

“MIRACLES WORKED BY SMALL MEANS”

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Commenting in 1869 on the Mormon Battalion, Wilford Woodruff said, “When the Mormon Battalion was called for by the United States, we were in exile, having been driven from our homes, our country and graves of our fathers, from lands we had bought from the United States government for our religion, into the wilderness. The government made a demand upon us for 500 men to go to the Mexican war. I do not suppose that they expected that we would furnish them, but we did, and we did it by faith. 500 men, the strength of Israel, were sent to fight the battles of their country, leaving their wives, children, and teams on the prairie. They had to exercise faith, and so had we who remained, believing it would turn out for the best, and it has proved so. Every member of that battalion who has remained faithful has always rejoiced from that day to this, that he was a member thereof. It has proved a blessing to him, and it proved salvation to Zion.”

The saga of the Mormon Battalion is one of the most remarkable in human history. A small band of 500 men and 80 women and children, crossing a trackless wilderness of nearly 2,000 miles, changed the course not only of the destiny of the Church and kingdom of which Wilford Woodruff spoke, but of the American West and of the country as a whole. Only 335 men, plus four women, half-starved, many barefoot and in rags, straggled into the mission of San Diego in January of 1847. And yet, this remarkable band—those who completed the journey, those who were left along the way, and those who tarried in California after the journey—had a disproportionate impact on the history of the Church and of the nation.

Speaking to his son, Helaman, Alma said, “And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by very small means, the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls” (Alma 37:7). Speaking of the working of the Liahona, Alma continued that, “It was prepared to show unto our fathers the course which they should travel in the wilderness. And it did work for them according to their faith in God; therefore, if they had faith to believe that God could cause that those spindles should point the way they should go, behold, it was done; therefore they had this miracle, and also many other miracles wrought by the

power of God, day by day. Nevertheless, because those miracles were worked by small means, it did show unto them marvelous works ” (Alma 37:39-41).

In a remarkable way, the lives of the men and women who were part of the Mormon Battalion demonstrates how, in small ways, the Lord brought about marvelous change. That small band, even as had the Liahona, worked by faith, and by faith it changed the destinies not only of their families, but the destiny of a nation and of the Lord’s kingdom.

In latter days, the Lord said, “Wherefore, as ye are agents, ye are on the Lord’s errand; and whatever you do, according to the will of the Lord, is the Lord’s business. And he has set you to provide for his Saints in these last days, that they may obtain an inheritance in the land of Zion. And behold, I, the Lord, declare unto you, and my words are sure and shall not fail, that they shall obtain it. But all things must come to pass in their time. Wherefore, be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great. Behold, the Lord requireth the heart and a willing mind; and the willing and obedient shall eat the good of the land of Zion in these last days” (D&C 64:29-34). Those who responded to the call to arms, did not, in fact, respond primarily to a government request but a prophetic counsel. They were to act not only as defenders of their country’s interests, but in a profound way, they, too, were agents on the Lord’s errand. And they gave of their heart and of their minds. They gave of their physical strength to forge a path in the wilderness, to secure territories to build a nation, and to provide means whereby the work of Zion, itself, might be accomplished.

Thornton Wilder wrote a remarkable play called, “Our Town,” which, when I was in high school, we all had to read. Some of you may recall that play. It is somewhat unusual in that it has a stage manager who stands upon the stage during the course of the action. Periodically, he interrupts the action to comment and to talk with the members of the audience. The play is set in the Midwest. On one occasion, there is a man and his wife and their two children who are sitting around a breakfast table. The stage manager stops the action, turns to the audience, and says, “There they are. He is an attorney. That is his wife, and those are their two children. They have had thousands of meals around that breakfast table.” And then he asks the question, “How do such things begin?” Montaigne, the great French essayist, gave a remarkable insight into that question. He wrote, “The beginning of all things is frail and weak, therefore, always keep your eye on the beginnings.”

If one were to consider in 1847 the small band that had been formed by the Latter-day Saints to travel into the wilderness and into what was to become the Southwestern

United States—into then Mexican territory—one would have thought that the band was, in terms of its size, inconsequential, and yet, we now know that the drama that they enacted has had a profound impact on the course of our nation's history and the establishment of Zion.

It is doubtful that, at the time, most of those who participated in that great trek fully understood how their individual contribution would be part of an enterprise that would change the course of history. John Keegan, the military historian, in his famous book, *The Face of Battle*, noted that the man in the foxhole never really sees the battle, much less the war, in which he is engaged. He is preoccupied with his survival and with the demands of defense and of assault. It is the role of the commander to take him out of the foxhole, at least figuratively, in order that he may see that the shaking of kingdoms and the fate of nations is being shaped by the course of the battle and the broader war. And so it was, with the individual members of the Battalion.

