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AN EPISTLE

To the Members of the Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

INTRODUCTORY.

Dear Brethren and Sisters:

It appears proper, at this Fifty-eighth Semi-annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that an Epistle should be addressed to the members of the Church, in conformity with the custom which has been observed at the past five General Conferences.

DEATH OF PRESIDENT TAYLOR.

Assume of the Apostles are prevented, by circumstances well known to the Saints, from appearing in public, the Church will naturally look for some expression from them concerning their feelings and hopes respecting the work of our God. Especially at the present time is deep interest felt in the utterances of the Apostles, because of the loss which the Church has sustained in the death of PRESIDENT JOHN TAYLOR. Twice before has the Church mourned the death of its President, and each time the event has produced a profound impression upon its members. In this instance this sad event is invested with more significance than it would have been had it occurred in the ordinary way. President Taylor died in exile. For about two years and a half he had been compelled to live in seclusion, and to refrain from all public association with the people whom he loved more than he did life.

Through his decease the Church is called the third time to mourn the departure of the man who has stood as its President and as the Prophet, Seer and Revelator to this generation. The experience which the Saints have gained in passing through these trials has been of exceeding value to them. They have learned that God can take care of his own work, and that they need not worry nor yield to anxiety or doubt concerning its management.

After the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph there were pretenders who asserted that they had the right to take his place at the head of the Church. Some were deceived by their pretensions, not being familiar with the order of the Priesthood.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE APOSTLES.

For some time before his death the Prophet Joseph was inspired of the Lord to anticipate his own departure from earthly scenes. This was shown in various ways; but especially in the great anxiety which he displayed to bestow upon the Twelve Apostles all the keys and authority of the Holy Priesthood which he had received. He declared in private and in public that they were equipped and fully qualified, and that he had rolled the kingdom of God on to the shoulders of the Twelve Apostles.

PRESIDENT WOODRUFF'S PERSONAL TESTIMONY.

I, Willford Woodruff, being the last man living in the flesh who was present upon that occasion feel it a duty I owe to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to the House of Israel, and to the whole world to bear this my last testimony to all nations, that in the winter of 1843-4, Joseph Smith, the Prophet of God, called the Twelve Apostles together in the City of Nauvoo, and spent many days with us in giving us our endowments, and teaching us those glorious principles which God had revealed to him. And upon one occasion he stood upon his feet in our midst for nearly three hours declaring unto us the great and last dispensation which God had set His hand to perform upon the earth in these last days. The room was filled as if with consuming fire; the Prophet was clothed upon with much of the power of God, and his face shone and was transparently clear, and he closed that speech, never-to-be-forgotten in time or in eternity, with the following language:

"Brethren, I have had great sorrow of heart for fear that I might be taken from the earth with the keys of the Kingdom of God upon me, without sealing them upon the heads of other men. God has sealed upon my head all the keys of the Kingdom of God necessary for organizing and building up of the Church, Zion, and Kingdom of God upon the earth, and to prepare the Saints for the coming of the Son of Man. Now, brethren, I thank God I have lived to see the day that I have been enabled to give you your endowments, and I have now sealed upon your heads all the powers

of the Aaronic and Melchisedek Priesthoods and Apostleship, with all the keys and powers thereof, which God has sealed upon me; and I now roll off all the labor, burden and care of this Church and Kingdom of God upon your shoulders, and I now command you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to round up your shoulders, and bear off this Church and Kingdom of God before heaven and earth, and before God, angels and men; and if you don't do it you will be damned."

And the same spirit that filled the room at that time burns in my bosom while I record this testimony, and the Prophet of God appointed no one else but the Twelve Apostles to stand at the head of the Church and direct its affairs.

THE PRESIDENCY IN THE APOSTLES.

When the Prophet Joseph had passed away by foul assassination, those who possessed the Spirit of God and were living in close communion with it, knew the voice of the true shepherd and were not deceived by the claims of men who pretended to have authority. The body of the Church followed the leadership of those whom God had chosen, and whom His servant Joseph had been instructed to prepare for this great responsibility. The Twelve Apostles, with President Brigham Young as their head, became the presiding council of the Church.

