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Joseph Smith and the Spirit of Optimism

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We live at a time when calamity abounds. Collectively, we are surrounded by economic turmoil, terrorism, wars, gangs, sexual perversion, pollution, hunger, famine, poverty, and the disintegration of the family. Moreover, on an individual level, many contemporary households deal with disease, divorce, financial distress, unemployment, and a host of other critical issues. Years ago, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland jested, “I watch an early morning news broadcast while I shave, and then read a daily newspaper. That is enough to ruin anyone’s day, and by then it’s only 6:30 in the morning.”¹ More recently, Bishop Richard C. Edgley observed:

We live in a world today of isms—agnosticism, secularism, atheism, pessimism, and other isms. And today we certainly live in a time of great pessimism and concern. We face challenges both economically and spiritually. The stock market, a rather reliable index of public sentiment, has had distressing declines in value. The unemployment rate has risen from the comfortable levels we enjoyed in the past. Homes are foreclosing at an alarming rate, unusually high energy costs are affecting all of us, and so forth. . . . Perhaps most alarming is a retreat toward a godless society as more people are moving away from faith in Deity and the establishment of basic

moral values that have become the basis of a righteous life and are challenging our religious beliefs and our lifestyle.

The evidence of the decline in moral values is readily available as we see the continued rise of pornography, the rampant use of illegal drugs, cohabitating outside of marriage, and every other degenerate practice known to man.²

Certainly, such news does not give us much to cheer about these days; in fact, it would be rather easy to become a professional pessimist. Today, there are many who seek for peace but cannot find it. Consequently, a host of individuals in our society suffer from anxiety, depression, and stress. We live in a day in which the love of many has waxed cold (see Matthew 24:12) and men's hearts are failing them due to fear (see Luke 21:26). Without the perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ, life could be overwhelming and devastating to most individuals.

The Example of Joseph Smith

Even though the Prophet Joseph Smith was born over two hundred years ago, he too faced many of life's stresses, trials, heartaches, and difficulties. Shortly after the Church was organized, the Lord counseled Joseph to "be firm in keeping the commandments wherewith I have commanded you; and if you do this, behold I grant unto you eternal life, *even if you should be slain*" (D&C 5:22; emphasis added). In addition, the Lord told Joseph, "Be patient in afflictions, *for thou shalt have many*" (D&C 24:8; emphasis added). Such declarations would not bring peace to the soul of a fair-weather follower of Christ. In fact, for most individuals, such "warnings" would cause extreme stress and worry. A quick review of his struggles reveals that Joseph had more trials than most individuals will ever face. He once declared, "Deep water is what I am wont to swim in. It all has become a second nature to me."³ Joseph did not merely *survive* his trials; he bore his difficulties with patience, long-suffering, and meekness. Through opposition, he learned to develop godly attributes. Joseph declared, "I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain . . . knocking off a corner here and a corner there. Thus I will become a smooth and polished shaft in the quiver of the Almighty."⁴ The trials and challenges that Joseph faced molded him into a Saint. The following are some of the tests he faced:

- His leg was operated on at age seven. Not only was there a long recovery time but Joseph walked with a limp the rest of his life.

- He was mobbed, assaulted, and tarred and feathered at the Johnson home in Hiram, Ohio, resulting not only in immediate pain and difficulty but also in back pains for the remainder of his days.
- As the leader of the Church, Joseph spent much time hiding from false accusers, keeping him away from his family and loved ones.
- His tooth was broken when wicked men tried to shove a vial of poison down his throat. From that day forward, Joseph spoke with a lisp.
- Joseph was beaten on his hips with guns, leaving bruises on each side over eighteen inches in diameter.
- Of Joseph's eleven children, only five lived to adulthood. Four of his children died the same day they were born, and two other children died within their first year.⁵
- Emma was often sick as a result of pregnancies or emotional stress.
- At one time, Joseph had over forty-six lawsuits filed against him.
- On numerous occasions, Joseph was imprisoned falsely and had to deal with the burden of contrived legal, or sometimes illegal, charges.
- He had to cope with the venom of apostates and often heard reports of the murder, rape, and torture of his beloved Saints.⁶
- Joseph lived in a state of constant financial struggle and poverty. It wasn't until he and Emma moved to Nauvoo that they lived in a home they could call their own.
- Joseph was constantly hounded, driven, persecuted, harassed, and threatened by mobs.

During the height of the persecutions, the Prophet wrote, "My family was kept in a continual state of alarm, not knowing, when I went from home, that I should ever return again; or what would befall me from day to day."⁷ Any of these challenges would have tested the most faithful Saint to the core. Imagine dealing with the death of several of your own children, having over forty lawsuits issued against you, or having your life threatened on a regular basis. Joseph reached a point in his spiritual development where he was able to say that such trials were "second nature"! For most of us, it is difficult to handle life when enemies or even good friends are merely angry with us. How difficult would it be to keep believing, building, and preaching while bullets are flying over your head and wicked men are conspiring to kill you? Indeed, Joseph Smith was no ordinary man.

Most people would crumble under the pressure of one or two of these major difficulties. It is mind-boggling to realize that Joseph suffered trials of

such magnitude his entire life. As contemporary Latter-day Saints, we can learn much from Joseph Smith as we deal with our own challenges. Joseph modeled how to be cheerful regardless of world conditions, persecution, personal sorrow, or extreme trials. If anyone ever had a legitimate reason, or reasons, to be discouraged, it was Joseph Smith. Yet most of the time he was happy and optimistic. Some would argue that Joseph was happier than he should have been! Indeed, Joseph Smith serves as an example of a Saint filled with faith and hope—something all of us can look to as we seek to survive in this treacherous world.

