

“BEING OBEDIENT AT AN INCONVENIENT TIME”

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My dear brothers and sisters and friends, I feel greatly honored by this invitation to speak in such a historically revered place, and in commendation of those noble ones that we do remember as the Mormon Battalion. Perhaps they are listening. If they could penetrate the veil and also speak, they would say, *"You pay us the greater honor by speaking of our spiritual obedience. Let others commend our temporal conquests – the road we built, and the miles we traveled, and the wells we dug. But please speak of us as a battalion who knew that Brigham was God's prophet, and as with Abraham, nothing that could be asked of us was too much. Include our names."*

Reasons

When you speak of those who paid a great price to establish this dispensation, **God does not always give reasons.** Today, we cannot measure all of the reasons the Battalion members said yes when called to serve. Nor can we measure all the dividends which followed. But the call of the Battalion is a powerful reminder that **God has reasons and He knows best.**

The original call of the Battalion was for 1,000 volunteers, exceeding by tenfold the highest enlistment quotas set upon any of the states. Then it was reduced to 500. Brigham Young himself led the enlistment drive, and at the end of 20 days, the rosters were filled. Soon they were on that way to the ocean of peace we call Pacific.

Brigham gave the Battalion members this very sound advise: "A private soldier is as honorable as an officer, if he behaves as well." He also told them that they would have no fighting to do. "For we shall go into the Great Basin, which is the place to build temples." But Brigham never attributed to himself the wisdom of selecting the Great Basin. Rather, he said, "I do not wish for men to understand that I had anything to with our being moved here. That was the providence of the Almighty. It was the power of God that wrought out salvation for these people. I never could have devised such a plan."

The service of the Mormon Battalion reminds us of the experience of Brother Richard W. Young in the early chapters of Church history. Richard was a grandson of Brigham Young, and one of the first members to attend the military academy at West Point, having been set apart by his [grand]father to be a missionary in the United States Army. Upon his graduation at West Point, the

United States was not at war. There was a surplus of officers in the Army, and it was thought not dishonorable to resign a commission. Richard wished to resign to accommodate his desire to enter law school. Remembering however that he had been set apart by his grandfather to be a missionary in the Army, he asked his dearest friend, Heber J. Grant, to inquire of John Taylor, the then President of the Church, if resignation would be acceptable. President Taylor said, "Richard is to remain in the military." He was greatly disappointed. Richard's first assignment, however, was at Governor's Island, adjacent to New York City. He lived in comfortable government housing, received his officer's salary, and attended Columbia Law School, graduating with honors. On graduation, he was appointed to the staff of General Winfield Scott Hancock, a prominent military leader. At the close of that term, Richard again prevailed upon Heber J. Grant to ask John Taylor for permission to resign his commission. President Taylor again stated, "Richard is to remain in the military." This time, Richard W. Young's disappointment was exquisite. He said, "I would like to have *reasons*." Heber J. Grant responded, "He did not give you any reasons before, when he told you to stay in the Army, and you received your legal education free of debt while living on Governor's Island. I think that you can afford to take the advise of President Taylor without reasons." Richard answered, "I wouldn't think of doing anything else, but I wish there were reasons." Richard was on his way to his new assignment when he met one of his classmates who was bewailing his fate because he had just been assigned to Fort Douglas in distant Utah. It occurred to them to petition the Secretary of War for an exchange of assignments, which was readily given. Richard W. Young spent the next four years at Fort Douglas, living free of charge in government housing, drawing his officer's salary. Because there was little to do, he commenced the practice of law in the office of his relative, LeGrand Young, building his own clientele. After four years, President Taylor said to Heber J. Grant, "I see by the morning paper that your dear friend Richard W. Young's term has expired at Fort Douglas. You may now tell him that the time for his missionary labors has come to an end and he is at liberty to resign."

Continued Associations

Having been assured by the Lord that that same sociality which exists among us here will continue into the next life, we may anticipate that there will be firesides, and family home evenings, and reunions on the other side of the veil. We might wisely invite Richard W. Young to speak to our posterity on the blessings of being obedient, even when no reasons are given. We would be *equally* well served by inviting members of the Mormon Battalion to speak to those postmortal gatherings on the same subject. Indeed, Battalion members may now be listening in this day as we thank them for serving even when it was inconvenient and all the reasons were not offered. But if they could speak today, it would be on the subject of obedience.

