



Mystery and Monuments

We rightly boast of a God of miracles. What we must remember is that he is also a God of mysteries. This mystery side of God's ways is precisely why the monument-polishing habit is so vital to a stable faith.

Many years ago, this lesson was forever branded on my consciousness. In 1980, I was invited to take a new position at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon, while still teaching at a Bible college in Denver. After agonizing over the decision, the Lord made his direction clear to us. I accepted the appointment, and we put our home on the market. Nice place, choice neighborhood, fair price. Unfortunately, the housing market had slowed, and to my dismay there were few prospective buyers.

Several months later I found myself backing out of my driveway alone. It was the pits to leave behind my wife and two teenage daughters to fend for themselves indefinitely. Under cover of darkness I wept intermittently all the way to Fort Collins. I had never dreamed when I accepted the job that our family wouldn't make the move together.

At worst I figured our Denver home would sell soon. Week after week passed. The loneliness was oppressive for all of us. Absolutely nothing was happening on that house. I had not imagined that when I left in August, I would be flying back to Denver for Christmas break to visit my family. Still, I returned in hope, not because of any real prospects, but because of my own romantic notions about the way God works.

After Christmas break, I boarded the plane and headed back to Portland alone with a big lump in my throat. Bubble burst. Home not sold and husband wondering, how long, O Lord? How long? This is the mystery side of God.

As weeks passed, my situation evolved into something of a *cause celebre* around campus. The attention was both welcome and tiresome. I needed prayer desperately, but asking for it meant having to answer the same old questions the same old way. I was constantly reminded that heaven was brass, and the Lord, so far as I could tell, was doing absolutely zero to fix the problem.

Maybe it wasn't God's will for me to be at Western after all, people had to be wondering. In fact, a few of our friends in Denver did question whether the Lord was sending me a signal. One well-meaning student was really troubled by my situation because it blew his paradigm.

"God doesn't separate families," he offered.

Could have fooled me! I guess he overlooked Matthew 19:29 where the Lord Jesus speaks of the reward of any dis-

ciple “who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for my name’s sake.”

After a couple of months my wife flew to Portland. During this brief visit she was able to observe me ministering in my new academic environment, meet my faculty colleagues, and talk with some of my students. Her visit coincided with the issuance of faculty contracts, renewed annually. Was I going to return next year with the housing situation still unresolved?

My wife has always been a tower of strength, one of those all-too-rare, battle-tested, whatever-the-Lord-wills spouses that every soldier of Christ needs at his side. God’s will has always been her will and her heart has always been fused with mine. If Olsie had second thoughts about an open-ended commitment to this teaching ministry, it would cause me to revisit the issue. Under the circumstances, I needed to reconfirm God’s will and her affirmation was critical.

Her answer did not surprise me. “Jimmy, I have sat through your classes and talked with students. It is clear to me that God wants you here,” she responded with tears welling up and a slight tremor in her voice. “It just kills me to be separated like this, and the girls miss you so much, but you have to sign that contract and we just have to wait on the Lord.”

With that bold step I hoped our resolution to follow wherever Christ leads was sufficiently established. Way down deep, I felt that this decision was the final bridge we needed to cross before the Lord intervened and blew the whistle on the trauma.

Fat chance. Time marched on relentlessly and days added up to weeks. Then one day, out of the blue, it happened—a phone call from my wife. Since long distance calls between us were strictly rationed, I knew this was either very good or very bad news. She informed me that there was a serious buyer,

with cash, who said he would be coming back in the morning with his wife for another look. Mentally he was already remodeling the place and that was an auspicious sign.

The next day passed slowly. Distraction soon started biodegrading into a surly impatience. Late in the afternoon I convinced myself that this qualified as an emergency and called my wife.

“Olsie, what’s going on back there?” I asked impatiently. “How come you haven’t called?”

“Oh, Jimmy, I don’t know what is happening,” she explained sadly. “The man came back this morning with his wife, then left with no explanation.”

Well, the potential buyers never returned.

Now that was a biggie, but by no means our first tribulation. And nothing compared to what lay ahead, which would include our daughter’s strange and horrifying future illnesses. If we hadn’t learned through experiences like this the “secret” of what I call monumental faith, I for one might have been a spiritual casualty. The Lord taught us a spiritual discipline known and practiced by God’s people from time immemorial, but widely overlooked and neglected today.

Without it, the storm waters of adversity would have swamped our spiritual boats, and we would have found our faith too small to cope with those rogue waves of incomprehensible affliction that seem unyielding to any amount of prayer, and even appear at times to intensify with every breath of supplication. Without the ballast of a monumental faith it is likely that faith will capsize in the giant swells.

