

Tenacious Faith and Selfless Service

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In the 20th chapter of Matthew, we read the interesting account of the mother of James and John approaching the Savior and requesting that her two sons be permitted to sit at His side, one on the right and one on the left, in His kingdom. The Savior explains that this is not His to give and says, “But it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father” (verse 23). When the others of the Twelve heard about this conversation, it was the source of some ill feelings toward James and John. *Indignation* is the word used in the Bible. The Savior called the Apostles together and taught them this great lesson:

Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them.

But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister;

And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant. [Matthew 20:25–27]

Recall these words of the Savior as recorded in Mark: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it” (Mark 8:35).

To lose ourselves in the service of others, which is to lose ourselves in the work of the

Lord, takes a great deal of faith—faith that He will provide for us and sustain us in the challenges and trials of that work, and faith that He will prepare the way for us to accomplish His work.

Recall with me the account of the sons of King Mosiah, who, after being changed from their wicked ways through the visit of an angel of the Lord, worked tirelessly to undo the damage they had done and to strengthen the Church. Then they desired to carry the message of salvation to their brethren, the Lamanites (see Mosiah 27). We read in Mosiah:

Now it came to pass that after the sons of Mosiah had done all these things, they took a small number with them and returned to their father, the king, and desired of him that he would grant unto them that they might, with these whom they had selected, go up to the land of Nephi that they might preach the things which they had heard, and that they might impart the word of God to their brethren, the Lamanites. . . .

Now they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the

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very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble.
[Mosiah 28:1, 3]

Mosiah inquired of the Lord concerning their request, and the Lord told Mosiah, “Let them go up, for many shall believe on their words, and they shall have eternal life; and I will deliver thy sons out of the hands of the Lamanites” (Mosiah 28:7). As the four sons of Mosiah and their companions reached the land of the Lamanites, they separated and went to different parts of the land. Ammon went to the land of Ishmael, where he was taken, bound, and carried before the king, who was King Lamoni. Ammon told the king, “I desire to dwell among this people for a time; yea, and perhaps until the day I die” (Alma 17:23). The king, being pleased with Ammon, desired that he should take one of his daughters as his wife, but Ammon declined, saying, “Nay, but I will be thy servant” (Alma 17:25). And thus began one of the most successful missions recorded in the scriptures, in which thousands of the Lamanites were converted to the truth. Ammon did not begin by calling King Lamoni to repentance or by listing the injustices of the Lamanites toward the Nephites. He began by saying, “I will be thy servant”—a profound lesson. Ammon’s faithful service to King Lamoni soon led to opportunities to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the king, to his household, and to many others.

Now recall the response of Nephi when he was informed by his father that the Lord had commanded Nephi and his brothers to return to Jerusalem to procure the brass plates from Laban. Most of you can probably quote Nephi’s response:

I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may

accomplish the thing which he commandeth them.
[1 Nephi 3:7]

This is a remarkable answer, and it warrants closer consideration. Where did Nephi come by this answer? Was he simply saying what he thought his father wanted to hear? Or, perhaps, was he merely repeating something that he had heard his father say? Most certainly not (for both questions). Nephi was a young man (probably near the same age as most of you), and he had undoubtedly already faced challenges through which he had experienced the Lord preparing a way for him to accomplish what was commanded. Nephi’s faith-filled response flowed from his own experience in relying on the Lord. I expect that many of you could proclaim a similar witness as a result of the Lord preparing the way for you.

Further in Nephi’s account, we see that after a failed attempt to get the plates, Nephi’s older brothers were ready to admit defeat and return to their camp in the wilderness. Nephi succeeded in convincing them to try again. This second attempt, in which the family’s wealth was offered to Laban, also failed, and Nephi’s older brothers were angry and started to take it out on Nephi and Sam. An angel of the Lord intervened, yet the older brothers murmured, asking, “How is it possible that the Lord will deliver Laban into our hands?” (1 Nephi 3:31). Nephi counseled, “Let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands?” (1 Nephi 4:1). Nephi showed tenacious faith.

As a side note, remember that part of the Lord’s work, for which He will prepare the way, is avoiding temptation and sin. We read in James:

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in

their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world. [James 1:27]

He will provide the way for us to keep ourselves unspotted from the world.

