

Brigham Young

The Man and
Leader



Address Delivered at Salt Lake City,

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By

PRESTON NIBLEY

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One hundred twenty-four years ago tomorrow, on the 1st day of June, 1801, there was born in the little village of Whitingham, Vermont, a child whose name and fame were destined to become known throughout the civilized world—Brigham Young the great leader of the Latter-day Saints and founder of the State of Utah.

He was the ninth child of a poor farmer, John Young, who had settled at Whitingham for the purpose of taking up new land. The Young family came originally from England and had been among the earliest settlers of Massachusetts. John Young himself had fought under Washington throughout the Revolutionary war. In 1804, when the boy Brigham was two years old, his father moved westward again, having the pioneer spirit, and located at Sherburn, New York State, where Brigham was destined to spend his boyhood days. Here he grew up in the rough and difficult element of frontier life. There was practically no opportunity for schooling. Somewhere, somehow, he did manage, as he has informed us, to attend a school for "eleven days," but that was all the school education that this man ever had to face the world with. However, he did learn the most necessary of all lessons—he learned how to work, to take care of himself, to rely upon his own strength and his own efforts to carry him through.

Speaking of those early days he once said to a congregation of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City:

"Brother Heber (referring to his life-long friend, Heber C. Kimball), and I never went to school until we got into Mormonism, that was the first of our schooling. We never had the opportunity of letters in our youth, but we had the privilege of picking up brush, chopping down trees, rolling logs, working amongst the roots and getting our shins, feet and toes bruised. The uncle of Brother Merrill, who now sits in the congregation, made the first hat that my father ever bought me, and I was then about 11 years of age. My sisters would make me what was called a 'Jo Johnson' cap for winter and in the summer I wore a straw hat which I frequently braided for myself. I learned how to make bread, wash the dishes, milk the cows and make butter. . . . These are about all the advantages I gained in my youth. I know how to economize, for my father had to do it."—Journal of Discourses, Vol. 5, page 97.

Her Great Reward

When the boy Brigham reached his 14th year a great and irreparable sorrow came into his life. His noble and splendid mother, weary and worn with the struggle which life in the frontier had forced upon her, closed her eyes in her last sleep. All honor to her name and memory. Though her struggle was hard, few women have been more fortunate than she was. She was permitted to give to the world eleven splendid children. And there was Brigham, her great reward. Her soul was to shine out gloriously in him all his days.

Brigham always spoke with the greatest reverence and appreciation of his mother. In a sermon on Aug. 15, 1852, he said:

"Of my mother—she that bore me—I can say, 'no better woman ever lived in the world than she was.'" And again, "My mother, while she lived, taught her children all the time to honor the name of the Father

and Son, and to reverence the Holy Book. She said, 'Read it, observe its precepts and apply them to your lives as far as you can. Do everything that is good; do nothing that is evil; and if you see any persons in distress, administer to their wants.'

If I understand the character of Brigham Young aright, I should say that that is the foundation on which he builded all his days.

Never Idle

And so, at the age of 14, Brigham Young was motherless, cast adrift on the world to make his way as best he could. But you may be assured that this boy who had learned to work was never idle. He always found something to do, and had something to show for his labor. At the age of 21 he was at Port Byron, a little town on the Erie canal, able to call himself a "carpenter, joiner, painter, and glazier." As a boy he seems to have been as earnest, as substantial as he was later on, when grown to be a man.

Two of Brigham's friends at this time were Henry Wells, founder of the Wells-Fargo Express company, and Isaac Singer, inventor of the Singer sewing machine. Mr. D. B. Smith, of Cayuga county, who knew Brigham at Port Byron, said later: "Brigham Young was as fine a speciman of young manhood as I have ever known, and would have made his mark in whatever community his lot might have been cast."

In the spring of 1829 Brigham left Cayuga county, where he had resided more than 16 years, and moved about 50 miles westward to Mendon, Monroe county, where his father and most of his brothers and sisters had previously settled. Mendon is only about 15 miles from Manchester, the boyhood home of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and about the same distance away, a little to the north, is Palmyra, where, one year after Brigham settled in Monroe county, the Book of Mormon was printed.