Dr. Martin Seligman, a prominent psychologist and one of the major proponents of positive thinking, explained: “Life inflicts the same setbacks and tragedies on the optimist as on the pessimist, but the optimist weathers them better. As we have seen, the optimist bounces back from defeat, and, with his life somewhat poorer, he picks up and starts again. The pessimist gives up and falls into depression. Because of his resilience, the optimist achieves more at work, at school, and on the playing field. . . . Americans want optimists to lead them.”⁸

Most certainly, Joseph Smith was an effective leader. He seemed to always bounce back from defeat. He never did give up; defeat was not part of his vocabulary. Because of his resilience, he accomplished so much more than the average man. The Saints adored Joseph because of his leadership, faith, and hope. In fact, many Saints learned to be happy as they followed his example. Because of his own rock-solid faith, Joseph instilled courage and hope into the hearts of his followers.

The Purpose of Our Existence

The Prophet Joseph taught:

Happiness is the object and design of our existence; and will be the end thereof, if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping all the commandments of God. But we cannot keep all the commandments without first knowing them, and we cannot expect to know all, or more than we now know unless we comply with or keep those we have already received. . . .

In obedience there is joy and peace unspotted, unalloyed; and as God has designed our happiness—and the happiness of all His creatures, he never has—He never will institute an ordinance or give a commandment to His people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which He has designed, and which will not end in the greatest amount of good and glory to those who become the recipients of his law and ordinances.⁹

Joseph understood that happiness is the purpose of our existence—it is why we are here on earth. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we have a perspective that allows us to deal with stress, difficulty, and strain—and yet be full of faith. Joseph Smith had that mindset. It is disheartening today to look around in many of our Latter-day Saint congregations and realize that some of the most faithful members are downright miserable and discouraged. Yes, there are sore trials to face, and most of us have been weighed down by many of them. But once again, because we view life through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we should be the happiest people on earth! Joseph Smith, regardless of his terrible, heart-wrenching trials, seemed to model happiness almost daily. It is one thing to be happy when life seems to be going well but an entirely different matter to choose happiness when there is not much to smile about. One of Joseph's great gifts was his ability to take courage and choose happiness, regardless of the circumstances.

A great secret to happiness is gratitude. One author wrote, "All happy people are grateful, and ungrateful people cannot be happy. . . . Because gratitude is the key to happiness, anything that undermines gratitude must undermine happiness."¹⁰ Truly, Joseph Smith was happy because he was grateful. He often counted his many blessings and was occasionally reminded that his circumstances could have been much worse. For example, as Joseph began the year 1836, he reflected: "This being the beginning of a new year, my heart is filled with gratitude to God that He has preserved my life, and the lives of my family, while another year has passed away. We have been sustained and upheld in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation, although exposed to all the afflictions, temptations, and misery that are incident to human life; for this I feel to humble myself in dust and ashes, as it were, before the Lord."¹¹

Furthermore, Joseph understood that happiness is correlated with keeping the commandments of God and that our Father in Heaven gives us commands so that we will have joy not just in eternity, but right here, right now, on earth. Sadly, many who are not happy lack faith. They do not believe in Heavenly Father's promises to them or his assurances to all Saints who will keep the commandments and live the gospel. For example, in Joseph's case, he knew that his life would *not* be taken until he accomplished the work God had sent him to do. President Brigham Young declared that he often heard Joseph say, "I shall not live until I am forty years of age."¹² Meanwhile, Joseph stated with confidence, "God will always protect me until my mission is fulfilled."¹³ With that perspective, Joseph took great comfort in knowing

that he would be preserved until his mission was completed. When nineteen-year-old William Taylor asked Joseph, “Don’t you get frightened when all those hounding wolves are after you?” Joseph simply responded, “No, I am not afraid; the Lord said he would protect me, and I have full confidence in his word.”¹⁴

A more detailed example of Joseph’s complete faith and trust in such promises is preserved in Sarah Stoddard’s journal account. Sarah had a son named Charles, who was fourteen years old at the time and served as a house-boy to William Law. One day after Charles cleaned Mr. Law’s gun, Law bragged to his young apprentice that he would kill the Prophet Joseph Smith with one shot. Law sent Charles to invite Joseph over to his home. Charles was mortified. Would he go down into the annals of history as the boy who cleaned the gun that killed Joseph Smith? Instead of extending an invitation, Charles ran down the streets of Nauvoo as fast as possible to warn the Prophet of impending danger. He begged the Prophet not to visit Mr. Law. Calmly, Joseph assured Charles that no harm would come to him—at least not on that day. In Sarah Stoddard’s words,

The Prophet in a final attempt to calm my dear son uttered the fateful words, “Mr. Law may someday kill me, Charles, but it won’t be today.”

As they approached their destination, Mr. Law came staggering out of the house [he was drunk] shouting what he intended to do.

The Prophet said kindly and unafraid, “You sent for me, Mr. Law?” to which Mr. Law replied with oaths that now he was doing the whole a favor by disposing of the Prophet with one shot.

Calmly the Prophet unbuttoned his shirt and bared his chest, then said, “I’m ready now, Mr. Law.” Charles said at this point he nearly fainted. Sick fear strangled him until he was speechless and paralyzed, unable to move a muscle.