In the Latter-day Saint theology, when we speak of kingdoms of glory, we do not speak of geography, not of latitudes and longitudes, not of metes and bounds. Rather, we speak of *continued associations*. Joseph's great 1832 vision of kingdoms of glory found in Section 76 of the Doctrine

and Covenants revealed that the Celestial Kingdom is favored by the presence of God, the Eternal Father. **And it is His *presence*, not it's location, which makes it Celestial.**

One of Joseph's dear friends was Demick Huntington. He had conferred many favors on Joseph, causing the Prophet to inquire how he could repay. Demick said, "Grant that wherever you and your family will be in the next life, there I and my family may be also." Demick Huntington requested a grander favor than he could comprehend. The next life would be heaven enough if his family could continue the association throughout the eternity with Joseph's family.

The Savior understood this virtue of continued association with those we love when he prayed for His disciples near the end of His mortal ministry, that "where I am, there they may be also." That hour in the meridian of time, His disciples did not understand all the doctrines of the kingdom, and indeed, they were surprised by Christ's resurrection, and believed not for joy. And yet they were reassured when the Savior suggested they might continue association with Him into the next life.

The band of brothers and handful of sisters who constituted the Mormon Battalion were welded to each other through their hardships. It is likely that the heaven that they now enjoy, that which they have earned, is one in which they continue that intimate fraternity. Their families wish to be together forever because of what they endured in association during the days of their probation.

On January 30, 1847, Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke issued his famous Order Number 1, in which he stated, "the end of the long, long trail. We have dug wells which the future traveler will enjoy." This is also a rich metaphorical phrase, for their contribution was more than deep *physical* wells. Their contribution was also a lesson on the wells of obedience, when they said yes to God in their hours of extremity. They could say – as Brigham did when the Prophet Joseph was martyred, "Here is Brigham. Have his knees ever faltered?" – "Here are the well diggers of the Battalion. Have their knees ever faltered?"

Women Were Better than Good

If we invite the Battalion members to speak to our posterity in firesides in the world to come, we must not forget to include the testimonies of the handful of women who commenced the journey with them. Being of a modest and refined gender, the privations for them must have been even greater to endure. They must have yearned for cleanliness, the association with other women, the warmth of a self possessed home that they could beautify, and the privilege of fulfilling the maternal instincts by bearing and raising children. Yes, if the Battalion's men could speak, they would not let us forget the women.

Remember the comment of one of Brigham's wives who walked 1,500 miles in the first company to enter the Valley. She said that she would walk another 1,000 miles to leave it.

In the earliest hours of this dispensation, there were women to match the men:

1. There was the widowed *Mary Fielding Smith*, the daughter of Britain, who raced her company leader to the Valley when he offered no help. Her nine year old son, Joseph F. Smith, drove a team of oxen across the plains, and later became President of the Church.
2. There were *Ann Whitney* and *Eliza R. Snow*, who sang to Wilford Woodruff in the pure Adamic tongue.
3. *Husbanda Young*, Brigham's daughter, who brought her beautiful golden harp a thousand miles across the plain. And then her father Brigham said, "Fanny, would you be willing to give your harp to a blind musician? There's a man by the name of Giles who just came over from England. Over there, he made his living by playing the harp, but he was unable to bring one with him. If you are willing, I should like to give him yours." Fanny gave.
4. *Hanna Widsoe*, whose husband died prematurely in Norway. She brought her two little boys to America and raised them alone, investing herself in them such that each became a university president. One graduated first in his class from Harvard University. The ward teachers came to their modest Cache Valley home and spoke disrespectfully of priesthood leaders. Hanna Widsoe showed them to the door with the instruction never to return until they could speak well of the Lord's anointed, as she didn't want her sons poisoned by unkind observations.

The men, in the early hours of this dispensation, were good. *But the women were better than good.*

A Convenient Time

A more recent historian has written these words in connection with the trek of the Mormon Battalion: "Few of those who today speed in cushioned ease over the mountains, the painted desert, and other arid stretches, know little if anything of the rigors and suffering of this pioneering by soldiers that long ago." The Battalion's commander recorded: "Everything conspired to discourage the extraordinary undertaking of marching this Battalion through an unknown wilderness with a wagon train." I have sometimes thought that their journey was like that of Christopher Columbus: They traveled to the edge of a world they could not see. They put their hands in the hand of God, and just trusted that He would lead them.

