

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 38 · 2020 · Pages vii - xvi

The End from the Beginning

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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THE END FROM THE BEGINNING

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: *We are often at the dubious mercy of people, forces, and events that are beyond our control. But a trust in Providence — a word that is used relatively seldom these days for power that transcends even those people, forces, and events and that can, in the end, overrule them for our good — can nonetheless give us serene confidence. That such providential power exists, that it is personal and caring, is one of the fundamental messages of the scriptures and the prophets.*

Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it. (Isaiah 46:10-11)

Notoriously, the imperial Japanese attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor caught the United States by surprise. America was grossly unprepared and entirely shocked.

On Sunday, 7 December 1941, the day of the attack, my father, having fled the poor employment prospects available during the Great Depression, was serving in the horse cavalry of the United States Army — yes, such a thing still existed — along California's border with Mexico. Hearing the news from Hawaii, he made a journal entry that day for the first time in weeks. I don't know why he was keeping a journal. He wasn't a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at that time (nor for more than three decades thereafter), so it wasn't a result of exhortations to write one's personal history.

Camp Lockett, Calif.

Sunday

Lots of excitement today. Japanese bombers attacked Pearl Harbor — killed 350 soldiers at Hickman [*sic*] Field — lots of other damage etc. Our outfit is patrolling the Mexican border, machine guns have been set up at various points. All leaves, furloughs and passes cancelled until further notice. Just heard that Japan has officially declared war against the U.S. — No doubt as to what our answer will be — Hang on, boys, here we go.¹

That entry has fascinated me since we first unexpectedly found the journal and read it, several years after my father's passing. It's not a retrospective look at the Second World War. It hadn't been edited in the intervening years. It reads today as it was written then, from the perspective of someone caught in the rush of events as they unfolded.

Unlike us, now seventy-five years removed from Hitler's death in his bunker in the *Führerhauptquartiere* in Berlin and the surrender of the Empire of Japan on the deck of the USS Missouri, Dad could not look back with calm, informed understanding at the Pearl Harbor attack. Did he realize that World War II had just begun? Perhaps; I don't know. Certainly he didn't know that he would end up experiencing the V-1 "buzz bomb" and V-2 rocket attacks on London, crossing the English Channel just after the Battle of the Bulge, serving in General George S. Patton's Third Army, participating in the liberation of the Nazi death camp at Mauthausen, Austria, and being demobilized, whole and in good health, from liberated Paris. He didn't know that he and his brothers would survive. (Fortunately, all of them did.)

Camp Lockett, Calif.

Monday

Our country declared war on Japan today in answer to her declaration against us.

Our own particular little outfit here is armed to the teeth in case of any surprise from the border.

1. This quotation, along with the two following, comes from my father's personal journal, in my possession. Hickam Field (not *Hickman*), now Hickam Air Force Base and part of the Joint Base Pearl Harbor — Hickam, actually lost 189 with 303 wounded on 7 December 1941. In the overall Japanese attack, though, 2,403 Americans were killed and somewhat fewer than 1,200 others were wounded.

Three carloads of Japanese were captured today as they attempted to reach the border. We cooperated with the state police & immigration men in catching them. They were heavily armed but did not resist.

Enemy planes were over San Francisco tonite — city was blacked out.²

On Tuesday, 9 December, his journal entry reads, in part, “President Roosevelt speaking tonite — cussing Japan, Germany, Italy and giving the country a pep talk — stressing our obligations, etc.” From his entry of Wednesday, 10 December, “Another blackout again tonite. Had two last nite. Pacific coast is afraid of air raids.”

Fortunately, as I write, we don’t have a global military conflict hanging over us. But we nonetheless live under the shadow of death, in perpetual uncertainty about many things. And we are not in control — as the recent COVID-19 pandemic has sharply reminded us. Each of us is obligated to function with a host of unanswered, open questions. Will my business survive? Can I trust this or that person? Will I keep my job? Will I lose my investment? How long will my health hold out? How will my children do as they grow up? What if an earthquake comes? What if a tornado strikes? When will I die? What plans should I make?

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15, English Standard Version)

In the Muslim world, very much in the spirit (or so it seems to me) of that passage from the Epistle of James, people don’t commit to an action or make a promise or arrange a meeting without saying *in sha’a Allah* (“if God wills”). That habit, of course, can easily slip into fatalism or even cynicism. But, if it is said sincerely, it seems to me a salutary acknowledgement that we are, in the end, neither the complete masters of our souls nor the autonomous captains of our fates. Overall, in fact, we are rather like improvising characters in the second act of a three-act

2. I have been unable to verify that Japanese aircraft really did fly over the San Francisco Bay area in December 1941, but there were certainly widespread reports of such activity. See comments of Lt. General John L. DeWitt in “Chronology of 1940-1941 San Francisco War Events,” *The Museum of the City of San Francisco* (December 9, 1941), <http://www.sfmuseum.org/war/40-41.html>.

play of which the first act has largely been forgotten and for which the script of the third act hasn't yet been delivered to us.