Mr. Law paced a few steps, turned, aimed, and pressed the trigger. There was complete silence. Then the air rang with profanity, and Mr. Law turned on Charles, accusing him of fixing the gun so it would not go off and threatening to kill even Charles—my innocent, frightened, but faithful son.

The Prophet, to divert Mr. Law’s blame of Charles, suggested that a can be placed on a fence post for Mr. Law to take a practice shot. Relieved, Charles ran for a can and laid it on its side on the post. Mr. Law paced back, took aim, and fired. His “one shot” streaked through the exact center of the can.

Even Mr. Law was quiet, as if stunned.

The Prophet buttoned up his shirt, gave Charles a meaningful look, and then said, “If you are finished with me now, Mr. Law, I have other things needing to be done. Good morning.”¹⁵

When the Lord told Joseph that his life would not be taken until his mission was completed, Joseph believed and had faith and complete trust in that

promise. He knew that God would not lie; such promises allowed Joseph to exercise faith, act in confidence, and be happy and full of hope.

Joseph's Affable and Cheerful Nature

Joseph was described by his contemporaries as being happy and cheerful. In the 1838 account of the First Vision, Joseph mentioned that he had a “native cheery temperament” (Joseph Smith—History 1:28). Similarly, a neighbor described Joseph as “a real clever, jovial boy.”¹⁶ His cheerful temperament and jovial nature proved a great blessing in his life and enabled him to pass through many difficult situations. His smile was “frequent” and “agreeable,”¹⁷ and his “countenance was ever mild, affable, beaming with intelligence and benevolence; mingled with a look of interest and an unconscious smile, or cheerfulness, and entirely free from all restraint or affectation of gravity.”¹⁸ Joseph Smith was a good-natured model of sociability. Mosiah Hancock reported that he “always had a smile for his friends and was always cheerful,” while Lyman O. Littlefield added that Joseph was “social, conversational and often indulged in harmless jokes.”¹⁹ The late Truman G. Madsen said that the Prophet Joseph was “easily inclined to laughter, sociable, animated, the life of the party, and colorful in his use of language.”²⁰ Consequently, Joseph Smith III recalled that his father’s home in Nauvoo was “generally overrun with visitors.”²¹ Joseph seemed to enjoy a houseful of company to entertain and good food to eat.

One of the challenges Joseph faced was the backgrounds and baggage new converts often brought with them from previous religious experiences. For example, during the 1800s, the Puritan influence loomed large. Therefore, Christians during this period were taught that “one’s focus should be on strictly spiritual concerns and that most forms of recreation, play, popular music, and other ‘worldly’ concerns were to be engaged in at the peril of their eternal souls.”²² For example, one minister of Joseph’s day preached, “Hell stands open to receive you, and devils stand ready to drag you into everlasting fire. . . . Why be careless? Why be merry?”²³ Such was the tenor and sentiment of puritanical religiosity in the early 1800s. President Brigham Young was a product of such strict Puritan beliefs: “When I was young [he said], I was kept within very strict bounds, and was not allowed to walk more than half-an-hour on Sunday for exercise. The proper and necessary gambols of youth [were] denied me. . . . I had not a chance to dance when I was young, and never heard the enchanting tones of the violin, until I was eleven years of age;

and then I thought I was on the high way to hell, if I suffered myself to linger and listen to it.”²⁴

President Young explained that parents of his day whipped their children for reading novels, refused to let them attend the theater, and would not allow them to play or associate with other children who held lesser standards or values. In fact, it was his belief that when such children finally were old enough to leave home and escape the rigorous training of their parents, “they are more fit for companions to devils, than to be the children of such religious parents.”²⁵ One of Joseph’s most pressing challenges was helping the converts with such prudish beliefs to understand that religion, happiness, and fun can be in harmony.

Latter-day Saint historian Leonard J. Arrington further explained: “It was common for these descendants of the Puritans to see displays of humor as a mark of insincerity, for humor suggested that nothing really mattered and that life was basically comic. To be overly humorous, they thought, was to be cynical toward life. But Joseph Smith saw humor and religion as quite reconcilable. As he saw it, once one acknowledges that there is something beyond laughter—a core of life that is solemn, serious, and tender—there is still plenty of room for jesting. At least, that is the way he was—‘a jolly good fellow,’ as one contemporary described him.”²⁶

Many of these new members struggled with Joseph’s jovial nature. In their mind, a prophet was someone directly from the pages of the Old Testament, complete with a long, flowing robe, beard, and somber nature. In fact, Rachel Ridgeway Grant felt that Hyrum seemed more like a prophet than Joseph, for he was “more sedate, more serious.”²⁷ When these new members witnessed Joseph’s jovial and playful attitude, they were often caught off guard. Unfortunately, some even left the Church soon after their conversion. According to Elder George A. Smith, one convert family apostatized soon after they arrived in Kirtland when they saw Joseph come downstairs from the room “where he had been translating by the gift and power of God” and romp and play with his children.²⁸