It was through his brother Phineas that the story

and doctrines of "Mormonism" were first brought to his attention. The Youngs were a religious and reverent family throughout. Brigham was an adherent of the Methodist Reformed church, but he had never become very enthusiastic about it. He was a hard-headed man and had to understand a thing before he accepted it. He said:

His Conversion

"I was not baptized on hearing the first sermon, nor the second, nor during the first year of my acquaintance with this work. I waited two years after this Church was organized before I embraced the Gospel."

Speaking of his conversion he once said:

"If all the talent, tact, wisdom and refinement of the world had been sent to me with the Book of Mormon, and had declared in the most exalted of earthly eloquence, the truth of it, undertaking to prove it by learning and worldly wisdom, they would have been to me like the smoke which arises only to vanish away. But when I saw a man without eloquence or talents for public speaking who could only say, 'I know by the power of the Holy Ghost that the Book of Mormon is true, that Joseph Smith is a prophet of the Lord,' the Holy Ghost proceeding from that individual illuminated my understanding, and light, glory and immortality were before me. I was encircled by them, filled with them, and I knew for myself that the testimony was true."—J. D. 1-90.

On the 14th day of April, 1832, Brigham was baptized. From that day until the day of his death, over forty-five years later, his history was inseparably connected with the history of the "Mormon" Church. It seems to have appealed to this man, who certainly had a future in any line of endeavor he might have followed, that the chief fact with regard to him was that he had an eternal soul to save. He was pre-eminently a sincere man, a believing man, and his entire purpose

in life resolved itself into this—that if the God of heaven had a mission for him to perform, he was there to perform it.

Brigham Young was not long in joining himself with the main body of the Saints after his baptism. He literally burned his ships. He later said:

“When I went to Kirtland I had not a coat in the world, for previous to this I had given away everything I possessed that I might be free to go forth and proclaim the plan of salvation to the inhabitants of the earth. Neither had I a shoe to my feet, and I had to borrow a pair of boots.”—J. D. 2-128.

Further describing his trip to Kirtland he said as follows:

“Brother Heber C. Kimball took his horse and wagon, Brother Joseph Young and myself accompanying him, and started for Kirtland to see the Prophet Joseph. We visited many friends on the way and some branches of the Church.

Meeting the Prophet

“We proceeded to Kirtland and stopped at John P. Greene’s, who had just arrived there with his family. We rested a few minutes, took some refreshments, and started to see the Prophet. We went to his father’s house and learned that he was in the woods chopping. We immediately went to the woods where we found the Prophet and two or three of his brothers, chopping and hauling wood. Here my joy was full at the privilege of shaking the hand of the Prophet of God, and received the sure testimony, by the spirit of prophecy, that he was all that any man could believe him to be, as a true Prophet. He was happy to see us and bid us welcome. We soon returned to his house, he accompanying us.”—Millennial Star. 25-439.

The above describes a historic meeting. Here was a young man, destined to be the great leader of a great people, journeying several hundred miles in bor-

rowed clothes to meet the prophet of his chosen religion, and he found him "chopping and hauling wood." But when Brigham shook his hand he "received the sure testimony" that this man was indeed a prophet. Truly the Almighty does choose the weak things of this world to confound the wise. Who, in all the world, were in more humble circumstances that day than these two young men. It may be said that at the time of this meeting Joseph Smith was not quite 27 years of age, and Brigham a few months before had turned 31. That the prophet was greatly impressed with his new adherent is attested by the fact that he said to some of his friends the same evening. "The time will come when brother Brigham Young will preside over this Church."

Arriving at Kirtland Brigham would let nothing turn him away from his purpose to assist "in building up the Church and Kingdom." He relates as follows:

"In the fall of 1833, many of the brethren had gathered to Kirtland, and not finding suitable employment, and having some difficulty in getting their pay after they had labored, several went off to Willoughby, Painesville, and Cleveland. I told them I had gathered to Kirtland because I was so directed by the Prophet of God and I was not going away to Willoughby, Painesville, Cleveland or anywhere else to build up the Gentiles, but I was going to stay here and seek the things that pertained to the Kingdom of God."

