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Preservation of Life as Manifested in the Lives of Latter-day Prophets

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Students of the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are aware of numerous instances where the Prophet Joseph Smith's life was preserved. In great probability, there are also many that are not readily recognized and perhaps many more that were never recorded. Most Latter-day Saints are at least somewhat familiar with the many accidents that befell young Wilford Woodruff, any one of which could have proven fatal. Few, however, fully appreciate the frequency of heavenly intervention that the Presidents of the Church have experienced. It is likewise inspiring to note the accounts wherein the prophets recognize the hand of the Lord in having preserved their lives. As Spencer W. Kimball declared in 1972:

Full provision has been made by our Lord for changes. . . . There have been some eighty apostles . . . since Joseph Smith, though only eleven have occupied the place of the President of the Church, death hav[ing] intervened; and since the death of his servants is in the power and control of the Lord, he permits to come to the first place only the one who is destined to take that leadership. Death and life become the controlling factors.¹

Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and John Taylor

The accounts of the preservation of the Prophet Joseph's life are numerous. On many occasions in New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois, mobs and individuals continually sought to destroy him. Upon receiving the gold plates, young Joseph was told by Moroni that "God had a work for me to do, and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people" (Joseph Smith—History 1:33). For the rest of his life, individuals shot at him, hid to waylay him, tarred and feathered him, and otherwise attempted to frustrate or alter his divinely appointed mission. Numerous accounts could be cited wherein his life was miraculously preserved. One account, however, dramatically demonstrates how the Lord raised Joseph up as well as others who would play a prominent role in helping to preserve the life of the young prophet.

When about seven years of age, Joseph Smith endured a very difficult operation. If the surgery had not been successful, young Joseph may have lost his leg—if not his life. The Prophet remembered, "I was attacked with the Typhus [typhoid²] Fever, and at one time, during my sickness, my father despaired of my life."³ As a complication from the fever, Joseph's leg became infected and needed to be operated on. Dr. LeRoy S. Wirthlin, a historian and doctor, commented on the medical process the ailing boy was required to endure: "With an absence of specific treatment and before antibiotics, this illness [osteomyelitis] took [a] great toll of many youth in both morbidity [characteristic and severity of disease] and mortality [death rate]."⁴

Further, Dr. Wirthlin points out that the medical technology was not generally available to perform the kind of surgery needed in this specific instance at that particular time.

Not by mere coincidence, the Joseph Smith Sr. family was required to move eight times in an approximate ten-year period as a result of crop failure, subsequent loss of homes, etc. These moves put the Smith family in close proximity to the Dartmouth Medical School precisely when Dr. Nathan Smith was experimenting with the very procedure that would save the future Prophet's life. Wirthlin further suggests that Dr. Nathan Smith "had more experience with osteomyelitis than anyone had previously recorded in the medical literature in the English language. Although he enjoyed good results, his work and results were not repeated until the early twentieth century."⁵

Despite the painful ordeal, the young Joseph Smith survived the operation. Neither the doctor nor perhaps even the future prophet knew, at the time, the reason for this providential preservation. Joseph Smith was foreordained as an "instrument in the hands of the Almighty to perform an important work" for the salvation of mankind (2 Nephi 3:24). Still later, through revelation, the Prophet learned in a blessing given under the hands of his own father that he (Joseph Smith Jr.) had been given a promise of life until his earthly efforts to restore the Church and Kingdom of God were completed.⁶ He likewise knew at a tender age (twenty-four years) that his life would be forfeited for the cause of Christ (D&C 5:22). To both promises, Joseph Smith the Prophet was a faithful and willing participant.

In 1842, having returned from the British Mission, Brigham Young, who would succeed the Prophet Joseph, was attacked by a slight fit of apoplexy, a condition in which an individual loses consciousness because of a lack of blood reaching the brain. As a part of this attack, he had a high fever that lasted more than two weeks. During his illness, he was administered to by the

Prophet Joseph and Willard Richards. The Prophet prophesied that Brigham would recover from his illness and live.⁷ According to Elder Young's own account of the experience, after eighteen days of illness, he ceased breathing. "I was bolstered up in my chair, but was so near gone that I could not close my eyes, which were set in my head; my chin dropped down, and my breath stopped." His wife, Mary Angell Young, seeing his condition, "threw some cold water in my face and eyes, which I did not feel in the least; neither did I move a muscle. . . . I was perfectly conscious of all that was passing [on] around me; my spirit was as vivid as it ever was in my life; but I had no feeling in my body."⁸

When her initial efforts to revive her husband failed, Mary "held my nostrils between her thumb and finger, and placing her mouth directly over mine, blew into my lungs, until she filled them with air. This set my lungs in motion, and I again began to breathe."⁹

