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By Elder Jeffrey R. Holland
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The Best

IS YET TO BE | *Look ahead and remember that faith is always pointed toward the future.*

The start of a new year is the traditional time to take stock of our lives and see where we are going, measured against the backdrop of where we have been. I don't want to talk about New Year's resolutions, but I do want to talk about the past and the future, with an eye toward *any* time of transition and change in our lives—and those moments come virtually every day.

As a scriptural theme for this discussion, I have chosen Luke 17:32, where the Savior cautions, "Remember Lot's wife." What did He mean by such an enigmatic little phrase? To find out, we need to do as He suggested. Let's recall who Lot's wife was.

The story, of course, comes to us out of the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, when the Lord, having had as much as He could stand of the worst that men and women could do, told Lot and his family to flee because those cities were about



As Lot and his family left Jerusalem, Lot's wife looked back and was turned to a pillar of salt for disobeying the Lord (see Genesis 19:26).

to be destroyed. "Escape for thy life," the Lord said. "*Look not behind thee . . . ; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed*" (Genesis 19:17; emphasis added).

With less than immediate obedience and more than a little negotiation, Lot and his family ultimately did leave town but just in the nick of time. The scriptures tell us what happened at daybreak the morning following their escape:

"The Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone

and fire from the Lord out of heaven;

"And he overthrew those cities" (Genesis 19:24–25).

My theme comes in the next verse. Surely, with the Lord's counsel—"look not behind thee"—ringing clearly in her ears, Lot's wife, the record says, "looked back," and she was turned into a pillar of salt (see verse 26).

Just what did Lot's wife do that was so wrong? As a student of history, I have thought about that and offer a partial answer. Apparently, what was wrong with Lot's wife was that she wasn't just *looking* back; in her heart she wanted to *go* back. It would appear that even before she was past the city limits, she was already missing what Sodom and Gomorrah had offered her. As Elder Neal A. Maxwell (1926–2004) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles once said, such people know they should have their primary residence in Zion, but they still hope to keep a summer cottage in Babylon.¹

It is possible that Lot's wife looked back with resentment toward the Lord for what He was asking her to leave behind. We certainly know that Laman and Lemuel were resentful when Lehi and his family were commanded to leave Jerusalem. So it isn't just that she

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looked back; she looked back *longingly*. In short, her attachment to the past outweighed her confidence in the future. That, apparently, was at least part of her sin.

Faith Points to the Future

As a new year begins and we try to benefit from a proper view of what has gone before, I plead with you not to dwell on days now gone nor to yearn vainly for yesterdays, however good those yesterdays may have been. The past is to be learned from but not lived in. We look back to claim the embers from glowing experiences but not the ashes. And when we have learned what we need to learn and have brought with us the best that we have experienced, then we look ahead and remember that *faith is always pointed toward the future*. Faith always has to do with blessings and truths and events that will *yet* be efficacious in our lives.

So a more theological way to talk about Lot's wife is to say that she did not have faith. She doubted the Lord's ability to give her something better than she already had. Apparently, she thought that nothing that lay ahead could possibly be as good as what she was leaving behind.

To yearn to go back to a world that cannot be lived in now, to be perennially dissatisfied with present circumstances and have only dismal views of the future, and to miss the here and now and tomorrow because we are so trapped in the there and then and yesterday are some of the sins of Lot's wife.

After the Apostle Paul reviewed the privileged and rewarding life of his early years—his birthright, education, and standing in the Jewish community—he says to the

