



By Elder Quentin L. Cook
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

Valiant in the Testimony of Jesus

We cannot afford to have our testimonies of the Father and the Son become confused and complicated by stumbling blocks.

Eternal life is the greatest gift of God and is bestowed on those who “keep [God’s] commandments and endure to the end.”¹ On the other hand, eternal life with our Heavenly Father is denied those “who are not valiant in the testimony of Jesus.”² There are a number of stumbling blocks to our valor that can prevent us from reaching the goal of eternal life.³ Stumbling blocks can be complex; let me illustrate.

Many years ago my father built a small cabin on part of the ranch property where he had been raised. The vistas across the meadows were exceptional. When the walls were framed in for the cabin, I made a visit. I was surprised that the window with the view focused directly on a power pole that was a short distance from the house. To me, it was a huge distraction from the magnificent view.

I said, “Dad, why did you let them put the power pole directly in front of your view from the window?”

My father, an exceptionally practical and calm man, exclaimed with some emotion, “Quentin, that power pole is the most beautiful thing to me on the

entire ranch!” He then made his case: “When I look at that pole, I realize that, unlike when I grew up here, I will not have to carry water in containers from the spring up to the house to cook, wash my hands, or bathe. I will not have to light candles or oil lamps at night to read. I want to see that power pole right in the middle of the view window.”

My father had a different perspective on the power pole than I did. To him

that pole represented an improved life, but to me it was a stumbling block to a magnificent vista. My dad valued power, light, and cleanliness above an aesthetic view. I immediately realized that while the pole was a stumbling block for me, it had great practical, symbolic meaning to my father.

A stumbling block is “an impediment to belief or understanding” or “an obstacle to progress.”⁴ To stumble spiritually is “to fall into sin or waywardness.”⁵ A stumbling block can be anything that distracts us from achieving righteous goals.

We cannot afford to have our testimonies of the Father and the Son become confused and complicated by stumbling blocks. We cannot fall into that trap. Our testimonies of Them need to remain pure and simple like my father’s simple defense of the power pole on the ranch where he grew up.

What are some of the stumbling blocks that confuse and complicate our pure and simple testimony of the Father and the Son and keep us from being valiant in that testimony?



One Stumbling Block Is the Philosophies of Men

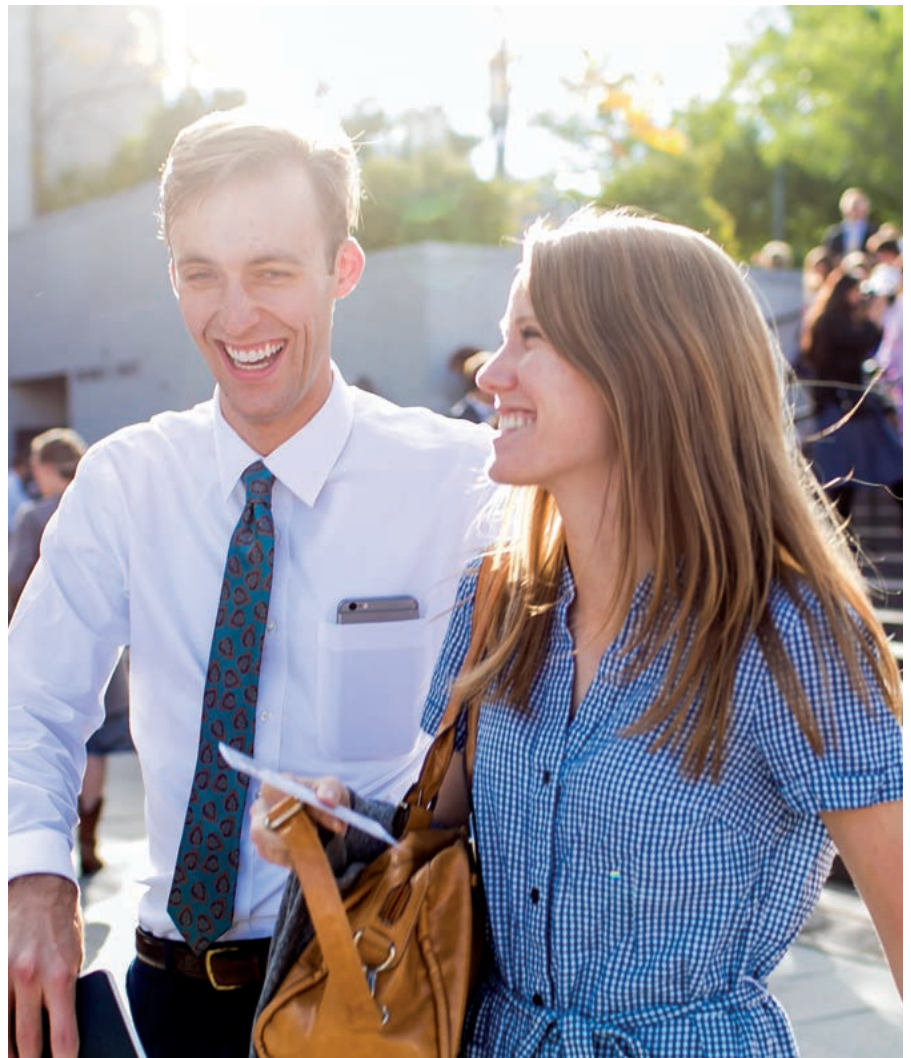
We are committed to knowledge of every kind and believe “the glory of God is intelligence.”⁶ But we also know that the preferred strategy of the adversary is to lead people away from God and cause them to stumble by emphasizing the philosophies of men over the Savior and His teachings.