The lessons which the Church then learned in regard to the Priesthood, and the rights of the Priesthood, have never been forgotten. When President Young was taken from us, there was no jar nor division of sentiment among the Apostles; and among the people there was scarcely a question as to where the right of Presidency rested. President John Taylor took the position which belonged to him, and the work of God moved forward without interruption, and with a union and harmony on the part of all connected with it, most delightful to witness. He has stood at our head for nearly ten years, and during that period he has possessed the gifts and qualifications which belonged to his high office and calling. His entire career is one that can be contemplated with the utmost satisfaction and pleasure by all who love the truth and admire integrity in those who are called to be servants of God. From the time that he was baptized a member of the Church until his spirit took its flight from earth, he never wavered in his advocacy and defense of the principles of righteousness. Under all the varied circumstances through which he and the people of God were called to pass, in the midst of the deepest trials and afflictions, his voice was always raised in tones of encouragement and hope; and when the storms were the fiercest, he rose to the occasion and always displayed undaunted courage and unflinching devotion to the Zion of God. In the providence of God it fell to his lot to be with the Prophet Joseph and Patriarch Hyrum when they were martyred for the truth, and he mingled his own blood with theirs. Though severely wounded on that occasion, he miraculously escaped death. He was a man whom the Lord loved. The evidence of this is to be found in the fact that He chose him to preside over His Church at the departure of His servant Brigham. We feel thankful to God our Eternal Father that we have been permitted to live with and enjoy the society of President John Taylor and be his fellow-laborers. Our association with him and the Presidents and Apostles who have gone before him into the spirit world, we esteem as a great honor. We take delight in anticipating the rejoicing that we shall have when we shall be permitted to mingle in their society.

Once more, the responsibility of presiding over the Church has fallen upon the Council of the Twelve Apostles. The Counselors of President Taylor, Brothers George Q. Cannon and Joseph F. Smith, being members of the Council of the Twelve Apostles at the time they were chosen to be members of the First Presidency, have, since his death, taken their places again as members of that Council.

Fifty-seven years and a half have elapsed since the Church was organized. In looking around among those with whom we associate to-day, how few there are left of those who, under the Lord, helped to lay the foundation of this work and were the companions of the Prophet in the early labors connected therewith! To-day there is but one Apostle left of those who belonged to the Council of the Apostles during the lifetime of the Prophet Joseph, or, indeed, at the time these valleys were first settled. The other faithful Apostles who were ordained under the direction of the Prophet Joseph have all passed behind the veil. Since the death of President Young four have joined him in the other world, and in the same period six have been ordained as members of the Council of the Twelve Apostles. This gives some idea of the changes which are occurring, and how rapidly a new generation is taking an active part in the building up of Zion.

THE LABORS OF THE APOSTLES.

Those of us who have been at liberty to travel, have devoted our time to visiting the various Stakes, and in meeting with them at their Quarterly Conferences. Some of us have been laboring in Mexico, others in Arizona, besides visiting the Stakes in Idaho and in Utah. These Quarterly Conferences are attended with excellent results. The people come together and receive instructions and counsel upon leading topics, and much good is derived therefrom.

Though it involves considerable labor for the Apostles to visit them, yet we are encouraged in doing so by the advantages which those visits bring to the people in keeping them informed concerning general movements and counsel. In these labors we have had much joy and satisfaction, especially in witnessing the increase of faithfulness on the part of the Saints.

THE PATIENCE OF THE SAINTS.

Though many of the leading men have been compelled to be absent, some of them having been incarcerated in prison, the people have, nevertheless, been steadfast, and have sought with increased diligence to perform their duties. The persecution to which they have been subjected has led the people to think and act for themselves, and not to depend so much upon others for guidance. This can not fail to be attended with good results. It is necessary that all the members of the Church should exercise their powers of reason and reflection and thoroughly understand why they take the course which God points out. Intelligent obedience on the part of His Saints is desired by our Father in heaven. He has given us our agency to think and act for ourselves, on our own velition, to obtain a testimony for ourselves from Him concerning the truth of the principles which He teaches, and then be firm and unshaken in the performance of all which is necessary for salvation.

We have felt great satisfaction in witnessing the dignity and courage which the Saints have exhibited through the trials of the past three years. Their conduct has been admirable. They have displayed great qualities. The forbearance, patience and fortitude which they have exhibited are proofs that God has been with them. Outrages which would have goaded any other people into acts of violence have been of frequent occurrence. In other communities men and women would be desperate under such treatment. But the Lord has given His people power to control themselves and peace has been maintained. Riots and bloodshed have been avoided, and even under strong provocation, when blood was shed, the community restrained itself. Prejudice may prevent our nation and its rulers from acknowledging, at the present, how noble the demeanor of the people has been under those trying circumstances, and with the strong provocations which they have had to indulge in outbreaks; yet the time will come when all this will receive its proper recognition and due credit will be accorded the Latter-day Saints for their magnanimity and self-control throughout this entire persecution.

PRIMARY ASSOCIATIONS, ETC.

