

Happily Ever After: Lessons from Joseph Smith, Lehi, and the Recent Accounting Scandals

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The title of my remarks is “Happily Ever After.” If you don’t remember anything else that I say, please remember the following three points:

1. “Happily every after” does NOT happen without continuing effort.
2. We should not get discouraged when our careful plans and solutions don’t always lead to calm, clear sailing.
3. Don’t assume that the lives of those around you are cloudless and sunny just because the sun is shining where you are.

The Causes of and the Responses to the Recent Accounting Scandals

I teach accounting. I love accounting. The corporate accounting scandals of the past couple of years have generated both good news and bad news for accountants. The bad news is that the entire field of accounting has now been tainted. For example, the name Arthur Andersen, which for 89 years represented professionalism and excellence, is now the punch line of late-night comedians’ monologue jokes. And in my own home there has been a subtle but troubling increase in scrutiny from my children when asking me for lunch money or for payment for household jobs. They will still take a check from my wife, but, with my

being tainted by this whole accounting thing, my credit rating is down in their eyes, and they prefer to receive payment from me in cash!

The silver lining for accountants in all of this is that everyone has been reminded how important accounting and accountants are. Without accurate, timely, and unbiased financial reports, our capitalist system just doesn’t work very well. For example, without reliable financial reports, bankers are more uncertain about the ability of a company to repay a loan; this increased lender’s risk makes it harder for companies, especially small companies, to get loans. In addition, the crisis in investor confidence sparked by the relentless barrage of accounting scandals in 2001 and 2002 helped lower stock values in the United States by over 20 percent, eliminating more than \$2 trillion in wealth for U.S. investors. Those of you who have dismissed accountants as “bean counters” must now acknowledge that those are pretty important beans.

What were the underlying causes of these accounting scandals? Among the many candidates, let me mention two: (1) greed and (2) bad accounting rules.

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Greed has been with us for a long time. In Moses 5 we read that Cain learned from his mentor, Satan, that he might “murder and get gain” (Moses 5:31). After Cain slew his brother Abel, he gloried in what he had accomplished and said: “I am free; surely the flocks of my brother falleth into my hands” (Moses 5:33). With his ill-gotten wealth, Cain saw himself as being financially free from money worries. But this feeling of freedom was almost surely short-lived. Greed is insatiable, and it probably was not long before Cain looked with envy on other flocks and fields. In fact, his greed ensured that he would never be financially free.

With the accounting scandals we have seen greed in the corporate board room, greed among bankers who have knowingly financed some pretty unsavory plans, and greed among employees who have been more than willing to turn a blind eye to rampant corporate deceit because that deceit was helping to boost the values of the employees’ shares in their company 401(k) retirement plans. We have seen greed among the auditors who didn’t blow the whistle on financial reporting fraud for fear of losing the business of lucrative clients. We have seen greed from attorneys who chalked up many billable hours advising their corporate clients how to carefully structure their deceptive financial dealings—and who have chalked up even more billable hours helping to clean up the mess that they helped create in the first place.

For government regulators and a concerned business community eager to “fix” the corporate accounting scandals, greed is not a very promising target. Greed is with us for the long haul and cannot be legislated or regulated out of existence. So if greed can’t be eliminated, the next alternative is to improve accounting rules and auditing practices. The most visible result of this effort is the Sarbanes-Oxley Act passed by Congress in 2002. The provisions of Sarbanes-Oxley include, for example, requirements that

all large companies in the United States develop a code of executive ethics and that the head of each company personally vouch for the reliability of the company’s financial reports. In addition to Sarbanes-Oxley, the detailed accounting rules governing U.S. companies have been actively reexamined in order to close the loopholes that the accounting scandals revealed.

The hope in all of this is that the accounting problems will be solved once and for all and that the U.S. business community can live happily ever after. This is wishful thinking. Sarbanes-Oxley and the individual efforts of good business people and accountants around the country have made things better. But let’s not kid ourselves; there will be more accounting scandals. The underlying problem of greedy managers still exists, and these managers will find ways to circumvent and exploit any set of accounting rules.

So, is there no hope? Of course there is hope, *if* we remember that “happily every after” doesn’t happen through a single event, a single Congressional act, or a one-time overhaul of the accounting rules. The economic environment evolves, creative accountants cook up new ways to deceive, and a new generation of investors forgets the expensive lessons of the past. Accordingly, Congress, the regulators, and the accounting profession have to actively seek out and solve new problems as they arise. We make a mistake by getting discouraged when a past answer proves unable to satisfy all future questions. Life is about learning from the past and then relishing the opportunity to generate new answers to new questions as they arise. Ultimately the reliability of our financial reports will be greatly enhanced by our experiences with Enron, WorldCom, Arthur Andersen, and the rest—not so much by the one-time corrections made in direct response to the scandals but more through continuing application of the lessons learned from them.

