



Courtesy of Steve Gilchrist. Modeled by Mike Nielson.

As we travel through this life, we will individually be tried and stretched at times beyond what we feel are our breaking points.

The Willie and Martin Handcart Companies: Application and Insights into a Recurring Rescue

JEFFREY D. MESERVY

Jeffrey D. Meservy is an adjunct professor at Brigham Young University and Brigham Young University–Idaho (meservyje@byui.edu). He also serves as the director of the Taylorsville Institute adjacent to Salt Lake Community College (meservyjd@ldschurch.org).

.....

The purpose of this paper is not to retell the stories of the handcart companies, one led by James G. Willie and another led by Edward Martin; many have done that very well. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to draw from their examples and experiences and find application for us today. Context, stories, and quotes of these pioneers are used here only in a supportive effort to identify principles, which can guide us today as we strive to live the gospel. President Gordon B. Hinckley stated, “Stories of their rescue need to be repeated again and again. They speak of the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹

The year 1997 was a year in which members of the Church paid special tribute to the nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint pioneers. It marked 150 years since those faithful followers of Jesus Christ left their precious things, such as their homes, their temple, and in some cases, even family members. Seeking religious freedom and following a living prophet, they embarked on a westward journey which would teach lifelong lessons to all who had the courage to begin the trek and press forward faithfully. Speaking in the April 1997 general conference, Elder M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve

Apostles stated, “There are lessons for *us* in every footstep they took—lessons of love, courage, commitment, devotion, endurance, and, most of all, faith.”²

Those lessons that Elder Ballard said were *for us* were first experienced and learned by them. One of the lessons learned by the individuals in the Willie and Martin handcart companies was that God was willing to stretch them individually beyond what they surely must have felt was their breaking point. These individuals were tried and stretched to a point where they experienced a dire, desperate need to be rescued, and they wholeheartedly relied on the hope that rescuers would come. At that point, they slowly but faithfully continued to press forward with a knowledge and understanding that they could not complete the journey on their own. Eventually, that physical rescue would come, and it would be more than a one-time, one-event, once-occurring rescue; rather, of necessity, it would have to be a recurring rescue. Wave after wave of rescue companies and individuals would be required to bring the handcart companies into the valley.

The personal experiences of individuals in the Willie and Martin handcart companies and the events that led up to the recurring rescue are full of lessons for each of us today. As we travel through this life, we will individually be tried and stretched at times beyond what we feel are our breaking points. We too will have moments in our lives where we will experience the dire and desperate need to be rescued spiritually, and we must learn to wholeheartedly rely on Jesus Christ and his Atonement. As Elder Ballard stated, “It will require every bit of our strength, wisdom, and energy to overcome the obstacles that will confront us. But even that will not be enough. We will learn, as did our pioneer ancestors, that it is only in faith—*real* faith, whole-souled, tested and tried—that we will find safety and confidence as we walk our own perilous pathways through life.”³

Like the Pioneers, We Must Decide What Needs to Be Carried and What Needs to Be Discarded

After approximately four to six weeks at sea, traveling on four different ships, most of the individuals who would make up the Willie and Martin handcart companies arrived in New York and Boston; they then faced a roughly 1,000-mile journey to Iowa City, where they were outfitted with handcarts. Iowa City became a place of sacrifice for many; here, leaders assigned five people to a handcart, with each person being allotted only seventeen pounds of personal belongings to store in the cart. Already, before the handcart journey had

even begun, many of these faithful Saints had to choose which personal items they would leave behind. John Jaques recorded the following in Iowa City, “This caused many heartaches, for many of the cherished articles brought from the old country were disposed of at great sacrifice.”⁴ More than two decades later, reflecting on the sacrifice, Jaques would write:

As only a very limited amount of baggage could be taken with the handcarts, during the long stay in the Iowa City camping ground there was a general lightening of such things as could best be done without. Many things were sold cheaply to residents of that vicinity, and many more things were left on the camping ground for anybody to take or leave at his pleasure. It was grievous to see the heaps of books and other articles thus left in the sun and rain and dust, representing a respectable amount of money spent therefore in England, but thenceforth a waste and a dead loss to the owners.⁵

It is worthwhile to note here that this deep personal sacrifice, this off-loading of excess “baggage,” preceded the recurring rescue that would later save the individuals in these companies. Elder Boyd K. Packer has analyzed the significance of the off-loading of excess baggage; he pointed out that, “everything taken at the outset, by these handcart pioneers was deemed indispensable,” but the “definition of indispensability was rapidly revised in the interest of survival and priorities established on the scale, size, weight, and immediate usefulness.”⁶ Elder Packer then mentioned all sorts of things that were thrown away and asks why they did this. Answering his own question, he said, “Because they just could not carry it.”⁷ Elder Packer then quoted Isaac Foster, who pointed out the irony that “possessiveness compelled most of the immigrants to cling to their burdens until they wore out their teams.”⁸ Finally, Elder Packer taught a powerful lesson by quoting G. E. Peterson, who said, “To lighten up at the outset was our salvation.”⁹

One lesson to be drawn from this event is that today, as we each walk our own perilous pathway through life, we must make personal, difficult decisions and at times sacrifices as we off-load our personal baggage: our own will, our own wants, and our own desires. Many times people choose to carry things that the Lord does not want them to carry. For example, an individual may choose to hang on to the hurt and pain caused by another individual, wearing out not their teams, but themselves, families, and friends. Jesus Christ and his Atonement enable us to continually off-load baggage that he does not want us to carry. Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated, “So it is that real, personal sacrifice never was placing an animal on the altar. Instead, it is a willingness to put the animal in us upon the alter and letting it be consumed! Such is the sacrifice

unto the Lord . . . of a broken heart and a contrite spirit, (D&C 59:8), a prerequisite to taking up the cross, while giving ‘away all our sins’ in order to know God (Alma 22:18), for the denial of self precedes the full acceptance of Him.”¹⁰ This off-loading of baggage helps allow us to experience the spiritual, recurring rescue of the Atonement of Jesus Christ over and over throughout our life.