In the organizations which have been established among our people in all our settlements in these mountains, the advancement and training and benefit of all classes are amply provided for. Among no people of whom we know anything have such provisions been made for the salvation and care of the members of society of all ages as among the Latter-day Saints. If we and our children do not progress in intelligence and in the knowledge of all principles pertaining to life here and life hereafter, it is because we do not avail ourselves of those facilities which are placed within our reach. We have the Primary Associations provided for the benefit of the young children of our Church, and their instruction in those simple principles which they can understand. We also have Sunday schools for the training and education of those of larger growth. In them they can learn the doctrines of salvation and the history of the work of God, and be prepared for greater progress. Then we have the Young Men's and Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Associations, which have been organized, as their names imply, for the development of the young people of both sexes and their advancement in every thing that will qualify them for lives of usefulness and honor. But besides these organizations we have the various councils of the Priesthood, to some office in which every young man who is worthy can be ordained. The young women, as they increase in years, can also find a sphere of usefulness in the Relief Societies which have been organized for the purpose of assisting the Bishops and Counselors and Teachers of the Wards in caring for the poor and relieving the wants of the suffering and distressed. So that by means of these organizations, which are of vast interest to us as a people, every one from early childhood to maturity, can be led forward step by step, from one degree of knowledge to another until fully qualified to discharge all the duties of perfected and honorable manhood and womanhood.

So far as we know the sisters who have charge of the Primary Associations are doing a most commendable work in arousing interest in the little ones and in teaching them in simple style those lessons which are adapted to their understandings. We hope that in all our settlements these associations will receive the constant care and attention of our wise and judicious sisters. The seed sown in the hearts of the children by the instructions imparted there will produce in years to come an abundant harvest that will gladden the hearts of the Saints who witness it.

OUR SUNDAY SCHOOLS, ETC.

The progress of the Sunday School cause in Zion continues satisfactory, though undoubtedly somewhat retarded

by the enforced absence from its labors and associations of so many brethren and sisters who have in former years taken an active interest in its welfare. We notice, with pleasure, the constantly increasing number of schools, teachers and scholars reported by the officers of the Union and the evident care taken by the presiding local authorities in our settlements to have a Sunday School as one of the first institutions established. We are also gratified to learn that in most of the foreign missions of the Church Sunday Schools and Improvement Associations are being organized wherever practicable. In Great Britain, in Continental Europe, in New Zealand, and in the Sandwich Islands, as also in the branches scattered throughout the missions in the United States, these institutions are found contributing their influence in instructing and forming the character of the children of the Latter-day Saints.

The Mutual Improvement Societies are also accomplishing great good throughout our settlements. In connection with them and the Sunday Schools, we desire to remind our brethren and sisters who are engaged in the praiseworthy labor of fostering these institutions, that the original design in organizing Sunday Schools and Improvement Societies among us was, that the children and youth of the Saints should be made wise in the principles of the Gospel and their faith be developed in the revelations of God. This the officers and teachers should keep constantly in mind. The books used should be almost without exception, the revelations of God as contained in ancient and modern Scripture, together with the other works of the Church. The teachings, while direct, brief and simple, should be such as will increase the faith, develop the veneration and love, and draw out the intelligence of the youthful bearers toward the divine principles of which by God's grace, we have been made the custodians. All attempts, however slight, to secularize these institutions and to change them so that they will not accomplish the ends sought for in their creation, should be discountenanced. The spirit and teachings of the Gospel should hold undivided control in all our ministrations connected with this cause. In the theological and other classes all discussions should be avoided as much as possible on subjects which God in His wisdom has not yet fully revealed. We know there are many persons who appear to take more delight in dwelling upon questions which are mysterious and cannot very well, in our present state of knowledge, be answered than they do upon those subjects which are plain and simple and essential to present progress. But the Lord has revealed so much that we can understand and that we ought to learn in order to be useful in the labors devolving upon us here, that we need not enter into discussions on subjects which in no way affect our happiness here or eternal salvation hereafter. In our theological classes, quorum meetings and other assemblies, therefore, these debatable questions need not be discussed or be dwelt upon to occupy the time of the members, to the exclusion of more profitable topics. In the Primary Associations, the Sunday schools and the Mutual Improvement Associations, singing should receive a large share of attention. Singing exercises can be made a great attraction and also a valuable addition to the education of the young. The interest that is now taken among us in vocal and instrumental music is a marked feature of the times, and this taste adds increasing opportunities for its development in the facilities which are now being furnished to all who desire its cultivation. Instead of having a select few act as choirs in these institutions to do the singing for the whole, the voices of all should be united in harmonious melody in giving utterance to the feelings of their hearts in hymns and songs. This will increase the pleasure of the meetings, and make all feel that they have an equal interest in worship and rejoicing.

THE RELIEF SOCIETIES.

