

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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Ebenezer

It had been a very long day. The sun was setting behind the northwestern Italian mountains as my missionary companion and I trudged wearily to the last house in the row. It was my turn to ring the bell and make our pitch over the intercom. I offered a variation on our usual introduction before receiving an unusual reply.

“Ah,” said the voice on the other end, “*i fratelli mormoni*. [The Mormon brothers.] Come on in!”

With that the gate buzzed open, and we walked apprehensively through it. Our delight at being invited in was balanced against doubts about the sanity of anyone evidently so eager to talk to us.

Our concerns were quickly laid to rest. We were greeted by a wonderful, older Christian couple who had lived next to missionaries in Switzerland years before. We had an edifying conversation and asked if we could return again. At this point, the husband and wife exchanged sober glances.

“Well, you see,” the husband began, “we are leaving on Monday for Switzerland, where we will be staying for many months. I have been diagnosed with leukemia, and we are returning to Switzerland for chemotherapy treatments.”

“I am so sorry to hear that,” I said. “That must be terrifying.”

“No,” the man responded firmly, straightening his shoulders. “It is not terrifying. And do you know why it is not terrifying?”

We didn’t know why, and we waited for his explanation.

“Did you happen to notice the inscription above our gate?” he asked. “It says *Eben-ezer*. And because you are missionaries,” he added with a

smile, “I am sure you know what *Eben-ezer* means?”

My companion and I looked at each other in some consternation. I racked my memory but could find only two referents for the term: Ebenezer Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol* and the second verse of “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” The former was no help, and the latter I understood only dimly.

Before we could answer our host’s question, or apologize for our ignorance, he pulled a well-worn Bible from the shelf and opened to 1 Samuel 7, from which he read the account of the Israelites, besieged by the Philistines, imploring the prophet Samuel to make a burnt offering and plead with the Lord in their behalf. “And as Samuel was offering up the burnt offering,” the account records:

the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel: but the Lord thundered with a great thunder upon the Philistines, and discomfited them; and they were smitten before Israel. . . . Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us (1 Sam. 7:10, 12).

Our host repeated with emphasis those six concluding words (in Italian: *Fin qui l’Eterno ci ha soccorsi*). “At every junction of our lives,” he then explained, “we’ve been able to look back and see how the Lord has helped and succored us through all the challenges that preceded that point. We know that He has sustained us to this point, and we know that He will sustain us through the trial that lies before us. And so, for us, that trial is not terrifying.”

I have reflected on this couple and their Christian witness many times across the intervening years. Thanks to them, the words of the hymn have deeper meaning and double force:

*Here I raise my Ebenezer,
Hither by thy help I'm come,
And I hope by thy good pleasure,
Safely to arrive at home.¹*

Ebenezer means “stone of help.” At various points since that unforgettable missionary encounter, I have figuratively raised an Ebenezer of my own. I have known that the Lord had succored me through trials past; and I have known that He would sustain me through trials yet to come. I suspect that your experience has been much like mine.²

What is true of each of us individually is surely true of all of us institutionally. On this day of transition in the university leadership, I believe we can raise a collective Ebenezer, knowing that the Lord who has succored us through the trials and triumphs of the last nine years—and who has done so not least through the consecrated labors of His servant Kevin Worthen—will continue to guide

¹ Robert Robinson, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (1758).

² While working on this essay, I learned that an admired colleague, Curt Holman, chair of the BYU department of dance, explored this theme in a 2013 BYU devotional address. See Curt Holman, “Raising Your Ebenezer: A Monument to Remember,” BYU Devotional, July 30, 2103,

this special university until it fulfills its prophetic destiny and becomes, “in the process of time, . . . the fully anointed university of the Lord about which so much has been spoken in the past.”³

Several weeks ago, I sat in a deans council meeting when (then) AVP Reese invited President Worthen to share a few concluding remarks. As President Worthen spoke, I felt a distinct impression from the Spirit. The message went something like this: “This is not just a good man; this is a *great* man. I am blessing you with the opportunity to be close to him and to learn from him. Treasure this.”

I do treasure my association with President Worthen, as I treasure my association with President Reese and with all of you, the incomparable faculty of Brigham Young University. We are engaged in what I regard as an indispensable enterprise within the grandest cause under the heavens—the cause of Zion in the latter days. It is a cause, the Prophet said, “that has interested the people of God in every age; . . . a theme upon which prophets, priests, and kings have dwelt with peculiar delight.”⁴ And it is a cause, the Lord has suggested, in critical need of a school (see D&C 97:3).

<https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/curt-holman/raising-ebenezer-monument-remember/>.

³ Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University” in *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams* (John S. Tanner ed, BYU Press, 2022) 55.

⁴ *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007) 186.