Nothing ever seems to happen at a convenient time in God's work:

- It was not convenient for the Saints to be driven from Missouri to Illinois. Abandoning their homes and two million dollars worth of property was not convenient. For Brigham and the Twelve to return 11 times to assure none of the Saints had been left there.
- It was not convenient for the Saints to leave Nauvoo in the winter and cross the frozen Mississippi, even when a number of the women were heavy with child.
- It was not convenient for many Saints to cross the plains by handcart.

- It was not convenient for many new converts to leave the green hills of Britain and relocate in the more arid climate of the Rocky Mountains.
- It was not convenient for the Battalion's men to leave their families when most needed for the trek across the plains.
- For that matter, it was not convenient for Joseph and Hyrum to seal their testimony with their blood at their young ages, or for the Savior to atone at the age of 33.

But God has never been concerned with our convenience. He commands, and a Battalion obeys, and then blessings flow.

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we are not as concerned with rewards or punishments as we are with *consequences*. We believe that we must truly reap as we sow. The law of consequences generally dictates that, when we make a wrong choice, we reap the reward first, and then we pay the price later. And when we make a correct choice, we usually pay the price first, and we reap the reward later. The Battalion paid the price first. They *and we* have been reaping the rewards of their temporal and spiritual accomplishments for many years.

Little Mary, the mother of the Master, said, "From henceforth shall all generations call me blessed." We fulfill that prophesy every year when we remember Mary, and speak of her motherhood of the Christ. Mary was not to be forgotten!

To the Prophet Joseph, who said that his name "should be had for good and evil among all nations, and that the ends of the earth would inquire after his name." That prophesy is also fulfilled as we, in our testimonies, often honor Joseph, and some self appointed historians vilify him. Joseph also, by heaven's decree, was not to be forgotten!

The same is true of the Mormon Battalion. Men and women of good purpose assure the perpetuation of the Battalion's contribution by this yearly celebration. That also must be very pleasing to Our Father in Heaven.

When Johnston's Army headed to Utah, Brigham's stinging words were: "These people are free! We are not in bondage to any government on God's footstool. We do not intend to transgress any law. But as for any nation coming to destroy this people, God Almighty being my helper, they cannot come here. They might as well try to obliterate the Sun. God is at the helm. This is the mighty ship Zion. How easily some men are scared. I have not been frightened yet. We came to these mountains willingly, because we had to."

Captain Van Fleet of the US Army asked one of the women if she would destroy her home for religion's sake. She replied, "I will not only do so, [but] I will stay up nights to do it." When Johnston's Army eventually left the Valley [sic Utah], the Saints purchased for \$10 wagons that

initially cost \$150 to \$175 each. Flour that had cost the government \$28.40 a sack was sold for 52 cents a sack. Brigham Young had his son-in-law, Hyrum B. Clawson, spend \$4,000 to purchase \$40,000 of goods.

It was also a time for great courage. The Saints endured the invective of the early gentile inhabitants of Utah, the Eastern press, the adversarial US Government, the biased and unfair judges, and the prejudiced B. H. Roberts and Reed Smoot trials. For Satan was not using his second team! He knows in the language of the scriptures that he "hath but a short time." But he was seeking to hold back the Missouri River in its decreed course with his puny arm. The God of Heaven had proclaimed that He would bring this work out of darkness into His marvelous light. And God is never slack concerning his promises.

Brother Brigham

My grandfather often drove President Heber J. Grant up onto the Avenues of Salt Lake at night. They parked the automobile. They looked at the magnificent Salt Lake Temple. President Grant cried. He said, "It always makes me cry when I look at the Salt Lake Temple lit at night, to remember that this our fathers built for us. They started to build the temple, and there was one lone tree in the Valley. Out of their poverty, they gave of their substance." Grandfather said, "The only other time I saw Heber J. Grant cry was when the Saints sang in his presence 'We Thank Thee Oh God for a Prophet,' to which President Grant would add, 'I am not worthy to have them sing that in my presence, because they used to sing that for Brother Brigham.'"

The men of the Battalion went because they truly believed that Brigham was a prophet. And his devotion to his people, who lovingly called him Brother Brigham, is absolutely endearing. As Brigham left for the Valley, he said, "If the brethren love me as much as I do them, they will not be long behind. I feel like a father, with a great family of children around me in a winter storm, and I am looking with calmness, confidence, and patience for the clouds to break and the sun to shine, so I can run out an plant and sow, and gather in the corn and the wheat, and say to my children, 'Come home.'"

