RETURN

Four Phases of Our Mortal Journey Home

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To Mary,

my eternal companion, and
our eternal family
And he also saw other multitudes feeling their way towards that great and spacious building. And it came to pass that many were drowned in the depths of the fountain; and many were lost from his view, wandering in strange roads.

1 Nephi 8:31–32

And the mists of darkness are the temptations of the devil, which blindeth the eyes, and hardeneth the hearts of the children of men, and leadeth them away into broad roads, that they perish and are lost.

1 Nephi 12:17

Chapter Twenty-Four

True to Ourselves and Our Mission

While bearing my testimony in the presence of the First Presidency and the Twelve in my first meeting as a General Authority, I noticed something very interesting. Displayed on the walls of the meeting room in the Salt Lake Temple were paintings of all the Presidents of the Church of this dispensation, from Joseph Smith to Spencer W. Kimball. On the wall opposite Joseph’s painting was a portrait of Hyrum Smith. I wondered, Why Hyrum? During my testimony I found myself thinking, Oliver, Oliver, where are you?

Afterwards I went to a dear friend, Elder Bruce R. McConkie, and asked, “Why would I have thought that?”

He held up his scriptures and said, “Your scriptures are the same as mine.” He knew the answer was there. So I searched.

Later I went back to him and said, “It is true. The place of Oliver Cowdery was given to Hyrum Smith” (see D&C 124:94–95).

It is incredible that Oliver would fall away from the Church when you think of all he saw the Prophet Joseph Smith do and all
he heard him say. He served as Joseph’s scribe. He was a witness to the plates. He was with Joseph on that marvelous day, April 3, 1836, when Jesus, Moses, Elias, and Elijah appeared to them in the Kirtland Temple. He was with Joseph day in and day out, as companion, confidant, and friend. And while he was true to his witness of the Book of Mormon and eventually came back into the Church, he lost his place as the second elder of the Church because he was not always true to himself and to his mission.

Now every time I visit that room in the Salt Lake Temple, I am reminded of the importance of being faithful to the end. Like Oliver, if we are not careful and true to who we really are, we can lose our opportunity to participate in this work, and, if we do not come back, jeopardize our place in the kingdom.

Mists of Darkness

We don’t know the end from the beginning. That is, we don’t know what opportunities, adventures, and trials we have ahead of us. For example, we don’t know whether our greatest test will be morality, an attitude about a doctrine, losing the Spirit because we refuse to forgive someone, or the illness, injury, or death of a loved one. But we do know that as we press forward each of us will be tested in some way. To recollect Nephi’s vision of the pathway through life, all of us will find ourselves in the mists of darkness—forging ahead through experiences and circumstances that can deceive us, distort our perspective, and make it easy to wander off into broad and strange roads. Only when we hold on to the word of God, including the promptings of the Holy Ghost in our own hearts and minds, will we be able to stay on the path, take our rightful place, and receive our eternal reward.

The Lesson of Samuel Brannan

To stay on the path, we must heed more than just our own desires and feelings. In my office hangs a painting by Arnold Friberg of the ship *Brooklyn*. It serves as a sad reminder of the importance of being true to ourselves and our missions, and it clearly demonstrates the importance of following the prophets.

Samuel Brannan was a naturally gifted leader; he could have been a great leader. One historian called him “a man of more ability and zeal than high principle.”1 Interestingly enough, he once served as an apprentice to Oliver Cowdery in the Church’s printing office.2

In 1846, as the Saints prepared to move west, Brigham Young called Orson Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, to organize a group of Saints in the northeastern United States to gather to the West under the leadership of Samuel Brannan. They were to sail around Cape Horn at the tip of South America, land in California, and then travel overland to meet Brigham Young. The prophet wanted to explore all possible options for leading the Saints west, and Brother Brannan was entrusted by the Lord to lead this part of the effort.

On February 4, 1846, Brannan and 238 men, women, and children set sail on the ship *Brooklyn* from New York. If they thought their journey westward would be easier than that of the Saints who went by land, they were quickly disappointed. Terrible storms tried the patience and faith of all those aboard; the journey was horrendous. But the Saints remained faithful in their afflictions, surprising the crew as they sang the hymns of Zion during a life-threatening storm.

be imagined," wrote one historian. Brannan “believed he’d marked the true site for Zion.”

Brannan must have been filled with desire and enthusiasm to succeed in his assignment. Certainly he had paid a dear price to find this new “Bountiful” in the West. He journeyed east to share his discovery with Brigham Young, meeting the prophet’s party in Green River, Wyoming, on June 30, 1847. We can imagine the conviction with which he made his case to have the Saints settle in the fertile climes of California rather than the barren deserts of Utah. But the prophet would not budge from the vision that had been given him: The Saints were to settle in the Rocky Mountains.5

This was Brannan’s moment of truth, the test that would determine whether he would complete the mission that had been given him. Brannan chose to go his own way rather than follow the prophet, and, as Robert Frost would say, that made all the difference.6