When that anticipated sale fell through, I lost it for the better part of a day. Call it my day of spiritual infamy. Thank God for his mercy that passes understanding, for I was very angry with the Lord—something I had never done before.

Why? Some of us are wired so that we cope better with flash floods than with slow, dripping, water torture. Another factor was my faulty preconception of the way God was supposed to operate. This trial violated my paradigm. It was something of an “out of the box” encounter with the mystery side of God.

In our walk with God we tend to elevate precedents, biblical and personal, into “laws.” We get these neat little models in our heads of the way God is supposed to do his business. The effect is to put him in a mold. We like to have it so, because it furnishes us a comfort zone. We like predictability. We want to be able to anticipate with some accuracy what the Lord will or will not do. We like a God whose ways fit almost geometrical patterns. Therein lies a problem.

The plain truth is that sometimes it would be quite a challenge for us to go into court, unroll the recent tapestry of our experience with God, and convince a jury of our peers, based on what is going on in our lives, that we are the certifiable objects of divine favor or the beneficiaries of his power or wisdom.

When that long-awaited “buyer” left us stranded, I was exasperated with God. The previous day I had been running around campus singing his praises. Now it felt as though my premature thanksgiving had embarrassed even God himself. I just couldn’t believe he would do such a thing.

He shattered my little paradigm like a rock smashing a clay pot. Everything had come together and the Lord so cruelly, it seemed, pulled the rug right out from under my joy and embarrassed my praise. What is one to say about such a thing?

Never before, despite many hurtful and harsh experiences in my life, had I experienced this feeling of anger toward God. Previously I would have been unable to relate to this emotion,

but now I was so angry I could spit nails. The next day it was all I could do to collect myself to teach.

Between classes, uncharacteristically, an anti-social inclination came over me. I would stride angrily back to my office, slam the door to shut out the stupid world, and just sit there with almost clenched teeth, glaring defiantly at my hateful surroundings.

“Lord, I have served you faithfully. I have put you first and it just seems like you have put me last. Here, for your sake, I’ve burned my bridges behind me and you refuse to build any before me. Instead of helping, you seem to be teasing. Do I deserve to be jerked around like this? For two cents I’d just jump in my Datsun and head back to Denver.”

That day I was a fool percolating foolish thoughts, a man reminiscent of Jonah himself. In the displacement of my irrational anger, I was mad at everything and anybody who might dare to violate my little spatial boundaries.

Let’s face it. There are times when the Christian life doesn’t seem to live up to its billing. God doesn’t seem to perform as advertised. His behavior is maddeningly mysterious and He doesn’t seem to be operating according to blueprint.

Never imagine that you are immune to a spiritual knockout. “Let him who thinks he stands beware lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). In dark hours of prolonged crisis, I have heard the finest of Christian men and women cry aloud, “Where’s God? I don’t understand. Where *is* God?”

Didn’t the Psalmist say, “Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1).

Wasn’t a great saint totally mystified by the ways of God when he asked, “How long, O Lord? Wilt Thou forget me forever? How long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my

heart all the day? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13:1–2).

Wasn’t Job exasperated out of his mind by his falsely accusing friends when God wouldn’t step forward and answer for him in the immensity and mystery of his sufferings?

Are we stronger than they are?

Once in a while that old philosopher’s dilemma gnaws at our faith like a dog on a bone. If God is totally good, one ponders; he cannot be all-powerful since he isn’t stopping the trouble. Then again, if he is all-powerful, he cannot be totally good and wise or else he would put a stop to all the misery and trouble we go through.

It’s neither mentally nor spiritually healthy to be in denial. We must be honest with ourselves, but most of all with God about our thoughts and feelings. He knows them anyway. No use to hide them, so let’s just agree to put away those phony “who, me struggling?” faces and get real. Before we go any further, let’s just admit to ourselves that sometimes in our distresses such thoughts flit across our minds.

We may not like to admit it, but it is good for us to realize that in this flesh, our faith, however real, is a fragile thing and easily rattled. Otherwise, if like Peter (Matthew 26:33) we are too sure of ourselves, our faith is apt to get mugged in the alleys of reality. Moments occur when our theology blushes or bristles at the realities of our experience. We don’t know how to reconcile the two. Times arise when God is thunderously silent in the face of our impassioned prayers and he seems unaccountably unresponsive to our predicaments. The operative word here is *seems*. The ways and works of God never deviate from his revealed character and promises. Never. In our human frailty and limited understanding, it sometimes seems that God is not measuring up to his résumé. How are we supposed to deal with that?