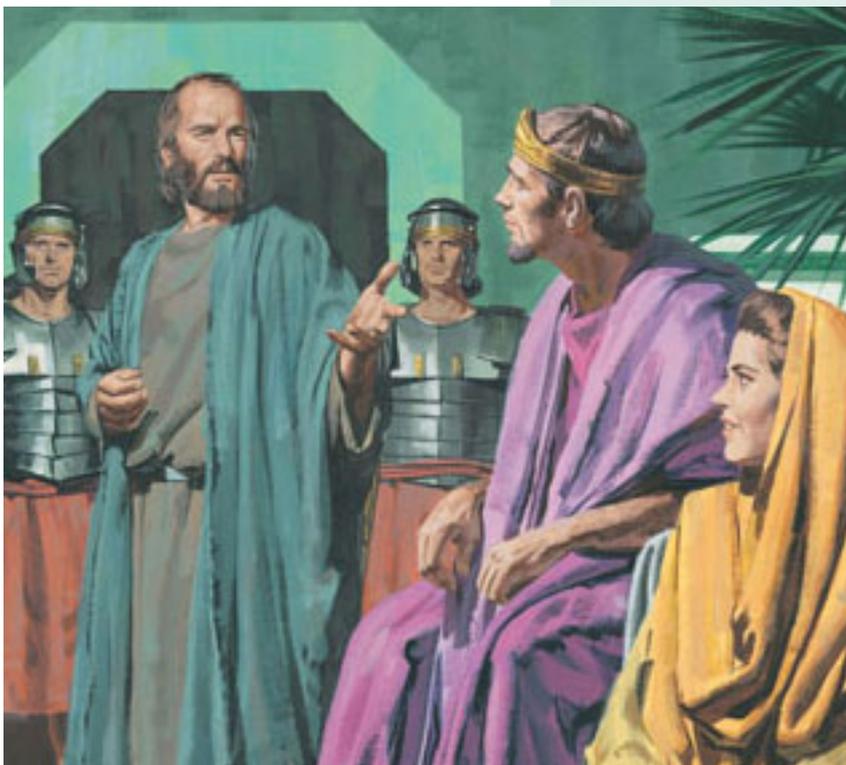


ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT GREER



Leaving the Past in the Past

Name withheld

When I was 16, I didn't get along with my twin brother at all.

We fought about everything. One day he humiliated me at school with an intensely critical and personal attack in front of a group of friends. His actions and hurtful words left me devastated in a way my teenage self could not bear. Even when our parents confronted him about the incident, he never said he was sorry. For years I held onto the pain.

He was still on his mission when I received my own mission call. I was

preparing to enter the temple and began to reflect on my life to find where I needed to change to feel prepared to go to the temple. I realized that even though I didn't often think about what my brother did, I still needed to forgive him.

My brother had hurt me more than anyone else, and I knew it wasn't going to be easy to forgive him. So I prayed for help from Heavenly Father.

With His help, I decided to start writing my brother regularly on his mission. Before that, I'm sorry to admit, I hardly wrote him at all. Then I sent him a package. When I left on my mission, he came with my parents to the missionary training center and

gave me a hug. He even wrote me a few times.

I know that even though it may take time, with Heavenly Father's help, we can let the past remain in the past.

Philippians that all of that was "dung" compared to his conversion to Christianity. He says, and I paraphrase, "I have stopped rhapsodizing about 'the good old days' and now eagerly look toward the future 'that I may apprehend that for which Christ apprehended me'" (see Philippians 3:7–12). Then come these verses:

"This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

"I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13–14).

No Lot's wife here. No looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah here. Paul knows it is out there in the future, up ahead wherever heaven is taking us, that we will win "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Forgive and Forget

There is something in many of us that particularly fails to forgive and forget earlier mistakes in life—either our

mistakes or the mistakes of others. It is not good. It is not Christian. It stands in terrible opposition to the grandeur and majesty of the Atonement of Christ. To be tied to earlier mistakes is the worst kind of wallowing in the past from which we are called to cease and desist.

I was told once of a young man who for many years was more or less the brunt of every joke in his school. He had some disadvantages, and it was easy for his peers to tease him. Later in his life he moved away. He eventually joined the army and had some successful experiences there in getting an education and generally stepping away from his past. Above all, as many in the military do, he discovered the beauty and majesty of the Church and became active and happy in it.

Then, after several years, he returned to the town of his youth. Most of his generation had moved on but not all. Apparently, when he returned quite successful and quite reborn, the same old mind-set that had existed before was still there, waiting for his return. To the people in

his hometown, he was still just old “so-and-so”—you remember the guy who had the problem, the idiosyncrasy, the quirky nature, and did such and such. And wasn’t it all just hilarious?

Little by little this man’s Pauline effort to leave that which was behind and grasp the prize that God had laid before him was gradually diminished until he died about the way he had lived in his youth. He came full circle: again inactive and unhappy and the brunt of a new generation of jokes. Yet he had had that one bright, beautiful mid-life moment when he had been able to rise above his past and truly see who he was and what he could become. Too bad, too sad that he was again to be surrounded by a whole batch of Lot’s wives, those who thought his past was more interesting than his future. They managed to rip out of his

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grasp that for which Christ had grasped him. And he died sad, though through little fault of his own.

