

# BUILDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN NAUVOO, ILLINOIS

By Ted L. Gibbons

**INTRODUCTION:** Five houses are still standing where ancestors of my children lived in Nauvoo in the days following the Missouri exodus. For a time, that beautiful Mississippi community must have seemed a heavenly gift. Once the swamps were drained the site became a truly attractive place. In addition, the Illinoisans were receptive and helpful. Converts arrived by the hundreds. Doctrinal growth added structure and stature to the restoration. Joseph seemed to become more prophetic and powerful than he had been before. The Nauvoo years preceding the martyrdom provided a season of rest and rejoicing for the beleaguered saints of the Most High.

## 1. THE SAINTS SOUGHT REFUGE IN ILLINOIS.

The enduring trauma of the flight from Missouri is for modern church members what the flight from the Land of Nephi was for the people of King Mosiah. Alma asked of some of them,

And now behold, I say unto you, my brethren, you that belong to this church, have you sufficiently retained in remembrance the captivity of your fathers? (Alma 5:6)

Alma knew that there were lessons to be learned from the experiences of his people and the people of Limhi in the lands of their enemies. There are lessons for us to learn too. As you contemplate those suffering saints making their way out of the state of Missouri during that bitter winter of 1838-39, ask yourself what lessons you need to learn. Of course their departure from Missouri was not strictly a matter of agency. They were forced out—driven by their fear of death and their love of the gospel. But there were those who stayed behind, who abandoned the church and their testimonies rather than abandon their security

and their modest belongings.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of June this year I visited the grave of John Whitmer, one of the eight witnesses to the Book of Mormon and one-time church historian. His final resting place is in Kingston, Missouri, just a few miles east of Far West. No trudging through the winter snows for him; no retreat from pursuing mobs, not loss of property and position. Paul warned the Romans, "And be not conformed to this world . . ." (Romans 12:2), but John and others conformed and remained temporarily comfortable.

But the exiled saints simply departed and looked for a new home. Brigham led them while Joseph waited in Liberty Jail. Saints scattered up and down the river looking for shelter and work and food. But Joseph knew of the need his people had for the strength that would come and they labored together, and counseled his people to find another gathering place:

Members of the Church first became aware of Nauvoo in October or November 1838 when Israel Barlow, who with other Saints had fled northeastward towards Quincy, Illinois from Far West, Missouri. But losing his way arrived at the Des Moines River in Iowa. Crossing the Mississippi River Barlow came to old Commerce, Illinois and found Isaac Galland, owner of several parcels of land in Lee County Iowa as well as Commerce. Not authorized to make purchases for the Church, Elder Barlow directed his course downstream to Quincy. Subsequently, an exploring party was sent to examine Galland's lands. But while some Church leaders were in favor of gathering to Commerce, Illinois, and Lee County, Iowa, others suggested that the membership of the Church should scatter among the various counties in Illinois and elsewhere. In the meantime, Joseph Smith, who was incarcerated in Missouri, learned of Galland's offer and counseled the brethren to purchase the properties. When Joseph Smith escaped from Missouri law enforcement officers on 16 April 1839 he went immediately to Quincy arriving there on 22 April. At a council meeting held two days later, on 24 April 1839, it was resolved that "President Joseph Smith, Jun., Bishop Knight, and Brother Alanson Ripley, visit Iowa Territory immediately, for the purpose of making a location for

the Church" (History of the Church, 3:336). Properties at Commerce were purchased from Isaac Galland on 30 April 1839, and immediately thereafter the Saints began to settle the area (see Lyndon W. Cook, "Isaac Galland—Mormon Benefactor." *Brigham Young University Studies* 19 [Spring 1979]: 267-70).

The government of Illinois, sympathetic to the needs and the fears of the refugees, granted them a charter with unusual provisions. Some of those provisions were suggested by the Prophet himself:

The charter of the city of Nauvoo was devised by Joseph, as he says "on principles so broad that any honest an might dwell secure under its protective influence without distinction of sect or party." It was comprehensive, and in some respects unusual, but its provisions were purely republican and the end designed by its framer was insured. It was signed by Thomas Carlin, governor, and was certified by Stephen A. Douglas, secretary of state. (George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet*, p.361-362)

## **2. MISSIONARIES SENT FROM NAUVOO CONVERTED THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE.**

The missionary effort that commenced within weeks of the organization of the Church proceeded with increased vigor from the city of Nauvoo. A review of the countries first visited by missionaries during the Nauvoo period leaves me nearly stunned with the vision and courage of those early messengers of glory. In the years from 1839-1844, missionaries opened Germany (1843); Ireland, (1840); Israel, (1841); Jamaica, (1841); Russia,. (1843); Scotland, (1839); Tahati, (1843); and Wales, (1844) (see *New Era*, Mar. 1974, p. 41) and continued their labors in fields already undergoing the harvest of the restoration.

