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Faith of Our Fathers

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Faith of Our Fathers

HENRY B. EYRING

I am grateful to be with you in this Campus Education Week of the Church Educational System. Most of us in attendance had the chance to read the sixty-six-page class schedule, not counting the covers, before we came. It is worth careful study. It describes an offering that has grown to more than 1000 classes in this seventy-fourth year, with 180 faculty members and more than 600 volunteers. The description of what has been accomplished and will be provided fills our hearts with gratitude for those who have spent more hours than I can imagine to plan this great enterprise, for teachers who have invested lifetimes preparing for their presentations, and for those who will make it so enjoyable, including hundreds of BYU employees. For the Church Educational System and for all of us I ask that President Merrill J. Bateman extend our thanks to the people of BYU who in this Campus Education Week bless our lives and may not be able to be with us to hear our thanks.

That excellent class schedule also presents our theme: “Faith of Our Fathers,” chosen in part because of the centennial of the state of Utah. Here is what it suggests we consider:

Much could be said about the toil and hardship endured by the Saints in their westward migration. Our focus is on their faith, obedience, and steadfastness in the face of immense difficulty and uncertainty. Although their physical circumstances were much different than ours, the personal trials and challenges may, in fact, be very similar.

That set me to thinking about similarities in our lives. If I could visit with each of you and listen to the story of your life and what you know of your ancestors’ lives, my guess is that we would discover great differences. Each life is unique. That struck me as I reread journals and histories that have been passed down through the generations, describing lives of people as diverse as that of Mary Bommeli, my great-grandmother, and of Wilford Woodruff, a prophet of God. Yet I see a thread of faith, a

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particular faith, running in the lives of those heroes of the Restoration whose steadfastness and courage leave us in awe. Perhaps if we examine that thread today, we may find it in our own lives and strengthen it.

Those histories reveal as much about faith from what people did as from what they declared in words. Different as were their challenges and their responses, I thought I saw a recurring pattern. Here it is.

They shared a faith that the kingdom of God had been established for the last time, that it would triumph over great opposition and would become glorious in preparation for the day when the Savior would come to accept it, that it would stand forever, and that theirs was a rare privilege to have been called out of the world to build it.

They were sure that they were establishing Zion, a place of refuge. It is not surprising then that they plead for that Zion and that they expected not only to build it but to enjoy living in it. What is surprising is that their faith increased when they pleaded for Zion to be established even as they saw times of safety turn to times of testing.

Listen to the Prophet Joseph's pleadings in a letter from Kirtland to the exiled Saints in Missouri, December 10, 1833:

Now hear the prayer of your unworthy brother in the new and everlasting covenant:—O My God! Thou who hast called and chosen a few, through Thy weak instrument, by commandment, and sent them to Missouri, a place which Thou didst call Zion, and commanded Thy servants to consecrate it unto Thyself for a place of refuge and safety for the gathering of Thy Saints, to be built up a holy city unto Thyself; and as Thou hast said that no other place should be appointed like unto this, therefore, I ask Thee in the name of Jesus Christ, to return Thy people unto their houses and their inheritances, to enjoy the fruit of their labors; that all the waste places may be built up; that all the enemies of Thy people, who will not repent and turn unto Thee may

be destroyed from off the face of the land; and let a house be built and established unto Thy name; and let all the losses that Thy people have sustained, be rewarded unto them, even more than four-fold, that the borders of Zion may be enlarged forever; and let her be established no more to be thrown down; and let all thy Saints, when they are scattered, as sheep, and are persecuted, flee unto Zion, and be established in the midst of her; and let her be organized according to Thy law; and let this prayer ever be recorded before Thy face. Give Thy Holy Spirit unto my brethren, unto whom I write; send Thine angels to guard them, and deliver them from all evil; and when they turn their faces toward Zion, and bow down before Thee and pray, may their sins never come up before Thy face, neither have place in the book of Thy remembrance; and may they depart from all their iniquities. Provide food for them as Thou doest for the ravens; provide clothing to cover their nakedness, and houses that they may dwell therein; give unto them friends in abundance, and let their names be recorded in the Lamb's book of life, eternally before Thy face. Amen. [HC 1:456]

Now, after such a pleading, listen to the faith in this account, written by the Prophet Joseph on March 1, 1842, after the sorrows of Missouri and in the promise of Nauvoo. See if disappointment has dimmed faith.