If we can combine unwavering faith that the Lord will provide a way for us to do His will and His work, as demonstrated by Nephi, with selflessness in the service of others, as demonstrated by Ammon, we can be instruments in the Lord's hands in furthering His purposes, and we will find real and lasting joy as we lose ourselves in His service. Let me share some favorite stories that demonstrate how God prepares the way for those who faithfully and selflessly serve Him.

Wilford Woodruff, the fourth president of the Church, was baptized on December 31, 1833, in New York after hearing the preaching of two of the elders of the Church. He was 26 years old. The next spring he was part of Zion's Camp. After the march of Zion's Camp from Kirtland to Missouri, Joseph directed that Wilford and other single men in the company remain in Missouri to help build Zion. While in Missouri, Wilford yearned to serve a mission. He went into the woods and prayed that the way might be opened for him to be called to preach the gospel. He states, "Before I arose from my knees, the spirit of the Lord rested upon me and bore witness that my prayer was heard and should be answered upon my head." He arose from his prayer and walked from the woods to the road, where he encountered Judge Elias Higbee, a faithful high priest in the Church, who said, "Brother Wilford, the spirit of the Lord tells me that you should be ordained to go and preach the gospel" (quoted in Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964], 46–47). A few days later he was ordained a priest and, having been a member of the Church less than one year, started on his mission to the southern states.

We see Brother Woodruff's faith and the Lord's blessings in the following experience. He and his companion decided to travel down the Arkansas River and then walk into Tennessee. Being unable to get passage on a boat, they cut down a three-foot-thick cottonwood tree and hollowed out a canoe. They floated 150 miles in their handmade canoe to Little Rock, Arkansas. They then tied up their canoe and started the 170-mile walk to Memphis, Tennessee, on a road that, as Brother Woodruff said, "lay through swamps, and was covered with mud and water most of the way" (quoted in *Wilford Woodruff*, 54). The first day they walked 40 miles through mud and water that was knee-deep.

On March 24, after traveling about 10 miles, Brother Woodruff became lame with a sharp pain in his knee and stopped to rest. At this point his companion left to return to Kirtland and Wilford was left alone sitting on a log in an alligator swamp. Wilford records, "I knelt down in the mud and prayed, and the Lord healed me and I went on my way rejoicing" (quoted in *Wilford Woodruff*, 55).

He continues:

On the 27th of March I arrived at Memphis, weary and hungry. I went to the best tavern in the place, kept by Mr. Josiah Jackson. I told him I was a stranger and had no money, and asked him if he would keep me over night. He inquired what my business was, and I told him I was a preacher of the gospel. He laughed and said that I did not look much like a preacher. . . .

The landlord wanted a little fun, so said he would keep me if I would preach. He wanted to see if I could preach. I must confess that by this time I became a little mischievous, and pleaded with him not to set me preaching. The more I pleaded to be excused the more determined Mr. Jackson was that I should preach. He took my valise, and the landlady got me a good supper. I sat down in a large hall to eat. Before I got through, the room began to be filled by some of the rich and fashionable people of

Memphis, dressed in their broadcloth and silk, while my appearance was such as you can imagine, after traveling through the mud as I had done. When I had finished eating, the table was carried out of the room over the heads of the people. I was placed in the corner of the room, with a stand having a Bible, hymn book, and candle on it, hemmed in by a dozen men, with the landlord in the center.

There were present some five hundred persons, who had come together, not to hear a gospel sermon, but to have some fun. I read a hymn, and asked them to sing. Not a soul would sing a word. I told them I had not the gift of singing; but with the help of the Lord, I would both pray and preach. I knelt down to pray, and the men around me dropped on their knees. I prayed to the Lord to give me His spirit and to show me the hearts of the people. I promised the Lord, in my prayer, that I would deliver to that congregation whatever He would give to me. I arose and spoke one hour and a half, and it was one of the best sermons of my life. The lives of the congregation were open to the vision of my mind, and I told them of their wicked deeds and the reward they would obtain. The men who surrounded me dropped their heads. Three minutes after I closed, I was the only person in the room.

. . . In the morning, I had a good breakfast. The landlord said if I came that way again to stop at his house, and stay as long as I might choose. [Quoted in Wilford Woodruff, 55–56]

By the end of the first year of this mission, Brother Woodruff records that he “had traveled three thousand two hundred and forty-eight miles, held one hundred and seventy meetings, baptized forty-three persons . . . , organized three branches, ordained two teachers and one deacon” (quoted in Wilford Woodruff, 58).

