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* and especially the Republican primary campaign have created what *Newsweek* magazine has coined "the Mormon moment." This unprecedented attention on our Church and our beliefs has also had a downside. Never before have we received such scrutiny. Some of our beliefs, which to some may seem peculiar, have been ridiculed by a few. The ability to transmit information through the Internet and the media is unparalleled. The words of a bitter or disrespectful critic are magnified many times through the use of social media. This was a platform not available to our critics just a generation ago.

Our responsibility is to appropriately filter this rhetoric and attempt to understand why such things are said. For some critics, their crude utterances are made for political gain or entertainment. But please understand, the followers of the Savior have always been in the minority and often in history have suffered more than the simple sting of unkind and cruel words.

For a few, these verbal assaults on our religion have created a crisis of faith. They wonder if such things are true and, if so, how this could possibly be. Our history as a Church is a rich tapestry woven with beautiful threads of sacrifice, service, and devotion. The stories of early Church leaders and members are motivating and compelling. Their accounts of the remarkable and the mundane inspire us to accomplish difficult tasks. But, like all of us, they were not perfect. It is important to view the entire tapestry of our history and not just

individual threads that may seem to strike us as too peculiar if not viewed in the context of time and place.

I can testify that the more I learn of our Church, its doctrine, and its history, the stronger my testimony becomes. To achieve a proper balance, I encourage you to continue to pay attention to your spiritual well-being by praying, studying the scriptures, and keeping the commandments. Touch upon the stepping-stones that will build your faith. Then, when the winds of discontent blow, you will be protected from the storm.

While there are many stumbling blocks along our path, I will conclude with just one more. Stumbling blocks are often cleverly disguised. Let the advancements of today's modern technology be a springboard in your lives, not a stumbling block. Never have we been blessed with so many tools to perform the purposes of the Church. Social media can be an effective way to share the gospel. The new Family Search has revolutionized our ability to do family history. Instantaneous communication is achieved around the world with members and non-members alike with tools like LDS.org and Mormon.com.

Unlike even a generation ago, it is impossible for you to successfully complete your studies without ownership or easy access to a computer. Cell phones and texting have changed the way we communicate. Based on its membership, Facebook is now the third-largest country in the world. The Internet, with its use of social media, has contributed to revolutions in the Middle East. It is an absolutely fascinating time, and we are just seeing the beginning of this information revolution.

Unfortunately, all of this technology does have a downside. We should not be surprised Satan has figured that out so quickly. Resist the urge to spend too much time on video games, and avoid violent and inappropriate games altogether. This kind of entertainment can become strangely addictive. In ten years we

do not want to find some of you bright young people living in your parents' basements playing video games and surviving on Cheetos. Life does have greater meaning than the latest and greatest game.

Avoid online pornography at all costs. There has been a clarion call from our prophets on this matter, and you will be wise to pay careful heed to their warnings. To not do so can lead you to become ensnared in your own personal hell. Stay away from pornography.

While I appreciate the economy and efficiency of texting, don't give up on personal face-to-face communication. You don't need a battery, you don't need a signal, and you don't need a handheld device. You will be surprised what can come from a real, live conversation. Let's embrace the technology, but let's not forget the importance of personal communication. Try it. You might like it.

Well, brothers and sisters, there are many other stumbling blocks that will undoubtedly

threaten your future progress. Some of you will need to maneuver around them or laboriously push them from your path. You will avoid many stumbling blocks by living wise, obedient lives and by paying attention to the stepping-stones that will build your faith. But the challenges and trials will nonetheless come. When they do, if you have prepared they will become seasons of learning in your life. Rather than times of setback and loss of faith, these experiences themselves will become stepping-stones of spiritual strength for your eternal progression.

Be meek, humble, strong, and wise. The future is bright, and you, the rising generation, will determine our course. It has ever been so. Being with you today convinces me that our future has never been in better hands.

I wish you the Lord's choicest blessings as you continue forward on this magnificent journey known as mortality. This I say in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.