Let me, today, say a few words about how the experience of the Mormon Battalion is intertwined with the life of my wife's family. My wife's great-grandfather, Myron Tanner, as well as his elder Brother, Albert M. Tanner, were part of the Mormon Battalion. Let us consider for a moment what may have happened in the life of the Tanner Family that led Myron and Albert into that great enterprise and some of the events that flowed therefrom. The story goes back to 1832. In March of that year, the Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation pertaining to Jared Carter and his call to preach the gospel. We read in the 79th Section of the Doctrine and Covenants, "Verily I say unto you that it is my will that my servant, Jared Carter, should go again into the eastern countries, from place to place and from city to city, in the power of the ordination wherewith he has been ordained, proclaiming glad tidings of great joy, even the everlasting gospel. And I will send upon him the Comforter, which shall teach him the truth and the way whither he shall go. And inasmuch as he is faithful, I will crown him again with sheaves, wherefore, let your heart be glad, my servant Jared Carter, and fear not, saith your Lord, even Jesus Christ, Amen."

And so, Jared Carter and his brother, Simeon, undertook a mission into the eastern United States. They were notably unsuccessful. They had very great difficulties speaking to anyone pertaining to the Restored Gospel. And, indeed, Simeon said they should just give it up and go home. But Jared read again the revelation and said "No," that they had not yet accomplished that which the Lord had sent them forth to do. They came to Bolton, Warren County, New York, where they encountered my wife's great-great-grandfather, John Tanner. John Tanner was a very prominent member of that community. He was a member of the local Baptist church and a much respected

leading spirit among his neighbors. It was into that neighborhood that Jared and Simeon Carter came. Believing that these men were imposters, that they could not represent the truth of God, John Tanner determined to attend a meeting that they were holding, to expose the error of their witness. But upon seeing them and hearing them preach the gospel and bear their testimonies to the divinity of the mission of Joseph Smith, he was overcome himself with the witness of the Spirit and believed that they were not imposters.

When the elders asked his opinion of them and their doctrines, he said in the words of the wise Gamaliel at the time of the Apostle Paul, "If this work be of men, then it will come to naught, but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it." He invited the elders to spend the evening at his home, and he borrowed and began reading the Book of Mormon. And then, they went upon their way.

John Tanner had been suffering with an affliction in his leg for many, many months, and was unable to walk without great pain. Before leaving, Jared Carter told him that if he would read the Book of Mormon sincerely and ask of God whether it was true, not only would he receive a witness of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, but that the pain and difficulty in his leg would be healed. After John had read the Book of Mormon, he was so excited that he immediately got up to run to his neighbors and invite them to come to a meeting at his home upon the return of Jared and Simeon Carter. When the elders returned they asked him whether he had made his mind up about the book; that it was what it was represented to be, and he said that it was. They then asked him if he saw any change in his leg. He then said that as soon as he read the book and knew that it was true, he immediately put his foot to the floor, went to see his neighbors and did so without discomfort.

Elder Jared Carter then asked John Tanner to arise again and to walk, and he commanded him in the name of the Lord that he should do so. And he would not have the difficulty that he had had in his leg. He never did again. John Tanner undertook, therefore, to have his family go with him and join the Saints in Kirtland, Ohio. When he arrived he had six teams and wagons with merchandise and cash, altogether amounting to about \$10,000. He was a very prosperous man for his day.

He joined with the Saints and faithfully served them. He provided the money to pay off the note for the Kirtland Temple and put his signature to many notes which were undertaken by the Church for various construction and related activities. Indeed, the effort he put into paying for all of these notes led him, when he left to go to Missouri, with nothing but a horse and a cart. The horse was borrowed from his neighbors, and

he had only \$20 in cash. And yet, this man who contributed so much to the building of the kingdom, remained faithful. Wherever he went, he raised strong sons and daughters and became a respected member of his community. He, with the Saints, undertook the great trek from Nauvoo to the Great Basin.