After completing this mission, serving two missions to the Fox Islands in eastern Canada, and being called as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, Elder Woodruff, with others of the Twelve, was called on a mission to England in 1840. After arriving in England, he was

directed through prayer to the area south of Liverpool, where he was told that “many souls were waiting for [the Lord’s] word” (quoted in Wilford Woodruff, 116).

Again I quote from Elder Woodruff’s account:

On Sunday, the 8th [of March], I preached at Frome’s Hill in the morning, at Standley Hill in the afternoon, and at John Benbow’s, Hill Farm, in the evening. The parish church that stood in the neighborhood of Brother Benbow’s, presided over by the rector of the parish, was attended during the day by only fifteen persons, while I had a large congregation, estimated to number a thousand, attend my meetings through the day and evening.

When I arose to speak at Brother Benbow’s house, a man entered the door and informed me that he was a constable, and had been sent by the rector of the parish with a warrant to arrest me. I asked him, “For what crime?” He said, “For preaching to the people.” I told him that I, as well as the rector, had a license for preaching the gospel to the people, and that if he would take a chair I would wait upon him after meeting. He took my chair and sat beside me. For an hour and a quarter I preached the first principles of the everlasting gospel. The power of God rested upon me, the spirit filled the house, and the people were convinced. At the close of the meeting I opened the door for baptism, and seven offered themselves. Among the number were four preachers and the constable. The latter arose and said, “Mr. Woodruff, I would like to be baptized.” I told him I would like to baptize him. I went down into the pool and baptized the seven. We then came together. I confirmed thirteen, administered the Sacrament, and we all rejoiced together.

The constable went to the rector and told him that if he wanted Mr. Woodruff taken for preaching the gospel, he must go himself and serve the writ; for he had heard him preach the only true gospel sermon he had ever listened to in his life. The rector did not know what to make of it, so he sent two clerks of the Church of England as spies, to attend our meeting, and find out what we did preach. They

both were pricked in their hearts, received the word of the Lord gladly, and were baptized and confirmed members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The rector became alarmed, and did not venture to send anybody else. [Quoted in Wilford Woodruff, 117–118]

In the eight months time he preached in this area, Elder Woodruff was instrumental in bringing more than 1,800 souls into the Church. Certainly Elder Woodruff was an exceptional example of unwavering faith and selfless service.

Now permit me to relate some personal and family stories. First a brief story from my own mission to the south of France. My companion and I had labored some time in the town of Périgueux and had met with limited success. One evening, after a long day of tracting, we were ready to return to our apartment, but we decided to knock on the doors of one last street. Here we met a great family of three: a father, a mother, and a teenage daughter—the De Mets family—who were interested in hearing our message. The father, a large man, was a former police officer who had been injured in the line of duty and was paralyzed from the waist down. We taught the family about the restored gospel and returned to teach them a couple of more times. The Spirit was working on them, and they were receiving the word.

Then came the fateful announcement that many European missionaries (and missionaries elsewhere, I'm sure) hate to hear: the family announced that they were leaving on their annual vacation and they would be gone for a whole month. A month was a long time, and we were worried that the small flame of testimony would flicker and fade. All we could do was challenge them to read the Book of Mormon and to pray while they were away. They accepted the challenge. And while they were away we, too, prayed.

As soon as they returned, we anxiously and somewhat nervously went to their home. They

told us that when they opened the door to their hotel room, they saw a picture of the Savior on the wall, and seeing that picture reminded them of their commitment to study and pray. They were baptized shortly thereafter. We rented a small pool in a physical therapy office for our baptisms. Sister De Mets was baptized first. Brother De Mets was baptized next. To baptize him, we helped him onto a chair, which we then lifted into the pool. Following the baptismal prayer, one elder tipped the chair backward while the other held Brother De Mets' legs to keep them underwater. The daughter was baptized after her parents. We returned to the branch meeting hall, where all three were confirmed and we all enjoyed an outpouring of the Spirit.

In the late 1940s (which, by the way, was a long time before I was born) my parents and my three oldest brothers were living in Sugar City, Idaho. My father's carpentry business was beginning to grow, they had just bought a house, and my father and mother were both busily engaged in their Church callings.