Daniel Spencer, who oversaw the handcart outfit operation at Iowa City, appointed James Willie to be the captain of the approximately 500 people and 120 handcarts that made up the Willie company. On 15 July 1856, the Willie company left Iowa City “in first rate spirits,”¹¹ according to the company journal.

The Martin company left the Iowa City camp on 25 July 1856, ten days after the Willie company left. The first seven days after their departure were slow, and it wasn’t until 31 July that they traveled their farthest distance of seven miles. The earliest official count of the Martin company was made after combining with the Haven company in Nebraska under the direction of Elder Franklin D. Richards, who was returning home from presiding over the European mission. After the combining of the two companies, the Martin company consisted of 576 members.¹²

Historical Background: Willie Company from Iowa City to Sixth Crossing and Brigham’s Call to Rescue

From the beginning, there was an indication that the daily allowance of food was not sufficient. As they reached Florence, Nebraska, there was also a sense among some, such as Levi Savage and Milton Atwood, that they were too late in the season to proceed. Although some decided to stay in Florence, the vast majority decided to continue forward after their handcarts were all repaired and did so on 16 and 17 August. On 12 September, Franklin D. Richards, who had arrived in Florence about the same time as the Martin company, caught up to the Willie company at dusk. He visited with the Saints, cheering and buoying them up. But the next morning before leaving, he reprimanded Savage and Atwood for expressing their concerns about leaving so late in the season. The Willie company then broke camp and marched on towards Fort Laramie, maintaining an average pace of ten to twelve miles per day. They reached Fort Laramie on 30 September, having covered the approximate 500 miles from Florence in about forty-five days. During this time, six members of the company died, four of whom were over the age of sixty. Two days before

arriving at Fort Laramie, Levi Savage recorded, “The old appear to be failing considerably.”¹³

Even though the measurement was not exact, Fort Laramie was considered to be the halfway point between Florence and Salt Lake City. The Willie company had left Florence with a sixty-day supply of flour. Looking ahead, “they had to travel another 509 miles to reach the Salt Lake Valley, a journey that would take 44 days if they continued at their normal pace. If they continued to consume their flour at the normal rate, the remaining supply would last for only about two weeks.”¹⁴ At Fort Laramie, the Willie company read a letter that had been left there for them by Elder Richards, stating that the company should not expect to receive supplies until they reached South Pass,¹⁵ which was 280 miles away, roughly twenty to twenty-five days if they could keep their current pace.

At this point, one can readily begin to see the situation beginning to unfold with the Willie company. There were hundreds of people on the highlands of Wyoming soon to be out of food. Considering these circumstances, one wonders how many people, animals, supplies, and food it would take to rescue 400–500 people.

On 2 October, in an effort to help stretch their flour supply, Willie company members voted to reduce their individual rations from one pound per day to three-quarters of a pound per day. They also resolved to travel faster. These decisions contributed to an increase in the death rate, with six people dying between 1 October and 4 October. Only six people had died during the previous forty-five days. It was at this time on 4 October that Franklin D. Richards arrived in the Salt Lake Valley and informed Brigham Young that there were still over 1,000 people out on the trail. Brigham Young had knowledge that additional handcart Saints had arrived in the United States, but he didn’t know that the emigration leaders had sent them forward out on the trail so late in the season. President Young later stated that if these leaders “would have thought and considered for one moment, they would have stopped those men, women, and children [at Florence] until another year.”¹⁶

The next day was 5 October, and President Young convened the general conference with a call for rescuers to go and help those late companies on the plains. He stated:

Many of our brethren and sisters are on the plains with handcarts, . . . and they must be brought here, we must send assistance to them. . . .

I shall call upon the Bishops this day. I shall not wait until tomorrow, nor until the next day, for 60 good mule teams and 12 or 15 wagons. . . . Also 12 tons of flour and 40 good teamsters, besides those that drive the teams.¹⁷

One can imagine the urgency in the tone and the words spoken by Brigham Young. In the next morning's conference session, Brigham Young continued:

I feel disposed to be as speedy as possible in our operation with regard to helping our brethren who are now on the plains. Consequently I shall call upon the people forthwith for the help that is needed. I want them to give their names this morning, if they are ready to start on their journey tomorrow. And not say, "I will go next week, or in ten days, or in a fortnight hence." For I wish to start tomorrow morning.

I want the sisters to have the privilege of fetching in blankets, skirts, stockings, shoes, etc. for the men, women, and children that are in those handcart companies.¹⁸

That the urgency was felt by the congregation is perhaps illustrated no better than an account that comes to us by way of Lucy Meserve Smith, who stated that some of the sisters, rather than wait until they got home to find warm clothing to send, "stripped off their petticoats, stockings, and everything they could spare, right there in the Tabernacle" to be packed into the wagons.¹⁹

On Tuesday, 7 October, George D. Grant led the first relief company out of the Salt Lake Valley and back toward the east in search of the companies. This first rescue party consisted of about fifty men with twenty wagons²⁰ who traveled to Fort Bridger in six days, where they picked up needed supplies. At this point, one wonders if any of them imagined that the recurring rescue would continue for over two months as wave after wave of relief parties from the valley would eventually leave and make their way eastward.

