

Grasp onto the Rod



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We are used to and enjoy beginning a talk with Aloha. My wife has taught you how to say hello to those who are from Africa: Sawubona. Now, I will teach you the proper greeting for someone from where I come from. Are you ready? Potato!

While attending the campus in Rexburg, Idaho, I clearly remember a religion class on the Book of Mormon. I do not remember the professor's name, but I do remember that every day of class began with a hymn. Every day, it was the same: number 274, "The Iron Rod." We sang that song every day for the entire semester. At the time, I was a little disturbed about singing the same song every day, but by the time I finished the class, I had gained a deep appreciation of both the song and of Lehi's vision of the tree of life.

The prophet Lehi was given a vision of the tree of life, "whose fruit was desirable to make one happy" (1 Nephi 8:10). As Lehi tasted the fruit, it "filled [his] soul with exceedingly great joy" (1 Nephi 8:12). Lehi called his family members to share the fruit; only some of them joined him. Nephi, ever the seeker of understanding, prayed for the chance to witness the vision for himself. Nephi learned, the tree represents the "love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men" (1 Nephi 11:22). The rod of iron, is the "word of God" (1 Nephi 11:25).

Of those who partook of the fruit, a portion, even after attaining the fruit, bowed to the pressures of the world and turned their backs on the happiness available.

1Nephi 8: 24 – 28.

And it came to pass that I beheld others pressing forward, and they came forth and caught hold of the end of the

rod of iron; and they did press forward through the mist of darkness, clinging to the rod of iron, even until they did come forth and partake of the fruit of the tree.

25 And after they had partaken of the fruit of the tree they did cast their eyes about as if they were ashamed.

26 And I also cast my eyes round about, and beheld, on the other side of the river of water, a great and spacious building; and it stood as it were in the air, high above the earth.

27 And it was filled with people, both old and young, both male and female; and their manner of dress was exceedingly fine; and they were in the attitude of mocking and pointing their fingers towards those who had come at and were partaking of the fruit.

28 And after they had tasted of the fruit they were ashamed, because of those that were scoffing at them; and they fell away into forbidden paths and were lost.

I've often thought about these individuals, how easily they seemed to lose their way, even though they were on the correct path and holding to the iron rod. Perhaps, they did so with only a few light fingers on the rod. They weren't gripping it but keeping it within reach for comfort as they wandered towards the precious fruit. They refused to grasp it.

I want to discuss how we can avoid letting the large and spacious building keep us from remaining at the tree of life. This is for those of us who have listened a little bit to the world and allowed ourselves to get in a less than perfect place.

Some years ago, I had a friend whom I will call Mark. I will call him that, because that is his name. As with many Idaho boys, we were avid hunters. I remember vividly starting a hunt at 3:00 AM. We started early so we could be on the mountain top prior to sunrise. We took with us the essentials: a couple of sandwiches, some water, extra clothes, and of course, the most important of all were our rifles and three boxes of bullets each. It was never possible to carry too many bullets.

As we walked up that mountain in the dark, we could feel the crisp temperature, even though we were dressed for the cold. As the sun came up, the colors of the mountainside were incredible. The reds, yellows, and oranges of the leaves on the trees were breathtaking in spite of the freezing temperature. There was a gentle breeze that would push the leaves to twist them until the strength of the leaf would force itself back into place. It was as if the leaves were waving to us and welcoming us on their mountain.

As we arrived a few hundred feet from the top, we knew we wanted to get to the other side of a large gorge. From there, the trees that were so very welcoming could be seen so nothing moving would go unnoticed. It was the perfect spot for hunting.

The only thing standing in our way was a shale rock slide. To best describe a shale slide, is to have you imagine your mother's finest china. Now, take all of her largest plates and throw them in a pile on that mountain side. Some of the plates would break, but others would pile precariously on top of the broken pieces, a seemingly stable surface with danger buried beneath. It would take thousands of plates on top of each other to create that slide. You can imagine that if you walked on that, it would give way and slide downhill.

Mark and I began to cross that slide of thousands of plates of rock as flat and smooth as broken china. We had crossed slides like that many times in our years traversing the mountains in scout hikes, hunting trips, and other camping experiences. Since it was not new to us, we felt confident that we would be successful and that there would be no danger.