Elder Young had another brush with death in July 1839 when he and hundreds of other Saints contracted the dreaded malaria. Chills, severe fever, and debilitating weakness threatened to thwart still another mission to England. Brigham was so sick he could not even get up to secure water for himself or his suffering family. It was, he recorded, "a day never to be forgotten."¹⁰ The Prophet Joseph, himself afflicted, arose from his own sickbed and blessed others. Elder Woodruff, another witness, recorded, "It was a day of God's power. There was many Sick . . . on both sides of the river & Joseph went through the midst of them taking them by the hand & in a loud voice Commanding them in the name of Jesus Christ to arise from their beds & be made whole & they leaped from their beds made whole by the power of God."¹¹ Elder Woodruff relates that the first person Joseph visited in Montrose was Brigham Young. "Joseph healed [President Young;] then he arose and accompanied the Prophet on his visit to others who

were in the same condition.”¹² Brigham indicated, “I arose and was healed, and followed him and the brethren of the twelve [all of whom were stricken] to other homes.”¹³

In April 1877, a few months prior to his death, President Young noted, “I feel many times that I could not live an hour longer, but I mean to live just as long as I can. I know not how soon the messenger will call for me, but I calculate to die in the harness.”¹⁴ Barely four and a half months later, President Young died as he said he would, still in the harness.

John Taylor, third President of the restored Church, was known during his lifetime as a “living martyr.” He was savagely shot in the Carthage Jail. Later, he became known as the “double martyr” because of his earlier experience at Carthage and the situation surrounding his subsequent death. He died in exile as a result of being pressed by federal prosecution.

In June 1844, he was one of only two members of the Quorum of the Twelve who remained in Nauvoo while the rest of his quorum traveled in the East to campaign for the Prophet Joseph Smith as U.S. president. Brother Taylor was one of only a few select individuals who accompanied the Prophet and Patriarch Hyrum Smith to prison in Carthage, Illinois. There, Elder Taylor sang for, reassured, and wrote for the Prophet. When the shooting began, Elder Taylor suffered along with other victims of the ordeal. In less time than it takes to tell of the awful episode, two men had died; and another, Elder John Taylor, was critically wounded.

When Elder Taylor first noticed the mob approaching the jail, he attempted to secure the door, but the lock was unusable. As gun muzzles were thrust through the door, he endeavored to hinder their aim by deflecting them with a walking stick. Outnumbered and overpowered at the door, Elder Taylor attempted to jump from the second-story jail window, believing that possibly there were friends who could assist him on the outside. His effort to leap from the window, however, was frustrated, and he was pushed back when a shot from the doorway of the room hit

his left thigh, rendering him helpless on the window ledge. Almost simultaneously, another shot from the outside struck his watch in his vest pocket, propelling him back into the room. While he was on the prison floor, three other bullets struck him—one in the same left leg, just below the knee; a second in the left hip; and a third “entered the forepart of his left arm, a little above the wrist, and, passing down by the joint, lodged in the palm of his left hand.”¹⁵ Immediately following these incidents, the Prophet Joseph likewise attempted to jump from the window. Moments later, he lay dead.

Several days after the ordeal, examination showed that Elder Taylor’s vest pocket watch, which had been hit by a bullet aimed at his heart, was the means of knocking him back into the room, thus saving his life.

Up to that time . . . his being thrown back into the room when he felt himself falling out had been a mystery. . . . Had he fallen on the outside he would have dropped into the very midst of his enemies and would have been instantly dispatched; but the bullet aimed at his heart was turned by an over-ruling Providence into a messenger of mercy—it saved his life.¹⁶

Elder Taylor said of this experience: “I felt that the Lord had preserved me by a special act of mercy; that my time had not yet come, and that I had still a work to perform upon the earth.”¹⁷ Thus, having been severely wounded but having survived those wounds for a higher purpose, he has been referred to as a living martyr whose blood was mingled with that of the slain prophets. Addressing a group of Saints in Salt Lake City in 1885, President Taylor lamented: “You fled from Missouri to Illinois, and then from Illinois to this land, and why? Why did you leave Illinois and come here? Did you injure anybody? No. They killed your Prophets, and I saw them martyred, and was shot most unmercifully myself . . . and they thought they had killed me; but I am alive yet by the grace of God.”¹⁸

Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, and Joseph F. Smith

As a youth, President Woodruff was what we would refer to today as “accident prone.” It required special and frequent divine intervention to preserve him to become the Lord’s mouthpiece on earth. “Evidently, I have been numbered with those who are apparently the marked victims of misfortunes,” President Woodruff said. “It has seemed to me at times as though some invisible power were watching my footsteps in search of an opportunity to destroy my life.”¹⁹

His troubles began at age three when he fell into a cauldron of scalding water. Although he was instantly rescued, several months elapsed before his family felt he would recover fully. Late in his life, he gave a summary of his numerous accidents: “I have broken both legs, one of them in two places; both arms, both ankles, my breastbone, and three ribs; I have been scalded, frozen, and drowned; I have been in two water wheels while turning under a full head; I have passed through a score of other hairbreadth escapes.”²⁰

As if these misfortunes were not enough, he fell down stairs, off beams, and out of trees. He was charged by an infuriated bull, kicked by an ox, and dragged and thrown from fractious horses. He was buried and almost suffocated under a load of hay, bitten by a rabid dog, injured by axes and falling trees, and narrowly escaped death when shot at point-blank range.²¹

Through all these incidents, President Woodruff recognized the merciful protection and preservation the Lord had afforded him. “I have not now a lame limb about me . . . [and] I have been able to endure the hardest kind of manual labor, exposures, hardships and journeys. I have walked forty, fifty and, on one occasion, sixty miles in a single day.”²²

At the conclusion of his chronicle of unusual and narrow escapes with his life, he observed: “The repeated deliverances from all these remarkable dangers I ascribe to the mercies

of my Heavenly Father. In recalling them to mind I always feel impressed to render the gratitude of my heart, with thanksgiving and joy, to the Lord.”²³

Like that of President Woodruff, the preservation of President Lorenzo Snow’s life was both unusual and dramatic. In 1864, at age fifty, Elder Snow was called on a special mission to the Hawaiian Islands. The Saints in Hawaii had been virtually left alone since LDS missionaries had returned to the continental West during the Utah War.