The somber, pharisaic, holy attitude that was common among many religious leaders of the day did not set well with Joseph. The Prophet was a man of integrity—there was no pretense about him. It was not his nature to participate in shams or the false drama that “holy men” of his day had created. Moreover, despite the fact that he had seen God the Father and Jesus Christ, had entertained angels and other heavenly personages from the Book

of Mormon and Bible, Joseph never put himself above others. In fact, the Prophet was always down to earth and did not take himself too seriously. For instance, once when he was wrestling with Sidney Rigdon, Joseph accidentally tore a hole in his own pants. Those of a more holy bent might have been upset or embarrassed. However, Joseph simply had a good laugh over it.²⁹ Joseph said, “There was one good man and his name was Jesus. . . . I do not want you to think that I am very righteous, for I am not.”³⁰

In the 1820s, there was a prevailing belief that the more dramatic the display of spirituality, the holier the person. Joseph Smith viewed the ministers of his day as sanctimonious, histrionic, and often phony. He tried to convince new converts who were weighed down with such beliefs to purge them. For example, on one occasion, a man who had developed a falsetto approached Joseph. In preaching without microphones, ministers learned to pitch their voices high so that they could be heard from great distances. Moreover, such a speaking technique added much flare and drama to their oratory. “One man with exactly that tone came and said, with a kind of supercilious reverence, ‘Is it possible that I now flash my optics upon a Prophet?’ ‘Yes,’ the Prophet replied, ‘I don’t know but you do; would not you like to wrestle with me?’ The man was shocked.”³¹ Perhaps Joseph was not as interested in wrestling the minister as he was in teaching a principle—that preachers of religion need not be theatrical. Jediah M. Grant, who knew the Prophet well, underscored this point when he declared that Joseph Smith preached against the “super-abundant stock of sanctimoniousness” that characterized contemporary religion.³²

Joseph also knew how to use humor to relieve tense situations. Often, after heated discussions with preachers and pastors, he was prone to say, “Gentleman, let’s lay the scriptures aside for a moment and I’ll challenge you to jump at the mark with me.”³³ It was not that Joseph loved beating ministers in jumping competitions. His challenges most often eased tension, brought humor to tense situations, and exposed a “holier-than-thou” attitude.

On another occasion, with the opportunity to blend some humor with a true principle, Joseph dressed in ragged clothes and rode his horse down to meet a group of Saints who had just landed on the dock from England. The son of Edwin Rushton shared this account:

Father was very anxious to find the members of his family already established there, and hurried towards the town in search of them. He had gone only a short distance

when he met a man riding a beautiful black horse. The man accosted him, saying, "Hey, Bub, is that a company of Mormons just landed?"

In much surprise, Father answered, "Yes sir."

"Are you a Mormon?" the stranger continued.

"Yes, sir," Father again answered.

"What do you know about old Joe Smith?" the stranger asked.

"I know that Joseph Smith is a prophet of God," said Father.

"I suppose you are looking for an old man with a long, gray beard. What would you think if I told you I was Joseph Smith?" the man continued.

"If you are Joseph Smith," said Father, "I know you are a prophet of God."

In a gentle voice, the man explained, "I am Joseph Smith. I came to meet those people, dressed as I am in rough clothes and speaking in this manner, to see if their faith is strong enough to stand the things they must meet. If not, they should turn back right now."³⁴

Joseph's warmth and kindness proved a blessing to him when he was accosted by his enemies. Elder Parley P. Pratt explained that Joseph "possessed a noble boldness and independence of character; his manner was easy and familiar, . . . his benevolence unbounded as the ocean. . . . Even his most bitter enemies were generally overcome, if he could once get their ears."³⁵ Years afterward, Moses Wilson said, "Joseph Smith was a most remarkable man. I carried him a prisoner in chains to my house in Independence, Missouri, and he hadn't been there two hours before my wife loved him better than she loved me."³⁶ Joseph appears to have had not only charisma but also human warmth and gentleness that drew his fellow men to him.

Another great example of Joseph's gentility comes from Joseph's mother, Lucy Mack Smith. While in Missouri, Joseph was at the home of his mother, engaged in writing a letter and transacting some Church business when a mob of eight men came to the door and asked for him. They made it clear that they were there to kill Joseph Smith and all Mormons. After Joseph greeted the men, resolved their concerns, and smoothed over some ill feelings, they insisted on walking him home and protecting him from any harm and danger. These men were sent to assassinate the Prophet, not escort him home.³⁷ Joseph was able to win over the hearts of these men with his kindness and warmth.

Fun and Humor

Joseph liked to have a good time. He enjoyed socializing with friends and neighbors, and he certainly enjoyed games and contests. Joseph was certainly

a “people person” in every sense of that phrase. One of his close friends, Benjamin Johnson, said of Joseph:

The Prophet often came to our town, but after my arrival, he lodged in no house but mine, and I was proud of his partiality and took great delight in his society and friendship. When with us, there was no lack of amusement; for with jokes, games, etc., he was always ready to provoke merriment, one phase of which was matching couplets in rhyme, by which we were at times in rivalry; and his fraternal feeling, in great degree did away with the disparity of age or greatness of his calling.³⁸

Not only did Joseph Smith have many adult friends but he also had the gift of understanding young people. For instance, he knew that by engaging in physical activities with young men, he could develop a friendship and strengthen the bonds of love. Elder Lorenzo Snow related an occasion when Joseph played ball with some children. Hyrum, who possessed a more serious nature, chastised Joseph, calling the behavior inappropriate for the Lord’s anointed. The Prophet then explained to Hyrum the reason for his conduct: “Brother Hyrum, my mingling with the boys in a harmless sport like this does not injure me in any way, but on the other hand it makes them happy and draws their hearts nearer to mine; and who knows but there may be young men among them who may sometime lay down their lives for me!”³⁹

When Joseph was with the young men, he played baseball and quoits, a ring-toss game played with an iron ring. He was known to create his own games, complete with prizes. When the games were completed, Joseph would often encourage the youth in Nauvoo to come with him to build a cabin, chop wood, or engage in some other physical labor. At other times, Joseph would return home and get back to work, a signal that the young men should return to their homes as well.