On 10 October, five days after the conference concluded in the valley, the Willie company arrived at the Platte River Bridge, where they crossed the river later that day. The next fifty-mile stretch of trail would offer little water and terrible camping spots. It was during this stretch of the trail that Wilford Woodruff, traveling with the 1847 company, stated, "Our Camping place for the night was the most wretched of any ground we have found on the way. President Young thought it might properly be called Hell Gate."²¹

The Willie company arrived at the Sweetwater River on 14 October, just five days before the snow began to fall. It was here at Independence Rock that the Willie company members took inventory again of their situation and determined they had four days' worth of flour; they would need to cut their rations again to ten ounces a day for men, nine ounces a day for women, six ounces a day for younger children, and three ounces for infants. They also

calculated that if this flour was to last them to South Pass, they would have to increase their pace to twenty miles a day.²² Captain Willie must have realized that he was asking more and more of his people while providing them with less and less. This increase in demand, while providing less, continued in earnest the next day as the Willie company left Independence Rock on twice-reduced rations with a goal of twenty miles. They would cover only sixteen miles that first day, eleven miles the next day, and the third day, about ten miles; their strength was failing. The weather, however, was still cooperating on 17 October as temperatures remained mild during the day;²³ but this was little consolation to individuals who were in need of food and worn down by hunger. John Chislett recorded that among his 100 men, he "could not raise enough men to pitch a tent when we encamped."²⁴ On 18 October, the Willie company traveled eight miles, dispersed the last of their flour, and camped on the banks of the Sweetwater. The food that remained was a days' worth of crackers that Captain Willie had purchased at Fort Laramie. The Willie company was fifty-six miles away from their hoped-for resupply at South Pass. If they could keep the pace of eight miles a day, they would arrive at South Pass in seven days on 25 October. However, the very following day, 19 October, a difficult test would begin. This testing would foster in their hearts and minds an absolute understanding of their need and desire to be rescued.

Modern-Day Prophets Have Issued Calls to Rescue

Speaking in the October 1991 general conference, President Hinckley, then serving as first counselor in the First Presidency, said:

Now, I am grateful that today none of our people are stranded on the Wyoming highlands. But I know that all about us there are many who are in need of help and who are deserving of rescue. Our mission in life, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be a mission of saving. There are the homeless, the hungry, the destitute. Their condition is obvious. We have done much. We can do more to help those who live on the edge of survival.

We can reach out to strengthen those who wallow in the mire of pornography, gross immorality, and drugs. Many have become so addicted that they have lost power to control their own destinies. They are miserable and broken. They can be salvaged and saved.

There are wives who are abandoned and children who weep in homes where there is abuse. There are fathers who can be rescued from evil and corrosive practices that destroy and bring only heartbreak.

It is not with those on the high plains of Wyoming that we need be concerned today. It is with many immediately around us, in our families, in our wards and stakes, in our neighborhoods and communities.²⁵

President Monson's biography is entitled *To the Rescue*, and countless are the lessons and stories he has shared about reaching out to rescue.

Martin Company from Iowa City to Deer Creek

The Martin company's journey after leaving Iowa was hampered by challenges, including death, weather, lost animals, handcart breakdowns, and grumblings in the group. Despite these challenges, their trip across Iowa took about the same amount of time as the Willie company had taken.

The Haven company arrived at Florence, Nebraska, on 19 August; the last of the Willie company had left two days prior. On 22 August, the Martin company arrived at Florence. After combining with the Haven company, the Martin company totaled 576 members and 146 handcarts.²⁶ President Richards and his group would stay about two weeks, helping the companies prepare to leave Florence. The Martin company left Florence on 25 August. President Richards stayed in Florence until 3 September; he and his company would then average about thirty-five miles a day into the valley, riding in their light carriages and wagons.²⁷

While crossing Iowa, the Saints needed to carry only a month's supply of flour and other provisions—enough to sustain them for 270 miles. When leaving Florence, the Saints needed at least twice as much flour—enough to sustain them for sixty days. Even though the wagons were already fully loaded, a 100-pound sack of flour was added to most of the handcarts. Extra luggage, camp gear, and tents were also packed in some carts. This extra weight put a tremendous strain on the handcarts, and they continued to break down. The added weight also made the handcarts harder to pull.²⁸ On 4 October, the Martin company passed Scotts Bluff, a prominent landmark in western Nebraska. They had walked 472 miles from Florence, but were still 559 miles from their destination.²⁹ Four days later, on 8 October, the Martin company arrived at the halfway point of Fort Laramie, having traveled the approximate 500 miles from Florence in forty-five days, the same number of days it had taken the Willie company. The Martin company lost twenty members during this stretch of the trail.

Whatever hopes the Martin company members had with regards to purchasing much-needed supplies at Fort Laramie, they were soon tempered by stark reality. The cost of those items and the lack of funds the Saints had to purchase them were obstacles that were not to be overcome. Evidence of the need for more food can be found in the actions of some individuals while

at the fort. Robert Mattinson recorded that he was able to “get nothing but a quart of corn.”³⁰ In order to acquire some biscuits, bacon, and rice, John Jaques sold his watch.³¹

Albert Jones recounts that he “sold an extra over-coat at Laramie to one of the cooks for some dried peaches, apples and a little bacon and some flour.”³² These efforts to obtain food, as well as a rationing of the entire camp's food, show that those in the Martin company were well aware of their troublesome situation. The Martin company left Fort Laramie on 10 October, nine days after the Willie company had left.

