

More Than a Hero

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Jesus Christ is not only our hero; He is our Lord and King, the Savior and Redeemer of mankind.

From 1856 to 1860, thousands of Latter-day Saint pioneers pulled their belongings in handcarts for over 1,000 miles (1,600 km) as they traveled to the Salt Lake Valley. One hundred sixty-seven years ago this very week, on October 4, 1856, President Brigham Young was surprised to learn that two handcart companies, led by Edward Martin and James Willie, were still hundreds of miles from Salt Lake, with winter fast approaching.¹ The very next day, not far from where we meet today, President Young stood before the Saints and declared: “Many of our brethren and sisters are on the plains with hand-carts, and they must be brought here. ... Go and bring in those people now on the plains.”²

Just two days later, the first rescue parties departed in search of the handcart pioneers.

A member of the Willie company described the desperate situation prior to the arrival of the main rescue team. He shared: “[Just] when it seemed all would be lost, ... and there seemed little left to live for, like a thunderbolt out of the clear sky, God answered our prayers. A rescue party, bringing food and supplies ... , came into sight. ... How we thanked God for our rescue.”³

These rescuers were heroes to the pioneers, putting their own lives at risk in extreme weather conditions to bring as many as possible safely home. One such hero was Ephraim Hanks.

In mid-October, and unaware of the handcart predicament, Hanks was returning to his home in Salt Lake following a trip when, during the night, he was awakened by a voice saying, “The hand-cart people are in trouble and you are wanted; will you go and help them?”

With that question ringing in his mind, he hurried back to Salt Lake City. And upon hearing President Heber C. Kimball call for additional volunteers, Hanks set out the very next day, on his own, to the rescue. Moving quickly, he overtook other rescuers en route, and upon reaching the Martin company, Hanks recalled, “The sight that met my gaze as I entered their camp can never be erased from my memory ... [and] was enough to touch the stoutest heart.”⁴

Ephraim Hanks spent days moving from tent to tent blessing the sick. He related that “in scores of instances, when we administered to the sick, and rebuked the diseases in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the sufferers would rally at once; they were healed almost instantly.”⁵ Ephraim Hanks will forever be a hero to those handcart pioneers.

Similar to that remarkable rescue, events which impact our lives and even the course of history are frequently the result of decisions and achievements of individual men and women—great

artists, scientists, business leaders, and politicians. These extraordinary individuals are often honored as heroes, with monuments and memorials built to commemorate their exploits.

When I was a young boy, my first heroes were athletes. My earliest memories are of collecting baseball cards with the pictures and statistics of Major League Baseball players. “Hero worship” as a child can be fun and innocent, as when children dress up as their favorite superheroes for Halloween. Although we admire and respect many talented and remarkable men and women for their abilities and contributions, the degree to which they are revered, if taken to an excess, can be the equivalent of the children of Israel worshipping a golden calf in the desert of Sinai.

As adults, what was once innocent childhood fun can become a stumbling block when “hero worship” of politicians, bloggers, influencers, athletes, or musicians causes us to look “beyond the mark”⁶ and lose sight of what is truly essential.

For the children of Israel, the challenge was not the gold that they brought with them on their journey to the promised land but rather what they allowed the gold to become: an idol, which then became the object of their worship, turning their attention away from Jehovah, who had parted the Red Sea and delivered them from bondage. Their focus on the calf impacted their ability to worship the true God.⁷

The hero—our hero, now and always—is Jesus Christ, and anything or anyone that distracts us from His teachings, as found in the scriptures and through the words of living prophets, can negatively impact our progress on the covenant path. Before the Creation of this world, we looked to Jesus Christ when it became clear that the plan proposed by Father in Heaven, which included our opportunity to progress and become like Him, was being challenged.

Not only was Jesus Christ the leader in defending our Father’s plan, but He would also play the most crucial role in its implementation. He responded to the Father and volunteered to offer Himself “a ransom for all,”⁸ to pay a debt that each of us would incur through sin but could not pay on our own.

President Dallin H. Oaks has taught, “[Jesus Christ] has done everything that is essential for our journey through mortality toward the destiny outlined in the plan of our Heavenly Father.”⁹

In the Garden of Gethsemane, when faced with such an overwhelming task, the Savior bravely stated, “Not my will, but thine, be done,” and proceeded to take upon Himself the combined pains, the sicknesses, and the suffering for the sins of all who would ever live.¹⁰ In a perfect act of obedience and commitment, Jesus Christ completed *the* supreme heroic act in all of creation, culminating in His glorious Resurrection.

