

# *A Legacy of Faith*

SUSAN EASTON BLACK

**T**ell me a story," I nightly pled of Grandma as a child. Though I wanted to hear of Cinderella, Snow White, or Sleeping Beauty, she would say, "Susan, I can only tell you stories that are true. If you want to hear truth, I have something to say." Not wanting to sleep, I enthusiastically listened to stories of Jesus, the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, and those whose sacrifices created our legacy of faith.

Though I believed in the truthfulness of Grandma's stories, there was one that caused discomfort. It was of a young pioneer girl named Sarah Ann who was in danger of being trampled by stampeding buffaloes. In this perilous situation she knelt and prayed for protection.

"In answer to her prayer," said my grandmother, "she remained unharmed, even though hundreds of buffalo stampeded around her."

Instead of marveling with wonder at the miracle, I emphatically pronounced, "That's impossible!"

Grandma countered, "It is not impossible to those who have faith, Susan. It was because Sarah Ann had faith and you don't."

Such forthrightness caused me to ponder then and now. I attended Church, paid tithing, said my prayers, but the essence of faith, the substance of "things which are hoped for and not seen," had eluded me (Ether 12:6). As the years passed my outward demeanor mirrored faith, but my inner faith was lacking. I rationalized faithful events as good fortune, favorable circumstances, and just being "plain lucky." Would I ever have a faith like Sarah Ann's?

The answer was slow in coming, but in retrospect paralleled my desire for faith. That desire was ignited my freshman year at Brigham Young University. On a whim a girlfriend and I decided to spend the weekend in Salt Lake City. While sitting with suitcases in hand at Temple Square, my friend casually remarked, "The president of the Church, David O. McKay, lives just across the street in the Hotel Utah." Her continual nods of assurance and our curiosity led us to the hotel. Speaking with the bellboy and then the hotel

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*Susan Easton Black was a professor of LDS Church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University when this devotional address was given on 22 November 1994.*

manager about where the famous resident lived was frustrating. Their negative attitude, punctuated with security implications, fell on deaf ears. We left them determined to answer the hypothesis “If I were a prophet of God, behind which door would I choose to live in this hotel?”

After hours of knocking on doors and greeting blank stares from grumpy hotel guests, we staked out three floors. An innocent chambermaid on one of the floors revealed the answer. Excitedly, we hugged each other as only BYU freshmen could. Our enthusiasm was boundless, until we concluded to see if the prophet was home. Being the smallest of the twosome, I was designated to knock on the door. If the knock was answered, I had been programmed to say, “We are selling early orders for Girl Scout cookies. Would you care to place an order?”

As I walked toward the door I felt reticent; yet, as my feet faltered and heart pounded, my friend pushed me forward. It wasn’t until I reached the door and was knocking that she ran like a “flash of light” to the far end of the hall. I was just turning to run when the door opened, and before me stood the prophet. He looked surprised but didn’t say anything. Neither did I, I couldn’t. I felt like I had a key to the celestial kingdom but did not belong—I was not worthy to be in his presence. I started to cry and then to sob. He took me by the hand and said, “Won’t you come in?” I waved to my friend down the hall—whose open mouth betrayed her surprise—and entered the prophet’s home. Our discussion remains personal, but the resulting impact was to change my inner direction dramatically. I resolved, as never before, to not just mirror faith, but to know of faith, to be faithful like Sarah Ann each day of my life so I would be worthy to see again a prophet, my Savior, and my Father in Heaven.

Oh, that I could say I had always lived up to that resolve. Like Nephi I can echo,

*My heart sorroweth because of my flesh; my soul grieveth because of mine iniquities.*

*I am encompassed about, because of the temptations and the sins which do so easily beset me.*

*And when I desire to rejoice, my heart groaneth because of my sins. [2 Nephi 4:17–19]*

To strengthen my resolve I determined that I would conscientiously study in depth the scriptures, doctrinal discourses, early Church records and histories, and biographies of the righteous. I can say with Parley P. Pratt, “I [have] always loved a book. If I worked hard, a book was in my hand in the morning. . . . A book at evening. . . ; a book at every leisure moment of my life” (*PPP*, 1985, p. 2; p. 20 in earlier editions). After decades of reading and reading and reading more, I learned: “If ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, . . . let this desire work in you” (Alma 32:27). That inner working has now resulted in knowledge of great truths of faith. From the scriptures I learned: “The Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him” (1 Nephi 7:12). “Ask in faith, nothing wavering” (James 1:6). “It is by faith that miracles are wrought” (Moroni 7:37). “Jesus [is] the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). “Your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). “Because of thy faith in Christ. . . thy faith hath made thee whole” (Enos 1:8).