On 17 October, the Martin company reached the pleasurable place of Deer Creek (current-day Glen Rock). Here, another decision was made that indicates the leaders' keen awareness of a need to travel faster to encounter resupply wagons that they hoped were on their way. Captain Martin “advised the whole camp to lighten up their extra luggage . . . as much as possible, by discarding and burning every article of wearing apparel that could be dispensed with . . . except our best and warm coats, cloaks, etc.”³³ John Jaques recorded, “owing to the growing weakness of emigrants and teams, the baggage including bedding and cooking utensils was reduced to 10 pounds per head, children under eight years five pounds. Good blankets and other bedding were burned as they could not be carried further, though needed more badly than ever for there was yet 400-miles of winter to go through.”³⁴ Apart from the need to lighten the handcarts and move quicker, the reasons for burning these blankets are more understandable in light of the recently high temperatures. On 3 October, Jesse Haven recorded that the temperature was just over 112 degrees, and on 4 October, he recorded that the weather continued to be hot.³⁵ On Saturday, the eighteenth the day after burning the blankets, John Jaques recorded it was a “cool fine day.”³⁶ However, unbeknownst to them on this “fine day,” the very following day, 19 October, would begin a test for them like no other. Throughout this testing process, members of the Martin (and Willie) companies learned that God would test them beyond what they thought they could endure; according to journal entries many thought and felt that all was lost. At this breaking point, and not until this breaking point, did God intervene with a recurring rescue to bring them home.

A Recurring Rescue Unfolds: Comparison from Scripture and Applications for Today

As we study these events carefully and compare them to the experiences of others, we see that God has often allowed individuals to be tested beyond what they thought they could endure, and then, delivered them at the moment when they thought all was lost. For example, a careful reading of Genesis 22:9–12 shows that God took Abraham beyond what Abraham would certainly have considered his breaking point. Verse 9 reads, “And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.”³⁷ Verse 10 continues, “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.”³⁸ Note that it doesn’t say he went forth to take the knife, or that he was about to take the knife. God waited until Abraham actually “took the knife.” After the knife was in hand and Abraham was ready to make the sacrifice, then, and not until then, did the angel of the Lord call unto him from heaven and say, “Abraham, Abraham: Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.”³⁹ Why did God wait for Abraham to take the knife? Surely God knew Abraham’s heart as they traveled to Mount Moriah; surely God knew Abraham’s heart as they walked up Mount Moriah; and surely God knew what was in Abraham’s heart as they built the alter. So why not tell him at any of those points along the way? Why was it necessary to wait for him to “take the knife”?

Elder Ballard gave some insight into this question when he recounted a visit that Brother Truman G. Madsen made to Israel with President Hugh B. Brown:

In a valley known as Hebron, where tradition has it that the tomb of Father Abraham is located, Brother Madsen asked President Brown, “What are the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?” After a short moment of thought, President Brown answered, “Posterity.” Brother Madsen writes: “I almost burst out, ‘Why, then, was Abraham commanded to go to Mount Moriah and offer his only hope of posterity?’ It was clear that [President Brown], nearly ninety, had thought and prayed and wept over that question before. He finally said, ‘Abraham needed to learn something about Abraham.’”⁴⁰

Elder Ballard summarized, “Sacrifice allows us to learn something about ourselves—what we are willing to offer to the Lord through obedience.”⁴¹ So



Keith Levitt.

“Our mission in life, as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, must be a mission of saving. There are the homeless, the hungry, the destitute. We have done much. We can do more to help those who live on the edge of survival” (Gordon B. Hinckley).

perhaps God offered the rescuers and the members of the Willie and Martin handcart companies this experience so they could come to learn something about themselves that they could learn in no other way. Through this experience they each came to learn what they were willing to offer to the Lord through their obedience. This is important because the Prophet Joseph Smith taught, “It is through the medium of the sacrifice of all earthly things that men do actually know that they are doing the things that are well pleasing in the sight of God, . . . and that under these circumstances they can obtain faith necessary for him to lay hold on Eternal Life.”⁴² What a blessing to have that knowledge, but it is given only after a substantial price is paid.

Sunday, 19 October 1856 dawned with the Willie company at the fifth crossing of the Sweetwater and the Martin company at the Platte River, ready to cross it for the last time.

The Willie Company

As the members of the Willie company members awoke on 19 October, one can only imagine that somewhere in their first few thoughts of the day was the recollection that they had doled out the last of the flour on the previous

day. The food that remained was a day's worth of crackers that Captain Willie had purchased at Fort Laramie. Here, the members of the Willie company were faced with the absolute certainty that if help did not come, they would die on the plains. That morning, the trail geography necessitated a departure from the Sweetwater, where they were camped at the fifth crossing, and a trek of sixteen miles where they would meet the river again at the sixth crossing. Somewhere around Ice Spring, far from the desired destination of the sixth crossing, they encountered the snow storm that unleashed its fury.