Is the answer just to trudge on in blind faith? No. Blind faith is not biblical faith. Biblical faith is rooted in revelation, which is grounded on historical testimony and evidence. The internal witness of the Holy Spirit confirms its truth.

No—blind, unthinking faith is not the answer. Blind faith is just another expression for gullibility, and this has nothing in common with Christian faith. Biblical faith is conviction built on facts, not irrational superstitions pulled mindlessly out of the air. The alternative to blind faith is what I term “monumental” faith.

What is meant by “monumental” faith? I do not mean “great” faith or heroic faith. No, this is a faith that has trained itself in the midst of adversity to *look back* at God’s *past* demonstrations of his character and confirmations of his promises. These monuments are a testimony of what he will do in the present, regardless of the difficult things that are happening.

Sometimes our faith may be under such heat from the friction of affliction that we may find ourselves at risk of spiritual meltdown. Long before that happens it is time to practice preventive maintenance.

How? Whenever you pray, polish your personal monuments. Our tender faith often requires shelter. That shelter is the active memory of those demonstrations and confirmations of God’s goodness, wisdom, power, and faithfulness that we have stored up from our past.

Whenever the mystery of our present experience of God obliterates any sign on our immediate horizon that God is who he claims to be, we need to hunker down under the umbrella of those trophies in our past. A “monumental” faith is able to look forward with confidence because it looks backward to the past. It discounts the baffling mysteries of present circumstances because it finds reassurance in his historical works,

his uncompromising character, and his unchanging promises. Therein is strength and hope for the future.

The logic of monumental faith is simple. If God loved and cared for me in the past, if God displayed his power and wisdom for me in the past; if God in his essential and moral being is the same yesterday; today, and forever; if I myself am on the same spiritual page as before when the Lord showed his glory on my behalf, then nothing in this baffling instance has changed except his secret purposes.

God has not changed, and you have not changed, but his purpose is different this time around. Be still, rest in the shade of his monuments, and wait patiently for him to finish his work. In the end he'll be there just as he was before.

“God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5b–6).

As Alexander Maclaren once put it, “Memory passes into hope, and the radiance of the sky behind throws light onto our forward path . . . [the] past reveals the eternal principles which will mold his future acts.”

Monumental faith is a faith trained to look away from the confusion of the moment to find security and confidence in the past evidences of God’s character and faithfulness. The scriptures are replete with illustrations of monument building and polishing in the midst of the travails of God’s people.

In Joshua 3, we find the armies of Israel poised at last for the impending invasion of the Promised Land. Their encampment lay near the banks of the swollen Jordan River, opposite Jericho. They were awaiting marching orders.

In front of them was a formidable obstacle. The Jordan and surrounding plain were in flood stage. But all this was providentially timed for God’s purposes. One reason was to pro-

vide a miracle that would serve to accredit Joshua as Moses's divinely endorsed successor.

However, there was another important reason for the wonder God was about to perform. In chapter four we read that the Lord wanted a monumental memory that would be a foundation on which to trust him in the future.

On the previous day the people of Israel were given preliminary instructions. The first directive had to do with the order of march. The priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord would move out first. Then the armies of Israel would follow. However, those following the priests and their sacred burden would at all times maintain a reverential distance of about 3,000 feet between the ark and the army.

The second instruction had to do with spiritual preparation. The next day God was about to perform a wonder that would link what he had done when their fathers crossed the Red Sea. At a specified point God was going to create a dam with his invisible hand so Israel could pass over to Canaan on dry ground. Note the word "dry" and marvel at the perfection of God's monument.

Such a close encounter with the presence and power of God calls for a consecrated people. Orders appropriate to that preparation were issued. The priests were instructed in their forward march to advance no farther than the spot where their feet touched the water's edge. There, in awe, they were to stand with everyone else while the power of God took center stage. Once the river basin cleared of passing water, the priests' orders were to take up their stations along with the ark in the middle of the riverbed, while the hosts of Israel passed by to the other side.

Joshua declared the Lord's intent to the people. God wanted to etch on their national consciousness an awareness of his presence and power among them. He did not want them to

forget. In the future, he knew times would come when they might imagine he had deserted them or they might forget his grace and power.

He erected a monument, physically and mentally, to keep hope and confidence alive in their hearts. Whenever doubt cast its shadows, this monument would be a reminder in perpetuity that the God of Israel was the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Once Israel crossed over to the west bank, and before the priests withdrew from their positions in the middle of the river bed, Joshua ordered one representative from each tribe to return to the spot where the priests were standing. Each was told to pick up a big stone and bring it back to camp, where they were to pile up these rocks as a memorial to the miracle they had witnessed that day.