These truths are not new but eternal. The followers of Christ in the meridian of time and Saints of the latter days made the discovery of these truths years before and lived enduring lives of faith. But for me and for you, individually, the truths need to be discovered anew to reach an understanding of who we are in the eyes of deity and why Jesus loved us so much he would atone for our sins that we might return to our Father in Heaven.

Helping me in the process of discovering faith have been the journals and histories of early Saints who knew and loved the Prophet Joseph Smith. I stand amazed at their resolve to tenaciously cling to faith amid the Extermination Order, Haun's Mill Massacre, and the prospects of war. It seems to me they echoed the words of Joshua, that no matter what trial beset them, they resolved, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). For like Job, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). And like Joseph Smith, "What power shall stay the heavens? As well might man stretch forth his puny arm to stop the Missouri river in its decreed course, or to turn it up stream, as to hinder the Almighty" and, yes, his faithful Saints from worshipping him (D&C 121:33).

The names and stories of those who remained faithful and endured in righteousness are not lost. They are told and retold by their thankful posterity from generation to generation. As we remember with gratefulness our legacy, let us recall the faithful declarations of the past. Near Liberty, Clay County, Missouri, Samuel Bent was the object of religious persecution. He was tied to a tree and whipped by a mob and saw his wife die from the effects of these privations (Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, vol. 1 [Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901–35], p. 368). Yet he nobly declared that "his faith is as ever and that he feels to praise God in prisons and in dungeons and in all circumstances whatever he may be found" (Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1983], p. 222).

For Titus Billing, his escape from mobocracy in Missouri was plagued with starvation and frostbite. "For three days and nights he

had only slippery elm bark for food. His feet were 'frozen so badly the flesh came off in pieces'" (Melvin Billings, comp., "Titus Billings: Early Mormon Pioneer," n.p., n.d., in author's possession, p. 21). Yet, like Samuel Bent, he praised God for his faith.

When Father Joseph Smith, Sr., was imprisoned for a note of indebtedness against him of fourteen dollars, he was promised he could go free if he renounced the Book of Mormon. His thoughts turned to the apostle Paul:

*I was not the first man who had been imprisoned for the truth's sake; and when I should meet Paul in the Paradise of God, I could tell him that I, too, had been in bonds for the Gospel which he had preached.* [Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith: By His Mother*, ed. Preston Nibley (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), p. 185]

Of those who epitomize the faith I wanted to obtain, a faith like Sarah Ann, is John Murdock. At age seventeen John "came near bleeding to death; yea death stared me in the face, but I covenanted with my Heavenly Father that if he would preserve my life, I would serve him." True to his resolve, John turned to prayer and meditation and began his search for the gospel of Jesus Christ that professed and practiced the ancient ordinances (see Journal of John Murdock, typescript, BYU-A, p. 3). He first united with the Lutheran Dutch Church, but "soon found they did not walk according to the scriptures." He next joined the Presbyterian Cedar Church: "I soon became dissatisfied with their walk, for I saw it was not according to the scriptures." He then united with the Baptists, but soon recognized "their walk not to agree with their profession, [and] I withdrew myself from them" (*ibid.*, pp. 3–4).

Continuing his search for truth, John turned to the Methodist faith, but discovered "when I did not please them I would have to be silent among them awhile." By 1827 he had joined the

Campbellites. “It caused me to rejoice, believing that I had at last found a people that believed the scriptures,” wrote John. For three years he faithfully attended their meetings, but as the ministers denied the “gift and power of the Holy Ghost,” John lost interest and concluded “all the [religious] sects were out of the way” (ibid., pp. 4–5).