The snow was accompanied by what John Chislett remembered as a "shrill wind [that] blew furiously." He recalled that the snow fell several inches in a short period of time. "We dared not stop,"⁴³ he said, "for we had a sixteen-mile journey to make, and short of it we could not get wood and water."⁴⁴ Even with a desire to keep moving, the company was forced by the storm to stop and wait it out. What goes through one's mind on the high plains of Wyoming, held up by a storm, out of food and facing certain death? Where does one look for hope? In this case, it was to the dream of a fifteen-year-old boy by the name of George Cunningham. The previous night, George had the following dream:

Two men [came] toward us on horseback. They were riding very swiftly and soon came up to us. They said that they had volunteered to come to our rescue and that they would go on further east to meet a company which was still behind us and that on the morrow, we could meet a number of wagons loaded with provisions for us. They were dressed in blue soldier overcoats and had Spanish saddles on their horses. I examined them, particularly the saddles as they were new to me. I also could discern every expression of their countenance. They seemed to rejoice and be exceedingly glad that they had come to our relief and saved us.⁴⁵

Because of his dream, one can only imagine that George kept looking westward the following day. It wasn't long before George cried out, "Here they come, see them coming over that hill."⁴⁶ Soon, Joseph A. Young and Cyrus Wheelock, the two men George had seen in his dream, were quickly coming towards them. Close behind them were Stephen Taylor and Abel Garr in a wagon. Joseph Elder stated, "They were Saviors coming to [our] relief."⁴⁷ This advanced party of rescuers let them know another rescue party was close behind with food and other badly needed supplies.

One may mistakenly assume that at this point the rescuers had arrived and the Willie company had been rescued. But what could these four express riders provide to the hundreds of members in the Willie company? With what food were they possibly going to fill their empty stomachs? A partial

answer to this question came in the display of overjoyed men and women weeping and giving thanks to God and the rescuers themselves. Though there was not enough food to go around, these advanced rescuers filled them with hope! The recurring rescue, however, had just begun.

Captain James Willie was not content to wait for the rescue wagons to arrive. He and Joseph Elder left camp on 20 October and traveled close to thirty miles in search of the relief wagons, which they eventually found. The next morning, on 21 October, they returned with several covered wagons, each loaded with desperately needed supplies. Mary Hurren recalled, "If help had not come when it did, there would have been no one left to tell the tale."⁴⁸

With the arrival of these additional rescuers and wagons filled with food, the casual observer may conclude that certainly now the Willie company had been rescued. But a more careful student will realize that the Lord would yet stretch the members of the Willie company. All members of this company would still be asked to sacrifice more than they had, and many more would make the ultimate sacrifice, for they had yet to face Rocky Ridge and Rock Creek Hollow.

Throughout the events of Rocky Ridge and Rock Creek Hollow, one sees the Lord again stretching his people beyond what they must have felt they were capable of enduring and then offering help on his timetable. Again, one can look to the scriptures to find an example of yet another time when the Savior did this. In 3 Nephi 1:9–13, we read, "There was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death except the sign should come to pass, which had been given by Samuel the prophet."⁴⁹ Verses 10 and 11 continue, "when Nephi, the son of Nephi, saw this wickedness of his people, his heart was exceedingly sorrowful. . . . And it came to pass that he went out and bowed himself down upon the earth, and cried mightily to his God in behalf of his people, yea, those who were about to be destroyed because of their faith in the tradition of their fathers."⁵⁰ In response to Nephi's prayer, the Savior said, "Lift up your head and be of good cheer; for behold, the time is at hand, and on this night shall the sign be given, and on the morrow come I into the world, to show unto the world that I will fulfil all that which I have caused to be spoken by the mouth of my holy prophets."⁵¹ Why did the Lord wait until the people were about to be destroyed? Why did the Lord wait until the very night before he was to come into the world to give that piece of information to Nephi? Could not Nephi have benefited from that news a few weeks or months earlier? Certainly

Nephi's heart had been exceedingly sorrowful for more than just that night. It is hard to believe that this was the first time Nephi had gone to the Lord in prayer for and in behalf of his people.

Some insight is given to these questions by Wendy Watson Nelson, who shared examples from the scriptures of people who were "desperate for the Savior to heal them, help them, cleanse them, guide them, protect them, and save them."⁵² Sister Nelson states, "Desperation can actually be a great motivator. Clearly the Prophet Joseph Smith experienced intense desperation in Liberty Jail. He pled with the Lord, 'O God, where art thou?' Because of such intense spiritual desperation, the Prophet received some of the most sublime revelations of this dispensation."⁵³ She continued, "When we're desperate to be guided by heaven, we work harder than ever to tune in to heaven."⁵⁴

Nephi and the handcart pioneers, including George Cunningham, were in desperate situations, and perhaps it is possible that when George offered his desperate prayer that night before retiring to his bed, he was motivated to pray with greater faith than he had ever done before in his life. Perhaps Nephi did the same. Perhaps our Heavenly Father and our Savior, Jesus Christ, allow times of desperation to occur in our lives so that we can learn to exercise faith beyond our usual calm, contented, comfortable efforts.

The Martin Company

Nathan Porter recalls that while waiting to cross the Platte River for the final time, those waiting to cross "huddled together like sheep"⁵⁵ in an attempt to shield themselves from the wind and the cold. Elizabeth Jackson recalled, "We had scarcely crossed the river when we were visited with a tremendous storm of snow, hail, sand and fierce winds."⁵⁶ This last crossing of the Platte River ushered in for the Martin company what Samuel Jones referred to as "one long funeral march."⁵⁷ On 20 October, before the Martin company could move forward, those who died during the night had to be buried. Elizabeth Jackson records that her husband was wrapped in a blanket and buried with thirteen others.⁵⁸ Journal entries attest that the weather continued to be miserable for the entire day. The Martin company traveled only a few miles on the twenty-first and rested all day on the twenty-second. They then proceeded on the twenty-third and traveled a distance of five miles to Bessemer Bend. It took them four days to travel ten miles. Travel was slow and they moved only a little, but they were pressing forward. In their suffering they found themselves in the company of another who suffered greatly. In Gethsemane,

