

Becoming a Disciple of Christ

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What a glorious sight this is. It is truly incredible, and as I look at you, I think what a wonderful group of sisters—there are a few brethren here, and we are surely glad that they have joined with us today. But I wonder about you. I wonder about your lives. I wonder about your families. I wonder about your testimonies of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I wonder about so many of your circumstances and realize that they are probably not that much different from mine because as women on this earth and in particular in The Church of Jesus Christ, we are doing so many of the same things, and I am glad that we can be here together today.

In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Lehi speaks of a land of promise, a land which is choice above all other lands (1 Nephi 2:20). The Lord God covenanted with Lehi concerning this land. He tells Lehi that if the people who possess the land shall keep his commandments, they shall be blessed and shall dwell safely forever (2 Nephi 1:9). From the beginning of time God has reserved choice lands and promised great blessings for his righteous followers.

Lehi's journey with his family to the promised land is symbolic of our journey through life to our promised land. Ultimately, it is our return to the land in which God and his Son, Jesus Christ, dwell.

We are promised that we can receive an inheritance in the heavenly city of God if while journeying through the wilderness of mortality we learn how to put off the "natural man" and "[yield] to the enticings of the Holy Spirit" (Mosiah 3:19). We must search diligently in the light of Christ and lay hold upon every good thing (Moroni 7:19) so the spirit within us will respond to a personal witness of the truth of all things. The Good Shepherd will call us—in his name he will call us (Alma 5:38). If we put aside the things of the world, we will hear his voice and follow him and become one of his disciples.

This requires that we have soft hearts so the Spirit can enter and illuminate our souls. It is also necessary for us to develop spiritual eyes so we can see through the mists of darkness and not be foolishly led onto broad roads that will lead us away so that we become

lost to the things of God (1 Nephi 12:17).

In our journey to this land of the heavenly city, whose builder and maker is God, we will encounter many obstacles and challenges. There will be ruts and holes of grief and despair, rivers of tears, and mountains of sorrow. Just as no two snowflakes are exactly alike, so each person travels a different road. Each must blaze her own trail. My sister-in-law Maryland Scholes writes:

"We are the solitary pioneer of our own lives.

"No one has journeyed our path before us.

"No one began the trek with our particular assets and liabilities.

"No one will endure our exact set of hardships.

"No one has challenged our meanest enemies or stilled the terror of our darkest moments.

"Only we can struggle toward our own frontier—and our own safety and our own personal promised land."

Each of us faces challenges. But we need not travel the road alone. President Gordon B. Hinckley entreats us to develop a "simple faith, an unquestioning conviction that the God of heaven in his power will make all things right and bring to pass his eternal purposes in the lives of his children" ("Faith of the Pioneers," *Ensign*, July 1984, 6).

Orson F. Whitney many years ago said: "No pain that we suffer, no trial that we experience is wasted. It ministers to our education, to the development of such qualities as patience, faith, fortitude and humility. All that we suffer and all that we endure, especially when we endure it patiently, builds up our characters, purifies our hearts, expands our souls, and makes us more tender and charitable, more worthy to be called the children of God . . . and it is through sorrow and suffering, toil and tribulation, that we gain the education that we come here to acquire and which will make us more like our Father and Mother in heaven" (quoted in Spencer W. Kimball, *Tragedy or Destiny*, Brigham Young University Speeches of the Year [Provo, 6 Dec. 1955], 7).

When we believe that we "can do all things through Christ" (Philip. 4:13), our burdens will become lighter, and we will find that "peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (v. 7). We then come to know that we have traveled the road thus far by the hand of the Lord and in the fellowship of our brothers and sisters in the gospel.

In 1843, my great-great-grandparents James Lewis Burnham and his wife, Mary Ann Huntley Burnham, along with their four little children, joined the Saints in Nauvoo, Illinois. James and Mary Ann had joined the Church earlier that year while living in Beaufort County, Illinois. James had been a minister of the Christian church, but upon hearing the "good news" of the gospel, he could only acknowledge that he had no authority to preach. He and his wife, Mary Ann, were baptized into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He preached and advocated its doctrine faithfully until the day he died.

James and Mary Ann's youngest child, a little girl named Maria Antoinette, died the year after their arrival in Nauvoo. At the time, James was also failing in health: he was afflicted with a lung disease. Nevertheless, he labored quarrying rock for the Nauvoo Temple. He and his wife were anxiously looking forward to the temple being completed so that they could receive their endowments and be sealed together for eternity.