Then, in the winter of 1830, John’s prayers were answered. Four missionaries sent to the Lamanites arrived in Kirtland from the state of New York. They preached, baptized, and built up the Lord’s church after the ancient order. Curious, John journeyed twenty miles to see for himself the new preachers and rebuffed a Campbellite who tried to dissuade him: “I told him I was of age, and the case was an important one, of life, and death, existing between me and my God, and I must act for myself, for no one can act for me” (ibid., p. 6).

He arrived at Isaac Morley’s home in Kirtland about dusk and was introduced to the four men and presented a copy of the Book of Mormon. As he read the new scripture,

*The spirit of the Lord rested on me, witnessing to me of the truth of the work. . . . About ten o’clock [the next] morning, being November 5th, 1830, I told the servants of the Lord that I was ready to walk with them into the water of baptism. [Ibid., p. 7]*

“This was the third time I had been immersed, but I never before felt the authority of the ordinance, but I felt it this time and felt as though my sins were forgiven,” wrote John. After being ordained an elder, he returned home rejoicing and endeavored “to bear testimony,” and to his joy, “My family gladly received me and my words, thank the Lord” (ibid., pp. 7–8).

It was John Murdock who, after the death of his wife, gave his surviving twins, Joseph and Julia, to Joseph and Emma Smith to rear. He was the John Murdock who served a

mission with Hyrum Smith to Missouri (see D&C 52:8–9). On the trek his feet became wet, “by which I took a violent cold by which I suffered near unto death [but] I could not die because my work was not yet done” (ibid., p. 10). Truly it was not complete. The calls from his prophets would take John from house to house and from village to village and from city to city, proclaiming the everlasting gospel to all who would listen from the eastern United States to Australia (see D&C 99:1). On 14 October 1852 a letter from Brigham Young released John from his final mission: “Return in peace. Your Mission is accomplished and others are on the way to follow up and build upon the foundation which you have laid” (Reva Baker Holt, “A Brief Synopsis of the Life of John Murdock,” n.p., 1965, in author’s possession, p. 12).

Who are those sent to build upon the foundation he laid? Is it you? Is it me? For the faithful Saints of yesteryear, when the winds of adversity, the trial of their faith, or an Abrahamic test raged and beat upon their house, it stood because their foundation was faith in Christ (see Matthew 7:27). The faithful Saints accepted the name of Christ by baptism, and their further covenants did not allow their faith to become like the waves of the sea tossed to and fro (see James 1:6), nor were they swayed from the strait and narrow path to the filthy waters or the spacious building (see 1 Nephi 8).

When they learned truth they willingly embraced it and accepted the gospel in its fullness. They did not view the gospel feast as a smorgasbord with a nibble here, a bite there, a taste, a smell, or even a desire to change the cook’s recipe. They accepted the gospel harvest as a feast of thanksgiving and embraced the truth as they came unto Christ and partook. They had through faith found the passageway to eternal life and clung to the rod of iron amid the refiner’s fire, the fuller’s soap, and the trials that tested their integrity and their grip. For

them and for thousands and now millions of Latter-day Saints their faith increased to knowledge, and they knew in whom they had trusted, they knew their Redeemer liveth (see Job 19:25).

The legacy of faith remembered by this generation needs to be repeated. "Shall the youth of Zion falter?" No, I trust not one. You are our hope. As a faculty member of this great university, I commit myself to share my talents and life to improving yours. Is it worth it to me? Yes, you are the promise of today, the hope of tomorrow. May you choose the path trodden

by our faithful forefathers who knew that yesterday's faith needed to be nurtured today. May you partake of the Lord's supper, his feast, his delicious fruit as you learn more of faith and embrace that truth. Then will the hope of eternal brightness be yours as you contemplate an infinite joy with the Saints of the Most High God—Abraham, Joseph Smith, John Murdock, and, yes, I could exclaim to my grandma, even Sarah Ann. May you resolve with me at this Thanksgiving season to retread their legacy of faith. I say this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.