

Joseph Smith and Zion's Camp

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The gospel lessons learned during the two months of Zion's Camp defined and refined the Prophet Joseph Smith and others as leaders of the Church.

On May 19, 1834, the Prophet Joseph Smith sat on the ground near Richmond, Indiana, with pen and paper in hand. Using his knees as support, he began to write a heartfelt letter to his wife, Emma: "I sit down in my tent to write a few lines to you to let you know that you are on my mind and that I am sensible of the duties of a Husband and Father and that I am well and I pray God to let his blessings rest upon you and the children and all that are around you until I return to your society."¹

Two weeks earlier, on May 5, he had led 85 men and wagons loaded with provisions, armaments, and munitions as they marched from Kirtland, Ohio, in an expeditionary force called Zion's Camp. They soon caught up with the first group of 20 men, who had left on May 1. The goal: to join forces in Jackson County, Missouri, with the state militia to restore lands to the 1,200 Latter-day Saints who had been driven from the area by local residents.

The organization of Zion's Camp had been revealed on December 16, 1833, when the Lord summoned "all the strength of mine house, which are my warriors, my young men, and they that are of middle age also among all my servants, who are the strength of mine house ... [to go] straightway unto the land of my vineyard, and redeem my vineyard; for it is mine" (D&C 101:55–56).

A second revelation on February 24, 1834, called for a minimum of 100 recruits to make up the company (see D&C 103:32–34) and appointed Joseph Smith to command the entire operation (see D&C 103:21–22, 35).

Returning to the Prophet's letter of May 19, we gain some insight into the weight of responsibility felt by the young 28-year-old leader: "[I] feel a satisfaction to write a few lines with my own hand. In this way I can have the privilege to communicate some of my feelings that I should not dare to reveal, as you know that [my] situation is a very critical one."²



Zion's Camp would test the Prophet Joseph Smith as well as many early leaders of the Church.

The task must have seemed daunting since the Prophet was inexperienced in military activities and affairs. The expedition would entail traveling more than 900 miles (one-way) through four states over rough roads and sometimes uncharted terrain. In addition, two months of supplies would be needed for more than 200 individuals. Perhaps most significant, however, was the fact that he would ultimately be responsible for the overall day-to-day operations and the physical well-being of the participants. For Joseph Smith, Zion's Camp would test his leadership skills at an early stage in his prophetic ministry.

With him were men who had been recruited primarily from Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. Many of them expected armed conflict and threats to their safety. For the more adventuresome types, such as 16-year-old George A. Smith, a younger cousin of the Prophet, the prospect of participating in an extended overland adventure seemed exciting. But all would be tested physically and spiritually.

Again, the Prophet's letter, written in the quiet moments of May 19, reveals an inner perspective as he prepares to face such challenges. The Prophet Joseph indicated that he found "satisfaction and comfort" in a few lines Emma had sent. He also wrote, "I hope you will continue to communicate to me by your own hand for this is a consolation to me to converse [with] you in this way in my lonely moments which is not easily described."³

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The March to Missouri

Zion's Camp was a long-distance march, and most company members walked the entire distance from Ohio to Missouri and back. Nevertheless, for more than a month, additional men and volunteers fell in with the company, increasing their ranks and numbers. The expedition covered between 20 and 40 miles a day. Heat, humidity, torrential rains, mud, uncomfortable sleeping conditions, broken equipment, food shortages, and unhealthy food added to their suffering. Surviving records clearly reveal that fatigue, discomfort, sickness, hunger, and thirst proved to be trying ordeals.

One might expect that the Prophet would have received better treatment than the others. However, young George A. Smith, who had been selected by the Prophet to help him, reported, "The Prophet Joseph took a full share of the fatigues of the entire journey. ... He walked most of the time and had a full proportion of blistered, bloody, and sore feet."⁴

George further recalled that the Prophet maintained a sense of optimism, though "most of the men in the Camp complained to him of sore toes, blistered feet, long drives, scanty supply of provisions, poor quality of bread, bad corn dodger, frowsy butter, strong honey, maggoty bacon and cheese. ... Even a dog could not bark at some men without their murmuring at Joseph."⁵

Heber C. Kimball wrote: "I frequently invited the Prophet to ride, seeing him lame and footsore. On such occasions he would bless me and my team with a hearty good will."⁶

In spite of the physical hardships, Zion's Camp remained a spiritual venture. Group prayers were conducted morning and evening. Sundays were usually reserved for rest and for Sabbath worship, including partaking of the sacrament, singing, preaching, and bearing testimony. The company experienced several miraculous healings, divine intervention, and powerful demonstrations of faith. The Prophet had many opportunities to teach about living a more Christlike life. He related visionary experiences he received while with the company. One written revelation, now canonized, was also given (see D&C 105).

