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Have I Done Any Good in the World Today?

LIFE EXPERIENCES OF PRESIDENT THOMAS S. MONSON

By Heidi S. Swinton

I was serving with my husband, then the president of the England London South Mission, when the phone rang on June 18, 2008. It was President Thomas S. Monson. He began in his usual friendly fashion, one of the trademarks of his ministry: “How is the mission? How is your family? How is jolly old England?” And then he paused and said, “I have been talking with Frances, I have prayed about it, and I would like you to write my biography.”

Needless to say, I was honored and immediately overwhelmed. He then suggested that if I got started the next morning, I could be halfway done by the time we came home. We had one year left of our three-year call.

President Monson teaches, “Whom the Lord calls, the Lord qualifies.”¹ I have come to appreciate that promise.

How do you write about the life of a prophet? You begin not at the keyboard but on your knees.

I recognized early that this would not be a

typical biography outlining dates, times, places, and travels. It was the account of a man prepared before the world was and called of God “to guide us in these latter days.”² *Humbling* is the best description. *Daunting*, *challenging*, and *consuming* follow close behind.

The Lord has said, “Whether by mine own voice or by the voice of my servants, it is the same” (D&C 1:38). Hearing the Lord speak through His prophet since Thomas S. Monson’s call to the holy apostleship in 1963 is where I began. I spent months reading the hundreds of messages President Monson has given in myriads of settings. I read biographies of all the Presidents of the Church and of many noted religious leaders. I studied the early Church in Scotland, Sweden, and England, where President Monson’s ancestors hail from; the Depression that so influenced his youth; and World War II and its aftermath with a divided Germany. (President Monson spent 20 years supervising this area of the



Left: President Monson—then Elder Monson—on the steps of the Church Administration Building in 1967. Above, from top: In his office in 2011; with Elder M. Russell Ballard at the groundbreaking of the Joseph F. Smith Building at Brigham Young University in 2002; at the Laie Hawaii Temple rededication in 2010; with his wife, Frances, following the April 2008 general conference.



Top: A portrait of President Monson in the 1960s. Above: With members and missionaries in Germany. Below, from left: As bishop of the Sixth–Seventh Ward with his counselors; talking with Boy Scouts; visiting the Tongan Mission in 1965.



Church.) I read his autobiography prepared in 1985 for just his family and later his daily journal of 47 years. I interviewed Church leaders who worked with him in many parts of the world and members who were touched profoundly by his ministry. I engaged a dear friend and history scholar, Tricia H. Stoker, to help with research. She had served on the writing committees of several *Teachings of Presidents of the Church* manuals and understood how to research the life of a prophet.

I interviewed President Monson in monthly video conferences from England and then, after returning home to Utah, in person while working from his office for 14 months. In every case I felt his warmth, as if we were sitting down at the kitchen table. He spoke of childhood and family, his call by President David O. McKay (1873–1970), and the influence of mentors like President J. Reuben Clark Jr. (1871–1961); President Harold B. Lee (1899–1973); and Elder Mark E. Petersen (1900–84), to name a few.

He learned Christlike living at home, where charity—the pure love of Christ—compassion, and a desire to lift and bless the lives of others were the standard and where, though his parents did not read him the scriptures, they lived them.

His focus on serving the one reaches back to his growing up on the west side of Salt Lake City, “between the railroad tracks,” as he likes to say, in the bottom of the Depression. His neighbors and friends had little in terms of material goods, but they had each other, and that was enough. Many close to him, including some of his favorite uncles, were not members of the Church. Religious affiliation held no barriers; he came to love people for people. His parents opened their hearts to everyone. President Monson has never left those moorings.

He is an unusual man who has reverence for everyone he meets and who is interested in their lives, worries, and challenges. He relates to a visiting dignitary from a foreign country with the same attention he does

the man who polishes his desk at night. Clearly, one of the measures of his greatness is that he can relate to anyone and finds he can learn something from each person he meets.

If, as President Monson says, an organization is the lengthened shadow of its leader,³ then the desire to lift, encourage, engage, involve, and rescue others one by one is our mandate. This way of living mirrors the example of the Savior, who “went about doing good, . . . for God was with him” (Acts 10:38).

