

Stones of Remembrance in the Garden of Our Lives

*One Family's Experiences of the
Faithfulness of God*

Herb and Elsie Purnell

This book is one family's account of God's faithfulness in their lives, from childhood to advanced age, through joy and deep grief, blessing and rejection, while living with the challenges of ordinary life in the U.S. and in Thailand.

Stones of Remembrance in the Garden of Our Lives: One Family's Experiences of the Faithfulness of God

By Herb and Elsie Purnell

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A photograph of a lush garden scene. In the foreground, there are several large, smooth, grey stones scattered on a green lawn. To the left, there is a large bush of white hydrangeas. The background is filled with various green plants and trees, with a soft, golden light filtering through the foliage, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. A small wooden structure with a corrugated metal roof is visible on the right side.

Herb and Elsie Purnell

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Preface

In Thailand, where Elsie¹ and I spent many of our adult years, the most famous stone is an engraved commemorative pillar, nearly four feet tall, thought to date from the 14th century, the reign of King Phra Ram Khamhaeng the Great of Sukhothai, on which is found the single most quoted line of Thai literature, which is still used as an idiom for prosperity:

nai náam mii plaa; nai naa mii khâaw

In the waters there are fish; in the fields there is rice.²

The Bible records the use of stones to record or mark special times of God's working in the lives of individuals or in the life of the nation of Israel. Some two thousand years before the description of kingdom prosperity was engraved on the Thai pillar, the last of the Old Testament judges, Samuel, erected a large stone³ to commemorate a victory God had given Israel over their enemies. However, Samuel did not chisel any words on this stone. Instead, he gave it a name: *Ebenezer* "The Stone of Help," meaning "Up to here the LORD has helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12).⁴ This Ebenezer stone was a marker to remind the people of a particular incident when God had been active on their behalf. Forgetting God's help had frequently been the first step in Israel's departure from faith, so Samuel's act was his attempt to keep the memory of this experience of divine aid alive in the nation's memory.

The following pages present an account of some of the Ebenezer stones that dot our life's journey. They have enabled us to remember

¹ December 14, 1934 – June 25, 2005

² In Thai: ในน้ำมีปลา ในนามีข้าว

³ Sufficiently tall to stay end-up and attract the attention of passersby as a marker.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible references mentioned are taken from the *New International Version* (2011).

times when God helped us in a particular way. Again and again, recollecting and reflecting on these memory markers has strengthened our faith and given us courage to face the new challenges that God allowed to come into our lives.

Our Ebenezer stones are specific to our lives and our experiences, of course. Others will have their own “stones of help” to mark out their journey of life and faith. We share our experiences here for readers who would like to see examples of God’s faithfulness. Above all, these stories are a brief but grateful accounting of God’s mercy and grace to us in our very ordinary pilgrimage as we have tried to follow and be faithful to him who called us to himself and has led us in his way these many years.

This account is divided into a number of chronological sections, from our early years through our post-high school years and then on to our life together in marriage, as parents. Some sections focus on our illnesses, particularly my heart surgeries and Elsie’s cancer which took her life in 2005. And the last sections include some of my accounts of God’s faithfulness in the years following Elsie’s passing.

We have been encouraged by family and friends who have prayed for us over the years and thus have shared in the highs and lows, joys and grief, that have been part of our lives. I am indebted to Liza Brozek, one of Elsie’s friends, who stayed with her on days when I taught an evening class at Biola University. Elsie wanted to tell her stories, so as she spoke Liza typed her words into her laptop. When she was finished, Liza read the stories back to Elsie so she could revise them a bit. At this time, Elsie was quite weak with cancer so I have taken the liberty of further revising and smoothing out her oral stories for this joint memoir. I have also used information from a few personal letters and some of the newsletters we sent out over the years that were sent back to us by family and friends after a fire destroyed our house in 1993.

