

Remarks for Spencer's Funeral
October 25, 2012
Stephen Allan Hales

This morning I am thinking of three rocks.

The first is an ordinary flat rock, about 6 inches across, under the cherry tree in our backyard. I see it every Saturday when I mow the lawn. Hannah put it there a couple of years ago when she was about 12 to mark the spot where a baby bird is buried. This bird must have fallen out of its nest just after it hatched, because Hannah found it one summer morning on the lawn, squawking and helpless, and she decided to become its mother. She had done this once before with a baby bird that had apparently fallen from its nest, feeding it cat food and water from the end of a straw, and helping it learn to fly by throwing it up in the air until one day, it flew away. This time, however, Hannah noticed a mother bird that would come every morning to one of the golden arbor pear trees west of our front lawn, flying frantically from branch to branch and chirping loudly. It was under this tree that Hannah found her bird, and she knew that her bird's real mother was desperate to recover it. We decided to build a little nest in that tree and put the baby bird in it, hoping for a reunion between mother and baby. One problem, though, was our cat, who spends lots of time in that tree. In our little home-made nest in the tree, the bird might be vulnerable. One evening just as the sun went down we put that nest as high up in the tree as we could reach, on the skinniest branch possible that wouldn't support the weight of a cat. We tried to do this when the cat wasn't watching, but when we got down and saw that the cat was right there, we gave that cat, who is also a much beloved part of our family, a very stern talking to about leaving the bird alone and staying away from the tree.

The next morning, early, Hannah went out to check on the bird and it was lying dead and mangled on the lawn, about where she had found it the first time. There was no mother bird, and the nest was tipped on its side still in the tree.

She came in crying quietly with the bird in her hand, and I suggested she throw it in the outside trash and clean out the bird cage she had built on the front porch. Then she lowered her head and wept quite intensely, and my heart melted. I told her we could bury it out back, and I would help. I dug a little hole under the cherry tree and, because she didn't think it appropriate to put the bird directly into the dirt, I searched through the garage until I found a clear plastic screw box that was just the right size for a coffin— crystal and transparent— like Snow White's, and we put the bird in that. Then, sensing an opportunity, I grabbed my scriptures and we knelt by the hole with the bird at the bottom. I read the Savior's words from Matthew 6: "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them." To care for this bird, Hannah had been doing the work of her Heavenly Father. This bird and all the other birds are under the personal care of our Heavenly Father, I said. He knows them and when they die, they come back into the presence of the Savior who created them, as part of that plan of happiness that will bless and save us all from death eventually. At this point I was crying too. It was a tender moment of testimony and of the comforting voice of the Spirit, there

in our backyard under the cherry tree, with a little bird in a plastic screw box. I covered the hole and went in the house.

The next Saturday when I was mowing the lawn, I saw that Hannah had placed a flat rock over that spot, and had written on it with a marker: "Here lies birdie. May he sing forever in the kingdom of our Heavenly Father and the Savior Jesus Christ." That rock is still out there, though the wording has worn off in the weather. That's rock number one.

The second rock is one that I keep in my office at work, and I brought it with me today. It's quite heavy and has some sparkles. It was given to me by my son Spencer when he was eleven years old. At the time, our daughter Hannah (from the first story) had just been born, and she had a congenital heart defect that would require open-heart surgery. Normally, the time when a new baby was born in our family was exciting for our older kids and a lot of fun. All of them would go to their grandma and grandpa White's house in Payson for a few days until their mom and new sibling came home from the hospital. This time, however, what we thought would be a few days at their grandparents home turned into a months-long period of uncertainty and worry for our kids. Hannah was in hospitals for more than a month, and had two surgeries at Primary Children's Hospital in order to save her life. Every day, Calli and I would drive to Salt Lake to be with Hannah for as long as we could. At the end of every day, we'd call our children in Payson with the latest news on her progress. One evening, after an exhausting day of worry and concern at Hannah's bedside in Salt Lake, we drove to Payson to see our other children and be with them for a few minutes before they went to bed. From the time he was very young, Spencer was always sensitive to how other people were feeling, and when they were sad or upset, it concerned him very much. On one of his hikes with his Grandpa White he had come across this unusual rock. That night when we came to visit, shedding a few tears at the fact that our family was divided up and separated and that the future was uncertain, Spencer brought out this rock and gave it to me. At first I didn't know what it was, and then his grandma explained that when Spencer found it up the canyon, he thought it was one of the most unusual rocks he had ever seen and he'd brought it home for me, to cheer me up. Then, I set down the rock for a minute and held Spencer in my arms, telling him how grateful I was for his kindness.