Christ "went forward *a little*, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him."⁵⁹ Even the Creator of worlds without number had reached a point where he moved forward only a little, demonstrating to us that in this life it's about direction and destination not acceleration. Here, at Bessemer Bend, is where the Martin company remained for the next six days. At this point, their situation was dire. Flour rations were reduced to eight ounces for adults and four ounces for children.⁶⁰ Louisa Mellor remembered the day, 28 October, at Bessemer Bend when "Captain Martin said there was only enough flour to last one more day."⁶¹ At prayer meeting on Sunday, 26 October, John Rodwell, a fifty-five-year-old carpenter from Suffolk, related a dream that the people would encounter rescuers at about noon on Tuesday or Wednesday. Josiah Rogerson, a member of the Martin company, recalled Rodwell as saying, "I saw a mule, packed with blankets and cooking utensils, come right in the middle of our camp, as we are now, followed by three Californians, wear[ing] blue soldier overcoats, riding mules or horses. They stopped and told us of teams and relief from the valley, after which we started again on our journey."⁶²

One can only imagine the talk that prevailed in camp for the next two days before the advanced rescuers arrived. Elizabeth Jackson, whose husband had died a few days earlier, leaving her with three children, went to bed on Monday, 27 October, fearing the absolute worst. However, that night she dreamed that her recently deceased husband stood by her side and said, "Cheer up, Elizabeth deliverance is at hand."⁶³

Louisa Mellor recalled that on Tuesday, 28 October, "We all gathered around, . . . praying God to help us, as we knew it was him alone who could deliver us from death."⁶⁴ Here, with the food all but gone and deaths occurring daily, the Martin company knew with certainty that only God could save them. Certainly, they must have felt that at *any moment* they could perish and knew that without rescuers, eventually they would perish. Joseph Smith experienced similar feelings, which he recorded in his history: "I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God . . . Thick darkness gathered around me, and it seemed . . . as if I were doomed to sudden destruction . . . at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction . . . just at this moment of great alarm . . . I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound."⁶⁵ Here is another example of the Savior stretching someone to their limits, allowing Joseph to arrive at the *very moment* where it seemed death and destruction

were eminent. Why? Certainly God knew what was in Joseph's heart when he read James 1:5; certainly God knew what was in his heart as he walked to the grove; and certainly God knew what was in his heart as he began to pray. So why did he need to have the experience that he had in the grove? Elder Robert D. Hales offered some insight when he shared the following after recovering from serious health challenges. He stated:

On a few occasions, I told the Lord that I had surely learned the lessons to be taught and that it wouldn't be necessary for me to endure any more suffering. Such entreaties seemed to be of no avail, for it was made clear to me that this purifying process of testing was to be endured in the Lord's time and in the Lord's own way. . . . I also learned that *I would not be left alone to meet these trials and tribulations* but that guardian angels would attend me. There were some that were near angels in the form of doctors, nurses, and most of all my sweet companion, Mary. And on occasion, when the Lord so desired, I was to be comforted with visitations of heavenly hosts that brought comfort and eternal reassurances in my time of need.⁶⁶

Francis Webster of the Martin company offered his testimony of not being left alone when he declared:

I have pulled my hand cart when I was so weak and weary from illness and lack of food that I could hardly put one foot ahead of the other. I have looked ahead and seen a patch of sand or a hill slope and I have said I can go only that far and there I must give up for I cannot pull the load through it. I have gone on to that sand and when I reached it the cart began pushing me. I have looked back many times to see who was pushing my cart but my eyes saw no one. *I knew then that the Angels of God were there.*⁶⁷

Perhaps God takes us to the breaking point so that he can teach us, as he taught Joseph, Elder Hales, and Francis Webster, that we do not walk alone, that angels, both seen and unseen, are there to comfort us, and that he is able to deliver us from any situation.

On 28 October, around midday, three express riders arrived in camp. These riders were Joseph A. Young, Daniel W. Jones, and Abel Garr. Again, one may be tempted to believe that because the rescuers had arrived, the Martin company had been rescued. But, as with the Willie company, these few express riders could give little in the way of material goods to the hundreds of members in the company. Again, they filled them with the one supply of which there was plenty to go around: hope. The arrival of these men had "put new life into the people."⁶⁸ At this point, however, the recurring rescue for the Martin company had just begun.

After holding up for six days at Bessemer Bend, the Martin company would finally move out on 29 October. Samuel Openshaw recalled that "the last [of the] flour was all ate."⁶⁹ The company traveled two days and arrived at Greasewood Creek on 31 October in the evening. Here, they encountered more rescuers, relief wagons, and several fires to keep them warm. With the arrival at Greasewood Creek and the additional relief wagons, food, and rescuers, one may be tempted to conclude that the Martin company had finally been rescued. Yet as with the Willie company, the Lord would still stretch the people in the Martin company. All members of this company would yet be asked to sacrifice more than they had, and many more would make the ultimate sacrifice. The members of the Martin company still had to cross the Sweetwater River and then face Martin's Cove.