In our most recent general conference, President Russell M. Nelson reminded us: “Whatever questions or problems you have, the answer is always found in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Learn more about His Atonement, His love, His mercy, His doctrine, and His restored gospel of healing and progression. Turn to Him! Follow Him!”¹¹ And I would add, “Choose Him.”

In our complex world, it can be tempting to turn to society’s heroes in an effort to provide clarity to life when it may seem confusing or overwhelming. We buy the clothes they sponsor, we embrace the politics they espouse, and we follow their suggestions shared on social media. This

might be fine for a temporary diversion, but we must be watchful that this form of hero worship does not become our golden calf. Choosing the right hero has eternal consequences.

When our family arrived in Spain to begin our service as mission leaders, we found a framed quote shared by Elder Neal A. Maxwell that has relevance to the heroes we choose to follow. He stated, “If you have not chosen the kingdom of God first, it will in the end make no difference what you have chosen instead.”¹² Brothers and sisters, it is by choosing Jesus Christ, the King of kings, that we choose the kingdom of God. *Any* other choice is the equivalent of choosing the arm of flesh, or a golden calf, and will ultimately fail us.

In the Old Testament book of Daniel, we read the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who clearly knew which hero to choose—and it was not any of the gods of King Nebuchadnezzar. They confidently declared:

“Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace. ...

“But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image.”¹³

As the Apostle Paul taught, “There be gods many,”¹⁴ and, I may add, heroes many to whom we are invited to bow down, to worship, and to embrace. But just as Daniel’s three friends knew, there is only One who is guaranteed to deliver—because He already has and He always will.

For us on our journey back to the presence of God, to our promised land, it’s not the politician, the musician, the athlete, or the vlogger that is the issue but, rather, choosing to allow them to become the primary objects of our attention and focus in place of our Savior and Redeemer.

We choose Him, Jesus Christ, when we choose to honor His day whether we’re at home or traveling on vacation. We choose Him when we choose His words through the scriptures and the teachings of living prophets. We choose Him when we choose to hold a temple recommend and live worthy of its use. We choose Him when we are peacemakers and refuse to be contentious, “*especially* when we have differences of opinion.”¹⁵

No leader has ever shown more courage, no humanitarian has shown more kindness, no physician has cured more disease, and no artist has been more creative than Jesus Christ.

In a world of heroes, with monuments and museums devoted to the exploits of mortal men and women, there is One who stands above all others. I testify that Jesus Christ is not only our hero; He is our Lord and King, the Savior and Redeemer of mankind. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Studies devoted to the Willie and Martin handcart companies include LeRoy R. and Ann W. Hafen, *Handcarts to Zion: The Story of a Unique Western Migration, 1856–1860* (1960); Rebecca Cornwall and Leonard J. Arrington, *Rescue of the 1856 Handcart Companies* (1981); Howard K. and Cory W. Bangerter, *Tragedy and Triumph: Your Guide to the Rescue of the 1856 Willie and Martin Handcart Companies*, 2nd ed. (2006); and Andrew D. Olsen, *The Price We Paid: The Extraordinary Story of the Willie and Martin Handcart Pioneers* (2006).

2. Brigham Young, “Remarks,” *Deseret News*, Oct. 15, 1856, 252.
3. John Oborn, “Brief History of the Life of John Oborn, Pioneer of 1856,” 2, in John Oborn reminiscences and diary, circa 1862–1901, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
4. Ephraim K. Hanks’s narrative, in Andrew Jenson, “Church Emigration,” *Contributor*, Mar. 1893, 202–3.
5. Hanks, in Jenson, “Church Emigration,” 204.
6. Jacob 4:14.
7. See Exodus 32.
8. 1 Timothy 2:6; see also Matthew 20:28.
9. Dallin H. Oaks, “What Has Our Savior Done for Us?,” *Liahona*, May 2021, 75.
10. See Luke 22:39–44.
11. Russell M. Nelson, “The Answer Is Always Jesus Christ,” *Liahona*, May 2023, 127.
12. Attributed to 18th-century English clergyman William Law; quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “Response to a Call,” *Ensign*, May 1974, 112.
13. See Daniel 3:13–18.
14. 1 Corinthians 8:5.
15. Russell M. Nelson, “Peacemakers Needed,” *Liahona*, May 2023, 98.