President Monson has long been calling us to be more like the Savior. When I interviewed President Boyd K. Packer, President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, he confirmed what I had come to understand. President Monson, he said, “is more Christlike than the rest of us.”⁴

For more than half a century, President Monson has given the suits off his back to the destitute. He has sat at the bedside of the ill and elderly. He has given countless blessings to people in hospitals and in their homes. He has turned the car around to make a quick visit to one friend and rushed from meetings to speak at the funeral of another. (If you ask him how many he counts on that list of friends, he will say, “At least 14 million.”) He will go to someone in a wheelchair who has a hard time coming to him, “high-five” a group of teenagers, and wiggle his

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ears at deacons on the front row. He exhibits great reverence for the lives of those he describes as “unnoticed and unrecognized,” known to few but their Father in Heaven.

Put simply, President Monson *does* what most people only *think* about doing.

His messages are filled with true accounts (he never calls them “stories”) that teach gospel principles. He explains: “The actions whereby we demonstrate that we truly do love God and our neighbor as ourselves will rarely be such as to attract the gaze and admiration of the world. Usually our love will be shown in our day-to-day associations with one another.”⁵

In all his ministry around the globe, perhaps some of the most gripping experiences were the years he supervised the Church behind the Iron Curtain. When my husband and I finished our mission in 2009, we went to Germany to walk the ground President Monson walked, talk to the members he so loved, and feel the influence of his years of service. What we found were hearty priesthood holders who wept as they spoke of his consistent visits, his love for Jesus Christ, and his encouragement and concern. We stood in the now-abandoned, dilapidated factory building in Görlitz where in 1968 President Monson stood at the podium and promised the haggard East German Latter-day Saints all the blessings that the Lord had for His children—if they were faithful. That day they sang with such fervor: “If the way be full of trial, Weary not! . . . Jesus never will forsake us, Weary not.”⁶ He had come under the direction of the First Presidency to the Saints’ rescue. Two decades later, with the Berlin wall still standing, these East German Latter-day Saints had stakes, meetinghouses, patriarchs, missionaries, and a temple. And then the wall came down, and the Saints were reunited with their families and as a country.

President Monson often says, “There are no coincidences” as he makes the point that his experiences in life have taught him to always look for the Lord’s hand.⁷

One of the great East German leaders was Henry Burkhardt, who worked closely and was with President Monson for two decades at the scene of all the pivotal



events in that country. Brother Burkhardt was a man who served so faithfully and at such great risk all those years behind the Iron Curtain as the Church's representative to the government. He served, among other positions, as a Church leader and as president of the the Freiberg Temple.

I asked him what stood out in his mind as the singular moment in President Monson's ministry. I expected him to mention the meeting in Görlitz, the dedication of the country in 1975, the organization of the first stake, the dedication of the Freiberg Temple, or the meeting with Herr Honecker, East Germany's highest Communist official, when President Monson asked permission for missionaries to enter the country and other missionaries to leave the country to serve in other lands. Given the death squads that patrolled the wall, the query sounded almost ludicrous, but Herr Honecker responded, "We have watched you all these years, and we trust you. Permission granted." Which one of these events would Brother Burkhardt choose?

Tears began to flow down his cheeks as he responded: "It was December 2, 1979." I couldn't register in my mind a major event attached to that date. "Tell me about it," I said.

"It was the day President Monson came to East Germany to give my wife, Inge, a blessing." President Monson had a weekend without an assignment, and he flew from the United States to Germany for just that purpose. Sister Burkhardt had been in the hospital for nine weeks with complications from surgery, and her condition was deteriorating. President Monson had recorded in his journal, "We joined our faith and our prayers in providing her a blessing."⁸ He had gone thousands of miles with his only free time in months—to the rescue.

"Let us ask ourselves the questions," he has said, "Have I done any good in the world today? Have I helped

Right: President and Sister Monson at the dedication of the Nauvoo Illinois Temple in 2002; President Monson speaking at the April 2008 general conference, when he was sustained as President of the Church; at the cornerstone ceremony for the Oquirrh Mountain Utah Temple in 2009; with a longtime friend in Ontario, Canada, in June 2011.

President Monson is constantly reminding us to reach out to one another.

anyone in need? What a formula for happiness! What a prescription for contentment, for inner peace. . . . There are hearts to gladden. There are kind words to say. There are gifts to be given. There are deeds to be done. There are souls to be saved."⁹

Such is the ministry of President Monson. He is always reaching out to the weary, the lonely, the

faint hearted. As Elder Richard G. Scott of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles says, "The Lord had to make Thomas Monson big because of the size of his heart."¹⁰

When the prophet dedicated the Curitiba Brazil Temple on June 1, 2008, he called a lad up to assist him at the cornerstone ceremony. A photographer suggested someone take off the boy's hat for a picture. The boy had no hair and was obviously undergoing cancer treatments. President Monson lovingly put his arm around him and helped him place mortar on the wall. One of those accompanying the President mentioned it was time to go back in the temple to finish the dedication on schedule. President Monson shook his head. "No," he said, "I want to call up one more." Looking over the crowd, he settled on a woman at the back, and as their eyes met, he motioned for her to come forward. He put his arm around her and with loving care escorted her to the wall to finish the cornerstone sealing.

