

## Elder James M. Paramore

### Personal prisons

My beloved brothers and sisters, for several years and with the deepest feelings I have thought about what I would like to talk to you about this morning. The prophet Mormon tells us that “by the power of [the Lord’s] word did they cause prisons to tumble” (Mormon 8:24). In recent weeks I have reread the stories of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo’s brilliant novel *Les Misérables* and of Bob Merrick in the novel *Magnificent Obsession* by Lloyd C. Douglas. These two stories, though widely different in time, circumstances, and affluence, have touched my heart in many ways.

I have agonized as I have thought about the ordeal of Jean Valjean—the nineteen years in prison and the things done to him for the small transgression of stealing a loaf of bread to feed a starving family. He suffered so many indignities even after he was finally released from the physical prison.

Some of the same feelings flood my mind as I reflect upon the self-inflicted sufferings of Bob Merrick. The life of a prominent surgeon was lost and the sight of another because of Bob Merrick’s wayward activities, selfishness, ego, and disdain for others. He suffered in a prison of his own making.

Yes, I realize these masterfully crafted episodes are fictional, but they cause me to think about the various types of prisons Satan leads us into building for ourselves and others, or that others build for us.

### The Savior will deliver us

Haven’t we all been delivered from various forms of captivity? How did you feel when the doors were opened to your personal prison? How was it to feel free? How wonderful it is to be liberated from any kind of a prison.

I remember how I felt forty-one years ago when I was taken from a train in Europe at 2:00 A.M. by two soldiers of a hostile nation and held against my will. I was verbally and physically abused. I felt I would never see my family or my country again. I assure you that while I was held captive, the blood coursed through my veins like adrenaline. Though the captivity lasted less than a day, it seemed like an eternity. And when I was put on another train and sent back to safety, my gratitude to the Lord knew no bounds. I was *free!* As I talked to the train conductor, I learned that hundreds had not been so lucky.

I then was led to think of Him who really delivers us from various types of prisons into forgiveness, a newness of life, of spirit, of change, and of opportunity, and how the souls of men find such relief, fulfillment, and safety when this occurs. I thought of the Son of God and His greatest freewill offering to each of us, given at the expense of His own life and under excruciating pain. I thought of how our Father in Heaven loves each one of us. And though we sometimes walk into prisons of our own making, He is there with keys to unlock the doors that bind us. I thought of those who help along the way, who share in turning those keys which deliver others, and who care so deeply sometimes that they rebuild the trust of others—like the two men of God in the novels helped to free Jean Valjean and Bob Merrick from their prisons into magnificent new freedoms promised by the Lord.

### Prisons that come from sin

As difficult as a physical captivity or prison is, there are other captivities or prisons even more devastating. They are very subtle and take various forms in life, such as (1) taking advantage of another; (2) bearing false witness to

get gain; (3) knowing things to be true and not defending them; (4) stealing the morality of another; (5) destroying the innocence of a little child; (6) being captive to alcohol or drugs; or (7) financially digging a pit for another, causing hardship and destroying his ability to take care of his needs and so on. There are many prisons which come from our sins or the sins of others "according to the captivity and power of the devil" (2 Nephi 2:27), who leads us away.

### **Deceit in business**

Let me take an example to illustrate the point of these prisons. The prophet Job counseled us not to "dig a pit for your friend" (Job 6:27). I understand that could mean a business associate, a neighbor, a member of the Church. How could this happen?

Several years ago a great young man had a thriving business. He had worked long, hard hours for many years to develop the skills, reputation, and expertise necessary to build his business and provide for the needs of his young family. He loved his work, and every morning he anxiously began each new project with creativity and opportunity. His was a great life, filled with much hope and many projects. Then one major project was completed and finalized. Rather large payments were anticipated, but a shrewd businessman found that oral approvals, given to my friend to make many necessary alterations in the project, could easily be broken and not honored. After all, there was no written record of the changes requested. It was just "good business" to get it as cheap as possible even after commitments were made. And so verbal commitments were not honored. The money due, which was considerable, was not paid.

At this point we have several prisons that are in place: the prison of deceit of the "shrewd" businessman, and the prison of the deceived, who could not now honor his own commitments.

To this day the one deceived, through further industry and much hardship, is still trying to get out of the prison created by another. And he has lost confidence in others, and he and his family have lost opportunities and his business because of another.

Did not the Savior teach through the prophet Moses, "If a man shall cause a field or vineyard to be eaten, and shall put in his beast, and shall feed in another man's field; of the best of his own field, and of the best of his own vineyard, shall he make restitution"? (Exodus 22:5).

These types of prisons often cause the offended to lose faith, hope, and even the ability to care for their own, as was the case with my young friend. But these prisons should not happen. They often cause years of anguish. They cause those involved to wonder about justice and mercy. Sometimes these people find it impossible to resolve their own personal affairs honorably.

### **Do unto others**

The lessons taught by the Savior differ widely from these actions. For He taught, in effect, Do unto others as ye would have them do unto you (see Matthew 7:12; 3 Nephi 14:12). He taught, "Behold it is my will that you shall pay all your debts" (D&C 104:78). Yes, even if it takes years, pay your debts.