Since that day I have kept the rock, displaying it on my desk at work as a reminder of kindness. It reminds me specifically of my son Spencer's characteristic kindness, which I have seen many times. But it also reminds me that the simplest acts can often be the most meaningful when we're reaching out in love to another person. I have seen this demonstrated over and over in the past few months through the service of our extended family members and friends. Every night in our prayers it has been our privilege to mention before the Lord the kindness of those who have given us such touching service. Especially in a week where our daughter's marriage and our son's death were separated by exactly seven days, we have been the recipients of a tremendous amount of kindness from our family and friends. Our bishopric and stake presidency have been true messengers of the Lord Jesus Christ in our home, and the priesthood blessings we have received from several of you have opened to us the understanding and comfort of heaven. Spencer was among the most grateful for all the service provided to our family and to him

personally. Please read his blog post from last May that's printed on the back of the program. You, brothers and sisters, are truly "willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort, and to stand as witnesses of God at all times and in all things, and in all places that ye may be in" (Mosiah 18: 9). This rock from Spencer is a reminder to me of that.

The third rock I'm thinking of is what the scriptures call "The rock of our redeemer" (Hel 5: 12) and "the stone of Israel" (D& C 50: 44),— the Savior Jesus Christ. Through His willingness to submit to His Father's will, he made possible the plan of salvation and happiness that places us into families, allows those ties to continue forever, provides forgiveness for sin, perfects our bodies through the resurrection, and opens a door to exaltation in our Heavenly Father's kingdom. I have been thinking a great deal about the Plan of Happiness these past few months. In some ways, they have been months of sadness and many tears. Since Calli and I were married twenty six years ago, we have offered our prayers together night and morning, then giving each other a kiss right afterwards. For the last little while, our prayers conclude with both parties making a mad dash for the Kleenex box in order to wipe up the drippy stuff that makes a kiss unappetizing. And yet I still feel in my heart that it really is a plan of happiness. One of the happiest days of my life was the day Spencer was born. On that day I took my journal to the hospital to write Spencer a letter while Calli recovered from the birth. Let me read from part of it:

March 5, 1987; 9: 08 a.m.

To my first born son, Spencer Stephen Hales,

My son, you were just born an hour ago, and I want to tell you how much your mother and I love you. These words seem so new to me— son, mother, and father. I am just a young man— or so I feel— and by the time you read this I of course will have been a father for several years— and the concept will be familiar to us both. But for now, it is new and I feel challenged and excited.

We got up at 4: 45 this morning, prepared and came over to Payson Hospital. At a little before eight, our doctor, Stephen Rees, began the operation. It wasn't long before I could look in the mirror and see your little head, covered with black matted hair, poking though the opening. I stood up— I had been sitting near your mom's head, and with the anesthesiologist, moved closer to see you born. There was pushing and manipulating. Both doctors were trying to squeeze you out; the anesthesiologist was telling your mom she would feel pressure; she was grimacing as she felt it. The doctor said—" look at the size of that head!" and you were out. The nurse held you up for me to see briefly— you made some little squawks. You were blue— but beautiful and perfectly formed. And I loved you! I had before you were born. Your mom saw you then as I did and felt the same.

The nurses took you over to clean you off. I couldn't see them too well because of the doctors. Calli asked me where you were, and I looked and saw they had a stocking cap on your head, and two nurses were working on you.

