

Chapter 2

HOME LIFE: MISSOURI

Having already bore us a son, Susie was three months pregnant with our daughter. We believed our Lord always provides, though neither of us was employed when I left the Navy. We moved into the vacant home of Susie's grandmother, who was living in a nursing home in Branson, Missouri. It was a large two-bedroom mobile home with a two-car garage on five acres, just outside of town. Branson is a tourist town, bursting with country music shows, motels, and many other forms of recreation. Being nestled in the hills of southern Missouri with my wife and two small children, I felt we were in a virtual paradise with a hopeful future. Neighbors included family members; my wife's uncle and his family on one side of us, and Susie's parents, brother and sister, on the other.

While in the Navy and living in Florida, we had been on our own. But with no employment, our savings began to dwindle. Susie's family was willing to help, sometimes seemingly beyond necessity. We became as close by heart as by locality. In Florida, we had taken the responsibility of cleaning the church building when I was in port and Susie taught summer Bible school for the children. Now, in Branson, we resumed similar responsibilities additionally serving as leaders of Zion's League, the church program for teenage youth. As often as the doors were open, we were in church.

Soon I found employment in Branson at a building supply store and was later hired by a utility company in nearby Springfield. My training in the Navy with gas turbines, generators, and associated systems and powerhouse work was what I'd hoped to do upon discharge. Working at the powerhouse gave me the opportunity both in operations and maintenance. With the job I had hoped and prayed for, two precious children and a loving wife, and membership in the local congregation, life was pretty much as it now sounds: too good to be true.

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RLDS CHURCH LEADERS in 1984 legislated steps that many "Restorationists"¹ thought would throw the church into apostasy. While in Florida and just prior to my discharge from the Navy, Susie and I noticed the struggles these changes seemed to be causing. Perhaps not so strangely, similar struggles

¹ "Restorationist" is a term commonly used among fundamentalist RLDS members. It is derived from an early phrase "restored gospel." Today, many of the independent fundamentalist RLDS congregations call themselves Restoration Branches. —*Editor*

were also resident among the members of the Branson congregation. As idyllic as life in Branson was, such changes were devastating to us: our church and our devotion to Christ through the church *was* our life. I found myself digging into our scriptures (Joseph Smith's "New Translation" of the Bible, commonly known to RLDS members as the *Inspired Version*, the *Book of Mormon*, and the *Doctrine and Covenants*) to try and understand what was happening.

I also began reading RLDS church history to see why the early church had failed to build Zion in preparation for Christ's coming. Not realizing it, I began worshipping the church structure rather than the true author of our faith, Jesus Christ. I had become very much a Pharisee, ever frustrated over the operation of the church organization, yet all the while losing sight of the basic beauty of Christ's precepts. Church history, along with other books containing prophecies and experiences (dreams, visions, etc.) of people within the church since its inception in 1830, seemed to indicate a falling away of the church would occur.

The doctrines of the RLDS church are extremely complicated and even bizarre when compared to those of traditional or evangelical Christian denominations. There are teachings that speak of angelically delivered gold plates translated by Joseph Smith and known as the *Book of Mormon*. Within the plates was contained a "sealed portion," so called because it was sealed shut by God until the RLDS people would reach a particularly high state of obedience and righteousness. Not even Joseph Smith was allowed to see inside these pages. Although by Smith's account, the entire set of gold plates was taken back to heaven, much hope has been pinned on the promise that the sealed portion would someday be returned to be translated. Also prevalent within the RLDS culture were the *Book of Mormon* apostles known as the three Nephites. In the *Book of Mormon*, these three were supposedly so righteous that Christ spared them the death process, and therefore they have been alive and walking the earth doing good deeds since 30 AD. Yet even their divine influence has not been sufficient to bring back the sealed portion. Though many RLDS claim to have seen these three Nephites at various times of need or inspiration, the church was not then nor now, any closer to fulfilling its "cause"—Zion.

The RLDS *Inspired Version* is replete with changes not found in the King James translation. Even Smith's book of Revelation has significant differences. Changes to the wording, sometimes entire chapters, were made after Smith's introduction of the *Book of Mormon* and *Doctrine and Covenants*, and therefore, upholds his progressively shifting doctrines. The Christian Bible points to Christ, whether through the fulfillment of the law that Moses gave, or the words of the prophets and apostles. Conversely, the *Book of Mormon* defines the fulfillment of its prophecies will come through a "choice seer" (not the Messiah), who is to accomplish these things in the last days. For *Book of Mormon* believers, the miraculous works and writings of this seer are anticipated in the coming forth of the sealed portion and the building of a New

Jerusalem (Zion) on this continent for Christ's return. The reader should note that this "choice seer" doctrine came to play heavily in the circumstances precipitating the writing of this book.

Smith's *Doctrine and Covenants* (D&C) is comprised of revelations from the prophets of the church. After Smith's 1844 death, elected delegates at the RLDS world conference, held every two years, would vote on revelations for inclusion in the *Doctrine and Covenants*. According to church doctrine and tradition, no one but the church prophet receives authentic revelation concerning the direction or governing of the church.

For over 150 years, members have placed their confidence in the prophet for divine guidance. I have discovered, however, the necessity to continually re-evaluate our confidences. Whatever we honor as "authority" will always have influence, if not completely dominate, our reception of information as well as our perception of it.

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WITH FRUSTRATIONS INCREASING IN THE 1980S, many congregations across the United States were simply shut down because of their failure to comply with new doctrines being promoted by the RLDS world church.² This repositioning by church leaders increased the growing dissatisfaction of the grassroots members. Those who had been lifelong members of local congregations were finding themselves unable to worship in the buildings they, their parents, or their grandparents had built through monetary donations, and for many, their own labor. Since church headquarters had the deed to these properties, buildings were often sold once the majority of local members opposed the RLDS world church. The outcome of this vying for authority was that the grassroots members did not perceive the church as being equipped to tell them how to conduct services, and because those members would not accept the many doctrinal changes, the church did not perceive them as equipped to conduct services.