Here in mortality, it is not sufficient to have an experience with the Atonement of Jesus Christ and be rescued from our sins only once. Just as wave after wave of rescuers continued to come from the valley, we too must continually seek for the rescuing and enabling power of the Atonement throughout our lives. Our need to be rescued spiritually is a need to be rescued through a recurring rescue similar to the physical rescue of the Willie and Martin handcart companies. Part of that recurring rescue will involve God stretching us to realms we would not choose to go on our own. Preaching to the Twelve in Nauvoo, Joseph stated "that the Lord would get hold of their heart strings and wrench them, and that they would have to be tried as Abraham was tried and Joseph said that if God had known any other way whereby he could have touched Abraham's feelings more acutely and more keenly he would have done so."⁷⁰ John Taylor also commented on this teaching from the Prophet Joseph when he said, "Did you ever know it is necessary that we should be tried in all things? If you do not you will find it out before you get through, and we are not through yet quite. . . . In this connection, I am reminded of what I heard the Prophet Joseph say, speaking more particularly with reference to the Twelve, 'The Lord will feel after your heart strings, and will wrench them and twist them around, and you will have to learn to rely upon God and upon God alone.'⁷¹

When called to pass through these experiences, we must remember, "God afflicts his people artistically. His is never a random blow. Only marvelous skill lies in the Lord's Chastening. Affliction in our youth may be intended for the ripening of our old age. Today's affliction may have no meaning for today; it may be designed for circumstances fifty years ahead . . . The mighty God

takes mighty time to work His grand results.”⁷² It is through this recurring rescue that God works his grand results.

Elder Ballard spoke of standing on the hill and looking out over the area where the rescuers first saw the Willie company and then stated, “I contemplated the joy that will fill our hearts when we fully come to know the eternal significance of the greatest rescue—the rescue of the family of God by the Lord Jesus Christ. For it is through Him that we have promise of eternal life. Our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is the source of spiritual power that will give you and me the assurance that we have nothing to fear from the journey.”⁷³

Notes

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Reach With a Rescuing Hand,” *Ensign*, November 1996, 86.
2. M. Russell Ballard, “You Have Nothing to Fear from the Journey,” *Ensign*, May 1997, 59.
3. Ballard, “You Have Nothing to Fear from the Journey,” 61.
4. Stella Jaques Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques: Including a Diary of the Martin Handcart Company* (n.p.: L. D. Bell, 1978), 109.
5. John Jaques, *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, 1 December 1878, 1.
6. Boyd K. Packer, All-Church Coordinating Council minutes, 24 October 1989, copy in author’s possession.
7. Packer, All Church Coordinating Council, 24 October 1989.
8. Packer, All Church Coordinating Council, 24 October 1989.
9. Packer, All Church Coordinating Council, 24 October 1989.
10. Neal A. Maxwell, “Deny Yourselves of All Ungodliness,” *Ensign*, May 1995, 68.
11. Willie Company Journal, 15 July 1856, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7439/james-g-willie-emigrating-company-journal-1856-may-nov-16-53>.
12. Andrew D. Olsen, *The Price We Paid* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006): e-book 393.
13. Levi Savage Journal, 27 September 1856, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7460/savage-levi-journal-1855-mar-1858-oct>.
14. *Mormon Handcart* (Historic Site Guide), 47, copy in author’s possession.
15. Chislett, “Narrative,” 320. Chislett recalls this letter coming about the time the Willie company was near Independence Rock. However, it mostly likely came while they were at Fort Laramie. William Woodward’s journal entry for 29 September tells of James Willie receiving a letter from Elder Richards at Fort Laramie. Levi Savage’s journal entries for 4 and 6 October mention that the company couldn’t be certain of resupply until they reached Pacific Springs—just west of South Pass. The letter mentioned by Woodward is the most likely source for the information that Levi Savage recorded.
16. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (London: Latter-day Saints’ Book Depot, 1854–86), 4:68.
17. *Deseret News*, 15 October 1856, 256.
18. *Deseret News*, 15 October 1856, 256.
19. Lucy Meserve Smith, Original Historical Narrative of Lucy Meserve Smith, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.

20. Redick Allred and Harvey Cluff both mention about fifty men being in George Grant’s rescue company; Allred also mentions twenty wagons. See Redick Allred journal, 6 October 1856, Church History Library Harvey Cluff, “Autobiography and Journals,” Church History Library, 18. Daniel W. Jones later named twenty-six of the rescuers he remembered. See Daniel W. Jones, *Forty Years among the Indians: A True Yet Thrilling Narrative of the Author’s Experience Among Natives* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 61. Nearly sixty years later, Solomon Kimball named twenty-seven of the men who comprised this first rescue company and said they had sixteen wagons. See Solomon F. Kimball, “Belated Emigrants of 1856,” *Improvement Era*, December 1913, 109. LeRoy and Ann Hafen reference Kimball’s count in *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856–1860* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark, 1960), 124.
21. *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal, 1833–1898 Typescript*, ed. Scott G. Kenney (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 3:208.
22. *Mormon Handcart*, 50.
23. *Mormon Handcart*, 50.
24. Chislett, “Narrative,” 321.
25. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Our Mission of Saving,” *Ensign*, November 1991, 59.
26. Olsen, *The Price We Paid*, 393.
27. Olsen, *The Price We Paid*, 423.
28. *Mormon Handcart*, 44.
29. Olsen, *The Price We Paid*, 443.
30. Robert Mattinson, “Reminiscences,” in *Life Stories of My Ancestors, Frances Rushton Hutchens* (n.p., 1996), Church History Library.
31. Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques*, 141.
32. Albert Jones, “Autobiography,” Mormon Biographical Sketches Collection, Church History Library.
33. Josiah Rogerson, “Martin’s Handcart Company, 1856,” *Salt Lake Herald*, 10 November 1907, 3.
34. Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques*, 144; see also William Binder, journal, 17 October 1856, Church History Library.
35. Jesse Haven Journal, 1852–1892, October 1856, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/5319/haven-jesse-journals-1852-1892-vols-4-5>.
36. Bell, *Life History and Writings of John Jaques*, 144.
37. Genesis 22:9.
38. Genesis 22:10.
39. Genesis 22:12.
40. Trumen G. Madsen, *The Highest in Us* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 49; see also M. Russell Ballard, “The Law of Sacrifice” (CES Symposium for Religious Educators, Brigham Young University, 13 August 1996), 2.
41. Madsen, *The Highest in Us*, 49. See also Ballard, “The Law of Sacrifice,” 2.
42. Joseph Smith, comp., *Lectures on Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 69.
43. Chislett, “Narrative,” 322.
44. Chislett, “Narrative,” 322.
45. George Cunningham, “Autobiography,” 5, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7431/cunningham-george-reminiscences-1876-fd-2-2-5>.
46. Cunningham, “Autobiography,” 5, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7431/cunningham-george-reminiscences-1876-fd-2-2-5>.

