

Ryan Umari

Family Stories and Light Talk- March 8th, 2026

So before starting the talk, I want to first say that after serving in nursery for almost a year and a half, Sarah and I could easily give talks on how cute and lovable the nursery kids are, and I definitely feel closer to Jesus Christ being near children and their innocence. Being in nursery has been one of the most joyful and special things in my life. But there is another topic that I felt I should focus on.. What I most wanted to discuss today is learning our family history and stories, and ways they can point us toward the Gospel.

So much of our foundation in life comes from stories we hear as children about our parents, grandparents, and relatives, and the types of people we understand our family members to be. These stories become a part of our early and lifelong identities, and can point us in unique directions on our practical and spiritual paths in life. Elder Gong gave a wonderful talk called "We Each Have a Story" challenging us to learn and explore more about family stories and where we have come from. So today, I am going to share with you two of the stories or special things about my family that are part of my foundation, and how they have helped me grow in my faith in Jesus Christ.

The first story with gospel relevance is my family's long love of chess. My parents met during the time that Bobby Fischer was going to Iceland to play in the World chess championships against Boris Spassky, and the excitement of those events got them playing a lot of chess too. I learned by watching them years later at age 4, and played in my first tournament a year later. I love how President Uchtdorf has lots of stories about aviation and flying planes and can make analogies to the gospel from those experiences. Our family's obsession was chess. Chess Camp, Chess life magazine, we have so many stories from those years. And there are spiritual connections here too.. Chess isn't as perfect of an analogy to the gospel as in our lives we need to act more with faith than calculating and strategy, but there are definitely some parallels.

We often talk about God having a plan of happiness and progression for all souls, and a plan for our personal life. There is a metaphor sometimes used for God as a chess master, which as Google explains, is a metaphor that portrays God as the perfect, omniscient strategist, orchestrating life's events and navigating human free will to achieve an ultimate divine victory for good. I like that in this analogy God is understood as being able to use his foresight to work with human mistakes and imperfection, to guide mortality toward a beautiful, perfect, and benevolent outcome. I like this also because in this analogy we understand that while God has a great and overarching plan of happiness, he can implement this plan for each individual, by wisely guiding aspects of our lives for growth and good. And through our choices, we can become partners with God in bringing to pass His will or His purposes for us in our lives. In his

talk “Where will this lead”, President Oaks says, “We make better choices and decisions if we look at the alternatives and ponder where they will lead.” This is similar to a chess game and considering moves and the potential responses and outcomes they will lead too. Before we receive spiritual confirmation that the path or choice we are considering is right, we are told that we should “study it out in [our] minds.

Also similar to chess we understand that there is opposition to God and his plan; there is a force of intelligent opposition to souls. In the game, while there are light and dark pieces, neither side is inherently good or bad. But in mortality, light and darkness are very real things, and we know that God is able to have victory in this war between light and darkness not simply because of being omniscient, or being able to see further out than his opponent. God’s greatest power resides in his perfect righteousness, his infinite goodness, and in his love for all of his children. And the victory for light forever happened when he sent his son Jesus Christ to atone for sin, redeem humankind from the effects of the fall, and provide a path whereby each individual soul could be reconciled to Him once again.

God and Jesus Christ are the ultimate sources and power of light in the world. In the gospel of John, John writes of Jesus that he is “the light that shineth in darkness”, and he is the “Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” In Joseph Smith’s First vision, he uses similar language to describe God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. “I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—*This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him!*” In Moses 1:11 we read, “But now mine own eyes have beheld God; but not my natural, but my spiritual eyes, for my natural eyes could not have beheld; for I should have withered and died in his presence; but his glory was upon me; and I beheld his face, for I was transfigured before him.

These descriptions make me think of a short account and witness of Jesus’s light that affirm these scriptures regarding God’s indescribable light and glory. The account is by Private George Ritchie who became a doctor, and after this experience, lectured and wrote books sharing his testimony of Jesus and gospel principles for over 20 years. After having an extremely high temperature, and being without vital signs for 9 minutes, he had an experience of incredible light encompassing his hospital ward room..

He recounts: “I stared in astonishment as the brightness increased coming from nowhere, and seeming to shine everywhere at once. All the light bulbs in the ward couldn’t give off that much light. All the bulbs in the world couldn’t.” And like Moses he understands that his natural eyes would not have been able to withstand the brightness of this light. “I’m glad I don’t have physical eyes at this moment..” He continues, “This light would destroy the retina in a second.” “No I corrected myself, not the light. He. He would be too bright too look at. For now I saw it

was not light but a Man who had entered the room.. The instant I perceived Him, a command formed itself in my mind. "Stand up! The words came inside me, yet they had an authority my mere thoughts never had. I got to my feet, and as I did came the stupendous certainty: "You are in the presence of the Son of God."