Separating "Sheep" and "Goats"

For future leaders such as Brigham Young and Wilford Woodruff, who served as second and fourth Presidents of the Church, respectively, Zion's Camp provided their first opportunity to be with the Prophet Joseph for an extended period of time, and they rejoiced in that which they learned from him.

Wilford Woodruff wrote: "We gained an experience that we never could have gained [in] any other way. We had the privilege of ... seeing the workings of the spirit of God with [the Prophet], and the revelations of Jesus Christ unto him."⁷

Brigham Young was even more explicit: "I have travelled with Joseph a thousand miles, as he has led the Camp of Israel. I have watched him and observed every thing he said or did. ... For the town of Kirtland I would not give the knowledge I got from Joseph from this Journey. ... This was the starting point of my knowing how to lead Israel."⁸

The trek became a time when some increased in their faith and loyalty, while others struggled and lost their faith. Sadly, the hardships generated frequent contention among some of the men. On June 3, after nearly a month's travel, the Prophet stood on the back of a wagon and issued a warning. George A. Smith reported that the Prophet said "our murmuring and fault-finding and want of humility had kindled the anger of the Lord against us; and that a severe scourge would come

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upon the Camp and many would die like sheep with the rot. ... But by repentance and humility and the prayer of faith, the chastisement may be alleviated but cannot be entirely turned away, for as the Lord lives this Camp must suffer a severe scourge for their wickedness and rebellion. I say it in the name of the Lord.”⁹ In spite of the pronouncement, some continued to display a contentious spirit. They would later learn that the Lord's prophecies are fulfilled.

On June 5–6, 1834, following travel through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, picking up recruits along the way, Zion's Camp crossed the Mississippi River near the town of Louisiana, Missouri. On June 7 the troops arrived at a small branch of the Church known as Salt River, where they waited for 17 people from Pontiac, Michigan, who were under the direction of Hyrum Smith, the Prophet's brother, and Lyman Wight.

With the arrival of this last contingent on June 8, Zion's Camp consisted of just over 200 men, 12 women, and 9 children. Final preparations were made for the push to western Missouri. Before leaving, the Prophet sent Parley P. Pratt and Orson Hyde to Jefferson City, the Missouri state capital, to meet with Governor Daniel Dunklin. On June 12 the army broke camp and commenced the trek across northern Missouri.

The Governor's Decision

Brothers Pratt and Hyde expected to receive orders from the governor concerning the role Zion's Camp would play in conjunction with the troops called out by the state. However, the governor changed his mind, refusing to intervene militarily, stating that he dared “not attempt the execution of the laws in that respect, for fear of deluging the whole country in civil war and bloodshed,”¹⁰ but he believed the Saints should continue their efforts through the courts. Governor Dunklin's position was disturbing news. Without the immediate support of state troops, the reinstatement of the displaced Missouri Saints in Jackson County could not take place.

Hurrying to report Governor Dunklin's position to the Prophet, Brothers Pratt and Hyde arrived on June 15. After learning of the governor's decision not to intervene, the Prophet decided to go to Clay County and meet with the Saints. He sought the will of the Lord for direction.

On June 22, 1834, the Prophet received the hoped-for revelation. The Lord informed Zion's Camp that because of present circumstances the redemption of Zion would not happen at that time (see D&C 105:9). Furthermore, they were assured that their journey and sacrifice had not been performed in vain. “I have heard their prayers, and will accept their offering,” the Lord declared and then indicated that the journey had been undertaken “for a trial of their faith” (D&C 105:19). Meanwhile, they were instructed to return to Ohio, where they were assured that they would receive “a great endowment and blessing to be poured out upon them” (D&C 105:12)—a promise later fulfilled by blessings associated with the Kirtland Temple. To the Jackson County Saints, the Lord promised they would find “peace and safety” living among the citizens of Clay County (D&C 105:25).