Brigham wore himself out in this service. He said, "I calculate to die in the harness." Near the end of his life, he said to Wilford Woodruff, "Stay and talk with me. I am weary of matters and men." He slept with one eye open, one foot out of bed. When asked upon his arrival in the Valley by his local bishop to pay tithing, Brigham said, "Take whatever you like. Everything I own is tithing."

During the trek across that plains, when the travel was very slow, and some murmured, he said, "I am going to the Valley. If anyone else wants to follow, the road is open." He said he danced to kick the people's burdens off his toes.

In reverence to the building of an early temple, he said, "We built it without shoes or pantaloons because God commanded it." Our grand Salt Lake Temple was referred to by one of his daughters, Suzy Young Gates, as "that frozen poem, the Salt Lake Temple."

As said by another, if Joseph was *Mormon's* universalist, concerned with ancient languages, temple cities, making our calling and election sure, then Joseph [Brigham] was *our* particularist. He cared about type of soap the Saints used, the very day for the planting of grain, the type of bonnets that the sisters wore to protect their faces from the Sun.

Through all these ordeals, Brother Brigham remained very calm. He said, "All I have to do is to live. I have often made the comparison, and keep my spirit, feelings, and conscience like a sheet of blank paper, and let the Spirit and power of God write upon it what He pleases. What He writes, I will read. If I read before He writes, I am very likely to do wrong. If you take the same course, you'll not have the least of trouble."

Mark Twain said that he and others visited President Brigham Young, who seemed to be a quiet, kindly, dignified old gentleman with a gentle craft in his eye that probably belonged there. Brigham paid no attention to Mark Twain, merely looking at him at distant intervals as a cat might look at a kitten meddling with her tail. Brigham's conversation with others flowed on sweetly, peacefully, and musically as a summer brook. When the audience ended, Brigham put his hand on Mark Twain's head, beamed down at him in an admiring way, and said to him, "Awe, your child, I presume. Boy or girl?"

Another visitor to Brigham Young was Tom Thumb, the famous midget of the day. Looking up at Brigham, who must have seemed and loomed very large in his presence, Tom Thumb said, "There is one thing I cannot understand. That is this belief in polygamy." Smiling down at him, Brigham answered very genially, "I couldn't understand it either, when I was your size." It was hard to get the better part of Brigham.

Brigham slept soundly when he went to bed. He trained himself to shut up his thinker when he retired, and he went to sleep at once. His rule was eight hours of eight hours of sleep, eight hours of work, and eight hours of recreation.

Spiritual Tettering

Today, we remember the times when this kingdom seemingly tettered: When there were only six members of the Church, or when the Kirtland Bank failed, or when a majority of the Twelve lifted their heel against the Prophet Joseph, for only Brigham and Heber remained absolutely faithful. When Joseph was martyred and Satan laughed, and God held His peace, and the Saints wept, and darkness seemingly covered the Earth, when Johnston's Army headed for Utah, when crickets came,

when plural marriage was practiced, Church properties were confiscated, Temple Square was rented, the presidency was in seclusion and other leaders in prison, and when 500 of the Church's ablest manpower were added to the Battalion. But the good ship Zion didn't really tetter, for it was steadied by the hand of divinity, and the promises proclaiming the destiny of this Church were made sure. Some who were not spiritually converted were spun off, but the caravan continued on. *Those who left the Church will be remembered in eternity as those who might have been.*

This is the Right Place

When the early Saints and the returning Battalion members entered the Valley, it appeared a very improbable place of gathering. One United States Senator stated that he wouldn't give a pinch of snuff for the entire territory. Another had characterized it as a vast region of prairie dogs and impenetrable mountains covered to their very base with snow. He wished the government did not own it. But they were not prophets.

And Joseph had proclaimed that the Saints would continue to suffer much affliction, and would be driven to the Rocky Mountains, many would apostatize, others would be put to death by our persecutors, or lose their lives in consequential exposure or disease, but some would live to go and assist in making settlements and build cities and see the Saints become a mighty people in the midst of the Rocky Mountains.

The initial company of arriving pioneers surveyed the Valley in less than one week. In less than one month, 27 buildings were erected. The Saints re-baptized each other as a memorial of their commitment to God. In the first difficult winter, Brigham said of the few who had food, but were hesitant to share, "We will take, and we will give to the poor, and those that will not divide may be thankful their heads are not found wallowing in the snow.