In a minute, they brought you over to me in a warm, heavy blanket. For the first time I held you and whispered “welcome.” Calli asked me to bring you over to her, which I did, pulling down the blanket a bit. Did you have a chin? she wanted to know. Yes, a little pudgy one. You were perfectly formed in every way— a miracle. I carried you to the nursery, where the nurse took you by the head— it looked rough to me!— and put you on the scale. As she stretched out your leg [to measure you], you gave a hurt feelings type of cry, and my heart when out to you.

I went back while they sewed up your mom. She has gone through so much to get you here. Even now she hasn't yet touched you (her arms are strapped down) but she has such tender feelings for you. When she was through I went back to the nursery and looked at you in the incubator. I counted your fingers and toes. Even your fingernails were perfect— not [too] long or [too] short. You looked at my face with one eye. The other was stuck shut with that goop they put in them.

I don't know what babies understand and feel at this point in their lives. By the time you read this, you will remember none of what I've described. But as I looked at you and you looked at me I felt a kinship of spirits and a closeness that I've never known before. This is the new blessing of fatherhood, and I feel it is a tremendous blessing.

10: 00 a.m. I just took a break from writing to go look at you again. Still there, at the far side of the room in the incubator. You look big compared to the one other baby in there.

Yesterday, Spencer, when I came home from work and your mom was at her parents' house for a baby shower, I had a long prayer about you and us. To have a child is a great responsibility. I explained that I felt that having a child was the most significant thing I had ever done so far, and yet it has little to do with any talent, ability or effort on my part. I've now been party to the creation of a perfect human body which is inhabited by an immortal spirit. All of this is a gift and a responsibility. We have brought you into a wicked, yet beautiful world. I want you to know what a great life this can be, and what a comfort and strength it is to know the Lord and his dealings with his children. To influence your life so that you come to know this, while the world is trying to influence you in an opposite direction is a great challenge. You will soon enough learn how weak your mother and I are in so many ways. I do not particularly feel strong enough by myself to take on the world and win. But, Spencer, you can be assured that with the stakes so high, we will do what we must to succeed. Besides, I am not your only father, and your other Father wields the resources needed to bless you life when my abilities fail. This is my great comfort.

Calli and I have no particular qualifications for parenthood other than that we love you with all of our hearts and we came from backgrounds that have taught us what a piece of heaven a home and family can be. I think, Spencer, that we'll have a great family.

The letter went on from there. A few months later, Spencer was blessed in our Provo Fifth Ward Sacrament Meeting, with the same grandfathers and uncles in the circle who are here today. In my journal, I wrote that it was “one of the greatest experiences of my life.” Here is part of that blessing, as I recorded it on the day it was given:

“Heavenly Father, with gratitude in our hearts for the Holy Melchizedek priesthood which we bear and by the authority of that priesthood, we take this child in our arms to give him a name and a blessing. The name which we give him for his mortal lifetime, until he returns again to thee and is know by that name Thou didst so recently call him, is Spencer Stephen Hales.

And, Father, we desire to bless him with every blessing necessary for him to have a successful and happy life, eventually to dwell with thee in thy kingdom forever. We bless him with health of mind and body, that he may have a long and a useful life, that he may be enabled to accomplish the many responsibilities Thou shalt give him. We bless him with a special affinity for Thy Spirit and guidance that he may be an effective servant in building up Thy kingdom, preparing this world into which he is born for the eventual return of thy Son. We bless him that he may be a special messenger in spreading the Gospel, that he may be a missionary in many ways and to many peoples. . . .

We bless him with every blessing that he will need to meet the challenges he shall face in his lifetime. We bless him with the strength to fulfill Thy purposes for him, knowing that for such a time as this has he been reserved and now is born . . .

These experiences represented times of great joy in my life, and I felt that the Plan of Happiness was open to our family and that the Lord would prepare the way before us with many more similar opportunities.

And he has. But there have been some questions along the way, too. At about the time Spencer turned 19, he had an accident that required surgery on his foot, and later struggled with depression. We spoke often over the next several months and years about a mission until Spencer was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2009, and then it became apparent that he wouldn't have that opportunity. Thinking back on that blessing I had given him as a baby and many others since, I often asked the Lord about what was happening. In great mercy He would answer my prayers. I remember very clearly one evening when I had been thinking about Spencer and praying as I was traveling, asking how it was that these promises regarding a mission didn't look like they would be fulfilled, and the Lord distinctly whispered to my soul, with a feeling of tremendous love and reassurance, that these things would not be clear to me now but would be later.