Joy and Sorrow

Zion's Camp advanced about two miles east of Liberty, Missouri, and arrived at the home of A. Sidney Gilbert on June 23. Brother Gilbert had operated the Church storehouse in Independence and also acted as agent for the Church while in Jackson County. Here they experienced a joyful reunion with a number of Missouri Saints, including Bishop Edward Partridge, William W. Phelps, Isaac Morley, John Corrill, Thomas B. Marsh, Lyman Wight, and a number of Whitmer family members.

Their rejoicing, however, was short-lived. The following day cholera struck the camp. Individuals with severe cholera experience a rapid loss of fluid causing dehydration and shock, which can result in death in a matter of hours. For several days the disease ravaged the camp in fulfillment of the foretold “scourge” the Prophet had warned would come because of contentious behavior. Sixty-eight members suffered in varying degrees from the effects of the disease.

Even the Prophet Joseph and Hyrum were taken ill for a short time. While the brothers were praying for relief, Hyrum sprang to his feet, exclaiming, “I have had an open vision, in which I saw mother kneeling under an apple-tree; and she is even now asking God, in tears, to spare our lives. ... The Spirit testifies, that her prayers, united with ours, will be answered.”¹¹

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Although Joseph and Hyrum subsequently recovered, others were not as fortunate. By week's end, 15 Latter-day Saints had died; 13 were camp members, including one woman and a young girl. The dead were wrapped in blankets and buried in makeshift graves near Rush Creek.

On July 3 a general meeting was held for the Missouri Saints and the members of Zion's Camp. In it the Prophet officially disbanded the camp. Camp members did not return to Ohio together in one large body but made their way home in smaller groups. The Prophet remained in Clay County, counseling with leaders before leaving about July 12. He arrived back in Kirtland about August 1.

Success or Failure?

Some members of Zion's Camp subsequently apostatized because they fully expected they would fight, while others lost faith because the Missouri Saints were not restored to their homes and property; hence "Zion was not redeemed." In short, there were some then and there are some today who may view the 1834 march to western Missouri as a failure. Yet Zion's Camp was successful in many ways: (1) by responding to the call, the Saints in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Michigan demonstrated their loyalty to God and His Prophet and their love for members of the Church living in Missouri; (2) while in Missouri the Prophet organized the Missouri Stake, further strengthening the Church; (3) most important, for those who demonstrated their steadfastness, this trial of faith prepared them for future leadership roles.

In 1835 the Prophet organized the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Quorum of the Seventy. Significantly, nine of the original Twelve and all of the Seventy had marched with Zion's Camp. The Prophet commented: "Brethren, some of you are angry with me, because you did not fight in Missouri; but let me tell you, God did not want you to fight. He could not organize His kingdom ... unless He took [leaders] from a body of men who had offered their lives, and who had made as great a sacrifice as did Abraham."¹²

Lastly, we should not overlook the fact that the Prophet Joseph Smith, as the commander, may have gained more from the experience than anyone else.

Five years after Zion's Camp the Lord revealed to the Prophet that all of the trials in his life "shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good" (D&C 122:7). Surely the Zion's Camp experience was "for his good." Unquestionably, he learned valuable gospel lessons regarding "faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, brotherly kindness, godliness, charity, humility, [and] diligence" (D&C 4:6). He also learned lessons regarding relationships with others, the need for preparation, and the consequences of one's actions. In short, Zion's Camp was an important chapter in the life of Joseph Smith that further defined and refined him as a prophet-leader to the Latter-day Saints.

Notes

1. Joseph Smith to Emma Hale Smith, in Dean C. Jesse, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (2002), 340–41. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized throughout.
2. Joseph Smith to Emma Hale Smith, 341.
3. Joseph Smith to Emma Hale Smith, 341.
4. George A. Smith, "My Journal," *Instructor*, May 1946, 217.
5. *Instructor*, May 1946, 217.
6. Quoted in Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (1888), 56.
7. *Deseret News*, Dec. 21, 1869.
8. Quoted in Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (1985), 45–46.
9. *Instructor*, Apr. 1946, 184.
10. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (1985), 94.
11. Lucy [Mack] Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (1853), 201.
12. *History of the Church*, 2:182, note.