And yet, in the words of the great Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), “It is perfectly true, as the philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.”³ We have absolutely no alternative. Keeping journals, as my father sporadically did, may have helped him — as it has certainly helped me — to understand something of his past. It isn't of great assistance, though, for peering into the future.

But faith in the teachings and promises of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can be of incomparable value in just that regard.

I think, in this connection, of a remarkable address given by my friend and former academic dean Todd Britsch at the 30 September 1997 Brigham Young University devotional assembly. It was titled “Trusting God When Things Go Wrong,” and I hope that he won't mind my extensive quotation from it:

I believe that the characteristic that helped both Mormon and Paul face difficult lives with calmness and optimism is trust in the Lord and his promises. For them this trust transcended any circumstance, however negative and threatening. Once believers have come to know that God's assurances are true, no circumstance can undermine their fervent and, ultimately, optimistic view of the world God has created. They understand that the reason for their existence, even in times of trial, is joy. For the next few minutes I would like to make some suggestions that might strengthen our trust in God — even when conditions are not the best.

First, it is good to know how things will ultimately end. That is, it is important to know that God's promises of the ultimate triumph of goodness and righteousness are valid. I would like to illustrate this point with an analogy from football. I do this with a bit of an apology to my colleagues who can't understand how someone who makes his living teaching about poetry, music, and painting could be such a fanatic about this slightly rough sport.

A few years ago, before the time that all BYU games were televised live, I landed at the Salt Lake airport just as a BYU

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals IV A 164* (1843): *Det er ganske sandt, hvad Philosophien siger, at Livet maa forstaaes baglænds. Men derover glemmer man den anden Sætning, at det maa leves forlænd.*

“away” game was concluding. I rushed around the terminal until I finally found someone who could assure me that we had won, although by a very close score. That evening, after returning to Provo, I went downstairs to watch the replay of the game on KBYU. My demeanor was amazingly serene. When we fumbled or had a pass intercepted, I hardly reacted. My wife could even let our children get around me. Usually I feel obligated to help my brethren in striped shirts by pointing out their errors in judgment. Because my seats are on row 25, such correction often requires a rather high decibel level. This loudness has carried over to watching football on television. But on that day I remained absolutely calm, even when I had the benefit of instant replay to verify my claim that their defensive back clearly arrived early and that the ground had obviously caused our running back to lose the ball. I was a veritable model of football decorum, never becoming unduly upset or ill behaved.

The cause of my improved behavior was obvious: I already knew the outcome of the game — BYU would win. It is amazing how that knowledge changes things: cornerbacks can get beat, running backs can fumble, linebackers can miss tackles, offensive guards can blow blocking assignments, and other things can go wrong. But when we know the final score, such things can be endured and sometimes even ignored.

We also know the final score for the history of this world and for the life of the righteous. The Lord and his people will triumph. It is true that the sorrows of this world and the strength of Satan’s forces will win a number of the skirmishes. I am reminded of a wonderful cartoon that appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine many years ago. It depicts on a baseball scoreboard the battle between the optimists and pessimists. Each inning the pessimists are ahead, sometimes by rather large scores. But at the end of the game, the score reads, “Optimists 1, Pessimists 0.” So it is with the history of this world. Satan and his followers, as well as the natural circumstances of mortal life, will inflict many bruises and win many battles. But God, who knows the end from the beginning, has promised that those who serve him will receive the fullness of his blessings. When

we realize that righteous living puts us on the winning side, we can learn to trust him during trying times.⁴

Perhaps I can illustrate my point another way:

After their final Passover meal together, Jesus and his followers walked to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he apparently often went to pray. He withdrew himself, and, as Latter-day Saints understand, commenced there the awesome and mysterious process of his atonement for the sins of humanity.

However, that Passover — a communal celebration of goodness and hope and God’s power to save — was marred, as so many human activities are, by wickedness, this time in the form of Judas’s treachery. And that was followed by the stunning violence and injustice of the crucifixion. These were exceptionally abhorrent acts. In some ways, the most cosmically abhorrent in all of human history. But injustice and even injury are, far too often, everyday hallmarks of the ordinary world in which we live.

For centuries, Christians have commemorated the day that followed, that particular Friday, as *Good Friday*. Now, this is not meant ironically, even though the day was anything but a good one. It was, of course, the day on which Jesus Christ was crucified, the day of his death on Calvary. Nor is it intended superstitiously, apotropaically. Rather, the word *good* should be understood in one of its old, archaic meanings: “holy” or “godly” or “pious.”