After Spencer's brain surgery in 2009, followed by radiation treatments and chemotherapy, we had great hopes for his complete recovery. However, there was a time when it seemed that our prayers for miracles and blessings were not being granted. When a test was taken that could have resulted positively or negatively, it seemed that the negative result was most often what we received. I would have to say that we were used to miracles in our family, we were used to

feeling that our prayers would be answered according to our expectations if we just had enough faith. This was a difficult time for Spencer, as well.

In late April we had all gone to Church while Spencer stayed home because of a headache that wouldn't go away. I received a text from him while we were in Sacrament meeting asking me to take him to the hospital, as he was having seizures and losing feeling on his right side. That day ended up with Calli and me in the hospital with him, still dressed in our Sunday clothes talking to a doctor at midnight who was still wearing his suit from Sunday meetings, explaining to us that our son's brain was filled with cancer. It had grown so quickly and completely that there was nothing more to do than to take him home and make him comfortable. This was so incredible to hear—and the doctor's estimate that he likely wouldn't live until the end of the year seemed unbelievable. That night, however, we felt the comforting reassurance of the Lord's spirit. As we went home and woke up the children to tell them, the comfort of the Holy Ghost was palpable. Still, this was not an easy thing. Again, one evening I was struggling with the blessings Spencer had received as an infant under my hands, promising "health of mind and body, that he may have a long and useful life." I prayed to know how he could receive a blessing like this and yet face an illness that would cut his life short. In the clearest language I have ever heard the Lord speak, He said to me "What life is longer than eternal life?"

Last Friday night, Spencer lay in a hospital bed in our study, unconscious and struggling with great difficulty to breathe. His hospice nurses had told us he would likely die during the weekend. It was at the same time very difficult to see and yet a time of peace, knowing that a sacred transition was about to happen. Then, early on Saturday morning, his breathing and his heart stopped and he was at peace. Saturday night, once again, I had the opportunity to write another letter to Spencer.

Saturday, October 20, 2012

My dear son, Spencer Stephen:

It's about quarter to eleven in the evening, and I have just added the date of your death— today — to the Church's records at familysearch.org. When I wrote you that letter on the day you were born, I knew you wouldn't be able to read it until much later. Tonight I'm writing one more letter to you, again unsure about when you'll be able to read it, but believing that sometime, somehow, the message will get to you.

Last night when I went to bed, you were struggling to breathe in a frightening way. With the help of the nurse who came, we rolled you onto your side and propped pillows behind your back and it seemed to help a little. But it was so hard for you, such a difficult, almost violent struggle. Calli wanted to be close to you so I helped her make a bed on the couch. We kissed goodnight and had our prayer, praying for you and for your release and peace . . .

At about 3: 50 a.m., however, Calli . . . woke me up, saying it seemed you had just gone. . . [W]e came down to where you were in the study. Calli said she had been sleeping and then awoke

suddenly, feeling she needed to check on you. As we stood by the side of your bed, you were still hot from your struggle, but your troubled breathing and your valiant heart had stopped. We stroked your hair and held your hands, and wept for our firstborn son. We were grateful that the Lord had answered our prayers for your release, but so desperately sorry to see you gone. I mentioned my thought, based on the accounts of many who have had near death experiences, that the spirit remains for a few moments in the vicinity when it departs the body, so took the chance to talk to you one last time. We told you again of our deep love for you, and how we would miss you. We explained that we knew you had a great work to accomplish, and to go with confidence into the presence of your Savior to claim the peace that is promised to those who are worthy. We told you of our hope that you will be allowed to be with us on those sacred occasions to come, including marriages and missions, and that we would think of you every day. We said we were happy for you, in spite of our abundant tears.