John Tanner's sons, Albert and Myron, responded to the call by Brigham Young to join the Battalion. Albert Tanner was one of the 335 who made it to Southern California, and mustered out of the Battalion in July of 1847. Myron, the great-grandfather of my wife, however, did not make it the entire distance for he suffered enormous illnesses during the trek. This twenty-year-old man wrote that, as he began the journey, his health had been very good until he reached Hurricane Point, just before they struck the plains. He wrote: "After that, I took down with chills and fever; and at night after being sick a week or so, I would have to crawl on my hands and knees to the tent, but in the mornings I could walk. I became somewhat improved before we reached the plains where we took off from the Arkansas River below Ft. Bent. I had been able to walk for a day or two before we started on the Simeron cut off. This route led to Santa Fe. We began our journey across the Simeron desert in the morning, and, after I had walked about ten miles carrying my knapsack, my gun, bayonet, and all my accoutrements, I gave out, and during the next five or six miles traveled, I unloaded part of my things at a time into the wagon. I was permitted to do this only when it became apparent to the officers that my condition was such that I could not go any further. About fifteen miles from the Arkansas River, going over this cutoff of about sixty miles in the desert, I gave out entirely and rode from there into the Simeron."

As he continues, "When we struck the Simeron, we had to dig wells for water for stock and for domestic use. At that time I took down with the mumps, which became very painful, and gathered under my right ear. That is the reason, as you will observe that my beard is heavier on one side than on the other. In this condition I suffered extremely, and for ten days and nights I never moved my jaw. The only nourishment I could receive was liquid food, such as milk or soup. During the day time, however, I now and then dozed a little from the jar of the wagon. From the Simeron we went on to Santa Fe, crossing a mountain where it was necessary to put one hundred men on in head of the ox teams to pull, and then pry the wheels of the wagons to get them over the large rocks.

"Owing to my condition, however, after our arrival at Santa Fe, I was permitted, with others of the sick, to go back to the Arkansas for the winter, and we located somewhere near the present site of Pueblo. There we had our winter quarters, in '46 and '47. In consequence of the hardships of the journey and the want of proper food, many took

down with scurvy. I was among them; Blanchard, and one or two others, died there; I do not remember their names. My legs were so drawn up that I was compelled to walk on my toes, which were turned back.

“There prevailed among many of the Battalion a determination not to take any calomel whatever. However, my condition became so bad that I determined to consult the doctor after Blanchard’s death, and he promised me a cure if I would take calomel, assuring me that he would administer it in such a manner that it would not remain in my system.”

I should point out, tangentially, that most of the men in the Battalion were reluctant to take calomel and felt that the doctor was a bit of a quack, which, in fact, he probably was. The calomel was often worse than the cure. If taken in too great an amount, it could prove fatal.

Continuing, he wrote: “At the same time my legs were blistered. The treatment proved effectual, and within two months after I was greatly improved.” Speaking of the condition of his feet and legs, he said: “I was very greatly surprised to find that I was unable to jump or lift at the same time both of my feet from the ground, and in this condition I remained for something like four months.”

Owing to the sickness of those who wintered at Pueblo, it was determined at last that they should not accompany the Battalion on its way to California. And so, he and a number of others, made their way to overtake the pioneers in the direction of Laramie. They were met in the vicinity of what is now Denver, by Amasa Lyman, and then followed after the pioneers, reaching the Salt Lake Valley on the 27th of July, 1847.

Now, though Myron did not complete the journey to California, the account which he gives is remarkably representative of the sufferings and hardships that were endured by this band of men and the women who accompanied them.

As you know, during the course of the journey, they did not see combat, except on one occasion with a group of wild bulls. Yet, the rigors of the journey itself and the path that they forged through the wilderness and the demands of civic occupation, once having arrived, took an incredible toll. A number died. Many were ill, and all in one form or another, knew much of the extremity of pain.

What was the outcome of this enterprise? Looking at it from a very personal point of view, the enterprise that began with the conversion of John Tanner led to a family, who

has had a disproportionate impact on the destiny of the Church and, through the lives of Myron and Albert, connected that family with one of the great sagas of Western history.

The individual effort of each member of the Battalion collectively added up to a remarkable set of achievements, both within the Church and beyond. Within the Church, in a real sense as Brigham Young perceived, the contribution of the Latter-day Saints to the Mormon Battalion and the Mexican War, provided a proof of loyalty to the nation that had so ill-treated them, as well as material succor for the Saints, that otherwise may not have been available. As President Polk considered the calling of members of the Mormon community to participate in the Mexican War, there were some, like Senator Thomas A. Benton of Missouri, who in fact hoped that the Mormons would refuse, so that the Church's enemies could use that refusal as an excuse to continue to harass the Latter-day Saints as they made their trek across the plains. Beyond this test of loyalty, the material assistance—the pay and the clothing allowance, the provision of guns—all of these, in fact, provided wherewithal which proved crucial for this band of pioneers.