But we can recognize that “goodness” only in the rearview mirror, as it were. The messianic dreams of Jesus’s disciples had, it seemed, been destroyed. The man in whom they trusted was dead. They were scattered as sheep without a shepherd.

What they do not seem to have fully understood — who *could* have fully understood it? Who can understand it today? — is that their leader’s violent, humiliating death, his apparent defeat, represented part of the greatest victory in this world’s history. His cry “It is finished” marked the culmination of the Atonement, his triumph over sin. It opened the door for all of us, if we will, to return into God’s presence. In its singularly horrible way, it was perfectly appropriate to Passover weekend, a peerless celebration of, precisely, goodness and hope and God’s power to save.

Holy Saturday, the last day of Holy Week and the day before Easter, follows Good Friday. It commemorates the day on which Jesus’s broken body lay dead in the tomb. It represents an interim period, a time of waiting and uncertainty.

4. Todd A. Britsch, “Trusting God When Things Go Wrong,” *BYU Speeches* (September 30, 1997), <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/todd-a-britsch/trusting-god-things-go-wrong/>.

Modern believers in the Restoration, however, understand that even while his body lay dead and motionless, Jesus was preaching as an immortal spirit to the spirits in prison, inaugurating the great work of the redemption of the dead that is carried on now in our temples.⁵ Encircled as we are by the obscuring veil, we may not always see God visibly at work from our vantage point in this fallen world. But he is always working for our salvation.

On that ancient Saturday, though, the apostles were hiding, their hopes dashed, not knowing what to do, perhaps anxiously anticipating their own arrest and execution.

Many of us are living our own Saturday, whether holy or unholy. Evil and injustice frequently seem to have the upper hand in the world around us, and indeed in our own lives. We're fearful and uncertain. Often, we've been defeated, sometimes we've been betrayed, and perhaps we feel that any significant victory is beyond our reach. We're worn out. We've heard promises of wonderful things to come, but we're unsure of them. Not uncommonly, our days can seem very dark. Have we believed in vain?

But the testimony of the four New Testament gospels, of the first apostles, of the early Christians, of Christian believers throughout the centuries, and of the Prophet Joseph Smith and his apostolic successors is that, early on Sunday morning, the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. Jesus had risen.

And, for all of us, Easter will come. Our Saturday of uncertainty and defeat does not, it will not, continue forever. As the great English mystic Julian of Norwich (who died circa 1416) so simply but memorably expressed the Christian hope, in words that she said had been given her by Jesus, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."⁶

William Clayton's lyrics for one of the greatest of all Latter-day Saint hymns, written in a camp of the exiled, persecuted, and dispossessed Saints along the trail to the as-yet unseen and largely unknown Great Basin, testify to exactly the same inspired confidence:

We'll find the place which God for us prepared,
Far away in the West,
Where none shall come to hurt or make afraid;
There the Saints will be blessed.
We'll make the air with music ring,
Shout praises to our God and King;

5. See 1 Peter 3:18-20; 4:6; D&C 138.

6. Julian of Norwich, "The Thirteenth Revelation", in *Revelations of Divine Love*, 31, <https://www.basilica.ca/documents/2016/10/Julian%20of%20Norwich-Revelations%20of%20Divine%20Love.pdf>.

Above the rest these words we'll tell —
All is well! All is well!
And should we die before our journey's through,
Happy day! All is well!
We then are free from toil and sorrow, too;
With the just we shall dwell!
But if our lives are spared again
To see the Saints their rest obtain,
Oh, how we'll make this chorus swell —
All is well! All is well!⁷

Knowing that things will end well transforms the meaning of the trials that go before and makes them endurable.

We can devote a great deal of time and energy to attempts to reconcile the earliest chapters of Genesis with contemporary geological science and the latest discoveries in biology. Given our current level of knowledge, though, the complete resolution of such matters seems to me not particularly urgent. And, of course, many have tried very hard over the centuries to wring precise timelines out of the often inscrutable prophecies of the Revelation of John, with varying degrees of thus far unverifiable success. We'll see who was right when the time comes.

But it doesn't seem to me insignificant that our Bibles begin with Genesis and end with Revelation. The first book does give us important insight into the first act of our play, and it forthrightly declares that, however the world came to be and however life arose on our planet, God was involved. It didn't happen by chance; He was in charge. Analogously, the book of Revelation, above and beyond all of its mysterious details, testifies that, no matter how difficult things become, God will be involved. It won't be mere chaos; He will be in charge. And those who align themselves with God will, in the end, be safe and secure and blessed.

There is no greater sense of peace, security, and assurance than in knowing how the play ends — that, in the old sense of the word, it's a comedy with a happy ending, not a tragedy — knowing that our team will win the game and that the good guys will win the war, knowing that evil will fail and be defeated, knowing that, if we're on the Lord's side, his certain victory will be ours, as well.

7. "Come, Come, Ye Saints," *Hymns*, no. 30.

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