Walter Murray Gibson, an opportunistic missionary, became the self-appointed leader of the native Saints. His actions and activities soon became inconsistent with the Church’s principles and policies. Among other things, Gibson, as their leader, sold priesthood offices.²⁴ Eventually, Church leaders received reports of his improprieties and sent a delegation of faithful missionaries and leaders to deal with Gibson personally and to attempt to negate the influences he had on the people.

When the missionaries arrived in Hawaii in 1864, they experienced a severe storm. Elder Joseph F. Smith, a former missionary to the islands and a member of the delegation, would not board the small landing vessel. He said to his companions: “If you by the authority of the Priesthood of God, which you hold, tell me to get into that boat and attempt to land I will do so, but unless you command me in the authority of the Priesthood, I will not do so, because it is not safe to attempt to land in a small boat while this storm is raging.”²⁵

Elder Snow did, however, board the small vessel with the missionaries and started for shore under the escort of the natives. The boatload of missionaries was struck by a huge wave and violently capsized. Within moments, all the passengers were accounted for except Elder Snow. Many minutes of frantic searching ensued. A missionary companion noted, “Finally one of the natives in edging himself around the capsized boat, felt Brother Snow with his feet and

turned and pulled him out from under the boat. His body was stiff and apparently life was gone. There was little doubt in the minds of any of those present that he was dead.”²⁶

Elder Snow had spent approximately fifteen minutes under water and showed no sign of life when taken from the ocean. Even when others had given up hope, the elders prayed for his life and worked over his body. One missionary, not willing to accept that Elder Snow had drowned, noted, “We did not only what was customary in such cases, but also what the Spirit seemed to whisper to us.”²⁷

After a full hour of laboring over their comrade and implementing known techniques to revive drowning victims, they attempted some lesser-known practices and a priesthood blessing. Finally, Elder Snow’s eye twitched, and a low, barely audible gurgle was heard in his throat. These indications of life, though faint, continued to increase in frequency until Elder Snow completely revived.

President Snow related his memory of the incident: “Having been somewhat subject to faint, I think that after a few moments in the water I must have fainted, as I did not suffer the pain common in the experience of drowning persons. I had been in the water only a few moments, until I lost consciousness. The first I knew afterwards, I was on shore, receiving the kind and tender attentions of my brethren.”²⁸

Elder Joseph F. Smith, Snow’s companion and his successor to the Presidency of the Church, testified, “It is very evident if the Lord had not come to the rescue through the faith and administration of the Elders that Elder Lorenzo Snow would not have recovered, notwithstanding the manipulations resorted to.”²⁹

President Joseph F. Smith, like his predecessors, was not immune from life-threatening and precarious situations. Elder Smith lived during a time of severe persecution.

In November 1838, Joseph F. Smith was born in Far West, Missouri, amidst the uncertainty of mob activity. He was the first child born to Hyrum and Mary Fielding Smith. His father was in prison, and Mary was seriously ill when Joseph F. made his advent into the world. Within days of Joseph's birth, a mob burst into the house and began to plunder the Smith family's possessions. President Smith later noted:

I, being an infant, and lying on the bed . . . was entirely overlooked by the family . . . during the fright and excitement. So when the mob entered the room where I was, the bed on the floor was thrown on to the other completely smothering me up, and here I was permitted to remain until after the excitement subsided. When thought of, and discovered, my existence was supposed to have come to an end; but subsequent events have proved their suppositions erroneous, however well founded!³⁰

Although his entire life was marked by threats and harassment from enemies to the Church, the preservation of President Smith's life is illustrated by his survival as a young missionary in Hawaii. Elder Smith became seriously ill and had a raging fever that persisted for nearly three months. He was cared for by a native woman named Ma Mahuhii. Years later, President Joseph F. Smith visited Hawaii with his close friend, Presiding Bishop Charles W. Nibley. Acquaintances from President Smith's earlier visits to Hawaii came to welcome them in customary Hawaiian fashion. When President Smith saw his aged Hawaiian mother, "he ran to her and clasped her in his arms, hugged her, and kissed her over and over again. . . . With tears streaming down his cheeks he turned to me and said, . . . 'She nursed me when I was a boy, sick and without anyone to care for me. She took me in and was a mother to me!'"³¹

Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, and David O. McKay

President Heber J. Grant's life was also beset with numerous obstacles and reversals. When Heber was only nine days old, his father, Jedediah Morgan Grant, died. In addition to numerous childhood diseases and hardships occasioned by the rigors and dangers of pioneer life,

young Heber also had his share of more dangerous sicknesses. Yet, as a child, he was promised he would live to one day preside over the Church. Elder Heber C. Kimball, a counselor in the First Presidency to Brigham Young, prophesied “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that you should become an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ and become a greater man in the Church than your own father”³²