On one occasion, several young men got into some mischief by throwing a wooden ball on top of a neighbor’s roof. The owner of the home rebuked the young men for the damage they had done. When Joseph came upon the scene, instead of joining in the chastisement or urging the young men to go somewhere else to play, Joseph distracted them. He thought of a new game that all of the young men could participate in: “He first took the children over to a carpenter’s shop and had the proprietor make each of them a small wooden ball on his lathe, while he fashioned paddles for each child out of some extra scraps of wood. He then showed the youngsters how to strike the ball with the paddle. Then, he taught them the object of the game. They were to hit the ball with their paddles, run to it and hit it again until they had knocked it to

a distant goal. The narrator of this incident stated that this activity ‘gave them good exercise, tested their muscular skills, and kept them busy for an hour or two, thereby keeping them out of mischief.’”⁴⁰

One day a bully from LaHarpe, Illinois, challenged Joseph to a wrestling match. The intimidator had soundly beaten every challenger that day. A hat was passed around the crowd, and whatever money was tossed in would go to the winner. If Joseph won, he would be able to post bail for his good friend Orrin Porter Rockwell, who was imprisoned in Missouri. “The man was eager to have a tussle with the Prophet, so Joseph stepped forward and took hold of the man. The first pass he made, Joseph whirled him around and took him by the collar and seat of his trousers and walked out to a ditch and threw him in it. Then, taking him by the arm, helped him up and patted him on the back and said, ‘You must not mind this. When I am with the boys I make all the fun I can for them.’”⁴¹

When Joseph sent Jacob Gates on a mission, he said, “Go and fill your mission, and we will wrestle after you come back.”⁴² It probably wasn’t Joseph’s intent to wrestle Brother Gates. Instead, Joseph’s invitation appears to be a way to lighten an emotional moment. At the time, Jacob gates was quite physically ill and was about to embark on his fifth mission, leaving behind his wife and children for an undetermined amount of time.⁴³ Joseph knew how to relieve burdens and often used humor to do it.

Consider another example. Shortly after James Henry Rollins was assigned by Joseph to work at his store in Nauvoo, the Prophet walked up, then raised his leg and laid it on the shoulder of young Brother Rollins. Shortly after, Joseph removed his leg and said, “I thought to break you down with the heft of my leg, but you are stiffer than I thought you were.”⁴⁴ Joseph’s joke on Rollins was his way of connecting with him and forging a friendship. Joseph’s closest associates knew that he played jokes and teased those he admired.

On another occasion, Joseph and several other brethren sought refuge from a mob in the Joseph and Isabella Horne home in Quincy, Illinois. Sister Horne noted that Joseph was in the “best of spirits.” After some food and good company, Joseph laughingly said, “Sister Horne, if I had a wife as small as you, when trouble came I would put her in my pocket and run.”⁴⁵

A few days earlier, a man in the community of Kirtland had sold his wife for a bulls-eye pocket watch. Many of the locals were talking about this newsworthy story when Joseph met Daniel McArthur in the woods. With a smile

on his face, Joseph greeted Brother McArthur with, "You are not the young man who sold his wife for a bull-eye watch the other day, are you?" Daniel replied, "No sir." Joseph laughed, having some fun with Brother McArthur.⁴⁶

One of the greatest demonstrations of the Prophet Joseph's humor occurred on a sultry day in May 1843. Joseph stood before the Nauvoo Legion and complimented them for their fine work and discipline. Since the weather was especially hot, Joseph asked for a glass of water. With the glass in his hands, he proposed this toast: "I will drink you a toast, to the overthrow of the mobocrats,' which he did in language as follows: 'Here's wishing they were in the middle of the sea in a stone canoe, with iron paddles, and a shark swallow the canoe, and the devil swallow the shark, and him locked up in the northwest corner of hell, the key lost, and a blind man looking for it.'"⁴⁷ The toast reveals in a very personal way Joseph's quick wit and humorous perspective directed toward those wanting to murder him. In such tense circumstances, Joseph focused on the lighter side.

Joseph also had a free exchange with Sidney Rigdon. Brother Rigdon was a polished orator who had a flare for the dramatic. When conducting meetings and introducing Sidney to the congregation, Joseph was prone to say, "The truth is good enough without dressing up, but Brother Rigdon will now proceed to dress it up."⁴⁸ Joseph's manner of speaking always endeared him to the congregation.