No Christian should ever be a challenge to another Christian. Many widows, single mothers, and older couples are victimized by those who take advantage of them, who do not honor their commitments and then put them into a type of prison. Those affected find themselves pleading for someone to open their prison doors, often while babies cry for bare necessities.

When we seek to follow Christ, we take the oath of a Christian as a member of this Church; we covenant to

never put another in any sort of prison, but rather to try to liberate those who are there. We become like one man who said that when he joined this Church it changed the way he thought, the way he talked, the way he believed, the way he dressed, the way he worked and honored his employer, the things he read, the movies he saw, the way he conducted his financial affairs in absolute honesty with everyone, and the way he served others. He truly believed in the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ and became free because of it. As is stated in the book of John, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

### **Freed from the prison of alcohol**

Years ago an acquaintance of mine was captive for over twenty years to a serious alcohol problem, which bound him every day. He would leave work, buy his alcohol, drive into the countryside, and drink until he could barely find his way home. He truly was under the captive spirit of the devil and lived in hell. A faithful home teacher loved this brother, saw him often, taught him to pray for help, and prayed for him often.

One day while he was driving his pickup truck into the countryside to begin his daily alcohol ritual, he felt a powerful influence to stop his truck, walk out into a field, fall to his knees, and plead for help from his Father in Heaven. Later he tearfully testified that as he arose from his knees, the desire to drink alcohol had completely left him. He had been delivered from a twenty-year prison. God heard his prayer, felt the desire of his heart, and opened the prison doors that bound him.

### **Jesus unlocks the doors**

Beloved friends, it is Jesus who has unlocked and will unlock the doors

of our personal prisons. It is a glorious promise to all who are captive, for whatever reasons, upon the condition of repentance.

Certainly a Latter-day Saint will demonstrate the freedom he has received by walking in all morality and all honesty, as taught by the Lord. For his word is his bond—sacred and honored. His life becomes the testament that it is all true—every principle and every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Savior and His prophets. By living these cardinal principles, we are truly free and we become the witnesses of His word.

One of the beautiful, profound statements of the man of God to Jean Valjean was: "My brother, you belong no more to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you, . . . and I give it to God" (Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, volume 1, book 2, chapter 12). No more prisons for others, if you will, because of my actions.

### **Repent to be free**

Jesus came that man might have life and have it more abundantly. He walked the path, taught the way, opened the doors to truly liberate mankind, and said, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The writer, Mr. Douglas, expressed it beautifully when he said to Bob Merrick, "When you find THE WAY, you will be bound—it will become an obsession—a magnificent obsession."

We know it works, for listen to the words which record what happened to the Saints who truly followed the Savior for two hundred years following His appearance in America:

"And as many as did come unto them, and did *truly repent* of their sins, were baptized in the name of Jesus; and they did also receive the Holy Ghost.

“ . . . And there were no contentions and disputations among them, and every man *did deal justly* one with another.

“And they had all things common among them; therefore there were not rich and poor, bond and free, but they *were all made free*. . . .

“ . . . And surely there could not be a *happier people* among all the people

who had been created by the hand of God” (4 Nephi 1:1–3, 16; italics added).

Yes, “by the power of his word did they cause prisons to tumble” (Mormon 8:24). May we live our lives so we will all be free with no prisons for ourselves or others, only a magnificent obsession filled with freedoms and blessings ahead, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

## Bishop Glenn L. Pace

### Strengthening personal testimonies

When I was young I was overly dependent on my older sister. For example, I was a fussy eater, and when we went to visit our grandparents I was constantly faced with being offered food I didn't like. To minimize my embarrassment, when the plate was passed to me, I would turn to my sister and ask, “Collene, do I like this?”

If it was familiar and she knew I didn't like it, she would say, “No, he doesn't like that.”

I could then say to Grandma, “She's right; I don't like it.”

If it was something we hadn't eaten before, she would say, “Just a minute,” and taste it, and then tell me if I liked it or not. If she said I didn't like it, no amount of coaxing could get me to eat it.

I know it is past time for me to rely on my own taste buds and stop denying myself healthy food just because my sister told me I didn't like it.

On a much more serious note, I believe the time has come for all of us to feast on the fruit of our own testimonies as opposed to the testimony of another person. The testimony of which I speak is much deeper than knowing the Church is true. We need to progress to the point of knowing we are true to the Church. We also need to increase our capacity to receive personal revelation. It is one thing to receive a witness that

Joseph Smith saw God and Christ. It is quite another to have spiritual self-confidence in your ability to receive the revelation to which you are entitled.

### The train of the Church

Many of us take the blessings of the gospel for granted. It is as if we are passengers on the train of the Church, which has been moving forward gradually and methodically. Sometimes we have looked out the window and thought, “That looks kind of fun out there. This train is so restrictive.” So we have jumped off and gone and played in the woods for a while. Sooner or later we find it isn't as much fun as Lucifer makes it appear, or we get critically injured, so we work our way back to the tracks and see the train ahead. With a determined sprint we catch up to it, breathlessly wipe the perspiration from our foreheads, and thank the Lord for repentance.

While on the train we can see the world and some of our own members outside laughing and having a great time. They taunt us and coax us to get off. Some throw logs and rocks on the tracks to try and derail it. Other members run alongside the tracks, and while they may never go play in the woods, they just can't seem to get on the train. Others try to run ahead and too often take the wrong turn.