The import of this act is mentioned twice in chapter four, a repetition underscoring its importance in the divine scheme of things. This mound was created for all God's people to take note and learn the wisdom of memorializing God's past works.

Remember how Jesus' disciples, when confronted with the problem of finding resources to feed the 4,000, had already forgotten the earlier lesson in his feeding of the 5,000?

We are too lax about preserving the memory of God's mighty acts on our behalf. Those monuments need to be polished! Otherwise, our faith languishes under the load of affliction at those times when God, for his own good reasons, seems to be in silent retreat.

Let me share a personal example of how failing to polish my personal monuments created an unnecessary crisis of faith. It was on that day of shame, the day when I was so angry that God was allowing our family to remain separated.

However one wants to explain it, when I was having my little hissy-fit with God, the Holy Spirit broke into my space uninvited and seemed to force me into an internal dialogue. It was as if he said:

“Jim, do you remember a few years ago that you had a problem with your home in Lakewood, Colorado?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Do you recall the predicament you were in at that time?”

“I had forgotten.”

The Lakewood house was a significant monument of the grace, power, and faithfulness of God that I had totally obliterated in this most recent trauma. How could I have lost sight of it? The Spirit of God was using my recovered memory to restore me to spiritual health.

You see, three or four years previous to this recent crunch, Olsie and I had decided to build the home we were now trying to sell. It was a similar situation. Our realtor, when the market was white-hot, had advised us to go slowly and avoid putting our old house on the market too soon. Otherwise it might sell while our new home was under construction, and we would have to move out long before we were ready. Seemed like good advice.

As things turned out, by the time we put it up for sale, the market had buckled considerably. Now we faced the grim prospect of owning two houses, having bridge loans, and other problems. On my Bible college instructor's income, that would have posed a severe hardship, if not a calamity.

But just as our realtor's contract expired, it came to the point where we, on our own, had one weekend to sell our house or face the ugly alternatives. If the pros couldn't sell this house in three months, what were our chances of moving it in a single weekend? With major prayer (but I must confess,

scant confidence, for we had been praying all along) we ran an ad in *The Denver Post* and hoped for a miracle.

Saturday evening we were entertaining some missionary friends when the phone rang. Somebody had seen our ad and was interested in looking at the house. Great! The fellow wanted to come by on Sunday. I told him that Sunday would be fine, but it would have to be in the afternoon, since we were in church Sunday morning.

“I’ll come by tomorrow afternoon. Hey, by the way, you mentioned attending church. What church do you attend?” It turned out that he was a member of the adult class I taught at Riverside Baptist Church. Unbelievable “coincidence”!

Sunday afternoon he signed on the dotted line. Done deal. Problem solved. The Lord saved the bacon. How could I have forgotten an act of God like that—the same way the disciples forgot and puzzled over how to provide food for another, yet smaller, crowd.

Now, a few years later, as I sat there stewing in my office over being separated from my family, the Lord gently coaxed my memory and brought to mind the fact that he had nothing to prove to me. In the past he had amply demonstrated his faithfulness, his goodness, his power and wisdom. How many times did he need to validate himself to me? Wasn’t there a point where in the mysteries of the present I could fall back on the monuments of the past and trust his character and his promises?

If we have walked with God for any length of time, if we are veterans of the Christian life, then there must have been along the way some dark passages and deep valleys where God has created some rocks of remembrance. It is those monuments we must keep front and center in our consciousness for the stormy days.

When the Lord brought the sale of our former house to mind, perspective came into focus. Even through my emotionally blurred vision, I could clearly see the answer.

“Jim, have I changed?”

“Of course not, Lord.”

“Have *you* changed? Are you still with the program? Have you stayed the same course?”

“Lord, you know *I* have not changed. If anything, your grace has improved and strengthened my walk. I know of no reason why, if you covered my back then, you would abandon me now.”

“Then what do you suppose the difference is?”

“The difference must be your purpose. You had one design then, and another now. You are always the same. Your character is fixed. There is no moral variableness or dark shadow in it (James 1:17). What does change is what you are doing in my life at a given time, how you are training me. There may be some barnacles you are beating off my spiritual hull and this pounding is what it takes.”

“There’s your answer, Jim. Don’t forget it. Polish your monuments for a rainy season when you can’t see the Son shining.”

Now, I did not have that literal “conversation” with God, but the Spirit did prompt an internal dialogue in approximately that vein.

All of a sudden my spiritual grip returned. Ashamed and humbled by my extreme immaturity and irreverence, I repented in sackcloth and ashes, as it were, resolving never again to forget God’s monuments.