Let's step away from the scene we have created in our mind to think of a time in each of our lives that we were in a place that was not safe. Perhaps you had been in that same situation before, but since nothing bad happened, you were confident that nothing seriously bad would go on. Perhaps it was a time when you were at a party that had alcohol or drugs, or you were alone with someone. It is a benign situation, right? Let me explain what happened in my case on that shale slide.

Mark led the way with me closely behind him. When we were about halfway across the slide, something very unexpected--at least to us--happened. Something at the bottom of those layers did not hold, and the rocks below us began to move. I immediately considered that I should not have been on that slippery slope.

In the Doctrine and Covenants 87:8:

“Wherefore, stand ye in holy places, and be not moved, until the day of the Lord come; for behold, it cometh quickly, saith the Lord. Amen.”

Mark and I both felt like we were not standing in a holy place. The leaves that previously were waving to us and welcoming us to the mountain now seemed to be mocking us and ridiculing us for being in a place that now had become very dangerous.

The rocks were moving, taking a helpless Mark and me with them. Within just a few seconds, Mark and I had slid about 40 feet down the slope of the mountain. As I reached with both hands for security that did not exist, and as my feet teetered on loose rocks, I realized that we were very close to the edge of a several hundred feet cliff, an edge from which there would be no return.

The only way for us all to remain safe at all times is to be where we should be. Being in a place where things are happening around us that we are sure will not affect us, even though they are not good things, does not always work out. There are times in those situations that can lead to a point of no return. Just like the shale slide, Mark and I had been there many times without consequence.

In the Doctrine and Covenants Section 1: 31-32, we are told, “For I the Lord cannot look upon sin with the least degree of allowance;

32 Nevertheless, he that repents and does the commandments of the Lord shall be forgiven;

While on that slide looking down at that deep canyon, Mark and I uttered silent prayers of deliverance. We knew we had pushed limits that were not meant to be pushed, and we knew that now we were in deep need of our Heavenly Father’s help. We knew we had put ourselves in a situation that was not where we needed to be or where Heavenly Father wanted us.

I hope that none of you can relate to this story. I hope that none of you have ever been in a situation where you finally realized that you made a mistake and should not be where you are.

Remember some of you trying to convince your parents that you would be safe at college? You promised in high school and again leaving for college that you would never allow yourselves to be at a party with alcohol or drugs or in a compromising situation with someone else. You likely promised, that if you ever found yourself in such a situation, you would leave immediately.

Or maybe you have found yourselves in such a situation, decided it wasn’t as bad as you might have expected or that you were strong enough to handle it, and came away without incident or problem. And maybe the next time such a situation presented itself, you stayed, and you eventually realized why you should leave.

Mark and I looked around and realized we were about half way across the slide. Turning around did not seem wise, because we were afraid that we would disturb too many of the rocks. Moving forward was the only recourse to our poor decision. We knew we had pushed the limits of crossing shale slides one too many times, but we could not take that choice back.

Doctrine and Covenants section 1: 25-27.

25 And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known;

26 And inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed;

27 And inasmuch as they sinned they might be chastened, that they might repent;

We ever so slowly began to inch ourselves across the remaining slide. During that time, we forgot our purpose of being on that mountain. We forgot how beautiful it all was. We now were only concerned with getting to a safe location and overcoming our poor decision.

Fortunately, the slide did not move any farther. We were able to get to firm ground on the other side. We sat down and offered prayers of thanksgiving and gratitude. Even though the air was still crisp and cold, we both were perspiring and breathing heavily, because we knew what the price of our decision could easily have been.

During an act of sin, we do not often think of the consequences. “We are caught up in the moment.” When we are away from the sin, we realize just how misleading and pathetic that phrase of “caught up in the moment” is. Those who came forth and partook of the fruit of the tree of life allowed others to influence them to leave the path. I hope, after a time, some of those who had left realized their error and turned back. Perhaps some of them found the path again and, this time, knew to grasp the rod.

If we are off the path, brothers and sisters, there is still great hope.

Luke 15:7 “I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.”

That hope comes through the Savior. He has suffered so we need not to. But it isn't easy, and it isn't free. During the time that our sin influences us, we cannot look at the world as a happy, welcoming place like those beautiful leaves as they waved to us. Sin distorts the world around us and causes us to see the negative.

