

INTERPRETER

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A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 25 · 2017 · Pages 81-83

Overcoming Obstacles: Becoming a Great Missionary

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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OVERCOMING OBSTACLES: BECOMING A GREAT MISSIONARY

Craig L. Foster

Review of Matthew Jensen, *Overcoming Obstacles: Becoming a Great Missionary*. S.L.: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016. 44 pp. \$5.50. Kindle edition, \$1.50.

Abstract: *Matthew Jensen's book Overcoming Obstacles: Becoming a Great Missionary shows how missionaries can remove their "perfect missionary" mask and learn to truly care about their investigators and what is best for them. In the process, they will become great missionaries.*

Reading this short book brought back many mission memories. In fact, I cannot imagine a returned LDS missionary reading this and not having a flood of memories of his or her own mission. The book came about when the author, Matthew Jensen, was asked to give advice to a cousin just beginning his mission, and he recalled his own highs and lows as a missionary in the Denmark Copenhagen Mission.

Jensen recalled going from a high to a low as he and his companion went from teaching a number of investigators to "knocking and contacting all day, every day" (p. 8). After a couple of transfers to a couple of "dead" areas, he experienced a crash in which he did some serious soul-searching.

Jensen explains that almost all missionaries enter their missions with the goal of being the "perfect missionary." Jensen suggests that most missionaries envision a lot of baptisms as the mark of being a perfect missionary. I must admit, at this point I couldn't help but think of Elder Kestler and Elder Greene from *Saturday's Warrior* boastfully announcing,

We are not the ordinary,
 Fearlessly extraordinary ...
 Bearing swords of truth we plunder,
 slicing wicked men asunder,
 We are something of a wonder,
 In our Humble Way.¹

I remember laughing at the silly false pride of these two missionaries when I saw the musical. Yet two years later, as I prepared to enter the MTC, I too had visions of grandeur of baptizing a lot of people and making my family proud. I am sure I went to the MTC with, as Jensen so nicely explained, “a ‘perfect missionary’ mask” (p. 9) in place.

Some missionaries are able to wear this mask their whole missions, but most experience a crash when the numbers game of investigators and teaching experiences does not add up to Wilford Woodruff-esque baptism numbers. The crash can be hard and painful, and many missionaries go through a period in which they question why they are even there.

Jensen explains that most missionaries will crash, but “every missionary can get through it if he or she focuses on the important things. There will be miracles and blessings which come from successfully enduring all types of trials, even this one” (p. 18).

Difficult choices will have to be made. Do they keep the mask on or do they seek to truly be guided by the spirit and make the necessary changes that will make them better missionaries? Depending on their decisions, most missionaries will fit into three categories: “numbers missionaries,” “zombie missionaries,” and “great missionaries.”

Not surprisingly, great missionaries don’t care about numbers as much as they do about people. They “care about their investigators and desire the best for them” (p. 23). A mission becomes more than just getting baptisms because the gospel of Jesus Christ is more than just a numbers game.

As I read this fascinating book, I thought of missionaries I knew decades ago in the Belgium Brussels Mission and couldn’t help but picture them as I read the three main categories. Thinking of the ups and downs of my mission, I also asked myself where I was in this spectrum. I’m not sure, but I do know that as other missionaries in my mission and I faced the reality that we would never have the numbers of baptisms

1. Douglas Stewart and Lex de Azevedo, “Humble Way,” *Saturday’s Warrior* (Salt Lake City: Embryo Music, 1974).

as those in other missions, we went through the process described by Jensen. I do know that I went away from my mission with a love for the Belgian and French people, some of whom I still keep in touch with thirty-six years later.

An important part of the book is the comments from other missionaries, at least one of whom is still serving on his mission. These missionaries expressed their thoughts about crashing, changing, working, and loving the people they served. Their experiences and comments helped bring the book to life. I hope this is just the first of more editions in which Jensen will include more comments from other missionaries describing their lows and how reading this book and following its advice changed and enhanced their mission experiences. These comments and experiences will ultimately be even more helpful for readers.

I wish I had this book when I entered the MTC. The principles and insights are helpful for missionaries and for life. Matthew Jensen correctly states that if missionaries no longer have that mask when they come off their missions, “they have made lasting changes and really improved their true selves” (p. 24). That is what everyone should hope for.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book for new missionaries, old missionaries, and even regular members of the church.

Craig L. Foster earned an MA and MLIS at Brigham Young University. He is also an accredited genealogist and works as a research consultant at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. He has published articles about different aspects of Mormon history. He is the author of two books, co-author of another, and co-editor of a three-volume series discussing the history and theology of plural marriage. Foster is also on the editorial board of the John Whitmer Historical Association Journal.