We next settled in Caldwell and Daviess counties, where we made large and extensive settlements, thinking to free ourselves from the power of oppression, by settling in new counties, with very few inhabitants in them; but here we were not allowed to live in peace, but in 1838 we were again attacked by mobs, an exterminating order was issued by Governor Boggs, and under the sanction of law, an organized banditti ranged through the country, robbed us of our cattle, sheep, hogs, &c., many of our people were murdered in cold blood, the chastity of our women was violated, and we were forced to sign away our property at the point of the sword; and after enduring every indignity that could be heaped upon us by an inhuman, ungodly

band of marauders, from twelve to fifteen thousand souls, men, women, and children were driven from their own firesides, and from lands to which they had warrantee deeds, houseless, friendless, and homeless (in the depths of winter) to wander as exiles on the earth, or to seek an asylum in a more genial clime, and among a less barbarous people. Many sickened and died in consequence of the cold and hardships they had to endure; many wives were left widows, and children, orphans, and destitute.

The statement then goes on to say:

In the situation before alluded to, we arrived in the state of Illinois in 1839, where we found a hospitable people and a friendly home: a people who were willing to be governed by the principles of law and humanity. We have commenced to build a city called "Nauvoo," in Hancock county. We number from six to eight thousand here, besides vast numbers in the county around, and in almost every county of the state. We have a city charter granted us, and charter for a Legion, the troops of which now number 1,500. We have also a charter for a University, for an Agricultural and Manufacturing Society, have our own laws and administrators, and possess all the privileges that other free and enlightened citizens enjoy.

Persecution has not stopped the progress of truth, but has only added fuel to the flame, it has spread with increasing rapidity. Proud of the cause which they have espoused, and conscious of our innocence, and of the truth of their system, amidst calumny and reproach, have the Elders of this Church gone forth, and planted the Gospel in almost every state in the Union; it has penetrated our cities, it has spread over our villages, and has caused thousands of our intelligent, noble, and patriotic citizens to obey its divine mandates, and be governed by its sacred truths. It has also spread into England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, where, in the year 1840, a few of our missionaries were sent, and over five thousand joined the Standard of Truth; there are numbers now joining in every land.

Our missionaries are going forth to different nations, and in Germany, Palestine, New Holland, Australia, the East Indies, and other places, the Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done. ["The Wentworth Letter," HC 4:539–40]

The Prophet and the faithful Saints expected trials. They knew the Lord would deliver them. They believed what Nephi taught:

But behold, I, Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance. [1 Nephi 1:20]

And they knew they would need such deliverance time and time again, as opposition would rise. They knew that the times of peace would be temporary, and so made of them times of gratitude and of boldness to go forward with the work.

As the leaders grew in faith through the cycles of opposition and deliverance followed by more opposition, so did the people. One was my great-grandmother, Mary Bommeli, a little black-eyed, teenage convert from Switzerland when she crossed the plains. I recently stood in the area of her childhood. I had always pictured it as on the side of an alp, but I was wrong. It is in the green rolling hills of northern Switzerland, with rich farmland and productive vineyards. I wish we had been able to find the house where the missionaries taught her and her family and where they all came to know that the gospel of Jesus Christ

and the kingdom of God had been restored and where they chose to give their lives to the kingdom—the older boys to go on missions and the rest to gather to America to build Zion. They left a beautiful place of safety for the unknown.

Mary chose to let the others go first without her. She knew she could make the money for passage with her weaving but that the others could not. She chose to let them go on missions and to America using all the money they could get from selling all they owned. She went alone from city to city weaving cloth for women, trusting in God. She also got herself arrested for preaching the gospel where it was illegal in Germany because she could not contain the good news within her.

She got to America, joined a pioneer company, and walked across the plains. She described that crossing on foot as one of the happiest times of her life. On that walk she met a returning missionary, Henry Eyring. They went in front of the wagon train to be clear of the dust. They described that trek not as a trial but as a time of joy as they told each other what a remarkable chance was theirs to have been found by the servants of God and to be allowed to help build the kingdom of God in the last days. They fell in love. For them, that passage was not a trial but a time of refreshing, of refuge. They chose to see in it a respite, he from his five-year mission and she from working her way alone from Switzerland. It was their youthful faith that made it a romantic stroll.

For Mary and for Henry, the trials began in the promised land. After their marriage, only Mary's weaving kept them from starvation. Henry was university-trained in Germany but ignorant of the skills needed to pioneer in the wilderness. They built a small home. Neither of them knew how to make adobe bricks. When the rains came, the roof leaked and then a wall collapsed. It fell on Mary, who was pregnant with their first child. Only the

remarkable fact that her loom protected her from the falling bricks saved her from greater harm. But the child she was carrying was injured. He was born with physical handicaps from which he was delivered only by death.