The most dramatic success came from the efforts of the Twelve in the British Isles. They had been commanded by revelation to depart from the temple lot in Far West on April 26 of 1839, and they did exactly that, returning to the stronghold of the bitter enemies of the Church to hold a meeting and conduct church business. They then departed, but did not actually leave for their missions

until they had settled their families in the Nauvoo/Montrose area. The account of the departure of Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young, leaving behind families ravaged with illness and themselves almost too sick to stand, is familiar to most members of the Church. The malarial swamps of the Nauvoo area caused much hardship in the early months of the settlement there.

Others faced similar hardships. John Taylor was stricken with sickness on his journey and finally sent his companions ahead and remained in Germantown, Indiana to try and regain his strength. When he was well enough he wrote to his wife. From that letter comes a priceless paragraph of faith and trust.

I placed myself under the care of a Docter who did all that he could for me and now near three weeks after my arrival I have got clear of my fever and am fast recovering--i[t] brought me however to the gates of death several times. It laid hold of me like a strong man armed and I was led to quail beneath the power of the adversary for I believe his hand was in it--You may ask me how I am going to prosecute my journey, with my trunk a distance of 300 miles or upwards by land, without means. I do not know, but one thing I do know, that there is a being who clothes the lillies of the valley and feeds the ravens and he has given me to understand that all these things shall be added and that is all I want to know. He laid me on a bed of sickness and I was satisfied. He has raised me from it again and I am thankful. He stopped me on my road and I am content. When my way is open to proceed I shall go on my way rejoicing. If he took me I felt that it would be well. He has spared me and it is better. The Lord does all things well. Bless his holy name Oh my soul and forget not all his mercies. (Ronald K. Esplin, *BYU Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4, p.433; also cited in part by M. Russell Ballard, "Anchored by Faith and Commitment," *Ensign*, July 1995, 16)

The following suggests the rapidity with which the Church grew in Great Britain.

In one year, 1840 to 1841—one year and fourteen days, to be exact—nine members of the twelve were called to labor in the British Mission. If you remember the history here at home, those years

marked the period of some of the severest persecution that the Church was to undergo in this dispensation. In that one year and fourteen days the nine members of the twelve with their associates, established churches in every noted town and city in the kingdom of Great Britain. They baptized between 7000 and 8000 converts. They printed 5000 copies of the Book of Mormon, 3000 hymnbooks, and 50,000 tracts, and they published 2500 volumes of the Millennial Star and emigrated 1000 souls to America. (Elder Harold B. Lee, C.R., April 1960)

### **3. THE EXAMPLES OF THE NAUVOO SAINTS SHOW THE IMPORTANCE OF ENDURING TO THE END IN RIGHTEOUSNESS.**

Like John Whitmer, there were those in the Nauvoo period who fell into apostasy. Some of the truly bright lights of the restoration flickered and dimmed. They send a warning across the years to us about the need to endure, to press forward, to continue, to hold out faithful to the end. But there were also those thousands of quiet, faithful disciples who paid the price to learn their duties and then paid the price to do their duties. They were men and women who placed their feet on the *path of safety* and then walked that path with wonderful faith.

There is but one path of safety for the Latter-day Saints, and that is the path of duty. It is not a testimony only; it is not marvelous manifestations; it is not knowing that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, that it is the plan of salvation—it is not actually knowing that the Savior is the Redeemer, and that Joseph Smith was his prophet, that will save you and me; but it is the keeping of the commandments of God, living the life of a Latter-day Saint. (President Heber J. Grant: C.R., April 1945)

What would you like friends and relatives to say about you when you are gone? If you could write your own epitaph, what would it say? What tribute inscribed on your tombstone would please you most? I was in Richmond, Missouri early in June at the grave of David Whitmer. As we drove from the cemetery a stone caught our eyes and we stopped for photos. It was a monument for George and Nancy Gardner. The top half was his, the bottom half hers. The final words for her,

carved larger across the bottom of the stone, were these: "SHE DONE WHAT SHE COULD."

