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Entering the Gate of Heaven

The example of Jacob (later known as Israel) shows us that the temple is not a place for casual attendance, attitude, or attire.

Can you imagine not being able to go to the temple for 20 years? Can you imagine your desire to be in that sacred place, to feel that peace, and to make covenants with the Lord, but having to wait?

In the Old Testament, Jacob had such an experience. He endured 20 years away from a place that was like a temple to him. His spiritual preparation and eventual return to that place were rewarded with spiritual manifestations and great joy. From his example, we can learn a lot about our own preparation to enter the house of the Lord.

Keeping Covenants

Jacob, later renamed Israel (see Genesis 35:10), is one of the inspiring prophets of the Old Testament. He is a study in making and keeping covenants and following the word of the Lord. He was born of goodly parents; his father was the humble Isaac, Abraham's son, who in a holy similitude of the Atonement of the Savior meekly agreed to be offered as a sacrifice. Jacob learned in his youth the importance of making and keeping sacred covenants.

Obediently following the counsel of his father, Jacob left Canaan to live with his uncle in Padan-aram (also known as Haran). While on his journey there he stopped at a site he would later rename Bethel (a contraction of the Hebrew

Beth-Elohim, meaning “house of God”). There the heavens were opened to him. He had a marvelous vision of receiving ordinances in the “house of God” and making covenants there that lead to eternal life. (See Genesis 28:10–22.)

None Other but the House of God

Jacob saw a ladder ascending from earth to heaven. Angels ascended and descended on the rungs of the ladder. At the top stood the Lord. What a powerful sight it must have been to see that the way to the presence of God is “to receive all those ordinances in the house of the Lord, which are necessary for you, after you have departed this life, to enable you to walk back to the presence of the Father, passing the angels who stand as sentinels.”¹

The next morning Jacob anointed a stone pillar on the sacred site of his vision and called the place Bethel, because it was “none other but the house of God” and “the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17). As President Marion G. Romney (1897–1988), First Counselor in the First Presidency, taught:

“Jacob realized that the covenants he made with the Lord there were the rungs on the ladder that he himself would have to climb in order to obtain the promised blessings—blessings that would entitle him to enter heaven and associate with the Lord. . . .



“Temples are to us all what Bethel was to Jacob.”²

It would be 20 years before the Lord finally commanded Jacob to “arise, go up to Beth-el” (Genesis 35:1). Can you imagine the joy Jacob must have felt knowing he would finally return to that sacred place? He had waited for so long; he wanted everything to be perfect. I am sure he prepared himself physically and spiritually.

Properly Preparing

The scriptures teach us that Jacob instructed his family to prepare spiritually and physically to enjoy the blessings of Bethel. He told them: “Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments” (Genesis 35:2).

The scriptures inform us that they complied, giving Jacob “all the strange gods” (Genesis 35:4) and all other things that would distract them from the holy and sacred experience of Bethel. They even changed

the way that they dressed to properly prepare.

That counsel is just as important today. There are many things we can do to prepare to enjoy the blessings of the temple, whether we are going for the first time, for the first time in years, or regularly. President Russell M. Nelson taught: “To enter the temple is a tremendous blessing. But first we must be worthy. We should not be rushed. We cannot cut corners of preparation and risk the breaking of covenants we were not prepared to make.”³

Jacob seemed to know that to prepare for spiritual experiences and personal revelation, his family needed to eliminate all distractions so they could focus on God and His eternal plan.

The temple is a house of learning, and we need to elevate our thoughts and minds to focus with a more eternal perspective. In the temple we learn visually, through participation, through symbolism, and, most importantly, through personal revelation. Our personal spiritual preparation will lead to personal revelation, greater understanding of the eternal plan of happiness, and a more intimate understanding and application of the Atonement of Jesus Christ in our lives.

Preparing Spiritually

We prepare spiritually by being clean. As we repent and put away those things that weigh us down, we can experience the glory and cleansing power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ as we return to the straight and narrow path. We will feel our “confidence wax strong in the presence of God” (Doctrine and Covenants 121:45).