Such zeal and energy as Brigham manifested could not be long withheld from recognition. In February, 1835, he was made a member of the first Quorum of Apostles, which Quorum stood next in authority to the First Presidency. This position gave him a great opportunity, and how he measured up to it we all know.

I must hasten on with my story, but I cannot refrain from mentioning that memorable mission which Brigham and a few of his fellow apostles undertook to England in 1839. As an example of faithfulness, of desperate struggle and determination to carry a mes-

sage of peace and good will to a foreign people, with no thought or hope of earthly reward, I know of nothing to equal it since the days of Peter and Paul and the early apostles. I will let Brigham relate it in his own words. This is from his journal under date of September 14, 1839.

"I started from Montrose (Iowa) on my mission to England. My health was so poor I was unable to go thirty rods to the river without assistance. After I had crossed the river I got Israel Barlow to carry me on his horse behind him to Heber C. Kimball's, where I remained sick till the 18th. I left my wife sick with a babe only ten days old and all of my children sick and unable to wait upon each other."—M. S. 25:646.

This from a sermon of his delivered at Salt Lake City many years later:

"In company with several of the Twelve I was sent to England in 1839. We started from home without purse or scrip, and most of the Twelve were sick; and those who were not sick when they started were sick on the way to Ohio; Brother Taylor was left to die by the roadside, by old Father Coltrin, though he did not die. I was not able to walk to the river, not so far as across this block, no, not more than half as far; I had to be helped to the river in order to get into a boat to cross it. This was about our situation. I had not even an overcoat. I took a small quilt from the trundle bed, and that served for my overcoat, while I was traveling to the State of New York, where I had a coarse satinette overcoat given to me. Thus we went to England, to a strange land to sojourn among strangers.

"When we reached England we designed to start a paper, but we had not the first penny to do it with. I had enough to buy a hat and pay my passage to Preston, for from the time I left home I had worn an old cap which my wife made out of a pair of old pantaloons; but the most of us were entirely destitute of means to buy even any necessary article."

Detailing his great success on his leaving Liverpool for home, in April, 1841, he records in his journal:

"It was with a heart full of thanksgiving and gratitude to God, my heavenly Father, that I reflected upon his dealings with me and my brethren of the Twelve during the past year of my life, which was spent in England. It truly seemed a miracle to look upon the contrast between our landing and departing from Liverpool. We landed in the spring of 1840, as strangers in a strange land and penniless, but through the mercy of God we have gained many friends, established churches in almost every noted town and city in the kingdom of Great Briton, baptized between seven and eight thousand, printed 5,000 Books of Mormon, 3,000 Hymn Books, 2,500 volumes of the Millennial Star, and 60,000 tracts, and emigrated to Zion 1,000 souls; established a permanent shipping agency, which will be a great blessing to the Saints, and have left sown in the hearts of many thousands the seeds of eternal truth, which will bring forth fruit to the honor and glory of God, and yet we have lacked nothing to eat, drink or wear; in all these things I acknowledge the hand of God."—M. S. 26:7.

Continual Growth

I have not the time at the present to do more than mention a few of the leading events in Brigham's long and arduous life, but it is beautiful to see that in his character, in his ability and in his faithfulness there was throughout a continual steady growth and advancement. Having set his hand to the plow, at no time did he falter or turn aside. Within three years of the time of his joining the Church he had been selected a member of the first quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and three years later he stood at the head of that quorum, next in authority to the First Presidency.

I might say that at all times he labored under the greatest difficulties, receiving no pay from his Church, and yet giving practically all of his time to it. He

could scarcely provide himself and family with life's necessities. He once said:

"I came into this Church in the spring of 1832. Previous to my being baptized I took a mission to Canada at my own expense, and from the time that I was baptized until the day of our sorrow and affliction, at the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum, no summer passed over my head, but what I was traveling and preaching, and the only thing I ever received from the Church, during over twelve years, and the only means that were ever given me by the prophet, that I now recollect was in 1842, when Brother Joseph sent me the half of a small pig that the brethren had brought to him."—J. D. 4-23.