We see this important point—that “happily ever after” is a continuing process and not the result of a one-time event—illustrated over and over in the scriptures. Let me give you some of my favorite examples.

Joseph Smith

As a 14-year-old boy in 1820, Joseph Smith had what he thought was a fairly straightforward question to ask the Lord. In his history Joseph mentioned three religious denominations that were predominant in the area in which he lived. He wanted to know which of those three he should join. I believe that Joseph wanted to join one of these churches and then to live “happily ever after.” Instead, he was told that he “must join none of them” (JS—H 1:19). Not only did Joseph not get a final resolution to the “which church is right” question, but now he had the added challenge of ridicule because he affirmed that he had seen a vision.

Three years later Joseph again went to the Lord with a straightforward request, as follows:

After I had retired to my bed for the night, I betook myself to prayer and supplication to Almighty God for forgiveness of all my sins and follies, and also for a manifestation to me, that I might know of my state and standing before him; for I had full confidence in obtaining a divine manifestation, as I previously had one. [JS—H 1:29]

Joseph simply wanted to know where he stood with the Lord, and he certainly wasn’t expecting a visit from Moroni to tell him of “a book deposited, written upon gold plates” (JS—H 1:34)

The life of Joseph Smith seems to be a series of these unforeseeable developments, each of which Joseph had to accept on faith without fully understanding where it would lead—from New York to Ohio to Missouri to Illinois to martyrdom. And when Joseph cried out to the Lord to better understand his rocky path, he was told:

Know thou, my son, that all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good. . . .

. . . Thy days are known, and thy years shall not be numbered less; therefore, fear not what man can do, for God shall be with you forever and ever. [D&C 122:7–9]

What can we learn from Joseph’s experiences? Yes, he did live “happily ever after,” but he had to wrestle with scoffers and false brethren and wickedness and laziness and disbelief until his death. And I suspect he is facing some of these same challenges in his continuing ministry beyond the grave. How foolish, and tragic, it would have been for Joseph to have given up in discouragement in 1825 because his heavenly manifestations in answer to prayer in 1820 and 1823 had not removed all of his life’s challenges.

Lehi

Father Lehi lived in a time of great wickedness in the city of Jerusalem. In 2 Chronicles we read the following about the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah:

He [Zedekiah] did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. . . .

Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the Lord which he had hallowed in Jerusalem.

And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers. . . .

But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy. [2 Chronicles 36:12–16]

In these frightful circumstances, Lehi prayed unto the Lord for his people—his family, his friends, and all of the people of Jerusalem (see 1 Nephi 1:5) As any of us would, I’m sure Lehi hoped that the Lord would direct him how to “fix” this problem once and for all. As any of us would be, Lehi was willing to do whatever

the Lord directed. Well, what the Lord directed did not turn out to be a one-time “fix” but instead resulted in a lifetime of preaching, teaching, and traveling. Years later, in his new home in the promised land, across the sea thousands of miles from Jerusalem, Lehi must have looked back and smiled at the completely unexpected way in which that initial prayer was answered: he was called to preach to a murderously wicked people in Jerusalem; instructed to flee into the wilderness with his family, then to travel across the most barren section of the Saudi Arabian peninsula led by a mysterious compass; and then to trust the fate of his family to an ocean voyage on a boat built by a first-time shipbuilder named Nephi.

Yes, Lehi did live “happily ever after.” However, remember that this was not without relentless effort. Lehi and his party were faced with the lack of food, and this problem wasn’t solved once and for all when Nephi made his new bow and arrows. Lehi sorrowed because of the rebelliousness of Laman and Lemuel, and he had to watch them repent and then rebel again and again, but he continued preaching to his wayward sons right to the end.

Lehi knew that there is no end to the works of the Lord (see Moses 1:38), and so there is no end to the work of His servants. Lehi pressed forward with faith in the answer to the prayer that he offered in 1 Nephi 1:14: “Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord God Almighty! . . . And, because thou art merciful, thou wilt not suffer those who come unto thee that they shall perish!” Lehi did come unto the Lord, and because he continued to come to the Lord throughout his life, in spite of unforeseen hardship and discouragement he lived “happily ever after.”