As a young man, Heber was taken seriously ill with an appendicitis infection that had spread throughout his body. The doctor reported that, in his opinion, Heber would die. Heber Grant apparently didn’t care for the doctor’s opinion and asked for another doctor’s prognosis. This doctor, also, was dubious of Heber’s chances for recovery, and when this second doctor offered a similar medical opinion as the first, a different opinion was sought. Likewise, the third through the eighth doctors concluded that Heber Grant’s condition was desperate and unlikely to improve. Still, Heber was not satisfied. A ninth doctor was called upon. In him, Heber finally found one who was not bound by the beliefs and opinions of the former eight and who suggested Heber would live. Elder Grant did live to fulfill the prophecy given to him as a child that he would live to preside over the Church.³³ When Elder Grant questioned the doctor about the doctor’s optimistic outlook concerning Heber’s own recovery, the Southern gentleman doctor said, “Mistah Grant, ah [I] just took a chance, suh [sir]. Ah have felt the pulse, suh, of thousands of patients. . . . But ah never felt a pulse just like yours, suh . . . in all of the tests that I made during an hour and three quarters that you were under the knife your heart nevah missed one single, solitary beat, and ah made up my mind that that heart would pull through.”³⁴

Later, President Grant remembered this experience and attributed his survival to the fact that in his youth he had kept the principles embodied in the Word of Wisdom. He said, “I leave my testimony . . . that I would not be standing here today talking to you if I had not obeyed the

Word of Wisdom [and] because in the kind providences of the Lord it had been revealed in a manifestation that I did not have to die.”³⁵

George Albert Smith likewise experienced the divine preservation of his life. Two such experiences occurred while Elder Smith was in full-time missionary service in the Southern States Mission. One night, well after dark, two missionaries were traveling a narrow mountain road in anticipation of finding some much-needed hospitality. The path was bordered on one side by a high mountain wall and on the other by a sheer precipice at the bottom of which ran a deep, swift river. Elder Smith recalled:

We walked almost with a shuffle, feeling each foot of ground as we advanced, with one hand extended toward the wall of the mountain. . . . As I walked along I felt the hard surface of the trail under my feet. In doing so I left the wall of the mountain which had acted as a guide and a steadying force. After I had taken a few steps away I felt impressed to stop immediately, that something was wrong.³⁶

Not knowing where he was, Elder Smith called to his companion. Directed by the sound of his voice, Elder Smith backed up until he came again to the wall. During the continued process of his maneuvering along the mountain trail, Elder Smith’s travel case/valise popped open, and its contents were scattered along the path. The two elders gathered what they could and determined to return to the scene in the morning light, as some items were thought to still be missing.

The next morning we returned to the scene of my accident. . . . While there, my curiosity was stimulated and aroused to see what had happened the night before when I lost my way in the dark. . . . I retraced my steps . . . and discovered that in the darkness I had wandered to the edge of a deep precipice. Just one more step and I would have fallen over into the river and been drowned.³⁷

Elder Smith was sickened at the realization of how close he had come to disaster and concluded his account: “I also was very grateful to my Heavenly Father for protecting me.”³⁸

Later, while still laboring in the Southern States Mission, Elder George Albert Smith had another harrowing experience. He, his companion, and some other elders were proselyting in a heavily wooded, rural area. The missionaries had enjoyed considerable success among the humble country people and had even been invited to spend the night with one family. Elder Smith remembered that about midnight, they awoke to a terrible noise caused by people yelling and shouting outside. With the aid of a bright moon, the missionaries inside the house could plainly see the individuals outside. Because of the foul language those outside used and the threats they made, the missionaries knew the intruders were no friends of theirs. “In just a few seconds the room was filled with shots. Apparently the mob had divided itself into four groups and were shooting into the corners of the house. Splinters were flying over our heads in every direction. There were a few moments of quiet, then another volley of shots was fired and more splinters flew.”³⁹

Despite the desperate nature of the situation, the missionaries remained calm. Elder Smith did not even get out of bed. “I felt absolutely no terror. I was very calm as I lay there, experiencing one of the most horrible events of my life, but I was sure that as long as I was preaching the word of God and following his teachings that the Lord would protect me, and he did.”⁴⁰

Young David O. McKay grew up in the farming community of Huntsville, Utah. His life spanned the years between the horse-and-buggy era and the new world of automation and air travel. He loved the technological improvements and delighted in the innovations they brought to his life. Perhaps in his exuberance and enthusiasm for the new and the exciting, young David sometimes lost sight of temperance and caution.