Desperately in Earnest

Twelve years out of the life of a man like Brigham Young, and to receive in return the material reward of the half of a small pig. That does not look to me like the work of a shallow impostor, but rather that of a man desperately in earnest, determined to do his duty and follow the dictates of his conscience, at all costs.

At the age of forty-three, after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, there suddenly came into his life the responsibility of leadership of the entire "Mormon" people. Others there were who claimed this leadership, but they were not able to establish it when matched with him. He said to the Saints at that critical time:

"Here stands Brother Brigham. Have his lips ever quivered? Have his knees ever faltered? I have spared no pains to learn my lessons of the kingdom, in this world and in the eternal world, and if it were not so I could go and live in peace, but for the Gospel and your sakes I shall stand in my place. . . . We have a head, and that head is the Apostleship, the spirit and power of Joseph, and we can now begin to see the necessity of that Apostleship. The Twelve can manage the affairs of the Church and direct all things aright.

Brother Joseph the Prophet, has laid the foundation for a great work, and we will build upon it; you have never seen the quorums built one upon another. There is an almighty foundation laid, and we can build a kingdom such as there never was in the world."

In the Hearts of the People

It was on this memorable occasion that Brigham Young established himself in the hearts of the people as the true successor of Joseph Smith. The founder, the leader, the prophet, seemingly the very life of the organization was gone. Dismay was on the faces of the people. What to do now, many asked, and there was no answer. But Brigham Young stepped forth and he knew what to do.

One can get an idea, too, of his marvelous prophetic powers from the last sentence quoted in that great speech: "There is an almighty foundation laid, and we can build a kingdom such as there never was in the world." I call upon my audience to witness whether that statement, made nearly eighty-one years ago, is true.

Of the trek across the wilderness and Brigham's selection of these valleys as a permanent home for the Saints, the principal facts are well known. It is sufficient for our purpose to note the part he played and the judgment he rendered. In the first place, there is all the daring that was manifested in the move west. But Joseph had foretold that the Saints would go, and so they would go—that was all there was to it, as far as Brigham was concerned. What Joseph had prophesied that would be fulfilled. To that thought Brigham had long since dedicated his life.

"This Is the Place"

When questioned on the way west, where the caravan would stop, President Young replied that he would know the place when he saw it. Beholding Salt Lake valley he readily declared: "This is the Place!"

A few weeks previously Samuel Brannan had traveled overland from California to meet the pioneers and induce them to settle in Sacramento valley. Sacramento valley was then the very cream of all the agricultural land in the west. But President Young stoutly refused to hear of Brannan's proposition. Brannan, discouraged and disappointed, could not understand why the barren desert of Salt Lake valley should be chosen in preference to the perfumed, fertile plain, and the perpetual sunshine of the Sacramento.

There might have been many who could not understand, but Brigham did. To quote from a sermon of his delivered June 7, 1857:

"As I often said, I am thankful to a fulness that the Lord has brought us to these barren valleys, to these sterile mountains, to this desolate waste, where only Saints can or would live."

And again he vehemently declared: "We have come to this place to rear Saints."

I will leave it to another than myself to delineate what would have happened had President Young followed Brannan's advice and led the "Mormon" caravan into Sacramento valley, where, within two years' time, there was witnessed the greatest gold rush ever known, and where, within ten years, 456 million dollars worth of the shining metal was dug up from the sands.

Without Faltering

Of President Young's long period as guide and leader of the Church in these valleys, covering more than 30 years, much might be said. It was a time of continued anxiety, trouble, and difficulty. The powers of the great man were often taxed to the limit, yet he stood steadily by his task, without faltering. There was the safe conducting of emigrants across the plains, the founding of new settlements, the Indian wars, the dealings with bitter-minded, prejudiced men sent here to govern, the building of railroads, the erection of

great Church buildings, the combating of enemies at home, who were bent to destroy, and the preaching of the Gospel abroad. In all his varied career, with its many difficult situations, few are the things in which he was not victorious.