With ceaseless labor and prayers they began to rise from poverty, in Davis County and in Salt Lake City. But that time of peace was cut short. President Brigham Young suggested that they move to St. George. They went to the unknown again, built homes, planted gardens, and served in the kingdom. Henry became the mayor of St. George for a time, a counselor in the stake presidency, and manager of the cooperative store. They helped build the St. George Temple, and Mary found joy in officiating there for twelve years. She wrote of that service as if she had felt the peace the Lord promised when he commanded that a temple be built long before. This is the promise from the book of Haggai in the Old Testament:

The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts. [Haggai 2:9]

But Mary heard what she considered a call from an apostle to move on from that time of peace. It was suggested that they join in the establishment of the Mormon colonies in northern Mexico. They went believing that the Lord would sustain them in his service. As nearly as I can sense from what they wrote about the move, they trusted that this promise applied to them:

There I will be also, for I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up. [D&C 84:88]

They saw more safety going forward to unknown service in the kingdom than in staying with the known and the comfortable. They

left what had become for them a Zion to help the Lord build another—not out of blind obedience, since they were invited and not called, but in faith that the wisest course for them was to go where they might best build the kingdom.

In Mexico the pattern of deliverance repeated itself for them. In time they were blessed with homes and gardens. Henry went away on a mission to the south in Mexico, as he had previously done from Utah to Germany, and he built up the cooperative store in Colonia Juarez as he had in St. George. Mary again gave tireless service in Relief Society. Their work and their faith again brought a taste of the peace that will be in the city of Zion. And then Henry died. The Mexican Revolution came. Mary and her family walked away from all they had built as they made their exodus to the United States. She died a widow, a refugee from that idyllic time in Mexico, yet full of faith in the destiny of the kingdom of God and in its head, Jesus Christ, as her deliverer.

Mary's story is worth telling not because it is exceptional but because it isn't. The growth in her faith seemed as constant in times of deliverance as it was in times of trial. That seems to have been true for each pioneer whose story I read. It seems to me that was true because their faith was based on an understanding of why God allows us to pass into such close places and how he delivers us. The "how" springs from the "why." The why is that our loving Heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, wish for us to be sanctified that we may have eternal life with them. That requires our being cleansed through faith in Jesus Christ, repenting because of that faith, and proving ourselves faithful to the covenants they offer us only through their mortal servants in the kingdom of God. Knowing their loving purpose makes it easier to understand both why they allow trials and how they deliver us.

They could make all the rough places smooth in building the kingdom and in our lives. They allow trials to come even when we are faithful because they love us. There are some scriptures that now seem clearer to me after reading those pioneer journals.

This one is from D&C 105:19:

I have heard their prayers, and will accept their offering; and it is expedient in me that they should be brought thus far for a trial of their faith.

Here is another we have heard often, from Ether 12:6:

And now, I, Moroni, would speak somewhat concerning these things; I would show unto the world that faith is things which are hoped for and not seen; wherefore, dispute not because ye see not, for ye receive no witness until after the trial of your faith.

But for me, the greatest comfort comes from this one in D&C 95:1:

Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you whom I love, and whom I love I also chasten that their sins may be forgiven, for with the chastisement I prepare a way for their deliverance in all things out of temptation, and I have loved you.

I have come to understand that to try our faith is not simply to test it but to strengthen it, that the witness which comes after the testing strengthens that faith, and that God's preparation includes in the plan for deliverance the timing that will best strengthen our faith.

It is clear that the quickest deliverance does not always go to those with the most faith. A remarkable example of immediate deliverance is the preservation of the children of Israel not when they were full of faith but when they murmured. You remember their complaint and the Lord's answer through Moses:

Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.

And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. [Exodus 14:12–13]

A loving father may have given speedy deliverance to help their wavering faith, but those with greater faith may gain more from delay. At least that seems to be the lot of some of the best and most faithful people. It is for such faithful Saints that the Lord may be giving reassurance in the words of D&C 58:3–4:

Ye cannot behold with your natural eyes, for the present time, the design of your God concerning those things which shall come hereafter, and the glory which shall follow after much tribulation.

For after much tribulation come the blessings. Wherefore the day cometh that ye shall be crowned with much glory; the hour is not yet, but is nigh at hand.

The Lord’s “nigh at hand” is often not as nigh as we would choose. But he sometimes honors the most faithful by offering the chance to share his view of time. And we stand in awe of those who patiently bow to the Lord’s longer view, in the process becoming more like him, beginning to see as he sees.

Some of our trials do not end in this life. For that, our Lord promises us strength to endure this way:

And now, O my son Helaman, behold, thou art in thy youth, and therefore, I beseech of thee that thou wilt hear my words and learn of me; for I do know that whosoever shall put their trust in God shall be supported in their trials, and their troubles, and their afflictions, and shall be lifted up at the last day. [Alma 36:3]

The Savior himself chose troubles and afflictions so that he could make us that promise of perfect understanding. All who trust him for strength to endure to the end of life treasure these words:

And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.