On one occasion in 1916, as a young Apostle, Elder McKay was driving in an area that warranted greater care because of dangerous conditions brought about by the flooding of the Ogden River. It had washed out a part of the road and threatened to destroy the bridge. David had consented to take his brother Thomas by car to make necessary connections to get to work. As a result of delays and needing to make his own train connection, David had second thoughts about trying to make the trip in the short time left. Elder McKay said, “I received a strong impression to *‘go up to the bridge and back.’*”⁴¹ Although the two men had not consulted with each other, Elder McKay’s brother confirmed those feelings by suggesting that they not attempt to cross the bridge because of potential flood conditions. Elder McKay remembered:

Notwithstanding these two warnings, as we approached the bridge I thought I could spend another five minutes and take him [farther]. . . . I saw the pile of rocks there at the bridge, and it seemed to be intact. . . . So jocularly I said, “I’m going across the bridge. Can you swim?” With that I stepped on the gas and dashed across the bridge. . . . The watchman . . . had stretched the derrick rope across the road, and . . . the day watchman, had not arrived. . . . The rope smashed the [front] window, threw back the top, and caught me just in the chin, severing my lip, knocking out my lower teeth, and breaking my upper jaw.⁴²

Although the accident could easily have been fatal, Elder McKay learned some valuable lessons. First, he learned the importance of listening to the prompting of the Spirit. Second, he was given an unusual blessing not only that he would be healed but also that he would neither be disfigured by the accident nor have pain from the injury as it healed. Each of the blessings was specifically and significantly fulfilled. Elder McKay’s life was preserved in spite of the severity of the ordeal, but it was also a powerful learning experience for the future leader of the Church.

An important experience of Elder McKay’s early apostleship was the assignment given to him in 1920 to tour all the Church’s missions. His travels took him and his companion, Hugh J. Cannon, literally around the globe and lasted during parts of two years. During Elder McKay’s

visit to the Hawaiian Islands, the local Saints took him to visit the world-famous Kilauea Volcano. One of the participants recorded:

After a day of inspiring conference meetings in Hilo, Hawaii, a night trip to the Kilauea volcano was arranged for the visiting brethren and some of the missionaries. . . . We stood on the rim of that fiery pit watching . . . [with] our backs chilled by the cold winds sweeping down from snowcapped Mauna Loa, and our faces almost blistered by the heat of the molten lava.⁴³ [p.138]

An enterprising missionary found a natural shelf just inside the volcanic crater where the visitors could view the spectacle without being exposed to either the cold wind or the searing heat. “After first testing its safety, Brother McKay and three of the elders climbed down into the hanging balcony. . . . After being down there in their protected spot for some time, suddenly Brother McKay said to those with him, ‘Brethren, I feel impressed that we should get out of here.’”⁴⁴

The group quickly assisted each other to climb back up the side of the crater where others of the party had remained. “It seems incredible, but almost immediately the whole balcony crumbled and fell with a roar into the molten lava a hundred feet or so below. . . . Not a word was said. . . . The whole thing was too awful, with all that word means.”⁴⁵

Throughout his world tour, Elder McKay fought bouts of severe sickness, was quarantined for disease, was introduced to unfamiliar foods, and was exposed to diseases in dozens of countries on several continents. Throughout it all, however, his health and vigor were preserved in an unusual and miraculous way, all in fulfillment of a very impressive blessing given to him by President Heber J. Grant:

We bless you with every gift and grace and every qualification necessary for you to possess to fully magnify this calling. We say unto you: Go forth in peace, in pleasure and happiness, and return in safety to your loved ones and to the body of the Church. We bless you with power over disease. . . . You shall be warned of dangers seen and unseen and be given wisdom and inspiration from God to avoid

all the snares and pitfalls that may be laid for your feet by wicked and designing men.⁴⁶

Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and Spencer W. Kimball

President Joseph Fielding Smith grew up in Salt Lake City, Utah, under the tutelage of his father, the Apostle and later Prophet, Joseph F. Smith. Joseph Fielding loved learning and enjoyed reading books from his father's vast library, and often, as a young boy, he hurried to finish his assigned chores so he could return to his reading.

On one occasion, while performing his chores, Joseph had a close brush with death. He and his brother George were working in the field loading hay to store in the barn. "They had stopped [his team] on a road by the canal to stack some bales [of hay] and give the team a drink. Because they had a skittish horse, Joseph told George to stand by the head of the team and hold their bridles until he [Joseph] could climb up and take the reins."⁴⁷

Instead of minding his older brother, George climbed up the back of the wagon onto the load. Something frightened the horses, and they jerked forward, jolting Joseph while he was climbing up the front of the wagon load. Joseph lost his balance and fell down between the horses. The boy was concerned about his precarious predicament and remembered thinking, "Well, here's my finish!" However, miraculously, "something turned the horses and they ran into the canal, while Joseph was thrown clear of their hoofs and the wheels of the wagon."⁴⁸ Joseph was not pleased with his brother's inattentiveness, but neither was he seriously hurt in what could easily have been a fatal accident. Young Joseph hurried home only to be met on the way by his father, the Apostle, who had "received a strong impression that his son was in some kind of danger."⁴⁹

Another experience illustrating the preservation of President Joseph Fielding Smith's life is captured by another writer:

The Lord purposely spared the life of Joseph Fielding Smith, who outlived fifteen of the apostles called after him and was in the Quorum of the Twelve longer than any man in this dispensation. . . . The Lord preserved him so that for two and a half years he could preside over the Church, lending to the Saints his tremendous understanding of Church doctrine and knowledge of the scriptures, his orthodoxy, and his uncompromising commitment to revealed truth.⁵⁰

Joseph Fielding Smith became President of the Church at the age of ninety-three and served energetically until his death in July 1972. He was succeeded by the relatively youthful Harold B. Lee.