The Testimony of Jesus being the light of the world and the light of men, has incredible literal truth. Ritchie experienced and testified that there is more light in him than could be shone by all the light bulbs in the world. And Moses testifies that his natural frame would have withered and died in God's presence. These are incredibly powerful accounts, and both experiences of seeing the light of God and the savior testified in scriptures, very literally. Jesus is the light of heaven and earth. He is the light of the universe. His goodness and virtue is light. So in choosing who to put our faith and hope in within a mortal chess game, or conflict between light and darkness on earth, Jesus Christ is not only the ultimate source of wisdom, that can see beyond our problems and challenges to our ultimate victory, but is also the ultimate source of Goodness and virtue, to whom we must enter a covenant relationship with, and live connected to, to be made partakers of salvation and exaltation.

Part 2

The second story I want to share is of my family's experience with the very real sources of light and darkness in the world. My mom was from Salt Lake City, and dad was from Baghdad Iraq, two different sides of the world, and a couple of the stories about my family in Iraq living under Saddam Hussein's regime are places where I see light and darkness in the world most intensely..

My dad told me that growing up in Iraq you couldn't turn the television channel when Saddam was on tv, or you could be put in jail. And he told me that growing up in Iraq made him Stoic because of things like walking to school and seeing men hanging in the street..

The Umari side of my family were not really religious, but were honorable people that served in society and the government there. My grandmother served as president of Red Crescent, which is like the Red Cross of the middle East, started an orphanage and did many charitable things. Her Father Arshad had been the Prime Minister of Iraq and reported to the King of England. And my grandfather, my dad's dad, worked in the government when Saddam Hussein came into power with a very violent regime and overthrew the government my grandfather worked in.

The story that made the greatest impression on me as a child was this.. On one night late at night at 3 in the morning, my grandfather was taken out of his home in his pajamas. Saddam's new government was killing almost everyone in the old administration, and doing kangaroo trials which were trials where they would bring people up on fake charges and then execute

them. But when they took my grandfather out for this, since he was known as being a very honest, high integrity person who wasn't a threat to anyone, they spared his life.

This has always stuck with me, because it taught me the principle that people acknowledge and see morality and uprightness in others. My grandfather's life was spared because of his goodness. My father was similarly moral but not religious, but a kind, gentle person who served our family, and was later an example to me of what being Christlike can look like, even though he didn't follow a religion. But his actions pointed to Christ, or helped me to recognize goodness and virtue, and to be able to have reverence for this in learning of the savior of humankind.

Along this line, my mother didn't attend church when I was young, but once said the comment to me, there is a God, and he has a son who is Jesus Christ. And without mentioning the idea of an eventual resurrection of the soul and body, she told me we have a spirit that will separate from our body when we die and go up to the spirit world. She might have said heaven. Her giving this short testimony of God, Jesus, and our spirits happened only once, but I only needed to hear it one time to remember it forever and take it to heart. My mom also prayed with us on occasion and while not a religious person, also softly through these few quiet moments, pointed me to God and Jesus Christ..

All of us have family stories that we can learn from, and even with darkness or imperfections in those stories, we can recognize God's perfect goodness and light working to help us to find him, to learn and to grow, and to develop strengths and positive qualities and character through the challenges and adversity we experience. In the way we reflect on these stories and mortal journey, we can see God's infinite wisdom, and great love for us, and the influence on our lives of the light of the world and the light of all things, his son Jesus Christ.

Final Section-

I had planned to end the talk here. But yesterday I received a text from Brother George that because of not having a youth speaker for today, the talks should be a little longer than I had been preparing for. So there is time to share one extra thought with you.. and it will tie in a little..

Sarah and I have made it a habit, to look for new books from our church leaders when we are at Deseret. These have been a great source of inspirational influence. We recently finished an inspiring book by Elder Uchtdorf called "After All We Can Do", and are almost done with a book on personal revelation by Elder Renlund titled "Learning to Listen- Principles for Personal Revelation". I want to share with you one of my favorite concepts from Elder Renlund's book and conclude.

As the book is about receiving personal revelation, a great portion of it is about becoming more sensitive to the voice and promptings of the Holy Ghost. Elder Renlund makes the helpful point that the Spirit will often give us direction or guidance from a previous point of reference. I'm sure most of us have often recognized that the Spirit can bring our attention to a previous experience, lesson we learned, or memory to provide guidance. Elder Renlund mentions that the scriptures are of the greatest material that the Spirit can point to, to remind us of a principle or gospel teaching, to help us understand the best choice or course of action in a particular moment.

He says- "Regularly studying the scriptures helps the Spirit remind us of truths when we need them. Then, when you encounter a situation in which you need inspiration from the Spirit, the Holy Ghost can help you recall the teachings and truths that you need in that moment. The Scriptures serve as the Springboard for revelation".

So reading scriptures daily gives the Spirit more to draw from that we will recognize when he needs to teach us, and we will be able to become a greater instrument in the hand of God for Good.

So to conclude.. I pray that we can all look back on our stories and the history in our families and see God's hand working to bring about good, and to lead us toward an ultimate victory in His light. And I pray we can read scriptures and words of the prophets often, to be able increase our ability to receive and act on spiritual guidance in our lives.

And I leave this hope with you, and say these things in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.