The Family of the Prodigal Son

In Luke we read Christ’s beautiful parable of the prodigal son. The parable concludes as follows:

And he [the father] said unto him [the elder brother], Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. [Luke 15:31–32]

Now this is a “happily ever after” conclusion if I have ever heard one—the prodigal is back, the elder brother has been gently shown the error of his ways, and the father has his two sons. But let’s continue with the scene. That night, after the fatted-calf leftovers have been put away in the refrigerator, everyone falls into a peaceful sleep. They arise the next morning. Is there anything left to be done? Well, let’s consider each of the three main characters. The prodigal himself has made great strides by humbling himself and returning to the house of his father, but a huge amount of follow-through remains to be done. The prodigal has to settle down, show some responsibility, and work long and hard in those fields by the side of his elder brother. The elder brother has been taught an important lesson by his father, but resentment doesn’t disappear overnight. Forever after, when there isn’t sufficient money to hire enough laborers or to buy new tools, he must stop his mind from thinking back on the family savings bundled up, hauled off, and wasted by his younger brother. As he makes himself serve his younger brother, day by day he will see toleration of his brother grow into appreciation into friendship into love. And what about the father? Maybe he needs to be more aware of showing outward gratitude to his older son, who has worked in the fields faithfully these many years.

The return of the prodigal son is just the beginning, not the end. There will be bumps in the road as the father and his two sons implement, for the rest of eternity, the lessons they learned on that joyous day when the prodigal returned. And those bumps won’t be so troubling if the three of them remember that

“happily ever after” means happily dealing with the inevitable bumps that we encounter.

Now think of some of those “happily ever after” moments in our lives: temple marriage, the arrival of a child, receiving a mission call, or the baptism of a child or a new convert. The joy at these moments is almost overwhelming. But in this joy are the seeds of danger if we have unrealistic expectations about what will come next. Write yourself a note—on your hand, in your day planner, or in your PalmPilot—reminding yourself that the innocent joy we are bathed in during these “happily ever after” moments is supposed to recede, just a little, so that we can roll up our sleeves and get to work. Savor the joy of the moment, but be realistically prepared for the ups and downs that surely lie ahead.

Let me illustrate what I mean by talking about the joy associated with the arrival of a child. Some of you have experienced the joy of holding a newborn son or daughter in the hospital. The joy is no less when you hold an adopted child for the first time. If your life were a movie, this is a moment when the music would swell, the image would grow soft and slowly fade, and words in a beautiful flowing script would appear on the screen: “And they lived happily ever after.”

Stop the music and let’s think about this for a moment. First of all, there is a 50-50 chance that the child in your arms is a little boy. More likely than not, that little boy is going to have an inexplicable fascination with fire and with sharp sticks. He is going to be able to create a blowtorch or a bomb out of common household supplies. I know this from personal experience with my own two sons. And I’m not going to list the common household supplies that can be used for explosive purposes because half the audience, the men, will remember nothing else from my talk except that list. So, back to holding that little boy and the “happily ever after” moment, we realize that it isn’t going to be a totally smooth “happily ever after.”

Yes, but what if the child is a little girl? Well, that will bring its own set of challenges—much more complex than the straightforward foolishness perpetrated by little boys. For one thing, that little girl may very well bring home one of those little boys one day, convinced that he should be her eternal companion. And in the meantime she will jam up your home phone lines, no matter how many there are, with conversations that started in school that day, that continue into the night by phone, and that will be resumed in school the next day. These are truly 24-7 conversations.

Rearing a child—boy or girl—is hard. Serving as a full-time missionary, out on the streets day in and day out, is hard. Being married and learning to set aside your selfishness for the good of the eternal partnership is hard. And we sometimes make these precious activities harder by unreasonably believing that we are failures unless every day of our lives is an error-free, fun-filled extravaganza that is leading on a straight course, without any dips or turbulence, directly to the celestial kingdom. Sometimes there are dips. Sometimes there is a substantial amount of turbulence. Dips and turbulence are normal and are not signs of personal weakness of character.

As an example of turbulence, allow me to give a brief synopsis of the history of family scripture reading in the Stice home. My wife, Ramona, and I have seven children. We have used a wide variety of approaches to family scripture reading over the years. We have used individualized reading charts (I love charts), colored pictures, and scripture discussion rather than just reading. We have done the traditional one-verse-at-a-time sequential reading circle. We have read sitting up at the breakfast table, and we have read with people sprawled in various postures on the family-room couches and floor. I have heard many verses read by sleepy, muffled voices barely able to escape from under thick blankets on a cold winter morning.