The Apostle Paul was a sure witness of Jesus Christ because of a miraculous and life-changing experience with the Savior.⁷ Paul’s unique background prepared him to relate to people of many cultures. He loved the “frank simplicity” of the Thessalonians and the “tender sympathy” of the Philippians.⁸ He initially found it more difficult to relate to the intellectual and sophisticated Greeks. In Athens on Mars’ Hill, he attempted a philosophical approach and was rejected. To the Corinthians he determined to simply teach “the doctrine of Christ crucified.”⁹ To use the Apostle Paul’s own words:

“And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power:

“That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.”¹⁰

Some of the most magnificent scriptural accounts of the Savior and His mission are set forth in 1 Corinthians. One chapter—15—has received worldwide attention through performances of George Frideric Handel’s *Messiah*.¹¹ It contains profound doctrine about the Savior. In the third part of *Messiah*, immediately following the “Hallelujah Chorus,” most of the scriptures used are from 1 Corinthians 15. In a few of these verses, Paul beautifully describes some of what the Savior accomplished:



“[For] now is Christ risen from the dead, . . . the firstfruits of them that slept.

“ . . . Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.

“For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. . . .

“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . .

“But thanks be to God, [who] giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹²

We know the Apostasy occurred in part because the philosophies of men were elevated over Christ’s basic, essential doctrine. Instead of the simplicity of the Savior’s message being taught, many plain and precious truths were changed or lost. In fact, Christianity adopted some Greek philosophical traditions to reconcile people’s beliefs

with their existing culture. The historian Will Durant wrote: “Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life.”¹³ Historically, and in our own day, some people reject the gospel of Jesus Christ because, in their view, it doesn’t have adequate intellectual sophistication.

At the dawn of the Restoration, many at least professed to follow the Savior’s teachings. Many countries considered themselves Christian nations. But even then there was prophecy of a more difficult time for our day.

Heber C. Kimball was one of the original Twelve Apostles of this dispensation and First Counselor to President Brigham Young. He warned: “The time is coming when . . . it will be difficult to tell the face of a Saint from the face

of an enemy to the people of God. Then . . . look out for the great sieve, for there will be a great sifting time, and many will fall.” He concluded that there is “a TEST coming.”¹⁴

In our day, the influence of Christianity in many countries, including the United States, is significantly reduced. Without religious beliefs, there is no feeling of accountability to God. Accordingly, it is hard to establish universal values about how to live. Philosophies which are deeply held often conflict with each other.

Unfortunately, this also happens with some members of the Church who lose their bearings and become influenced by the cause of the moment—many of which are clearly not righteous.

In line with Heber C. Kimball’s prophecy, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said in 1982: “Much sifting will occur because of lapses in righteous behavior which go unrepented of. A few will give up instead of holding out to the end. A few will be deceived by defectors. Likewise, others will be offended, for sufficient unto each dispensation are the stumbling blocks thereof!”¹⁵

Another Stumbling Block Is Refusing to See Sin in Its True Light

One of the unique and troubling aspects of our day is that many people engage in sinful conduct but refuse to consider it sinful. They have no remorse or willingness to acknowledge their conduct as being morally wrong. Even some who profess a belief in the Father and the Son wrongfully take the position that a loving Father in Heaven should exact no consequences for conduct that is contrary to His commandments.