As to the broader contribution to the West, although it is true that the Mormon Battalion never entered into direct combat with the enemy, it is a fact that wherever they went in their journey and into Southern California, the Battalion provided law and order. They set up institutions and provided the elements of civilization wherever they went. Indeed, they provided the garrison duty in the San Diego area, and when their term of duty was about completed, all of the citizens of that area petitioned Governor Mason and General Kearney, the commanding general, that the Latter-day Saints be importuned to stay and maintain the elements of order and of law and of civilization that they had established. In the process of the great trek as well, and secondly, they also opened up a number of major routes into the Southwestern United States. In addition to the three road routes that they established, they also provided the route for the Southern Pacific Railroad.

It has been noted that the interstate highway act enacted in the 1950s under President Dwight Eisenhower changed the character of the United States by integrating it together in ways that it had never been integrated before, and by providing routes by which Americans could move from the large cities into the suburbs. In a similar way the Mormon Battalion, by establishing the infrastructure of travel into that part of the United States, literally opened up the Southwest and California in ways that would not have been the case without their efforts.

As I mentioned earlier, they established elements of civilization wherever they were, including the establishment of the first free press, which they established in San

Francisco. Wherever the Latter-day Saints went, this rough-hewn group of men and women brought civilization, the basic elements of learning, and the establishment of norms of peace and of uplift. It was the Mormon Battalion that introduced into Southern California, the adoption of irrigation, without which the whole development of Southern California and the Southwest generally, would have been impossible. They participated in the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill.

The history of the Southwest and of California would be incomprehensible without the remarkable contribution of this small group of people. Upon returning to the Salt Lake Valley, members of the Mormon Battalion were instrumental in the establishment of all of the many communities and settlements throughout the Salt Lake Valley itself.

Beyond the patent contributions that the Mormon Battalion made to American and Mormon history, one sees beyond that to what Elder Neal A. Maxwell often referred to as the "Lord's micro-management"—the engagement of the Lord in the details of men's and women's lives in such a way, not only to bless them, but to spread the kingdom abroad. If one, for example, considers the gold rush, in the discovery of which members of the Mormon Battalion participated, one sees the hand of the Lord. As you recall, Brigham Young counseled the members of the Battalion and the Saints generally to gather in the Rocky Mountains, in the Great Salt Lake Valley and beyond, rather than to establish permanently in California. The gold rush could very well have submerged the faith in California but, in the way it unfolded and following the counsel of President Young, it helped provide the material foundation for the building of the great intermountain empire. As those who participated in the gold rush came west, they came through Salt Lake City, where, in order to lighten their load, they sold at very good prices many of the things they had brought with them, and beyond that, purchased other things that they needed from the Saints in the Utah area. Industry was established and commerce was spread abroad assisted by the movement west into California, with Utah literally becoming a crossroads of the West. In a real sense, the material foundation of the spread of the Latter-day Saint communities came out of the opening of California and the movement of many people into California through the Intermountain West.

As the camp of Zion formed many of the prominent leaders of the Church in these latter-days, so the Mormon Battalion contributed also to individuals and families who became decisive in the development of the Church and of the establishment of Mormon communities throughout the area. The Mormon Battalion established a reservoir of good will in California and among many others who would be critical to the Church in later times, when persecution raged once again.

Surely, out of small things have come great miracles in the lives of individual families and in the life of the kingdom of God itself. When Brigham Young summoned the 500 to respond to the enlistment call from the government, he had a vision that transcended this call to arms. The role that the Mormon Battalion would play was part of the Lord's intent to raise up a people and establish a community that would spread the gospel and its kingdom abroad until it filled the world. The members of the Battalion carried the weight of glory, not only of a burgeoning nation, but of the designs of the great Jehovah. As President Young proclaimed:

Our faith must be concentrated in one great work--the building up of the Kingdom of God on the earth, and our works must aim at the accomplishment of that great purpose.

We have a work on hand whose magnitude can hardly be told. It is... our duty to love the Gospel and the spirit of the Gospel, so that we can become one in the Lord, not out of Him, that our faith, our affections for truth, the kingdom of heaven, our acts, all our labor will be concentrated in the salvation of the children of men and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on the earth. This is cooperation on a very large scale. This is the work of redemption that is entered into by the Latter-day Saints. Unitedly we perform these duties, we stand, we endure, we increase and multiply, we strengthen and spread abroad, and shall continue so to do until the kingdoms of this world are the kingdom of our God and His Christ (Discourses of Brigham Young, p. 284).

May we, the heirs of the legacy of the Mormon Battalion, ever seek to realize the divine commission of which it was a glorious example.