To distinguish our contributions, Elsie's stories and reflections are put in *italic* font, and mine are left in the regular font. When we both comment on the same situation or happening, our contributions are separated by three stars: * * *

The contents presented here are not simply meant to be an account of how we grew up and what we did as adults, although a number of stories are just that because they provide background to what comes later, or because they show us as we were both in our younger years when God began to work in our lives, or because they are relevant in some way to the ups, downs, and ordinary times of our lives in adulthood. This account also contains a number of events, common and special, that give snapshots of our lives as we have continued to develop. And since we lived in various locations and different cultural settings we have included descriptions and some local color. But above all, the stories are primarily our memories and reflections on those events that show something of how God was shaping us, developing us, or working in our lives, stories that have left an imprint on us and reminded us of God's grace, care, provision, correction, discipline, and guidance. They are stories that we want to memorialize – the Ebenezer stones of remembrance in the garden of our lives. Some readers may see these stories as insignificant or just happy coincidences, or just being in the right place at the right time, or they may explain them in other ways, but we see them as evidence that God was at work in us and in our situations from the time we were young until our advanced ages.

Going through the many stories are threads that help to tie some experiences and events together. For example, readers can see strands of how God was developing Elsie to be a counselor to missionary families, to Third Culture Kids, to grieving parents, and more. Or her commitment to missions. Or her desire to bless others in one way or another. Or her willingness to take risks, whether by entering an oratory contest in high school, or through gumption in

getting to see Thai and British royalty, or through her courage to persevere in difficult times and through losses, using her experiences to help and encourage others.

There are strands through my life as well. For example, one is the recurrence of health problems and how God has spared me and cared for me. Another strand would include my work on the Thai, Northern Thai, and Mien languages. Another would be the sometimes out-of-the-ordinary means that God used to guide me, encourage me, and refocus my attention on him. And still another strand would be how I have struggled with grief over the years.

Since these stories are told from our remembered points of view, they might differ from how our siblings or our children or others remember the event. Thus, this selected account tries to record what it was in an event or a situation that stood out to us and in which we perceived God's hand to be at work in our lives. All can be seen as our Ebenezer stones, even though we frequently do not specifically use that word.

The bottom line in this collection of stories from our lives is to exhibit in a small way that God is faithful, that he can be trusted and relied on through the stages and experiences of life, and that he is worthy of all praise and glory. We have not wanted to be like Jesus' disciples who, as Michael Green points out, repeatedly forgot how Jesus had met their needs and the needs of others. Green writes,

“We see some marvelous display of the Lord's power, and yet we are full of doubts when we are thrown into another situation of need that casts us back on him. We simply do not expect him to act the second time! ... Lack of trust often springs from forgetfulness of past blessing.”⁵

⁵ Michael Green (2000). *The Message of Matthew*. InterVarsity Press, p. 174.

Or as Raymond Brown expresses the issue,

“[The Feast of] Tabernacles was an annual reminder of [the Israelite people’s] immense indebtedness to God. In the inevitable pressures of late twentieth-century life, we too can be so concerned about what we want God to do that we forget what he has already done for us. Like Samuel, we too can testify, ‘Thus far has the Lord helped us.’ Each day we need deliberately to recall the Lord’s goodness to us, possibly noting down specific instances of his promised help. Forgetfulness is at the root of a great deal of discontent. Obsessed with what we need, we ignore what we have.”⁶

Rams and Rocks: The story behind our stories

Elsie and I served in Thailand with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, now OMF International. It was founded in 1865 by Hudson Taylor as the China Inland Mission with the goal of penetrating the vast interior of unreached China with the gospel. The CIM eventually grew to be the largest Protestant mission in China but, with all the other missions and foreign Christian workers, was forced to leave China after the revolution of 1949-1950. But we need to step back in time eight years before there was a China Inland Mission.

The year was 1857. The place was the city of Ningbo, one of only five or six coastal cities in China that were open to foreigners for commerce and diplomacy. Missionaries took the opportunity to live and work in these port cities, presenting the Gospel through various ministries. One of these missionaries was Hudson Taylor, then a 25-year-old Englishman who had been sent out from England by the Chinese Evangelization Society, a small mission agency in London. Hudson Taylor had just resigned from the Society because it had gone

⁶ Raymond Brown (1998). *The Message of Nehemiah*. InterVarsity Press, p. 138.

into debt in order to pay, irregularly, its missionaries instead of trusting God to provide the money they needed.