Now the Spirit knoweth all things; nevertheless the Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people, that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance; and now behold, this is the testimony which is in me. [Alma 7:12–13]

Those words, “That he might blot out their transgressions,” remind us of the sweetest and the surest deliverance of all. Of all the tests we face, none hurts more than the death of a loved one or the misery of sin. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ all are delivered from death, and all will rise in the Resurrection, regardless of their transgressions. And by the Atonement of Jesus Christ, all may gain peace in this life washed clean from the sorrows of sin and have hope of a glorious resurrection with the just.

I listened to a man describe what it meant to his family to be built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. For them it was to know that their son would rise in the Resurrection; there he could finish the training of his infant son from whom he had been parted by death. Through their faith in the Savior, the family was delivered from sorrow and lifted to a place of peace. Gratitude for such deliverance appears often in the histories of pioneers, partly because death struck so often so early.

We find less mention of the deliverance from sin, since that is so private a matter. But it was there as surely as it is in our lives. Each

of us has in some degree felt the deliverance described in the history of Alma the Younger. You remember his words, which gladden us every time we hear them and bring back floods of gratitude for our own deliverance:

And now, behold, when I thought this, I could remember my pains no more; yea, I was harrowed up by the memory of my sins no more.

And oh, what joy, and what marvelous light I did behold; yea, my soul was filled with joy as exceeding as was my pain!

Yea, I say unto you, my son, that there could be nothing so exquisite and so bitter as were my pains. Yea, and again I say unto you, my son, that on the other hand, there can be nothing so exquisite and sweet as was my joy.

Yea, methought I saw, even as our father Lehi saw, God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels, in the attitude of singing and praising their God; yea, and my soul did long to be there. [Alma 36:19–22]

The peace of forgiveness and of hope in the Resurrection can come wherever we are. The peace that passeth understanding does not depend on a geographic place. The place of refuge is finally in our hearts. The Lord had at least two meanings when he said in D&C 97:21, “Therefore, verily, thus saith the Lord, let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion—the pure in heart.” Zion is where the pure in heart are gathered; that gathering creates a Zion. But in one person whose heart is cleansed by the Atonement and filled with the hope of eternal life there is a place of peace and refuge, too.

So we can choose to make our days here in this Campus Education Week a time of refreshing and this place a refuge. The people I thanked as I began today—the planners, the teachers, the workers—all of them have labored to make this such a time and such a place for us. I thanked them not only because they deserved it, but because we needed to offer the thanks. Our gratitude for them can

turn our thoughts to gratitude to the Savior, for whom they did this more than they did it for us. And when our thoughts turn to him in gratitude and in faith, the Holy Spirit can bring peace to our hearts.

With that feeling of peace comes a desire to serve. That is why those who have felt the blessings of baptism and confirmation feel impelled to share the gospel with others. That’s why Mary Bommeli went to jail. Now, we can’t get to all the activities and classes described in those sixty-six pages of the class schedule. But in whatever class we find ourselves, we can do what one of those hero pioneers might have done. We can remember the Savior and that we are blessed to be in his kingdom, and we can have in our hearts the question “How would the Master have me use something from this hour to serve him?” If we ask that in faith, with determination to follow the promptings that come from the Holy Spirit, those promptings will come. We will hear things we would not have heard and feel things we would not have felt.

We will go out from this place with plans to help build the kingdom. We will go out refreshed in our hearts and surer that what our pioneers believed was true: the kingdom of God has been restored and we are blessed as the few among our Father’s myriad children to build it for the Master for the last time.

If we do that, another blessing will come from these days. Some words will become as certain to us as they were to those pioneers. Listen to them now, from D&C 45:66–71:

And it shall be called the New Jerusalem, a land of peace, a city of refuge, a place of safety for the saints of the Most High God;

And the glory of the Lord shall be there, and the terror of the Lord also shall be there, insomuch that the wicked will not come unto it, and it shall be called Zion.

And it shall come to pass among the wicked, that every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must needs flee unto Zion for safety.

And there shall be gathered unto it out of every nation under heaven; and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war one with another.

And it shall be said among the wicked: Let us not go up to battle against Zion, for the inhabitants of Zion are terrible; wherefore we cannot stand.

And it shall come to pass that the righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy.

I testify that God the Father lives. I testify that Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father in

the flesh, came to the earth in the meridian of time, atoned for our sins, and established his kingdom with apostles and prophets. I know, as surely as if I had been there, that God the Father and the Savior appeared to the boy Joseph Smith; that they sent authorized servants to restore all the keys of the kingdom of God for the last time; and that those keys now are held by President Gordon B. Hinckley and exercised for the benefit of our Heavenly Father's children only in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I testify that this is the kingdom seen by prophets since the beginning and that our Savior is at its head, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.