Brigham thereafter used \$2,000 of Mormon Battalion money to buy out the only non-Mormon landholder in the area, Miles Goodyear, who had a homestead on what eventually became Ogden. At that Weber River Valley, he asked Ezra Chase about the crop he owned. His answer was it would yield 100 bushels of crickets to the acre, and about 50 bushels of mosquitoes.

The pioneers buried 6,000 dead along the trail. During Brother Brigham's tenure, they had colonized 100,000 Saints in 200 communities. One of them, Heland Pratt, had already abandoned his home at least four times to remain with the Saints. He was just building an adobe home in the Salt Lake Valley when Brigham approached him with a charge to go settle in the colonies of Mexico. Brigham added, "You'll be released when you die." And he did.

Brigham also said, "We have been kicked out of the frying pan into the fire, and out of the fire into the middle of the floor. And here we are, and here we'll stay, for God has shown me that *this is the place* to look at His people. *This* is where they will prosper."

It Feels Good Just to Obey

Great lessons to be learned from the early Saints, including the Battalion members, are centered in the joys of obedience. *Sometimes, it feels so good just to obey, even if reasons are not given.*

Years ago, I served as a Bishop in Southern California. One of my counselors was a newer convert to the Church. We gave him our first ticket to attend General Conference. Upon his return, we were anxious to hear his report. We inquired what had impressed him the most: Was it the keynote address of the President of the Church? Not that. Was it the majestic singing of the choir? Not that. Was it the great feeling of sacrifice of those who had built this marvelous tabernacle for us? Not that. He then said that he had noticed that there were 50 General Authorities, as we had in those days, and seven sessions of conference, as then was the pattern. He said all 50 were in their places on time before they commencement of each session. We replied, they had to be in their places on time. They are the General Authorities. He said, "**You have it all wrong. They weren't in their places on time because they are General Authorities. They are General Authorities because they were in their places on time. Long before they became General Authorities, they learned to obey before they could be called to lead.**"

A Latter-day Saint once came to me and asked what it means to be obedient. I asked the member to first give an answer. The member said, "If my bishop comes to me and asks me to accept a calling, I go home and pray about it. If I think he was inspired, I accept. If I think he was not inspired, I decline. I call this enlightened obedience. What do you think of that?" I said, "I think the principle of enlightened obedience, as you have explained it, is one of the saving principles of the Telestial Kingdom. You would be better served praying that your bishop would be inspired, and less time about whether he had been, *for sometimes it feels just so good to obey.*"

Saying Yes to the Lord

One of the grand Church leaders I have met in my Church experience is Brother Walter Kent from Milwaukee. He was born in Germany, as a boy compelled to serve in the German Army. He was age 17 when the war was over. He was the first missionary to serve in East Germany behind the Iron Curtain. He served there for five and a half years without purse or script. Years later, Brother Kent was called to serve as President of the North German Mission. A special assignment took him to East Berlin, where he met with Church members who had otherwise been separated from Headquarters. A sister approached him and said, "Brother Kent, 28 years ago, you served as our first missionary in East Germany. At that time, you called me to serve as the District Relief Society President. I'm still the District Relief Society President. I've been waiting for you, another holder

of the priesthood to come and release me." *Again, sometimes it feels so good to say yes to the Lord, even when it is inconvenient.*

When Naman, the Syrian, sought to be cleansed of his leprosy, the prophet Elisha told him to wash in the Jordan River seven times, "and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean." Naman was wroth because Elisha had not bade him do some great thing. He murmured that the Abana and Parpar Rivers of Damascus were better than the waters of Israel. His servants reminded him that, if the prophet had bade him to do a great thing, he would have done it. "How much better then, that he saith to thee, 'wash and be clean.'" Naman yielded. He humbled himself. He dipped himself seven times in the Jordan River, and his flesh came again, like unto the flesh of a little child. Then he proclaimed, "Behold, now I know that there is no god in all the Earth, but in Israel."

Battalion members were not asked to dip in the Jordan River, or to hold the same Church calling for 28 years, but **they were asked to be obedient at an inconvenient time, when not all of the reasons or blessings were yet evident. And that is their great lesson for us.**

In the societal gatherings of the next life, we might ask some of the Battalion to speak to our posterity. The assigned subject will be the joys of obedience. And the Battalion members will step forward to then bear their testimonies, and we will honor them, then and there as we do here and now, because they always said yes to the Lord.

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.