With all of this experience, one would think that the Stice family has finally got this scripture reading thing down and that we can proceed “happily ever after.” Well, two months ago we added two new little girls to our family. It had been 12 years since we had last changed a diaper. Now, with these two babies at once, we feel like we are changing three or four hundred diapers a day. To put it mildly, our family routine has been thrown for a loop. Once again we are regrouping to work out the logistics for family scripture reading. Sure, there is a little frustration because we are back dealing with an issue that I thought we had settled once and for all. I thought that, as far as family scripture reading goes, we were going to live “happily ever after.” And we will live “happily ever after” as we cooperate to enlarge our family circle and include two new babies in our scripture reading. (I wonder how these little girls will feel about charts?)

Our experience with family scripture reading also illustrates that this continuous, patient effort to make sure that we do live “happily ever after” pays off. A couple of years ago my daughter Ryan was invited to a party. From the description of the activities that were planned for this party, it was clear to her that the standards outlined in the *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlet were not going to be followed. She reports that the first thought that came into her mind was the following: “I can’t go to a party like that; my family reads the scriptures in the morning.”

I would like to make one concluding point. Just as it is important for us to remember that “happily ever after” is an ongoing process for us, we should also remember that it is an ongoing process for everyone we meet. This is hard to remember because people don’t tend to go out of their way to show us the storms and struggles in their lives. Our optimism and faith about our ability to deal with our own challenges sometimes makes us overly philosophical about the challenges faced by others.

To illustrate this point, I will tell you a sailing story. My wife’s brother Ray had a 20-foot sailboat that he kept on Lake Ontario in upstate New York. He consented to my accompanying him on a cruise from Braddock’s Bay, a little west of Rochester, to Sodus Bay, about 30 miles east of Rochester. We set out on a beautiful, sunny summer morning. The winds were coming lightly out of the west, and to my inexperienced eye it looked like a perfect day for sailing. However, because the winds had been steady out of the west for several days, the surface of the lake was undulating in long, lazy swells.

After a couple of hours of rhythmically going up and down and up and down, I became seasick and was growing increasingly apathetic about this cruise, this boat, and large bodies of water in general. Ray saw the signs of distress and wisely put me to work manning the rudder. I had to be alert because the long swells had a tendency to push the back of the boat (the stern, I guess a real sailor would say) to the right (okay, starboard). This would put us crossways to the swells, slowing our progress and, in my novice opinion, threatening to tip us over.

I gallantly manned my post at the rudder until, to my mild surprise, the rudder came loose from its attachment points on the stern of the boat. I pulled the wooden rudder up into the boat and intelligently called to Ray: “Is this supposed to come loose like this?” He had been relaxing, sunning himself on the foredeck, but the sight of me holding up the rudder spurred him to frantic action. He scrambled back to me, grabbed the rudder, and leaned out over the stern to try to reattach the thing. His haste stemmed from the fact that we were only about 300 yards from shore, and those gentle, lazy swells were now driving the rudderless sailboat inexorably toward the rocks.

I remember those anxious moments very well. There wasn’t anything that I could do to help, so I had plenty of time to look around

and think. Looming large in my thoughts was the fact that I didn't know how to swim. I looked around at the lake and the shore. I was struck by what a beautiful day it was. We were close enough to the shore that I could see people pulled off the road having picnics. I thought that they were probably chewing on a nice chicken drumstick, looking out at us with envy, saying, "Wow, look at those two guys out on that sailboat. What a beautiful day for a sail." Meanwhile, a short distance away, there we were on the boat fighting for our lives.

Well, we lived. Ray fixed the rudder. We made it to Sodus Bay, where we spent two days living on the boat, riding out a storm, and exploring. But we had been in real danger when that rudder came loose. And the fact that other people were happily picnicking just 300 yards away, admiring our sailboat, didn't lessen our danger at all. So, if your life is currently in the picnic phase and all things are going well, don't assume that all is well in those pretty sailboats that surround you. The sun may be shining, but the people in those boats could still be in extreme danger. And they may not feel comfortable coming out on deck and shouting for help. Sometimes our personal optimism causes us to overlook

the real struggles that are going on in the lives of people right next to us.

To summarize, allow me to review my three main points.

1. "Happily ever after" does *not* happen without continuing effort. For example, the financial reporting system in the United States has been improved because of the recent accounting scandals, but regulators, accountants, and the investing public must be forever watchful to counteract the development of new techniques for fraud and accounting deception.

2. We should not get discouraged when our careful plans and solutions don't always lead to calm, clear sailing. Joseph Smith, Lehi, and even the Stice family have learned that "happily ever after" means pressing forward with faith, not discouragement, while experiencing life's unforeseeable twists and turns.

3. Don't assume that the lives of those around you are cloudless and sunny just because the sun is shining where you are. Look up from your own peaceful picnic and be sensitive to the Spirit to tell you which of those nearby sailboats could really use some help.

May we all live "happily ever after" is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.