This was apparently the position taken by Corianton, the son of Alma

the Younger in the Book of Mormon. He had engaged in grievous immoral conduct and was being counseled by Alma. We are blessed that the great prophet Alma, who had personally experienced “the darkest abyss [and] the marvelous light,”¹⁶ recorded the instruction he gave. In the 39th chapter of Alma, we read how he counseled this son through the repentance process and then explained how Christ would come to take away sin. He made the necessity of repentance clear to Corianton because “no unclean thing can inherit the kingdom of God.”¹⁷

Alma 42 contains some of the most magnificent doctrine on the Atonement in all scripture. Alma helped Corianton understand that it is not an “injustice that the sinner should be consigned to a state of misery.”¹⁸ But he noted that starting with Adam, a merciful God had provided a “space for repentance” because without repentance, “the great plan of salvation would have been frustrated.”¹⁹ Alma also established that God’s plan is a “plan of happiness.”²⁰

Alma’s teachings are most instructive: “For behold, justice exerciseth all his demands, and also mercy claimeth all which is her own; and thus, none

but the truly penitent are saved.”²¹ Seen in their true light, the glorious blessings of repentance and adherence to the Savior’s teachings are monumentally important. It is not unfair to be clear, as Alma was with Corianton, about the consequences of sinful choices and lack of repentance. It has often been declared, “Sooner or later everybody has to sit down to a banquet of consequences.”²²

The remarkable and celestial blessing of the Savior’s Atonement is that through repentance, sinful conduct is blotted out. After Corianton’s repentance, Alma concluded, “Let these things trouble you no more, and only let your sins trouble you, with that trouble which shall bring you down unto repentance.”²³

Looking beyond the Mark Is a Stumbling Block

The prophet Jacob referred to ancient Jews as “a stiffnecked people [who] despised . . . plainness, . . . killed the prophets, and sought for things that they could not understand. Wherefore, because of their blindness, which blindness came by looking beyond the mark, they must needs fall.”²⁴

While there are many examples of looking beyond the mark,²⁵ a significant one in our day is extremism. Gospel extremism is when one elevates any gospel principle above other equally important principles and takes a position that is beyond or contrary to the teachings of Church leaders. One example is when one advocates for additions, changes, or primary emphasis to one part of the Word of Wisdom. Another is expensive preparation for end-of-days scenarios. In both examples, others are encouraged to accept private interpretations. “If we turn a health law or any other principle into



a form of religious fanaticism, we are looking beyond the mark.”²⁶

Speaking of important doctrine, the Lord has declared, “Whosoever declareth more or less than this, the same is not of me.”²⁷ When we elevate any principle in a way that lessens our commitment to other equally important principles or take a position contrary to or which exceeds teachings of Church leaders, we are looking beyond the mark.

In addition, some members elevate causes, many of which are good, to a status superior to basic gospel doctrine. They substitute their devotion to the cause as their first commitment and relegate their commitment to the Savior and His teachings to a secondary position. If we elevate anything above our devotion to the Savior, if our conduct recognizes Him as just another teacher and not the divine Son of God, then we are looking beyond the mark. Jesus Christ is the mark!

The 76th section of the Doctrine and Covenants makes it clear that being “valiant in the testimony of Jesus”²⁸ is the simple, essential test between those who will inherit the blessings of the celestial kingdom and those in the lesser terrestrial kingdom. To be valiant, we need to focus on the power of Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice to overcome death and, through our repentance, to cleanse us from sin, and we need to follow the doctrine of Christ.²⁹ We also need the light and knowledge of the Savior’s life and teachings to guide us on the covenant pathway, including the sacred ordinances of the temple. We must be steadfast in Christ, feast upon His word, and endure to the end.³⁰

Conclusion

If we are to be valiant in our testimony of Jesus, we must avoid



the stumbling blocks that entrap and impede the progress of many otherwise honorable men and women. Let us determine to always be in His service. While seeking knowledge, we need to avoid the philosophies of men that lessen our commitment to the Savior. We must see sin in its true light and accept the Savior’s Atonement through repentance. We need to avoid looking beyond the mark and focus on Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer, and follow His doctrine.