Once, as a young man, Harold B. Lee was violently knocked down by his mother. More surprised by her unusual behavior than hurt by her spontaneous actions, he soon learned the cause of her uncharacteristic roughness: “A bolt of lightning came down the chimney of the kitchen stove, out through the kitchen’s open doorway, and split a huge gash from top to bottom in a large tree immediately in front of the house. Had it not been for Mother’s intuitive action, and if I had remained in the door opening, I wouldn’t be writing this story today.”⁵¹

As a young man, Harold accidentally drank a lye solution; on another occasion, he spilled lye on his face.⁵² In both instances, his quick-thinking mother saved him from certain injury or death. President Lee attributed his preservation on these and other occasions to the fact that his mother lived close to the Spirit and knew intuitively what to do in emergency situations.

President Lee shared another account about his early life and testified of divine intervention. While exploring an area contiguous to his father’s farm, young Harold heard an audible voice warn him away from his intended destination. “Don’t go . . . over there,” the voice commanded. He looked around to determine the source of the voice, but finding himself alone, he determined to heed the warning and “then ran as fast as possible away from some unknown danger.”⁵³ Although he never knew what danger lurked, he had learned to be obedient to the

promptings of the Spirit, and this obedience had greater importance than his youthful curiosity. This experience became foundational.

In March 1967, Elder Lee suffered the effects of a grueling schedule. While in New Jersey, he became faint and had to lie down, and he received a priesthood blessing. The next morning, after a long night, he felt weak once again and concluded that he must return home immediately. In a subsequent general conference, President Lee related his unusual experience:

On the way across the country, we were sitting in the forward section of the airplane. . . . As we approached a certain point en route, someone laid his hands upon my head. I looked up: I could see no one. That happened again before we arrived home, again with the same experience. Who it was, by what means or what medium, I may never know, except I knew that I was receiving a blessing that I came a few hours later to know I needed most desperately.

Upon his arrival home, he experienced a massive hemorrhage, which, “had [it] occurred while we were in flight, I wouldn’t be here today talking about it.”⁵⁴ President Lee further testified:

I know that there are powers divine that reach out when all other help is not available. . . . One can only suppose that the Almighty has it in his hand to give or to take and he alone keeps the timetable. To the thoroughness and the skill of doctors, I owe much, but I’m not unmindful of the spiritual power which has been in evidence in the events leading up to the operation as well as circumstances resulting therefrom.⁵⁵

At age seventy-three, Elder Lee, who had served for over thirty years as a General Authority, came to preside over the Church because he was the man the Lord wanted to preside over His Church at that time.

When President Lee died unexpectedly on 26 December 1973 of cardiac arrest and lung failure, he was succeeded by President Spencer W. Kimball. President Kimball’s experiences in battling adversities and physical ailments have become legendary. At a young age, he battled the usual childhood diseases, including smallpox and typhoid fever; but, in addition to these killer

ailments, he also narrowly escaped drowning. In later life, his experiences with cancer, heart attacks, Bell's palsy, and strokes were humbling. Elder Russell M. Nelson, a noted heart surgeon, shares an unusual personal insight into the preservation of the life of the Lord's anointed:

On October 9, 1971, I performed a selective coronary arteriogram on him. We found that he had not only severe aortic valve disease, but also a high-grade obstruction. . . . His heart was being overworked because of the valve disease, and the overworked heart was being undersupplied with blood due to the obstruction in the main arterial supply line to the cardiac muscle. Indeed, this would be analogous to asking soldiers to fight a war with increasing opposition while decreasing the supplies to the troops.⁵⁶

Surgery was not recommended because of the complexities of such an operation and because of the advanced age of the patient. President Kimball discussed his condition with the First Presidency. His doctors provided their expert evaluations, and those present were free to ask questions about Elder Kimball's condition. Finally, President Kimball spoke, "I'm an old man and ready to die. It is well for a younger man to come to the Quorum and do the work I can no longer do."⁵⁷ Upon hearing this admission from President Kimball, President Lee, "speaking for the First Presidency, rose to his feet, pounded his fist to the desk, and said, 'Spencer you have been called! You are not to die! You are to do everything that you need to do in order to care for yourself and continue to live.'"⁵⁸

Elder Kimball obediently complied and made arrangements for the surgery to take place.

Elder Russell M. Nelson remembered:

On the eve of the operation, April 11, 1972, I received a blessing, at my request, from . . . President Harold B. Lee and President Nathan Eldon Tanner. They blessed me that the operation would be performed without error, that all would go well, and that I need not fear my own inadequacies, for I had been raised up by the Lord to perform this operation.⁵⁹

Elder Nelson continued: "From that very first maneuver until the last one, everything went as planned. There was not one broken stitch, not one instrument had fallen from the table,

not one technical flaw had occurred in a series of thousands of intricate manipulations. . . . Even more special than that was the overpowering feeling that came upon me. . . . The Spirit told me that I had just operated upon a man who would become president of the Church! . . . It was revealed to me that he would preside over the Church!”⁶⁰