That also happens in marriages and other relationships. I can’t tell you the number of couples I have counseled who, when they are deeply hurt or even just deeply stressed, reach farther and farther into the past to find yet a bigger brick to throw through the window “pain” of their marriage. When something is over and done with, when it has been repented of as fully as it can be repented of, when life has moved on as it should and a lot of other wonderfully good things have happened since then, it is *not* right to go back and open some ancient wound that the Son of God Himself died to heal.

Let people repent. Let people grow. Believe that people can change and improve. Is that faith? Yes! Is that hope? Yes! Is that charity? Yes! Above all, it is charity, the pure love of Christ. If something is buried in the past, leave it buried. Don’t keep going back with your little sand pail and beach shovel to dig it up, wave it around, and then throw it at someone, saying, “Hey! Do you remember *this*?” Splat!

Well, guess what? That is probably going to result in some ugly morsel being dug up out of *your* landfill with the reply, “Yeah, I remember it. Do *you* remember *this*?” Splat.

And soon enough everyone comes out of that exchange dirty and muddy and unhappy and hurt, when what our Father in Heaven pleads for is cleanliness and kindness and happiness and healing.

Such dwelling on past lives, including past mistakes, is just not right! It is not the



gospel of Jesus Christ. In some ways it is worse than Lot's wife because at least she destroyed only herself. In cases of marriage and family, wards and branches, apartments and neighborhoods, we can end up destroying so many others.

Perhaps at this beginning of a new year there is no greater requirement for us than to do as the Lord Himself said He does: "He who has repented of his sins, the same is forgiven, and I, the Lord, remember them no more" (D&C 58:42).

The proviso, of course, is that repentance has to be sincere, but when it is and when honest effort is being made to progress, we are guilty of the greater sin if we keep remembering and recalling and rebasing someone with his or her earlier mistakes—and that *someone* might be ourselves. We can be so hard on ourselves—often much more so than on others!

Now, like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies of the Book of Mormon, bury your weapons of war and leave them buried (see Alma 24). Forgive and do that which is sometimes harder than to forgive: forget. And when it comes to mind again, forget it again.

The Best Is Yet to Be

You can remember just enough to avoid repeating the mistake, but then put the rest of it all on the dung heap Paul spoke of to the Philippians. Dismiss the destructive, and keep dismissing it until the beauty of the Atonement of Christ has revealed to you your bright future and the bright future of your family, your friends, and your neighbors. God doesn't care nearly as much about where you have been as He does about where you are and, with His help, where you are willing to go. That is the thing Lot's wife didn't get—and neither did Laman and Lemuel and a host of others in the scriptures.

This is an important matter to consider at the start of a new year—and every day ought to be the start of a new year and a new life. Such is the wonder of faith, repentance, and the miracle of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The poet Robert Browning wrote:

LEARNING FROM THIS ARTICLE

What lessons from the past can guide you in the future?

What blessings do you want to exercise faith to receive?

Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

*The last of life, for which the
first was made:*

Our times are in his hand

Who saith, "A whole I planned,

*Youth shows but half; trust God:
see all, nor be afraid!"²*

Some of you may wonder: Is there any future for me? What does a new year or a new semester, a new major or a new romance, a new job or a new home hold for me? Will I be safe? Will life be sound? Can I trust in the Lord and in the future? Or would it be better to look back, to go back, to stay in the past?

To all such of every generation, I call out, "Remember Lot's wife." Faith is for the future. Faith builds on the past but never longs to stay there. Faith trusts that God has great things in store for each of us and that Christ truly is the "high priest of good things to come" (Hebrews 9:11).

Keep your eyes on your dreams, however distant and far away. Live to see the miracles of repentance and forgiveness, of trust and divine love that will transform your life today, tomorrow, and forever. That is a New Year's resolution I ask you to keep. ■

From a Brigham Young University devotional address given on January 13, 2009. For the full text of the address in English, visit <http://speeches.byu.edu>.

NOTES

1. See Neal A. Maxwell, *A Wonderful Flood of Light* (1990), 47.
2. Robert Browning, "Rabbi Ben Ezra" (1864), stanza 1.