In the summer of 1845, James's health grew worse. In October, he passed away. His death preceded the birth of another baby daughter by four days. That daughter, Mary Ann Burnham Freeze, was later to write: "This was a trying time for my mother, being left in sorrow and destitute of all worldly goods. She had no relatives near to help her. But the Saints were very kind to her in her afflictions. Her relatives in the East would gladly have sent means to take her back but it was no temptation to her. She had cast her lot with the Saints of God and would rather remain with them in poverty than have the wealth of the whole world elsewhere" (Burnham family records, in possession of author).

In February of 1846, the famous exodus from Nauvoo began. Mary Ann had no means by which she could move herself and her family out of the city. They remained there until after the mob took over Nauvoo. They were then forced to leave or lose their lives. She received a wagon for her city property and was lent a yoke of cattle that she might begin that memorable, toilsome journey with her four young children. She later tells of the mob searching their wagon for arms, the obscene language that they used, and how terribly she suffered from fear. She arrived in Winter Quarters late in the fall of 1846. She remained there for a year and a half, and then she along with others was compelled by the government to move back to the east side of the river because they were on Indian Territory.

As she was in the depths of poverty, she let Brother Daniel Wood take her second son, Wallace, who was ten (and who is my great-grandfather), and her third son, George, who was two years younger, to the Valley with him. This was a severe trial for Mary Ann. She was separated from her young sons for five years, because it wasn't until 1852 that she was able to start her trek west. Through the kindness and help of some of the brethren and sisters she was finally able to leave with the rest of her children and cross the plains. They arrived in Salt Lake City on October 8, 1852.

Regarding our early pioneers, Elder M. Russell Ballard said at the recent April general conference: "Each wagon and handcart was heavily laden with faith—faith in God, faith in the Restoration of His Church through the Prophet Joseph Smith, and faith that God knew where they were going and that He would see them through" ("You Have Nothing to Fear from the Journey," *Ensign*, May 1997, 60).

My pioneer forebears were followers of Christ, as were so many thousands and thousands of others. They paid a heavy price for their discipleship. But they came to know their Savior. He sent angels to minister unto them, and it eased their burdens. They came to appreciate the words of the song from the first LDS hymnbook assembled by the Prophet Joseph Smith's wife Emma: "How Firm a Foundation." The words of the third verse particularly gave them solace:

*Fear not, I am with thee; oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid.
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
.....
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.
(Hymns [Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-
day Saints, 1985], no. 85)*

Their lives exemplified faith and courage in every footstep.

In January of 1847, while the Saints were at Winter Quarters preparing to begin their westward journey, the Lord told the prophet Brigham Young: "My people must be tried in all things, that they may be prepared to receive the glory that I have for them, even the glory of Zion; and he that will not bear chastisement is not worthy of my kingdom" (D&C 136:31).

Much the same message has always been given to the children of God. In Isaiah 48:10 we read: "I have refined thee, but not with silver; I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction."

It is through meeting the challenges of our mortal journey that we become disciples of Christ. As we put our trust in him, he will bless us according to our faith. As we go through pains, sicknesses, afflictions, and temptations of every kind, our Savior will be there to succor us. He has paid the price through his atoning sacrifice to know us and to know how to help us. He knows how to deliver us safely back home. He is our Deliverer—our all!

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). According to our revelations, Christ is the light of the sun, the light of the moon, the light of the stars and of the earth. Furthermore, he is the light which "giveth [us] light, . . . who enlighteneth [our] eyes, which is the same light that quickeneth [our] understandings" (D&C 88:11). "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

So often the things that teach us the most and give us the greatest insights into God's ways happen through feelings and by the sure knowledge that pours into our thinking through the light that quickens our understanding. Recently I was pondering how I could be a better friend to my mother. She is a great lady. She is a very active and healthy person and lives an independent life. But she is alone. My father died a number of years ago, and she has become widowed again in recent years. Given that she lives by herself, loneliness is her greatest challenge.

As I was thinking about my mother, I felt a great sorrow for the difficult life she has had. She was only three when her mother died and nine when her father passed away. She was sent to live with an aunt who was kind but not motherly to her. My mother has been

forced to fend for herself throughout her life.

As I thought about this, I *knew* that the Lord is aware of the trials Mother has endured and that he loves her. I also became aware that my grandmother felt great sorrow in not having been able to mother and nurture her daughter in her growing years. I felt my grandmother's presence, and it was made known to me that as I loved and cared for my mother, her daughter, so my grandmother would be by my side and care and watch over me throughout my life.

In the gospel of Jesus Christ, we have help from both sides of the veil. The Lord tells us in the scriptures: "I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left . . . and mine angels [will be] round about you, to bear you up" (D&C 84:88).

We have a divine heritage as children of our Heavenly Father. If we remain true and faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ and endure to the end, the Lord tells us that the promised land will be ours and the blessings thereof will be ours and the riches of eternity will be ours (D&C 78:18).

I say these things as a disciple of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and in his name, amen.