The mission of the Relief Societies as organized among us, is truly grand and beneficent. There is no limit to their labors and usefulness while suffering and want exist in our midst. To aid the needy by feeding the hungry and clothing the destitute is distinctively and peculiarly their mission. In the energetic performance of their duty human sympathy and divine mercy are beautifully harmonized. In extending relief to the poor, the love of God and of our fellows is clearly manifest. It is more praiseworthy for a Relief Society to be able to say "There are none in our Ward in need of food, raiment or shelter," than to report thousands of dollars in hand, while the needs of the poor are unsupplied.

These societies have done a vast amount of good among us, and the members have been of great service in assisting the Priesthood in the wards in caring for the destitute and in supplying the wants of those who have been in need of help. In these labors we desire to give them every encouragement and to invoke the blessing of heaven upon them, and all their exertions for the benefit of suffering humanity.

THE CARE OF THE POOR.

As the winter season is approaching, it is proper that each Bishop and his Counselors should take the necessary

steps to properly care for the poor who live in their wards. They should call the Relief Societies to their aid in this labor. The reasonable wants of the poor should be supplied and the pangs of poverty and destitution should be averted. God has greatly blessed us in the fruits of our fields and gardens, in our flocks and herds, and in giving us comfortable habitations and means to sustain ourselves, and we should always remember the words of the Apostle James: "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

While it has always been the policy of our people to encourage industry and to repress idleness in every form, and to expect all persons to contribute, according to their ability, to their own support; still there are many cases where the aged and the infirm, or the unfortunate, cannot, with the utmost exertion and economy, obtain through their own labors sufficient to sustain themselves. It would be a great evil among us to encourage any class in living upon the benevolence of the community. No system of beggary should be permitted. Those able to work should be furnished employment. Persons who are properly disposed will be glad to obtain it in preference to being fed with the bread of charity; and all should be encouraged to labor according to their strength. This policy, if wisely pursued will prevent pauperism, develop self exertion and confidence, and produce self-respect. It is a cause of great pleasure to think that beggary is unknown throughout our settlements. There is no need for anyone, however destitute, to publicly solicit alms. But while this is the case, the sensitive and those who shrink from asking aid, who conceal, in some instances, their poverty, should be carefully looked after by the Relief Societies under the direction of the Bishops of the wards, so that there may be no individual in any of our wards suffering for the want of food or any other article necessary to sustain or preserve life. The community whose hearts are open to the cries of distress, who are ready to administer of the substance which the Lord gives them to relieve their fellow creatures, may always depend upon the favor of the Lord, for he loves those who are kind to their fellow-men, and who administer to their necessities, whose hearts are tender, and who readily respond to applications of this character which are made upon them, or who anticipate them by giving freely to the destitute.

FAST OFFERINGS.

In some of our wards there is not proper care taken in the collection of the fast offerings of the people. The first Thursday in the month has been set apart in the Church as a day of fasting and of prayer. That day should be strictly observed. Fast offerings should be brought with a liberal hand to the Bishop of each ward, that he may be prepared to supply those who are dependent upon the ward for sustenance. Some wards require considerable aid from the Church to help sustain their poor, because their own fast offerings do not supply them; while sometimes in the same Stake there are other wards where there are few, if any, dependent poor. Presidents of Stakes should make arrangements with the Bishops of the last named wards to transfer their fast offerings to the Bishop of some contiguous ward which has more poor within its borders than its own fast offerings will supply. In this way all the people can have an equal opportunity of doing their duty to the poor.

THE LESSONS OF LIBERALITY.

Experience has abundantly proved that those who are attentive to those and all other duties required by the Lord receive His blessing. God does bless those who devote themselves with singleness of purpose to His work. If proof of this were needed, one has only to notice the condition of Elders in the various settlements who have spent years of their lives upon missions. Though their home affairs may have been left to the care of their wives and children, they are not distinguished by their poverty from their fellow-servants who have remained at home.

We have only to look around us to satisfy ourselves also, that those who are generous in contributing to God's work are favored of the Lord. This was the experience of ancient Israel, and it is our experience. Yet in regard to voluntary donations there is too much carelessness, notwithstanding all the precious promises connected therewith. The Saints should be reminded of the obligation which rests upon them. Our children, also, should be taught this duty, that it may become a fixed habit with them to punctually attend to these matters. Those who have strictly observed these requirements can testify to the great pleasure and many rewards they have received from their observance.

This law of liberality appears to be one of the safeguards which the Lord has adopted to avert from his people the evil consequences which follow the possession of wealth. He has told us that the riches of the earth are His to give; but He has warned us to beware of pride, lest we become as the Nephites of old. We know the rule wrought for them, and we should spare no precaution to prevent wealth having a disastrous effect upon us. Many can endure poverty and be humble and live near the Lord who cannot bear riches. They become lifted up in