President Nelson further taught: “When we choose to deny ourselves of all ungodliness, we lose nothing of value and gain the glory of eternal life. Covenants do not hold us down; they elevate us beyond the limits of our own power and perspective.”⁴

He counseled that “spiritual preparation is enhanced by study” and that we can prepare by studying selected paragraphs from the following topics in the Bible Dictionary: “Anoint,” “Atonement,” “Christ,” “Covenant,” “Fall of Adam,” “Sacrifices,” and “Temple.”⁵ Such spiritual preparation will help us learn, receive sacred ordinances, and make eternal covenants with the Lord in the temple.

Our spiritual preparation is also strengthened as we dress in keeping with the sacred setting of the temple. The temple is not a place for casual attendance, attitude, or attire. President Boyd K. Packer (1924–2015), President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, taught, “We should dress in such a way that we might comfortably attend a sacrament meeting or a gathering that is proper and dignified.”⁶

We can also prepare spiritually by seeking our ancestors through family history research; then we can prepare physically by literally taking their names to the temple to perform their sacred temple work. Performing the work for our kindred dead will enhance every aspect of our temple experience and always offers deeper communion with God and enhanced love and appreciation for His plan of salvation.



Grandpa Hugh's Return

For Jacob, it was more than 20 years before he could return to his “temple” at Bethel. For the grandfather of one of our close friends, it was more than 50 years before he returned to the temple that he loved.

Hugh Lyman was born into a loving and faithful family. He was baptized at 8, received the Aaronic Priesthood at 12, and served a mission at 19. He was sealed to his wife and faithfully began to raise his family in the Church.

After a difficult personal experience, he left the Church and began to live far from the commandments of God. In 1968, he was disfellowshipped. He left his family, and for nearly 50 years pursued the “strange gods” of planes, boats, outdoor activities, and partying. By his own account he was consuming 30 gallons of alcohol and smoking 80 pounds of pipe tobacco annually.

But beginning in the mid-1970s, a wonderful ward member started visiting him regularly. Missionaries would stop by from time to time to invite him to return to the Church. Finally, in October of 2016, when Hugh acted on a challenge to read the book of 1 Nephi in the Book of Mormon, the fire of his testimony was rekindled.

The next Sunday, he attended church for the first time in 50 years. Since that day, he has not missed a Sunday attending church or a day of studying the scriptures.

Hugh explains that after meeting with the bishop, “I started preparing myself for the changes I would need to make to return to full activity. December 1, 2016, I stopped smoking and drinking. I paid a full tithing. I kept the Sabbath day holy, reading scriptures and attending Church meetings. I began wearing garments again.”

Back to His Bethel

In late January 2017, Hugh was returned to full fellowship in the Church, and he began to prepare to return to the temple. In February, he had temple recommend interviews with his bishop and stake president. He felt the joy of the Atonement of Christ, the blessings of obedience, and the power of the covenants that he had made in his life.

On March 10, 2017, after 50 years away from his Bethel, Hugh Lyman entered the Seattle Washington Temple with family and friends. As his recommend was accepted at the

front desk, he asked the brother there to scan it again, just to be sure. When it was again accepted, Hugh was overcome with emotion as he felt welcomed back into the house of the Lord. Later, in the celestial room, he said to his family, “This is the happiest day of my life!”

Like Jacob and his family, and like Hugh, we all need to prepare for the temple. Then, as we worship in that holy place, we can one day receive the same eternal blessings given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who have “entered into their exaltation, according to the promises” (Doctrine and Covenants 132:37). ■

NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Brigham Young* (1997), 302.
2. Marion G. Romney, “Temples—the Gates to Heaven,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1971, 16.
3. Russell M. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 32.
4. Russell M. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” 34.
5. See Russell M. Nelson, “Personal Preparation for Temple Blessings,” 33, 35.
6. Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (1980), 73.



Hugh Lyman outside the Seattle Washington Temple