Loosening of the Bow

Joseph recognized that there is a time and season for everything. When it was time to work, Joseph rolled up his sleeves and dove right in. Joseph also recognized when it was time to relax. For example, while studying Greek and Hebrew, he would often take short breaks from his studies to play with neighborhood children and to get some exercise. Afterward, Joseph would go back to his work. Unfortunately, it tried the patience of some "holy" members when they saw Joseph playing ball with the boys. It seems they wanted a more serious-minded prophet. While preaching one day, Joseph shared the following parable: "A certain prophet . . . was sitting under the shade of a tree amusing himself in some way, when a hunter came along with his bow and arrow, and reproved him. The prophet asked him if he kept his bow strung up all the time. The hunter answered that he did not. The prophet asked why, and he said it would lose its elasticity if he did. The prophet said it was just so with his mind, he did not want it strung up all the time."⁴⁹

Joseph understood the importance of rest, diversion, and recreation to relax his mind and body. He was also keenly aware of when those he labored with needed a break. He understood that physical activity and fun could lift a man's spirits. For example, in 1838, a group of Mormon militiamen, including Joseph, were encamped at Adam-ondi-Ahman in hopes of defending the Saints in Missouri. The weather was cold and drizzling, and the men were becoming quite depressed. John D. Lee recorded that "the Prophet came up while the brethren were moping around, and caught first one and then another and shook them up, and said, 'Get out of here, and wrestle, jump, run, do anything but mope around; warm yourselves up; this inactivity will not do for soldiers.' The words of the Prophet put life and energy into the men. A ring was soon formed, according to the custom of the people. The Prophet stepped into the ring, ready for a tussle with any comer. Several went into the ring to try their strength, but each one was thrown by the Prophet, until he had thrown several of the stoutest of the men present."⁵⁰

Meanwhile, Sidney Rigdon was quite upset that Joseph would encourage such an activity because it was the Sabbath day. As Sidney tried to break up the wrestling match, Joseph told him that if he did not allow the men their fun, he would throw him down. He then dragged him out of the ring, tearing his coat and causing him to lose his hat in the process. Rigdon complained about what happened to his clothing, but Joseph told his counselor he was out of place and had no one to blame but himself.⁵¹

Several days later, the troops were still camped at Adam-ondi-Ahman and trying to keep warm. The weather was bitter cold, and several inches of snow had fallen. Joseph sensed that the men were becoming despondent and discouraged. Edward Stevenson recalled that Joseph divided the men into two teams with himself at the head of one team and Lyman Wight the head of the other. At that point, Joseph engaged the men in a sham battle using snowballs instead of guns and swords. Soon, feelings of despair in camp were replaced with fun, excitement, and happiness. Spirits were rejuvenated, and men were able to approach their difficult situation with a new perspective.

In February 1843, Joseph organized a "Wood-cutting Bee." Seventy men sawed, chopped, split, and piled up a large stack of wood in the yard of Joseph's home. The wood was then distributed to Joseph's family as well as others in the surrounding area of Nauvoo. The purpose was not so much to compete in lumberjack skills but to build unity and camaraderie among the brethren and engage in some fun. A careful review of the Church historical

account reveals that this wood-cutting event was preceded by a myriad of Church activities and bad weather. In fact, the early days of February 1843 brought cold weather and heavy snows to Nauvoo. Consequently, most of the Latter-day Saints were confined to their homes for almost a week. During that week, Joseph had been involved in studying German, reviewing legal cases in his role of mayor, holding meetings with the Quorum of the Twelve, and reviewing the proof of the Doctrine and Covenants. The day before the “Wood-cutting Bee,” Joseph and others met from 9:00 a.m. until midnight as a high council to review land disputes between Wilson Law and Uriel Nickerson. If there was ever time for a good diversion and the “loosening of the bow,” this was it. Joseph recorded, “The day was spent by them with much pleasantry, good humor and feeling.”⁵²

Knowing how to relax and divert his attention towards other areas, when he could, he would endeavor to help others relax as well. Unfortunately, Joseph was not always successful in this quest. Robert B. Thompson, the Prophet’s secretary, was completely devoted to Joseph and was a tireless worker. Joseph spent so much time with Robert and was so attached to him that he said to Mercy Thompson, Robert’s wife, “Sister Thompson, you must not feel bad towards me for keeping your husband away from you so much, for I am married to him.”⁵³ Despite their close relationship, Joseph was concerned that if his secretary did not loosen his bow he would eventually wilt under the pressure of his duties. Once Joseph said, “Robert, you have been so faithful and relentless in this work, you need to relax.” Joseph encouraged Brother Thompson to get away from the office and find some recreation. However, Robert was a serious-minded man. He told Joseph, “I can’t do it.” Joseph replied, “You must do it, if you don’t do it, you will die.” One of Joseph’s sorrows was that Brother Thompson died prematurely—within two weeks of this prophecy. It was a difficult task for Joseph to speak at the funeral of his beloved secretary.⁵⁴

Hard Times

It should be noted, however, that Joseph wasn’t perfect in his faith and cheerful temperament. Of course, Joseph was human, and, like each of us, he had his moments when the circumstances were awful and grievous. Renowned Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote, “To live is to suffer.”⁵⁵ No mortals will escape suffering, and Joseph suffered much. We learn from several historical accounts that there were times when Joseph was simply devastated by the