Brannan returned to California in August 1847, disappointed and defiant. Soon gold was discovered in California, making Brannan and some other Church members suddenly wealthy. Brannan collected tithes of the members, but he refused to send the tithing of the California Saints to Salt Lake. The Church even sent one of the Twelve to retrieve it, but Brannan refused to give it up, keeping the money for his own purposes. “You tell Brother Young . . . that I’ll give up the Lord’s money when he sends me a receipt signed by the Lord,” Brannan is reported to have said.7

Brannan was excommunicated from the Church and left to

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himself. He prospered for a season, engaging in everything from mining gold, to establishing a mill, to speculating in real estate, to operating a distillery. He became California’s first millionaire and one of the wealthiest men in the West.8

But over time his fortunes changed. He lost his wife and his wealth. Known for his drunkenness, he died a penniless pauper in Mexico. His body lay unclaimed for sixteen months.9

Samuel Brannan had forgotten who he was and what he was about. First disappointed and then defiant, he failed to be true to himself and his mission and forfeited the opportunity to return to his heavenly home with honor.

Many of the Saints who arrived on the ship Brooklyn followed Brannan out of the Church, but some remained valiant. William and Jane Glover, for example, journeyed to Salt Lake City with their children and donated to the building of the Salt Lake Temple five thousand dollars in gold they had mined. Their donations, along with those of other Saints returning from California, “probably saved the Mormon money system and provided much of the liquid capital essential for continued economic growth.”10 They remembered who they were and what their mission was.

Wishes and Dreams Unfulfilled

The knowledge of who we are and what our mission is may come to us gradually as we develop our talents and gifts and listen to the promptings of the Spirit. Staying in tune with the Spirit will help us to choose wisely as we make our way in life.

Like millions of other young boys I had a dream of playing major league baseball. This was neither an idle dream nor a fleeting desire—it was a compelling drive occupying my youthful years. Hours of practicing and playing baseball competitively filled countless afternoons as I honed my athletic skills and followed advice from world-class players and coaches. The emotional ups and downs were punctuated with the elation of victory and the agony of defeat.

We have to understand that our hopes, dreams, and aspirations may not be fulfilled in our lives. Both our successes and our failures are the maturing moments of our life. What we learn from these experiences shapes our perspective. There are many reasons for our not achieving all of the goals we set for ourselves. Our goals may be unrealistic and beyond our mental, physical, or emotional capabilities. Or our goals may conflict with the natural evolution of circumstances around us, such as world events, social interactions, or the choices of others that are beyond our control.

My sister was one of the few people in the world to know of my dreams and disappointments. Many years ago, she gave me a card with a picture of a boy about ten years old, mitt in hand and bat slung over his shoulder, standing at the entrance to a stadium. My caring sister recognized her little brother’s boyhood dream that had not been fulfilled. She wrote tender words of comfort on the back of the picture: “I could not resist this card. It is so you!!! . . . I love you and think of you often.”

The picture was a poignant reminder of a dream not realized—to one day play for my favorite team, the New York Yankees, in Yankee Stadium. I have kept that card for many years because the picture teaches a valuable lesson: Don’t live your life in regrets. Don’t dwell on the past, even on the good things that you could not

or chose not to do. My mother taught me, “If the Lord wants you to be a ball player, you will be. Follow where the Spirit takes you!”

There will be times in our lives when things don’t go as we plan, but the Lord’s plan is greater than we can even dream. When disappointments come into our lives, it is well to remember that we should learn from our experiences, both successes and failures, and be grateful for being able to move joyfully forward with faith and hope.

I have often pondered what would have happened in my life if I had chosen to pursue a baseball career. If I had been successful in that athletic career, I would never have had all of the other exciting opportunities I had to work for international companies and, most important, to serve the Lord to the extent that has been my privilege. Sometimes unrealized dreams or prayers not answered in the way we hoped are blessings in disguise that fulfill eternal purposes in our lives.

As we look to the future and leave behind what is past, secure in the guidance of the Spirit, we will find joy in our life well beyond what might have been. When we remember who we are and are true to ourselves and to our mission, we enjoy life as it is and are enabled to continue faithful to the end.

TRUE AND FAITHFUL TO THE END

As sons and daughters of God, each of us left our heavenly home, having been called on a mortal mission for a noble purpose. Each of us should pray for guidance to know what we were sent to earth to accomplish—and for the strength and wisdom to remain true and faithful to the end.

It is part of the plan to have experiences that test, strengthen, and refine us. Most of these experiences can also distract us from completing our mortal mission by tempting us to let go of God’s
word in the scriptures, in the teachings of the living prophets, and the promptings of the Holy Ghost. The Savior warned that “the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things” can “choke the word” (Mark 4:19).

May we listen to the Spirit and remember who we are and what we are here to do—to follow the Savior and His servants and return with honor. The Lord will direct us in our life’s choices as we seek the guidance of His Spirit. Then, true to ourselves and our mission, we will be encircled in the arms of our loving Father and His Beloved Son and receive that sweet commendation, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: . . . enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

CHECKPOINTS

✓ How well do I understand my mission in life?
✓ Do I seek the guidance of the Spirit in the choices I make to fulfill my mission?
✓ How much do I allow myself to be distracted from that mission by the vain things of the world or other temptations?