Hudson Taylor and his fellow-worker John Jones had a storefront preaching hall in Ningbo just off a busy, dusty street. Twice a day they would have a service and would invite Chinese to come in to hear a message from the Bible about God and salvation through Christ. A Chinese teacher from the countryside had fallen ill in Ningbo and Hudson Taylor had been helping him recover his health. In return for the medical help, Taylor had the teacher write large Chinese characters on two vertical banners to be hung in the preaching hall. The banners were to serve two purposes: (1) to encourage Taylor and his co-workers by reminding them of God's faithfulness, and (2) to use as preaching points to explain to Chinese listeners what God was like and how he can be trusted.⁷

The words on these two banners eventually became the motto of the China Inland Mission and could be found in some form (banners by a doorway, on small desk calendars, on wall plaques, etc.) in Mission offices, homes, guest rooms, churches and so forth. And still, after over 150 years, the words continue to challenge and encourage, not only those in OMF International but thousands and thousands of people who have read the stories of Hudson Taylor that put this motto into practice.

The five characters written on the first banner came from Genesis 22:1-14, one of the most sacred stories in the entire Old Testament. As a test, God told Abraham to go to a certain mountain, build an altar, and on it to sacrifice his only son, his beloved Isaac, through whom God's promises would come. As Abraham and Isaac walked up the mountain, Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham carrying the fire

⁷ Lisa Nichols Hickman (2018). "Thus far the Lord has helped us." In *Christian History*, Issue 128, pp. 30-33.

and a knife, Isaac, who knew nothing of what would happen, spoke to his father. “The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son” (Gen 22: 7-8). In obedience to God, they built the altar and placed the firewood on it. Then Abraham tied up his son and laid him on the wood. Then he raised the knife to kill and offer Isaac as God had commanded. And at the last second God saw Abraham’s faith and complete devotion, ordered him not to harm the boy, and instead provided a ram for the sacrifice. Abraham called that place “*Jehovah-Jireh*”⁸ or “The LORD Will Provide” to memorialize the challenge to his faith along with God’s intervention and provision (Gen 22:14).

Taylor had had numerous experiences of trusting God to supply his needs before he became a missionary, back when he was just 20 or 21 in London, getting the first part of his medical training. So now out in China in 1857 as a young missionary with no guaranteed salary or means of support, he could look at the words on that banner – *Jehovah-Jireh*, The Lord will provide – and reflect on the many times when God had provided for him, and then in faith he could look to God for continued provision.

The four characters written on the second banner were taken from a later event in the Bible. First Samuel 7:2-13 tells how God gave the Israelite people, led by the prophet Samuel, a remarkable last-minute victory over their enemies. When they stopped pursuing their enemies, Samuel set up a rock or large stone and gave it a name: *Ebenezer* "Stone of help," or “Thus far has the Lord helped us,” to commemorate the victory God had given them.

⁸ The King James Version (KJV) and the New English Version (NEV) both use the Hebrew words while most modern versions, such as the New International Version (NIV) and the English Standard Version (ESV) use the English words.

So, the two banners, *Jehovah-Jireh* and *Ebenezer*, were hung up in a small chapel in China over 150 years ago to remind the young missionaries without any regular means of support that for each new trial that they faced they could reflect on the previous times that God had helped them (*Ebenezer*) and trust him to provide for their new needs (*Jehovah-Jireh*). Rock and ram. The record of past provision strengthening their faith for their next challenge.

Our account here, then, is the written record of many instances where God brought us into situations that challenged our faith. *Jehovah-Jireh*. But he also moved us to remember how he had helped us and provided for us in the past, sometimes in advance but more often at the very last minute. *Ebenezer*. Then when new tests or trials came, we could remind ourselves of all the memorial stones and trust God to provide for us once more. *Stones of Remembrance in the Garden of Our Lives*.⁹

⁹ Sometimes we call the reader's attention to God's provision, but in many cases, the reader can see God working in and through us in smaller matters that are not specifically labeled but which are nonetheless examples of what God was doing.

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