This feels like a nice thing to say, if you are not a fanatic about grammar. It would be a blessing to meet the Lord knowing you had done everything you could.

The Lord has said some nice things about some of his servants even while they were mortals. He complimented Nathaniel on his lack of guile (John 1:47); he referred to Peter as a rock (Matt. 16:16-19); he credited Warren Cowdery with causing joy in heaven (D&C 106:6); he knew that Abraham would teach his children correct principles (Gen. 18:19); he praised George Miller and Hyrum Smith for the integrity of their hearts (D&C 124:15,20); and he used Job as an example of righteousness in a discussion with the adversary (Job 1:8; 2:3). If he were to say just one thing about you—the thing you most need to hear—what would he say?

#### **4. THE RELIEF SOCIETY WAS ORGANIZED IN NAUVOO.**

In April of 1998, President Packer gave a wonderful sermon about the Relief Society. In part he said,

Some years ago Sister Packer and I were in Czechoslovakia, then behind the Iron Curtain. It was not easy to obtain visas, and we used great care so as not to jeopardize the safety and well-being of our members, who for generations had struggled to keep their faith alive under conditions of unspeakable oppression.

The most memorable meeting was held in an upper room. The blinds were drawn. Even at night, those attending came at different times, one from one direction and one from another, so as to not call attention to themselves.

There were in attendance 12 sisters. We sang the hymns of Zion from songbooks—words without music—printed more than 50 years before. The Spiritual Living lesson was reverently given from the pages of a handmade manual. The few pages of Church literature we could get to them were typed at night, 12 carbon copies at a time, so as to

share a few precious pages as widely as possible among the members.

I told those sisters that they belonged to *the largest and by all measure the greatest women's organization on earth*. I quoted the Prophet Joseph Smith when he and the Brethren organized the Relief Society: "I now turn the key in [behalf of all women]."

This society is organized "according to your natures. . . . You are now placed in a situation in which you can act according to those sympathies [within you]. . . .

"If you live up to [these] privileges, the angels cannot be restrained from being your associates. . . .

"If this Society listen[s] to the counsel of the Almighty, through the heads of the Church, they shall have power to command queens in their midst." (History of the Church, Vol. 4, pp. 607, 605)

The Spirit was there. The lovely sister who had conducted with gentility and reverence wept openly.

I told them that upon our return I was assigned to speak at a Relief Society conference; could I deliver a message from them? Several of them made notes; each expression, every one, was in the spirit of giving—not of asking for anything. I shall never forget what one sister wrote: "A small circle of sisters send their own hearts and thoughts to all the sisters and begs the Lord to help us go forward."

Those words, *circle of sisters*, inspired me. I could see them standing in a circle that reached beyond that room and circled the world. I caught the same vision the apostles and prophets before us have had. The Relief Society is more than a circle now; it is more like a fabric of lace spread across the continents.

The Relief Society works under the direction of the Melchizedek Priesthood, for "all other authorities or offices in the church are

appendages to this priesthood." (D&C 107:5) It was organized "after the pattern of the priesthood." (Women's Exponent, 1 Sept. 1883, p. 51) [Boyd K. Packer, "The Relief Society," Ensign, May 1998, 72]

That organization came during the Nauvoo period of our history.

Emma Smith, the first president of this organization, said to the sisters, "We are going to do something extraordinary" (Minutes of the Female Relief Society, 17 Mar. 1842, LDS Church Archives). Our celebration was indeed "something extraordinary." What began in 1842 with 20 women in Nauvoo, Illinois, now involves nearly four million women on every continent and in almost every country in the world. But what is significant is that it began with one woman, Margaret Cook, who offered to sew shirts for the men working on the Nauvoo Temple. She needed cloth and could not afford to buy it. Sarah Kimball offered the cloth, and within weeks the Relief Society was organized by the Prophet Joseph Smith under the inspiration of the Lord. It began with a small offering—at the front gate—and it has grown to a major force for good around the world, one stone at a time. (Elaine L. Jack, "A Small Stone," *Ensign*, May 1997, 74)

**CONCLUSION:** The accomplishments of the Saints in Nauvoo are astonishing. But they are the fruit of faith and sacrifice and commitment and covenant. A community of exiles turned to the Lord and to each other and changed themselves and the world. As we remember them draining their swamps and plowing their prairies and making their bricks and building their temple, we must remember that their lives are the example for our lives. None of us must ever expect it to be easy. The only promise we have is that it will be possible.

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