Their bishop came to my father and said he had a problem. "Why did you come to me?" asked my father.

The bishop replied, "Because you are my problem. I can't sleep at night because I can't stop thinking about you. You see, I received a call a few weeks ago from Salt Lake. The Brethren wanted you to go on a building mission to Tonga." (My father had served a proselyting mission there as a young man.) The bishop continued, "I told them that I didn't think you should go because you had just moved into a home that you are buying, you had three small children, you were just getting going in your business, and you were needed in the ward. Now, if I'm going to get any sleep, you'll have to call Salt Lake and tell them what you want to do."

My father telephoned Salt Lake and accepted the call, and he and my mother began preparations to leave. They turned their home back to

the seller, my father turned over his business contracts to another carpenter in the town, and they sold everything they had. My brothers said, "Daddy even sold our beds." Then, as a family, they left on their mission to help build Liahona High School in Nuku'alofa, Tonga.

My father recounts the following story, which occurred early in the construction of the school:

We needed rock for aggregate for the blocks we were making to build the Liahona School. We had taken the compressor out to the quarry and drilled many holes so we could put in dynamite and blast out the rock to be crushed in our small crusher.

President Dunn asked me to go to the government quarry and pick up the licensed dynamite expert of the Tongan Government and take him over to our quarry to get our blasting done.

At the appointed time next morning (about sun up) I left for the government quarry about five miles away. It was raining quite hard and became more intense as time passed. By the time I reached the [government office] it was raining so hard I couldn't see through the windshield of the jeep station wagon and I had to look out the side window to stay on the road.

I confronted the man I was to pick up but he protested because of the rain. I felt inclined to persist and in so doing we loaded up his gear and dynamite and started out. The rain continued making it almost impossible to drive. As we had to pass by Liahona I drove into the building area and stopped, but I was uneasy and felt that I should continue on to our quarry about a mile away.

I started the motor again and we were on our way. My passenger, for the most part, was silent. Upon reaching the gate to the fence around the quarry I stopped and turned off the ignition. It stopped raining instantly. My passenger, looking greatly surprised, got out and opened the gate. We drove down into the quarry, set the dynamite and fired it, getting out a good quantity of rock.

We gathered up the gear and put it into the jeep. I got into the jeep and turned on the ignition.

*The motor started and so did the rain. [Thomas P. Wilding, *History of Thomas Preston Wilding*, 1988, in author's possession, 45]*

One last story from my father's account of this mission:

During a conference session while Apostle Cowley was in Tonga in 1950, I was sitting on the stage, with my back to the opening that went all the way around the thatched roof at the eave line for ventilation.

A fellow tapped me on the shoulder and beckoned me to come out and talk with him. He wanted me to get another missionary and go to his home to administer to his wife who was very ill. The fellow was a member of the LDS Church but he had become inactive. His wife was not a member.

When we two Elders arrived at his home [we saw that] they had built a little house in back of their home for his wife. It is a Tongan custom to build these little one room houses about eight feet square as a place to die.

I was told that the doctors had told them there wasn't anything they could do for her and that the Tongan remedies did not help and that they wanted us to administer to her so she wouldn't die.

Family members had gathered and were sitting on mats around the entrance of the little house. I think all were non-members. I talked to them for some time explaining the priesthood ordinance of anointing and laying on of hands and the pronouncement of blessings. I told them that the Lord should not be mocked and that the sick were healed by faith, the power of the priesthood and the will of our Father in Heaven. I then asked if they still wanted me to administer to the sick lady. They did.

We Elders went into the little house. The lady was being held in the sitting position by a sister. She was too weak to sit by herself, her eyes had a glossy look and she was having much difficulty breathing. We knelt and had prayer. I asked the Lord to grant us His Spirit to influence us to speak His will and to bless the family members that they would know of His will. We knelt by the sick lady,

and my companion anointed her head with the consecrated oil and then we both placed our hands on her head and I spoke the words of the blessing promising her that she would get well.

The next Sunday I visited the Branch where this lady was also a visitor being completely well. She asked to be baptized. [History, 48–49]

It is my witness that if we show tenacious faith and are prepared to lose ourselves in service, our Father in Heaven will prepare the way for us to accomplish all that He asks of us. I pray that we can be instruments in our Father in Heaven's hands in doing His will and that we will find great and eternal joy in His service. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.