The day after the dedication, Elder Russell M. Nelson of

the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who had also been at the dedication, asked President Monson how he knew the woman was the boy's mother.

"I didn't know," he replied, "but the Lord knew."

It was not many months later that the boy



died. Elder Nelson says: “You can imagine what [the experience at the dedication] meant to the mother of that family. That was the Lord’s way of saying, ‘I know you, I am concerned for you, and I want to help you.’ That’s the kind of man we’ve got in this prophet of God.”¹¹

At a time when texting and e-mailing have replaced sitting down together, President Monson is constantly reminding us to reach out to one another. He shared this message through the words of a member who wrote him a letter: “The prayers of people are almost always answered by the actions of others.”¹² He often points to the counsel from the Lord: “I will go before your face. I will be on your right hand and on your left, and my Spirit shall be in your hearts, and mine angels round about you, to bear you up” (D&C 84:88). President Monson appreciates that so often *we* are those angels for each other. Alma committed the Saints at the Waters of Mormon to “bear one another’s burdens, that they may be light” (Mosiah 18:8); President Monson is calling us to live that covenant.

I have been the recipient of his bearing up others’ burdens. There came a time when he could see the weight of the responsibility of his biography weighing me down. He invited me into his office and with the gentlest and kindest voice said, “How can I help?”

My heart could not resist his overture, and I poured out my feelings of inadequacy, the intimidating nature of the task, and the volume of material to capture, organize, and synthesize. I wanted so desperately to get it right—for him. Our exchange was one of my most precious mortal

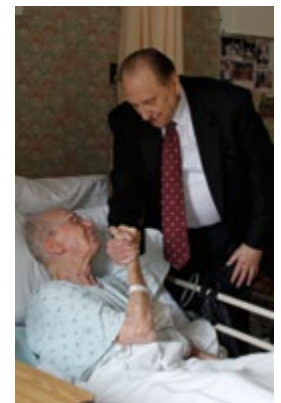
experiences. I felt like I was at the Pool of Bethesda and the Savior had lifted the drape and reached down to bear me up. President Monson understands the saving power of the Atonement and counts it a privilege to be sent by the Lord to bear up another.

“Reach out to rescue the aged, the widowed, the sick, the handicapped, the less active,” he has said, and then he has led the charge. “Extend to them the hand that helps and the heart that knows compassion.”¹³

His regard and interest in others are a measure of his testimony of the Savior Jesus Christ: “By learning of Him, by believing in Him, by following Him, there is the capacity to become like Him. The countenance can change; the heart can be softened; the step can be quickened; the outlook enhanced. Life becomes what it should become.”¹⁴ ■

NOTES

1. Thomas S. Monson, “Duty Calls,” *Ensign*, May 1996, 44.
2. “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet,” *Hymns*, no. 19.
3. See Kellene Ricks, “BYU Leader Begins ‘Lord’s Errand,’” *Church News*, Nov. 4, 1989, 3.
4. Boyd K. Packer, in Heidi S. Swinton, *To the Rescue* (2010), 1.
5. Thomas S. Monson, “To Love as Jesus Loves,” *Instructor*, Sept. 1965, 349.
6. “If the Way Be Full of Trial, Weary Not,” *Deseret Sunday School Songs* (1909), no. 158; see also Thomas S. Monson, “Patience—a Heavenly Virtue,” *Liahona*, Sept. 2002, 7; *Ensign*, Nov. 1995, 61.
7. Thomas S. Monson, in *To the Rescue*, 60.
8. Thomas S. Monson, in *To the Rescue*, 1.
9. Thomas S. Monson, “Now Is the Time,” *Liahona*, Jan. 2002, 69; *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 60.
10. Richard G. Scott, in *To the Rescue*, 162.
11. See *To the Rescue*, 521.
12. In Thomas S. Monson, “Be Thou an Example,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1996, 45.
13. Thomas S. Monson, Salt Lake City South Stake Conference Broadcast, Oct. 18, 2009, unpublished.
14. Thomas S. Monson, “The Way of the Master,” *Liahona* and *Ensign*, Jan. 2003, 4.



FROM LEFT: PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG DIMOND, LESLIE NIELSSON, MATTHEW REIER, AND GERRY AVANT