circumstances in his life. For example, on June 15, 1828, Emma gave birth to a baby boy they named Alvin. Several hours after Alvin's birth, he passed away. Of course, the death of their first son was overwhelming. However, at this same time, there was "another cause of trouble" that unnerved Joseph. Martin Harris had the 116-page manuscript of Joseph's first translation work on the Book of Mormon in his possession for just short of a month, and Joseph hadn't heard a word from him. As Joseph took a stage coach from Harmony to Palmyra, he began to think deeply about the manuscript and Martin's tardiness in returning it, which caused him great distress. A stranger whom Joseph met on the coach walked with Joseph for the twenty miles from where they were dropped off—the last four miles the stranger had to practically carry Joseph—and he was extremely distraught and physically exhausted. Hours later, when Martin joined the Smiths for a meal and revealed that he had lost the manuscript and couldn't find it anywhere, Joseph responded, "Oh, my God! . . . All is lost! All is lost! What shall I do? I have sinned—it is I who tempted the wrath of God."⁵⁶ In this case, there was no report of Joseph saying things like, "Don't worry, we'll find that manuscript," or "Don't worry, Martin, it will all work out." No, there was none of that. Instead, Lucy Mack Smith reported that Joseph was distressed, weeping, and grieving until sunset.⁵⁷ Those were dark days in the Smith home, and it took Joseph some time to emotionally and spiritually recover from the devastation. On this occasion, hope was traded for despair, and faith was exchanged with fear and dejection. However, the optimist will always bounce back from defeat. This experience ultimately molded Joseph into a stronger person.

The time Joseph spent in Liberty Jail was also a heart-wrenching experience. The prison dungeon, ironically called "Liberty," was a fourteen by fourteen square room with a six-foot-high ceiling. Joseph and his comrades Sidney Rigdon, Hyrum Smith, Lyman Wight, Caleb Baldwin, and Alexander McRae⁵⁸ were imprisoned in Liberty from December 1838 to April 1839. While there, they suffered much thanks to apostates who had turned against them—such as W. W. Phelps, William E. McLellin, and a host of others. Joseph and his prison colleagues had to deal with cold winter weather, extremely poor sanitation, sleeping on the ground, and food so disgusting that it was described as "very coarse, and so filthy that [they] could not eat it until [they] were driven to it by hunger."⁵⁹ For any human, it would be difficult to remain optimistic and full of hope while incarcerated. Perhaps the most difficult part of this entire ordeal was the intelligence Joseph often received

regarding the condition of the Saints—including his own family. Many members of the Church suffered from hunger, many were tortured, some were raped, and others killed—and Joseph could do nothing. Meanwhile, other members such as Isaac Russell claimed that Joseph was a fallen prophet and that he was now appointed to lead the Saints.⁶⁰

Perhaps in an act of pure frustration, Joseph penned a letter to the Church, lashing out at those who treated him and others so “vilely.” In his letter, he wrote that these men “shall be hanged upon their own gallows,” and “their name[s] shall be blotted out, and God shall reward them according to all their abominations.”⁶¹ In the same letter, Joseph harshly rebuked Colonel Hinkle, John Corrill, Reed Peck, William E. McLellin, W. W. Phelps, and David Whitmer for their roles in persecuting the Saints and committing Joseph to prison. Some others, Joseph said, “are too mean to mention.”⁶² In the letter, Joseph appears to show his human side—obviously he’s upset, angry, and perhaps exasperated. Who wouldn’t be? At this juncture, his heart appeared to be filled with disgust and frustration rather than hope and optimism. However, we must not forget that on November 3, 1838, just as Joseph and other Church leaders were being imprisoned, he said, “Be of good cheer, brethren; the word of the Lord came to me last night that our lives should be given us, and that whatever we may suffer during this captivity, not one of our lives should be taken.”⁶³ This statement reveals the answer as to how Joseph could be so positive amid so much trouble. He found comfort from the constant flow of revelation from the Lord. Truly, Joseph knew where to turn for peace.

Despite this prophecy, several days later, Major-General Clark read to the Saints in Far West these words: “As for your leaders, do not think—do not imagine for a moment—do not let it enter your mind that they will be delivered, or that you will see their faces again, for their fate is fixed—their die is cast—their doom is sealed.”⁶⁴ Such a directive would make it difficult for Joseph, or anyone else for that matter, to “be of good cheer.” Nevertheless, they held on to hope, kept their faith, and eventually escaped from Liberty Jail, one of the worst places that man could conceive.

Perhaps some of the darkest days for the Prophet Joseph were the Kirtland era of 1837, when the Kirtland Safety Society crumbled and apostasy abounded among the rank and file of the Church. Men like Warren Parrish, John Boynton, Luke Johnson, Martin Harris, and even Parley P. Pratt turned against Joseph, which wounded him to the core. Even before the Kirtland

Temple was finished, many in the Church turned against Joseph, including his brother William. Daniel Tyler recorded a moving incident when he attended a meeting where Joseph presided. Tyler wrote:

Entering the schoolhouse a little before meeting opened, and gazing upon the man of God, I perceived sadness in his countenance and tears trickling down his cheeks. . . . A few moments later a hymn was sung and he opened the meeting by prayer. Instead, however, of facing the audience, he turned his back and bowed upon his knees, facing the wall. This, I suppose, was done to hide his sorrow and tears. . . . When Joseph arose and addressed the congregation, he spoke of his many troubles, and said he often wondered why it was that he should have so much trouble in the house of his friends, and he wept as though his heart would break.⁶⁵

Indeed, after these experiences in Kirtland and others like it, Joseph was a broken man. However, Joseph never allowed Satan to keep him down for long. The Prophet relied on the Lord for help and strength, especially when he faced deep distress. For example, after the previous mentioned experience, Joseph composed himself and stated to his brethren: “The Lord once told me that if at any time I got into trouble and could see no way out of it, if I would prophesy in His name, he would fulfill my words. . . . I prophesy in the name of the Lord that those who have thought I was in transgression shall have a testimony this night that I am clear and stand approved before the Lord.”⁶⁶ Soon after, William Smith and others made humble public confessions.