Ezra Taft Benson, Howard W. Hunter, and Gordon B. Hinckley

President Ezra Taft Benson’s mortal existence was tenuous from the moment of his birth. Ezra was the firstborn of eleven children. At birth, he was in critical condition and appeared to be stillborn, as he did not start breathing immediately. The attending doctor said he would attempt to save Ezra’s mother but held little hope for the infant’s survival. President Benson later explained, “The faith of my father, the administrations of the priesthood, and the quick action of my two grandmothers, who placed me in a pan of cold water and then in a pan of warm water alternately, brought forth a husky yell to the joy of all.”⁶¹ In later years, “both grandmothers bore testimony that the Lord had spared the child.”⁶²

The baby soon grew to young manhood. At age sixteen, the future Prophet received a patriarchal blessing in which the preservation of his life was further predicated upon condition of his faithfulness. Further, “Ezra was told that, if faithful, he would go on a mission to the nations of the earth, that his life would be preserved on land and sea, that he would raise his voice in testimony and would grow in favor with the Almighty, and that many would rise up and bless his name.”⁶³

This blessing was fulfilled in minute detail and, in some cases, several times. In 1918, a dreadful epidemic of influenza swept the country, killing thousands. In addition, World War I was raging in Europe, and the number of soldiers recruited caused a shortage of farm laborers. Nineteen-year-old Ezra Taft Benson was one of those in training, and because help was needed

on the family farm, a two-week furlough was granted. The leave “was to begin on a Saturday. On Friday morning, Ezra felt a strong impression that he should leave for home immediately. . . . He requested permission to leave early [which was granted], caught a ride to Whitney, and arrived home around noon. Almost immediately he was stricken with a severe fever.”

For three days, the life of Ezra hung in the balance. Finally, his fever broke, and he began the long process of recovery. Sadly, Ezra learned that his two comrades who had bunked on either side of him back at his military quarters, one his cousin, had died from the effects of the illness. Ezra expressed his feeling that the Lord had a hand in preserving his life. “Had I waited,” he said, “I would have suffered there with the rest of them, and probably passed away.”⁶⁴

Latter-day Saints worldwide are grateful that the life of President Benson was preserved. His enthusiasm for the gospel, his emphasis on the Book of Mormon, and his love for the gospel are legendary and have contributed much to the lives of others.

When President Benson died in May 1994, the senior Apostle on earth was Howard William Hunter. President Hunter brought with him unique experiences of his own. Along with his predecessors, he enjoyed a preservation of life that enabled him to come to the “first place.”

As a young boy, Howard suffered from the debilitating effects of polio. Although he escaped many of the life-long consequences so often associated with this dreaded killer disease, Howard carried the reminder of his experience with him throughout his eventful life.

Later, in what President Hunter described as a refining process, he suffered, in succession, the effect of mumps, a serious operation to remove a tumor, a heart attack, heart bypass surgery, bleeding ulcers, diabetes, and the deterioration of a vertebrae in his back. In addition to being extremely painful, each of his illnesses required lengthy recovery periods, and each of them required immense patience. In conjunction with his characteristic humor and a

personal policy of deflecting the attention away from himself, President Hunter said, “I have had surgery, a heart attack, and the next may be a nervous breakdown for not being allowed to do anything.”⁶⁵

In the October 1987 general conference, following several of the problems noted above, President Hunter, seated in a wheelchair, spoke on the blessings of adversity in one’s life. He spoke on this topic with conviction, as his doctors had advised him he would never stand or walk again.⁶⁶

In the April 1988 general conference, President Hunter was again scheduled to speak. As a result of much practice and personal effort on his part, President Hunter “slowly stood and began to move, with his walker, to the pulpit.”⁶⁷ Following the address, President Monson, who was conducting, referred to President Hunter’s herculean effort to stand and walk again as a miracle.⁶⁸ Interestingly enough, and likely not by coincidence, the topic of President Hunter’s discourse in conference that day was the greatest miracle—the Resurrection of Christ.⁶⁹ Although President Hunter lived for only nine more months once he became the Prophet, he did as he instructed—he lived what he taught.

On Monday, 13 March 1995, President Gordon B. Hinckley stood before an international press corps to be introduced as the newest Church President and to introduce his counselors who would serve with him. As a part of his introduction, he announced that in the almost eighty-five years of his life, “he had spent only one night in the hospital,” and that night was for observation.⁷⁰

Gordon was a “spindly, frail boy susceptible to earaches and other illnesses.” He also “suffered from allergies, asthma, and hay fever,” and at “two he contracted a severe case of

whooping cough.” As a result of his illness and upon the recommendation of a doctor, the family moved to a more rural setting to preserve his health.⁷¹

During the dreaded pandemic of Spanish influenza of 1918, over twenty-five million people died worldwide. In Salt Lake City, eight-year-old Gordon Hinckley and several of his immediate family members contracted the illness. The elderly, infirm, and those already weakened by other sickness were particularly susceptible to the dreaded disease. After Gordon went through weeks of special care, his mother, Ada, “was relieved when Gordon pulled through, for he was still a skinny boy susceptible to illness.”⁷²

Notwithstanding his preservation despite early illnesses and weaknesses, President Hinckley has avoided serious injury or death on numerous other occasions, as illustrated by two brief examples. In May 1970, he flew to South America for a series of conferences. After completing his assignments in Lima, he flew to Santiago, Chile, for additional meetings. While in Chile, he received a telegram from the Peruvian mission president indicating that “less than a minute after his plane had left Lima, Peru had been hit with a devastating earthquake.”⁷³ In London eight years later, fire broke out in the hotel. Awakened to potential risk, President Hinckley and other guests “lugged their bags down six flights of steps to escape danger.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

The Presidents of the Church of Jesus Christ have been blessed during times of sickness or danger, and their lives have been preserved by the hand of a merciful providence. As a result of their lives being preserved, they have been permitted to serve, for a time, during the unfolding of unusual events during this last dispensation. Likewise, the lives of many other leaders of the Church have also been preserved.