My father saw the pole as a means of providing power, light, and abundant water for cooking and cleansing. It was a stepping-stone to improving his life.

One writer suggests that stumbling blocks may be made into “stepping-stones to a noble character and to Heaven.”³¹

For us, being valiant in our testimony of Jesus is a stepping-stone toward qualifying for the Savior’s grace and the celestial kingdom. Jesus Christ is the only name under heaven by which we may be saved.³² I bear my sure witness of both His divinity and His supernal role in the Father’s plan. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. Doctrine and Covenants 14:7; see also John 17:3.
2. Doctrine and Covenants 76:79.
3. See *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference* (2004), 52–53.



By Elder Gary E. Stevenson
Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles

4. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed. (2003), "stumbling block."
5. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, "stumble."
6. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36.
7. See Acts 9:1–9; 26:13–18.
8. See Frederic W. Farrar, *The Life and Work of St. Paul* (1898), 319.
9. See Farrar, *Life and Work of St. Paul*, 319–20.
10. 1 Corinthians 2:4–5.
11. See George Frideric Handel, *Messiah*, ed. T. Tertius Noble (1912).
12. 1 Corinthians 15:20–22, 55, 57.
13. Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, vol. 3, *Caesar and Christ* (1944), 595.
14. Heber C. Kimball, in Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (1945), 446.
15. Neal A. Maxwell, "Be of Good Cheer," *Ensign*, Nov. 1982, 68.
16. Mosiah 27:29.
17. Alma 40:26.
18. Alma 42:1. In Latter-day Saint doctrine, provision is made for all mankind, including those who do not hear of Christ in this life, children who die before the age of accountability, and those who have no understanding (see Doctrine and Covenants 29:46–50; 137:7–10).
19. Alma 42:5.
20. Alma 42:8.
21. Alma 42:24. Note that the personal pronoun for justice is *his* (male) and the personal pronoun for mercy is *her* (female).
22. Robert Louis Stevenson, in Carla Carlisle, "A Banquet of Consequences," *Country Life*, July 6, 2016, 48. Mrs. Carlisle credits Robert Louis Stevenson for the quote. Some give credit to others.
23. Alma 42:29.
24. Jacob 4:14.
25. In an article I wrote for Church magazines in 2003, I emphasized four areas that could create theological blindness and the stumbling that Jacob described: substituting the philosophies of men for gospel truths, gospel extremism, heroic gestures as a substitute for daily consecration, and elevating rules over doctrine (see "Looking beyond the Mark," *Ensign*, Mar. 2003, 41–44; *Liahona*, Mar. 2003, 21–24).
26. Quentin L. Cook, "Looking beyond the Mark," *Ensign*, Mar. 2003, 42; *Liahona*, Mar. 2003, 22.
27. Doctrine and Covenants 10:68.
28. Doctrine and Covenants 76:79.
29. See 2 Nephi 31:17–21.
30. See 2 Nephi 31:20–21.
31. Henry Ward Beecher, in Tryon Edwards, *A Dictionary of Thoughts* (1891), 586.
32. See 2 Nephi 31:21; Mosiah 3:17.

Look to the Book, Look to the Lord

Can you see the Book of Mormon as your keystone, your spiritual center of strength?

Mary Elizabeth Rollins

In my mind, I imagine you of the rising generation watching or listening to this conference session somewhere in the world. I'd like to share a true story with you, a story that can be both an example and a lesson. It can show you how to get closer to the Lord and access greater power to resist temptation.

This is a story of a young girl, living in New York, who before age three lost her father when his boat sank on a large lake. She, her mother, older brother, and younger sister moved to a new city in another state to live with her aunt and uncle. Sometime after the family arrived, missionaries and members of a newly organized religion came to their town with the glorious news of the Restoration of the gospel. They told a remarkable story of an angel delivering an ancient record to a young man named Joseph Smith, a record he had translated by the power of God. Two of the visitors, Oliver Cowdery and John Whitmer, had actually seen the engraved metal pages of the ancient record with their own eyes, and Whitmer witnessed he

had held the golden plates in his own hands. This record had been recently published, and Brother Whitmer brought the book with him. The name of the book, of course, was the Book of Mormon.

When 12-year-old Mary heard the missionaries speak about the book, she had a special feeling in her heart. Even though the Book of Mormon was thick with many pages, Mary yearned to read it. When Brother Whitmer departed, he