And throughout, how zealously he labored, the one grand hope of his life being to "do his bit" for the furtherance of the Kingdom. It was his all-absorbing ambition. As other men, he had his faults, failings, and weaknesses, but how they simmer away when measured up to the mighty efforts he put forth for righteousness! For 30 years, here in these valleys, he dedicated his life "to build up the Church and Kingdom of God." All around and about us are the evidences of his effort.

His calling people to form little settlements in near and remote parts of the Great Basin, and to establish themselves temporally, reflects greatly to the credit of his judgment and wisdom. By encouraging agriculture, and by discouraging vain and silly pursuits after wealth, he saw the whole people gradually root themselves permanently to mother earth where they had chosen to make their home. May he not often have reflected upon that prophecy of his? "There is an almighty foundation laid and we can build a kingdom such as there never was in the world."

Convincing Influence

Of his preaching, a word might be said. Up to the time President Young joined the Church, the last thing he ever thought himself to become was a preacher. In fact, he once stated publicly, "had it not been that I clearly saw and understood that the Lord Almighty would take the meek things of this earth to confound the mighty, the wise and the talented, there was nothing that could have induced me or persuaded me to have become a public speaker." He was not naturally an orator, but I do claim that he was a great preacher; one of the greatest, if not the greatest among the Latter-day Saints, during the time he presided over them. One

may go through volume after volume of the Journal of Discourses without finding sermons equal to his. There are interesting, instructive and learned discourses in those volumes, but I would say that Brigham's sermons stand out pre-eminently as faith-promoting.

Out of the great, genuine personality of the man, who had convinced himself to his heart's core, went the convincing influence into the hearts of his listeners. The Germans have a saying which reads, "Was aus dem Herzen kommt, geht zu Herzen" (What comes from the heart, goes into other hearts). This is what, to my mind, distinguished Brigham Young as a preacher, and is, after all, really the only kind of preaching worth hearing.

Another thing that forces itself to one's attention in reading the sermons of President Young is the clear and distinct knowledge he had of the doctrines, the objects and purposes of his religion. His purely doctrinal sermons are models of clearness and lucidity. He avoided the speculative and the hazy for the clear. "When I first commenced preaching," he once said, "I made up my mind to declare the things that I understood." "The Kingdom of our God," he said again, "that is set up on the earth, docs not require men of many words and flaming oratorical talents to establish truth and righteousness."—J. D. 4:20. He spoke simply and of the things he knew. To young Latter-day Saints, fruitful and faith-inspiring hours may be enjoyed by reading with studious care the sermons of President Young.

True Riches

How he dealt with material things, and how he regarded them throws interesting light upon his character. It is well known that during his youth and early years, he had known and felt the bitter pinch of poverty; and then, in later life, he acquired wealth and could command almost all that money could buy. But I want to claim for him that the accumulation of

great wealth did not make him a happier nor more blessed man, and did not detract from the humility he manifested in the days of penury. He knew the uses of wealth, and also of its uselessness. He did not need it to be a true Latter-day Saint; and if God should choose to take it away from him, there would be no drooping of countenance on his part. I find him publicly declaring in the tabernacle, "Brother Brigham can get along with as little as any man in Israel."

In a sermon on April 8, 1862, he said:

"Riches do not consist of gold and silver. It may be said that with them we can buy all the comforts we need for the body. That may be so under certain circumstances, still, gold and silver are merely a convenient means of exchange. The possession of all the gold and silver in the world would not satisfy the cravings of the immortal soul of man. The gift of the Holy Spirit of the Lord alone can produce a good, wholesome, contented mind."

There is a glance into the depths of true philosophy. That Brigham Young, the shrewd business man, should make such a statement, reveals the powers and scope of his mind.

Finally, let me say of him that I regard him in the highest measure as a great man, a true man, a chosen man, sent to play his part in the building of a Kingdom "such as there never was in the world." You who read these lines may or may not believe the doctrines that he taught, but you must accept the work which he performed. The colonization of the great arid west, the building of cities and towns in Utah, Idaho and Arizona, the founding of a commonwealth in the midst of a desert land; all this will stand everlastingly to his credit and honor.