After Mark and I had sat for a while, we realized we were no longer in danger. But now what? After what we had experienced, the simple excitement of the hunt was lost to us, so we abandoned the purpose of being on that mountain and looked for a way to move on.

That is just how sin is. We can get through it but must find a way to avoid it again. We must return to consistent activity in church, regular reading of the scriptures and above all pray to our Heavenly Father, even though we

feel like we might have offended Him. We need to stand in holy places and not be where bad things might happen.

We had gone through our mistake, then found a way to overcome it and return to good standing where we would not slide again. That is Repentance. The Savior is that way, as only through Him do we find our way back and gain the strength to become better.

My friend and I hiked up the mountain and crossed at the peak. Within only a few hours, we found ourselves on the right side of the slide and had a clear path to return home. This is as our Heavenly Father wants it to be, that we overcome weaknesses and return home with Him.

Doctrine and Covenants 18: 10-11,13

10 Remember the worth of souls is great in the sight of God;

11 For, behold, the Lord your Redeemer suffered death in the flesh; wherefore he suffered the pain of all men, that all men might repent and come unto him.

13 And how great is his joy in the soul that repenteth!

There is so much our Heavenly Father wants us to experience. He wants us to feel the sweet spirit of a testimony.

Might I share a couple of things that I have experienced? While on a visit to Africa with my family, my youngest daughter, Katie, and I posed in front of a small herd of zebra. Katie, being the inquisitive nine year old she was, ran to the camera to see how it turned out. I remained standing and thinking how wonderful it was to have all seven children with my wife and I and to be able to enjoy where my wife grew up.

During that moment of bliss, a stallion from the small herd must have taken me as a threat. Without me realizing it, he came up behind me and kicked me. I can tell you that Zebra's have extremely strong legs and poses a lot of power. This is not one of those experience our Heavenly Father wants you to have.

I served a mission in South Africa, where, as with other missionaries, I told many people that if they prayed they would soon receive an answer from heaven telling them our teaching is true. They could ask directly if the Book of Mormon is the word of God, and if so, the restored gospel came through the Prophet Joseph.

My companion enjoyed his time when he could listen to music, it did not have to be Mo Tab. I had determined that I would use the Sunday night when he disappeared into his head phones to test the promise, the promise that I had been making to others. I had entered the mission field due to the prompting of great parents and good church leaders. I remember when I was 14 my Bishop, John Adams asked me if I was going on a mission. That day I told him yes, so nothing else mattered, I had made a promise. I would go.

I clearly remember that night in the mission field in great detail. I placed a pillow under my knees.

I knelt down; my companion was lost in his music, so I began to pray out loud. I explained to my Heavenly Father that I needed to know if the promise I was giving to others was valid. I told Him that I had faith in Christ as Moroni instructed. I had a sincere heart; I really wanted to know. I had real intent, I told Heavenly Father that if it were not a valid promise, I would go home. I told Him I would not get off my knees until I received a yes or a no.

I am so very grateful that Heavenly Father was kind to me. He might have even chuckled a little bit over my demand to know.

I cannot express what happened after that. What I can express is that without any doubt I was given an answer from Heavenly Father that *The Book of Mormon* is as it claims to be. It is the word of God, Joseph Smith is a prophet. The promise I had been giving to others is valid. I do not remember how long I had prayed before the answer came, nor do I know how long it lasted but I cannot deny the sweetness of that answer.

The Savior appeared unto most of his disciples but Thomas was missing. But in John 20:26 – 29, we learn of the time Thomas was also there.

26 ¶ And after eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you.

27 Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing.

28 And Thomas answered and said unto him, My Lord and my God.

29 Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not

seen, and yet have believed.

For those who have not had a singular spiritual experience as I had, the Savior's words echo through the eternities: "blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed". If you are one who's testimony rests on repeated moments when the spirit has touched you, then blessed are you.

I have a very strong testimony that *The Book of Mormon* is the word of God. I know that Joseph Smith is the prophet of the restoration. I know that a loving Heavenly Father waits for us to plead with Him for help and for forgiveness. May we all overcome our moments on this slippery slopes in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.