Of course, there were other instances when Joseph was in deep anguish of soul and greatly suffered. The point is, however, that Joseph never let these experiences get the best of him. Joseph faced tremendous burdens, and sometimes the pressure brought him to his knees. But through it all, Joseph persevered. Once again, renowned psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman explained:

The defining characteristic of pessimists is that they tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault. The optimists, who are confronted with the same hard knocks of this world, think about misfortune in the opposite way. They tend to believe defeat is a temporary setback, that its causes are confined to this one case. The optimists believe defeat is not their fault: Circumstances, bad luck, or other people brought it about. Such people are unfazed by defeat. Confronted by a bad situation, they perceive it as a challenge and try harder.⁶⁷

Such was the lot and pattern of Joseph. From many heart-wrenching experiences, Joseph was transformed from a rough stone to a polished shaft.

Conclusion

President Thomas S. Monson recently declared, “My beloved brothers and sisters, fear not. Be of good cheer. The future is as bright as your faith.”⁶⁸ Joseph Smith seems to have lived that declaration perfectly. For example, Orson Spencer observed, “[Joseph] is remarkably cheerful for one who has seen well-tried friends martyred around him, and felt the inflictions of calumny—the vexations of lawsuits—the treachery of intimates—and multiplied violent attempts upon his person and life, together with the cares of much business.”⁶⁹ How could Joseph experience so many trials and heartaches and yet remain optimistic? His positive attitude was certainly a gift from God. Joseph was further blessed with the twin gifts of faith and hope. Regardless of what difficulties Joseph faced, he had the faith to believe that good would prevail. He declared: “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.”⁷⁰

Implicit in this statement is that our Heavenly Father is going to win. No person, institution, government, or army can stop God’s work from moving forward. Undoubtedly, this doctrine brought peace to Joseph’s soul. Moreover, the Prophet understood that God was his partner, and if he failed, or the work failed, it meant that God had failed. Since God does not fail, Joseph understood that neither he nor this work would fail.⁷¹ Such a concept allowed Joseph to exercise great faith and remain positive throughout his life. He always knew the work he had given his life to would succeed. He knew that the restored gospel of Jesus Christ would one day “fill North and South America it [would] fill the world.”⁷² Keep in mind that Joseph Smith made this statement while in a fourteen-by-fourteen-foot log cabin that held the entire priesthood of the Church. What vision! What perspective! What faith!

Joseph was sustained by his great faith, hope, and optimism. When a mob threatened to send the Saints to hell, Joseph said that if they did, “we will turn the devils out of doors and make a heaven out of it.”⁷³ Perhaps even more impressively, Joseph told his young cousin George A. Smith, “Never be discouraged. . . . If I were sunk in the lowest pit of Nova Scotia, with the Rocky Mountains piled on me, I would hang on, exercise faith, and keep up

good courage, and I would come out on top.”⁷⁴ This metaphor is powerful. What could be more discouraging than being stuck in the deepest pit and having one of the world’s largest mountain ranges piled on top of you?

In the tumultuous world we live in, Joseph Smith is a model of how each of us can look for the sunlight amid the storms of life. It was Elder Orson F. Whitney who reminded us that “the spirit of the gospel is optimistic; it trusts in God and looks on the bright side of things. The opposite or pessimistic spirit drags men down and away from God, looks on the dark side, murmurs, complains, and is slow to yield obedience.”⁷⁵ More recently, President Gordon B. Hinckley declared: “Of course there are times of sorrow. Of course there are hours of concern and anxiety. We all worry. But the Lord has told us to lift our hearts and rejoice. I see so many people . . . who seem never to see the sunshine, but who constantly walk with storms under cloudy skies. Cultivate an attitude of happiness. Cultivate a spirit of optimism. Walk with faith, rejoicing in the beauties of nature, in the goodness of those you love, in the testimony which you carry in your heart concerning things divine.”⁷⁶

Joseph Smith lived in great times of sorrow under tremendous amounts of pressure. It attests to his divine calling that he walked in the sunshine and had an attitude of happiness and the spirit of optimism. He walked in total and complete faith. Some could argue that Joseph was optimistic because of his own personality or genetics. However, a closer look reveals that Joseph walked on the bright side because of the teachings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps Joseph was happy because of his family life (see Psalm 127:4–5), because he knew that he could turn to God for help (see Psalm 146:5), or because he kept the commandments (see Proverbs 29:18). Perhaps Joseph Smith was a happy person because he trusted in his God (see Proverbs 16:20) or because he suffered for the sake of righteousness (see 1 Peter 3:14). Or maybe he knew the truth of the statement in Alma that “those who are righteous are received into a state of happiness, . . . a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow” (Alma 40:12). Perhaps Joseph took great comfort in the doctrine that we should be of good cheer, for Jesus Christ has “overcome the world” (John 16:33). Perhaps we will never know exactly why Joseph was as happy as he was. There is one clue, however, to his happiness. President David O. McKay once said, “The noblest aim in life is to strive to live to make other lives better and happier.”⁷⁷ Joseph spent his life striving to make the lives of others better and happier. Joseph taught, “I not only . . . sought my own peace, prosperity, and happiness, but

also the peace, prosperity, and happiness of my friends.”⁷⁸ As Joseph engaged in the noble endeavor of helping others in the cause of happiness, he certainly brought peace to his own soul. That is something all of us can do. **RE**

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