In a devotional by W. Glyn Evans, entitled *Daily with the King*, the following is written, “I will not demand that God explain himself to me at any time, for this is characteristic of the unregenerate man. I must be willing to let God be unreasonable, in my view, if necessary, because he is not concerned

with my understanding, but with my faith. The unregenerate man sees contradiction in the world and demands that God justify himself before him; the believing man makes no such demand, but believes God supremely.”¹

That was a change point for me—one of those monumental illuminations that marked an important spiritual understanding. Right then and there I developed a little higher threshold for the mystery side of God. Since then it has gone even higher as we’ve experienced the horrifying and prolonged ordeal with Juli and her mysterious illness.

Exactly one week after losing our potential buyer, my wife called again. This time it was for real. A retired colonel and his college professor wife showed up at our door. They loved the house and offered us a higher price than we had been asking when we were so desperate to move. Is that amazing!

What God did back then still astounds me. That is why I regularly memorialize God’s monuments of faithfulness. I store up in the “seven plentiful years” the great acts of God in my life, to feed my soul during those inevitable “seven lean years.”

As you read about Juli and Paul’s sufferings and what our family has endured, be assured that this habit of polishing monuments has played a large role in sustaining us. On many occasions when we were just about to lose our grip, this monument-polishing discipline was the difference between spiritual stability and utter calamity. For us it has been polish or perish.

So when, in the mysteries of God’s inscrutable purposes, life turns into a monster, don’t camp in the present. Take refuge in the past. Run to God’s monuments. Lock your arms of faith around their testimony. Like the ark of Noah, they are there for you to ride out the raging floods and the deafening silences of God. Whatever the pounding, pummeling present may seem to say, he will never leave you or forsake you, even if he seems at times to hide from you.

In Isaiah 50:10 we are told, “Who is among you that fears the Lord, that obeys the voice of his servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God.”

Does polishing monuments bring a quick end to life's stressful circumstances? Hardly. Sometimes when snow falls, it piles up.

I remember in 1992 when we were about five years into my daughter's illness. Life at that point was very stressful. What significantly sapped our strength was that Olsie was needed to care for Juli, as her circumstances caused Paul to be a virtual housebound prisoner. At this point her illness began taking ugly new turns and complications just kept multiplying.

One morning at the church office where my wife served as our bookkeeper, she literally came apart. Suddenly she could no longer add simple figures—literally. Right there this blind man opened his eyes and saw that his wife, overwhelmed by more than any one woman could handle, was sinking fast and needed rest. I told her I was taking her home immediately. The very fact that she didn't object was a huge clue that she was not herself.

Once in the car, Olsie's rubber bands just snapped. For fifteen minutes solid she was irrational: writhing . . . kicking . . . screaming . . . and bouncing her head off the dash. I felt helpless and totally bewildered. I had no idea what to do and fear seized me.

I got her home, put her to bed and for the next six weeks or so she was in a state of classic clinical depression, staring into a black hole so deep she thought she would never again see the light of day. In the months leading up to her breakdown, she had gradually lost twenty-five pounds and was so heartbroken and drained at Juli's pitiful condition that all her fountains were dried up. She could no longer even cry. Now at

last she collapsed emotionally in a fetal position on our bed. Occasionally she was tormented by literal voices taunting her and urging her to “Curse God and die!”

This happened to the most unlikely candidate on earth. Olsie has to be one of the strongest, most even-tempered, stable women alive. But even steel can bend and break under enough pressure. In fact, the doctor found her so anemic that she was near the point of needing a blood transfusion. How she stood up as long as she did is a wonder.

Thankfully, Olsie’s sister Barb and husband Don flew out to assist us in the nick of time, because just when she needed less anxiety and my full-time attention, I had to undergo surgery for a herniated disk. And I thought all the usual pastoral pressures, including a new church building program, were enough. Yet, every new trial is an opportunity to establish a new monument.

Neither my wife nor I have ever been very good about asking for or receiving help—a streak of that hillbilly independence we grew up with in the mountains of West Virginia. Now this had to change somewhat. When Olsie went down for the count, it literally took twenty-three volunteers, in rotating shifts, to cover all she had been doing. Suddenly church people came out of the woodwork to fill in the gaps, as they poured out their love and care for our family.

Though Juli was unable to be with church helpers physically, the emotional vacuum for Juli and Paul was filled in such a way that the two of them ironically experienced a sense of family they had otherwise missed in our previous go-it-alone mode. This significantly alleviated their sense of total isolation.

How wise are the unexpected ways of our God! Yes, he is a God of miracles, but he is also a God of mysteries. When the God of mysteries shows up, just take refuge in the shadow of his monuments.