I searched my scriptures with prayer and fasting in an attempt to understand what was happening. Along with these studies, I began to write poems that expressed my heart's desire. I had never written poetry before, nor even had an interest in reading it, but at these times and many to follow, poetry would become an unparalleled vehicle for expressing my feelings.

According to the *Book of Mormon*, if Zion were not accomplished, those who had received its teachings would be under condemnation. Although more voluminous, the extant *Book of Mormon* is considered from a spiritually enlightened standpoint to be the "lesser part," while the smaller, sealed portion (which no one has seen) is referred to as the "greater part." Therefore, those who accept it as inspired, yet fail to live righteously enough to "merit" the

² "World church" was a phrase adopted by the RLDS church in the 1970's to reflect its growth in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Haiti. The term took on a double meaning to fundamentalists as the church became more liberal and "worldly." —*Editor*

sealed portion's return to earth are under condemnation. I didn't know what this meant for those who had lived and died in the church with unfulfilled dreams, but it became very burdensome to me that Zion *must* be fulfilled. As ridiculous as these things now sound, at the time they were as real to me as seeing an automobile racing toward a street full of playing children. My attitude was one of serious urgency. I thought it necessary to accomplish the task set before us lest we be condemned. And to those who were not of like faith, we needed to take the truth of the gospel. It was as though the church had all the answers to the world's problems, but by failing to provide them, the problems were only growing worse: and this, to the peril of everyone. I began to panic. The task seemed so simple, yet why wasn't it being acted upon?

The sermons I preached as a lay member expressed that urgency and were received as powerful by those who heard them. I was unwaveringly sincere. I spoke on issues commonly ignored yet necessary, in my thinking. Quite often these issues seemed new to members and this, too, became frustrating. Why did these issues appear fresh? Why was there no Zion, when we of the "true" church had the message and mission for its accomplishment? And why was there such a lack of world peace?

Susie's passions and mine toward serving God were identical, thus we seemed to mirror the same panic and frustrations. By my ministry of preaching she, as well as I, began to believe that I would, in some way, be "chosen" to work with the seer referred to within the *Book of Mormon*. The poems I was writing, the sermons I was preaching, and acceptance by those whom they reached, confirmed the idea that the last days spoken of so often in Mormon texts were actually close at hand.

In light of what I've learned through years of reflection and what has become my life, it's become clear that those passions of dedication were not what I thought them to be. Indeed, many topics are worthy of sincere and fervent passion. However, we must carefully monitor our passions, making certain our desire to remedy the problem is the motivation, supported by our capacity to do so.

During this impassioned period, Susie became bombarded with stories of personal experiences that included visions, voices, and the unusual timing of a number of unique coincidences. Her experiences confirmed to her that I was not only to work with this choice seer, but that I, indeed, *was* this seer. While I had no doubts about my dedication of service to God, I had no personal indication from Him that He was calling me to such an important task. Susie's recounting of her visions frustrated me since God was not speaking directly to me. I didn't know if her visions were true or false. Yet, I was experiencing tremendous guilt in the event that they actually were true. I had no comprehension of how to discern the good or evil of such an encounter.

Eventually I found myself frantically looking for answers, not due to the passions and questions for sincere service, which were my previous motivation, but to prove one way or the other Susie's experiences about me. Susie, at the same time, became ever so persistent that they were true. My desire for a

better world along with the need for all mankind to prepare for Christ's return seemed to weigh heavily upon me as *my personal* responsibility. The pressure became overwhelming and I'm sure this had an effect on Susie as well. Our perception of reality was an extremely isolated view but one which seemed quite normal to us. Everything I believed in was built upon the foundation of Smith's "first vision," a very isolated religious belief that dictated we were to "join thou none of them," as "them" (the rest of Christendom) were an abomination in God's sight.

To consider the history and struggles of traditional, denominational Christianity by Smith's small view of God is complete rebellion as expressed by the words of Isaiah 52:11, "Touch not the unclean thing." This chapter of Isaiah is disjunctively quoted in *Book of Mormon* 3 Nephi 9:79, where it refers to the restoration movement of 1830 and the building of Zion in preparation for Christ's return. Differences between the RLDS view of the world, and that of non-Mormon believers, were viewed with pride—as a degree of holiness. We, of the Restoration movement, perceived ourselves as being more keenly aware of God's great and blossoming plan, more "inspired," and more "chosen." I've always had a strong desire for peace. I wanted to see no more Ethiopian famine, no more homelessness in our country, none of the poverty and sickness I had witnessed in other countries while in the Navy. Many people in the world are not as fortunate as in this nation, and the doctrines I had believed my whole life offered promise of a cure to all this.

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IT WAS AT THIS POINT that we began to consider a trip to Ohio, in order to see the Kirtland Temple. It is owned and operated by the RLDS church and esteemed as much more than merely an historic landmark, having been built in 1836 through much sacrifice by early church members. To RLDS members, a trip there would be not altogether unlike a pilgrimage to Israel's Holy Land undertaken by committed Christians. In addition to Kirtland's local area offering a rich history of the early church, even more so, as a shrine, the Temple is considered to offer spiritual insight to those who travel there seeking guidance concerning God's will in their lives. I'd heard and read many testimonies concerning supernatural experiences of church members while visiting Kirtland. Many of these experiences included powerful manifestations stemming from activities in the Temple. By now I was no longer that child with youthful dreams. I truly believed the words and the eventual possibility of the utopia. Unwittingly, I was becoming a fanatic.