Then we prayed together. We expressed our gratitude to Heavenly Father for allowing you to slip away without a long period of lingering, as we had been united in praying. We said how happy we were for your release from struggle and pain and disability, and how we imagined your great exhilaration at being free from your illness and your limiting body. We recounted our appreciation for the great privilege of being your parents in mortality, and remembered before the Lord how our sealing in the temple twenty six years ago has given us the sure expectation of a glorious reunion with you in the future. We thanked our Father for the gift of his Son, whose atonement gives us hope for all of this, and we closed in the name of our Savior with many tears.

We sat by your side for a while, wondering about all the things that would come next. Calli called Alexis and invited her to come over with Aaron from their apartment. I went upstairs and asked everyone to come down. When we were finally together, we talked of what had happened to you, and about the great peace that we had felt, Calli and I, as we had come to you soon after you died. By this time, the look of struggle on your face had relaxed, and you had a smile of the sweetest confidence, a look of complete peace. We prayed together as a family, and then the children went back to bed.

At about 10 a.m., I think, two men in white shirts and ties came to pick your body up. . . They loaded the gurney into the back of a white van, as your mother and I held each other and watched. For a moment they waited to close the door, sensing that we weren't quite ready to see you leave the shelter of our roof for the last time. And then they were gone. For a while after, I thought of you going to Salt Lake to their facility, and wondered how all that would work, then I realized that they didn't really have you at all, that you were elsewhere, and that you were fine. . . .

Even though on a day like today it seems that time stands still, there were still groceries to buy and the lawn to mow (Sam did that today). Calli and I went to the store to buy a few things. Tonight we had hamburgers for dinner and Lex and Aaron came over. Chris washed "the Mazda" (he still can't call it "his" car, even though you gave it to him, out of respect for you). Finally, at about 10, we gathered in the study and read John chapters 15 and 16 (we read 14 last night while

you struggled for breath), and mom prayed. I showered and shaved, since I hadn't had a chance all day, and came up to bed. I turned on the computer, changed your record on the Church's website, and began writing this final letter to you, my precious son.

Those are some of the details of this day. What I haven't expressed well is my broken heart that's bound together gently by the peace of the Spirit. I read again, in that first letter to you, of my conviction that, even though you had come into a wicked world, we would do all we could to help you, and that when our efforts failed, we had the sure confidence that your other father—your Heavenly Father— would take over for your blessing and salvation. That is exactly what He has done. The cancer, the struggles and sufferings you've been through have been your refiner's fire. When you slipped away from us this morning, my son, you were purified and prepared to stand without fear, as your patriarchal blessing says, before your Savior to be admitted as a worthy and qualified heir into His presence. I see the hand of the Lord in all that has happened, and praise our Heavenly Father tonight for his merciful kindness in allowing me to be your dad, for allowing Calli to be your mom— for us to be your parents— and to know that our association will continue for the eternities. I love you my precious son Spencer. I will think of you every day until I embrace you again in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Love, Dad.

The prophet Helaman counseled his sons about how to survive the challenges of mortality: “And now, my sons, remember, remember that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall” (Helaman 5: 12).

These past two weeks have seared into my heart the reality of the plan of happiness and salvation. In spite of tears there is no “gulf of misery” because of the Savior. This has been a time of joy and confidence that all is well, that the most important things are right. Because of our love for Spencer there have been many times that we have prayed “Bring him home. Let him live.” Now we see how completely that prayer has been answered. This world is not our home, and Spencer has been brought back to the Savior, the rock of his salvation, and will live free of the challenges of mortality that we here still face. I am happy for Spencer and testify with all my heart of the reality of the Savior and his saving power.

I witness that the truths of the plan of salvation and happiness that we often discuss casually on the summer days of our lives are true, and provide deep comfort and meaning when the first snows fall and challenges set in. I testify that the kindness offered by the Saints is one of the great evidences of the Savior's love for us— His servants truly are like Him in so many ways. I conclude by expressing my eternal love for Calli, who has experienced all these things on the most personal level as only a mother can, and who has been a true example of charity to Spencer,

to me, and to everyone else she touches. I love my son Spencer and am grateful to be his father, and I love each of my other children as well. I love each of you, and leave with you my testimony of the reality of our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ, which I have learned from personal, sweet and sacred experience. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.