At the funeral of President N. Eldon Tanner, President Ezra Taft Benson noted: “The death of a righteous individual is both an honorable release and a call to new labors.”⁷⁵ President Kimball further testified, “The death of his [the Lord’s] servants is in the power and control of the Lord. He permits to come to the first place only the one who is destined to take that leadership. Death and life become the controlling factors.”⁷⁶ President Benson added on another occasion in a similar tone, “It has been said that the death of a righteous man is never untimely because our father sets the time. I believe that with all my soul.”⁷⁷

The Lord alone has the right to control life and death. He preserves the life of a prophet whose service can bless the lives of His children everywhere. When a prophet completes his mission, he is given an honorable release from mortality and thereby from his sacred office. Upon a prophet’s death, another individual, whose life has also been preserved and prepared for a specific purpose, will take the helm of leadership in the Church. The successor assumes the position but never his predecessor’s place—the place that each prophet has molded in the hearts of his brothers and sisters.

¹ Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, 6 October 1972, 29.

² Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 35.

³ Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 665.

⁴ LeRoy S. Wirthlin, “Joseph Smith’s Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success,” in *Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, A Sesquicentennial Look at Church History* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1980), 330.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 341.

⁶ Preston Nibley, ed., *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, Lucy Mack Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), 309–10.

⁷ Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 104.

⁸ Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom*, reprint of 1877 original edition (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1975), 364.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 74.

¹¹ Wilford Woodruff Journal, 22 July 1839; as cited in *Wilford Woodruff's Journal: 1833-1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, Utah: Signature Books, 1983), 1:347–48.

¹² Wilford Woodruff, *Leaves from My Journal* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1881), 62.

¹³ Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 74.

¹⁴ *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Latter-day Saints' Book Depot, 1854–86), 18:357.

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¹⁵ B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor, Third President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 138–39.

¹⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Journal of Discourses*, 26:151.

¹⁹ Matthias F. Cowley, *Wilford Woodruff: History of His Life and Labors* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1964), 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Ibid., 6–10.

²² Ibid., 11.

²³ Ibid., 11–12.

²⁴ R. Lanier Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 122.

²⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, comp., *Life of Joseph F. Smith: Sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 216.

²⁶ Ibid., 215.

²⁷ Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1884), 279.

²⁸ Ibid., 280.

²⁹ Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 215.

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

³¹ Ibid., 186.

³² *Gospel Standards: Selections from the Sermons and Writings of Heber J. Grant*, comp. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1969), 12.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 326–27.

³⁵ Ibid., 326.

³⁶ George Albert Smith, “How My Life Was Preserved,” in *A Story to Tell: For Teachers, Parents and Children* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1963), 157.

³⁷ Ibid., 157–58.

³⁸ Ibid., 158.

³⁹ Ibid., 156.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ *Cherished Experiences from the Writings of President David O. McKay*, comp. Clare Middlemiss (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 138.

⁴² Ibid., 138–39.

⁴³ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ David Lawrence McKay, *My Father, David O. McKay* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 111.

⁴⁷ Joseph F. McConkie, *True and Faithful: The Life Story of Joseph Fielding Smith* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lawrence R. Flake, *Prophets and Apostles of the Last Dispensation* (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 96. [p.147]

⁵¹ L. Brent Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1985), 41.

⁵² Francis M. Gibbons, *Harold B. Lee: Man of Vision, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 24–25.

⁵³ Ibid., 23. See also Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer*, 40.

⁵⁴ Harold B. Lee, Conference Report, 8 April 1973, 179.

⁵⁵ Goates, *Harold B. Lee: Prophet and Seer*, 387–89.

⁵⁶ Russell Marion Nelson, *From Heart to Heart: An Autobiography* (n.p.: Russell M. Nelson, 1979), 162–63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 164–65.

⁶¹ Mark E. Petersen, “Ezra Taft Benson: ‘A Habit of Integrity,’” *Ensign* 4, no. 10 (October 1974): 22–23.

⁶² Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁵ Elanor Knowles, *Howard W. Hunter* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 273.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Howard W. Hunter, “He Is Risen,” *Ensign* 18, no. 5 (May 1988): 16–17.

⁷⁰ Sheri L. Dew, *Go Forward with Faith: The Biography of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 24–25.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 38–39.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, *Go Forward with Faith*, 313.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁷⁵ Ezra Taft Benson, *The Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1988), 33.

⁷⁶ Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, 6 October 1972, 29.

⁷⁷ Ezra Taft Benson, “Spencer W. Kimball: A Star of the First Magnitudes,” *Ensign* 15, no. 12 (December 1985): 33.