47. Joseph Elder, diary, 26, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.
48. Mary Hurren Wight, "Reminiscences," in James G. Willie History, 12, Church History Library.
49. 3 Nephi 1:9.
50. 3 Nephi 1:10–11; emphasis added.
51. 3 Nephi 1:13; emphasis added.
52. Wendy Watson Nelson, "Becoming the Person You Were Born to Be" (CES devotional address, Brigham Young University–Hawaii, 10 January 2016), 1.
53. Nelson, "Becoming the Person You Were Born to Be," 1.
54. Nelson, "Becoming the Person You Were Born to Be," 1.
55. Nathan Tanner Porter, "Reminiscences," 97, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
56. Kingsford, "Autobiographical Sketch," 3, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7547/kingsford-elizabeth-horrocks-jackson-autobiographical-sketch-n-d-2-6>.
57. Samuel S. Jones, in Orson F. Whitney, *History of Utah* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1904), 4:297.
58. Kingsford, "Autobiographical Sketch," 4, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7547/kingsford-elizabeth-horrocks-jackson-autobiographical-sketch-n-d-2-6>. For the number of people buried, see also <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/19345/watkins-john-reminiscences-1-5-trail-excerpt-transcribed-from-pioneer-history-collection-available-at-pioneer-memorial-museum-daughters-of-utah-pioneers-museum-salt-lake-city-utah-some-restrictions-apply>.
59. Mark 14:35.
60. James Bleak, journal, 25 October 1856, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7523/bleak-james-godson-journal-1854-feb-1860-feb>; Samuel Openshaw Diary, 9, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7559/openshaw-samuel-diary-1856-may-nov-3-10>. John Jaques said adult rations were reduced to four ounces; see "Some Reminiscences," *Salt Lake Daily Herald*, 15 December 1878, 1.
61. Louisa Mellor Clark, "Autobiographical Sketch," 3, Pioneer Memorial Museum, Salt Lake City. William Binder recalled this meeting being held on the morning of 28 October, the day the express rescuers arrived. He wrote, "During the morning of the 28th our Captain had rallied the camp as was our custom every day to meet for general Prayers. and while there he made know to the Saints the startling fact that our provisions had nearly exhausted. he informed us that if we were willing to reduce our amount of flour to one half of what it then was there would be enough to last us two days which he proposed we do[.] we accepted the proposition not knowing where or when we should have another supply. A few minutes after the meeting was dispersed our hearts were made glad with the appearance of three brethren who had come as an express from the relief company who were Stationed at Devils Gate. It is impossible to describe the joy and gratitude that filled every heart upon the arrival of such messengers of Salvation." William Lawrence Spicer Binder, "Reminiscences," Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
62. Rogerson, "Martin's Handcart Company, 1856," *Salt Lake Herald*, 17 November 1907, 14. Langley Bailey recalled that John Rodwell spoke in tongues rather than related a dream. An interpretation was given that rescuers would arrive within three days. See Langley Allgood Bailey, "Reminiscences and Journal," 6, Church History Library.
63. Kingsford, "Autobiographical Sketch," 5, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7547/kingsford-elizabeth-horrocks-jackson-autobiographical-sketch-n-d-2-6>.
64. Louisa Mellor Clark, "Autobiographical Sketch," 4.

65. Joseph Smith—History 1:15–17; emphasis added.
66. Robert D. Hales, "The Covenant of Baptism: To be in the Kingdom and of The Kingdom," *Ensign*, November 2000, 6; emphasis added.
67. David O. McKay, "Pioneer Women," *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1948, 8; emphasis added.
68. E. E. McBride, "Autobiographical Sketch," 4, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/19143/mc-bridge-e-e-autobiographical-sketch-1-4-trail-excerpt-transcribed-from-pioneer-history-collection-available-at-pioneer-memorial-museum-daughters-of-utah-pioneers-museum-salt-lake-city-utah-some-restrictions-apply>.
69. Samuel Openshaw, diary, 9, <https://history.lds.org/overlandtravels/sources/7559/openshaw-samuel-diary-1856-may-nov-3-10>.
70. Robert J. Matthews, "Great Faith Obtained Only through Personal Sacrifice," in *The Lectures on Faith in Historical Perspective*, ed. Larry E. Dahl and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1990), 241–62.
71. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 20:259–60.
72. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Beside Still Waters: Words of Comfort for the Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 113.
73. Ballard, "You Have Nothing to Fear from the Journey," *Ensign*, May 1997, 61.