



The Life and Ministry of George Albert Smith

One day during his service as President of the Church, George Albert Smith was sent a photograph with a note that read, “I am sending you this picture because it is a graphic illustration of the man we believe you are.” It was a picture of President Smith visiting with a mother and her four young children. On that particular day, President Smith had been rushing to catch a train when the mother stopped him, hoping her children could have the opportunity to shake hands with a prophet of God. An observer captured the moment in the photograph.

The note continued, “The reason we treasure [this picture] so is because, as busy as you were, in spite of the fact you were being hurried into your car and then to your waiting train, you still took time out to shake the hand of each child in this family.”¹

Acts of kindness like this one characterized the life and ministry of George Albert Smith. Whether by offering love and encouragement to a neighbor struggling with his faith or by organizing vast welfare efforts to feed thousands of people, George Albert Smith lived by the commandment of the Savior, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Mark 12:31).

Early Years, 1870–90



About age 4

George Albert Smith was born on April 4, 1870, to John Henry and Sarah Farr Smith in a humble home in Salt Lake City. The Smith family had a great legacy of service in the kingdom of God. George Albert’s father would later serve in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and in the First Presidency. His grandfather and namesake,

George A. Smith, was a cousin to the Prophet Joseph Smith and was among the first Latter-day Saint pioneers to enter the Salt Lake Valley in 1847; George A. Smith was also an Apostle and a counselor to President Brigham Young. George Albert's great-grandfather John Smith served as Patriarch to the Church and as the first stake president in Salt Lake City. And his maternal grandfather, Lorin Farr, was the first mayor of Ogden, Utah, and the first stake president in that city.



John Henry Smith

George Albert Smith loved and admired his parents. He credited his father for teaching him to reach out to those in need,² and he praised his mother for the sacrifices she made to raise her family in the gospel. “Although we were very poor,” he recalled, “and my father was on a mission when I was five years old, I never remember of hearing my mother complain, and I never saw her shed a tear because of conditions that surrounded her. She could make a dollar go as far as anybody I ever knew. . . .

“ . . . When father was absent from home on a mission, mother took his place, and she was really the head of the house in his absence. We attended to our prayers, and had a blessing on the food, and in case of sickness, she called in the elders, for she had great faith in the ordinances of the gospel. She has always been a strict tithe-payer, and as far as I have been able to discover, there has never entered her mind a thought that perhaps there might be a mistake and ‘Mormonism’ not be true. She believes it with all her soul.”³



Sarah Farr Smith

In particular, George Albert Smith remembered his mother teaching him to pray and trust that God would answer: “When I think of the influence of my mother when I was a little [boy] I am moved to reverence and tears. . . . I remember as though it were yesterday, she took me by the hand and we walked up a flight of stairs to the second story. There I knelt before her and held her hand as she taught me to pray. Thank God for those mothers who have in their hearts the spirit of the Gospel



*Children of John Henry and Sarah Farr Smith.
George Albert Smith is on the left.*

and a desire to bless. I could repeat that prayer now and it is a great many years since I learned it. It gave me an assurance that I had a Heavenly Father, and let me know that He heard and answered prayer. When I was older we still lived in a two story frame house and when the wind blew hard it would rock as if it would topple over. Sometimes I would be too frightened to go to sleep. My bed was in a little room by itself, and many a night I have climbed out and got down on my knees and asked my Father in Heaven to take care of the house, preserve it that it would not break in pieces and I have got back into my little bed just as sure that I would be safeguarded from evil as if I held my Father's hand."⁴

Looking back on his childhood, George Albert Smith said:

“My parents were living in very humble circumstances, but I praise my Maker and thank him with all my heart for sending me into their home.

“. . . I learned when I was a boy that this is the work of the Lord. I learned that there were prophets living upon the earth. I learned that the inspiration of the Almighty would influence those who lived to enjoy it.

“. . . I am thankful for my birthright, thankful for parents who taught me the gospel of Jesus Christ and set the example in their home.”⁵

Young George Albert was known as a happy, playful boy. Friends appreciated his cheerful nature, and he enjoyed entertaining them with the harmonica, banjo, and guitar and a repertoire of funny songs. Yet he also had experiences that helped him develop a strong sense of responsibility that was remarkable for his young age. When he was 12 years old, George Albert attended Brigham Young Academy, where he received some counsel that was to have a profound effect upon his life. He later recalled:

“It was fortunate that part of my instruction came under Dr. Karl G. Maeser, that outstanding educator who was the first builder of our great Church schools. . . . I cannot remember much of what was said during the year that I was there, but there is one thing that I will probably never forget. I have repeated it many times. . . . Dr. Maeser one day stood up and said:

“Not only will you be held accountable for the things that you do, but you will be held responsible for the very thoughts that you think.”

“Being a boy, not in the habit of controlling my thoughts very much, it was quite a puzzle to me what I was to do, and it worried me. In fact, it stuck to me just like a burr. About a week or ten days after that it suddenly came to me what he meant. I could see the philosophy of it then. All at once there came to me this interpretation of what he had said: Why, of course, you will be held accountable for your thoughts because when your life is complete in mortality, it will be the sum of your thoughts. That one suggestion has been a great blessing to me all my life, and it has enabled me upon many occasions to avoid thinking improperly because I realize that I will be, when my life’s labor is complete, the product of my thoughts.”⁶

Young George Albert assumed great responsibilities at home in 1882 when his father, who had been serving in the Quorum of the Twelve for two years, was called as president of the European

Mission. John Henry's absence required that George Albert help provide for the family. When he was 13, he applied to work at a Church-owned manufacturing plant and department store in Salt Lake City, but the manager said they could not afford to hire anyone. George Albert replied that he had not asked to be paid, only to work. He added, "I know that if I'm worth anything I'll get paid."⁷ His positive attitude earned him a position as a factory worker for \$2.50 a week, and his strong work ethic soon helped him advance to better positions in the company.

When he was 18, he found work with a railway surveying party. While working this job, the glare from the sun on the desert sands damaged his eyes. This left George Albert's vision permanently impaired, making it difficult for him to read and causing him discomfort throughout his life.

Missionary Service and Marriage, 1891-94

In September 1891 President Wilford Woodruff called George Albert Smith to serve a short-term mission in southern Utah. His specific assignment was to work with the youth of the Church in the area. For the next four months he and his companion helped set up youth organizations in the stakes and wards, spoke in numerous meetings, and encouraged the young people to live the standards of the Church.

Upon returning from his mission, George Albert continued courting his childhood sweetheart, Lucy Woodruff, the granddaughter of President Wilford Woodruff. They had grown up as neighbors, and Lucy had noticed the character traits George Albert was developing. She recorded her admiration for him in her diary: "Tonight I retire with a thankful heart to God . . . and pray that he may give me strength to be more deserving of the love of one whom I firmly believe to be one of the best young men that was ever placed on the earth. His goodness and kindness causes tears to come to my eyes."⁸



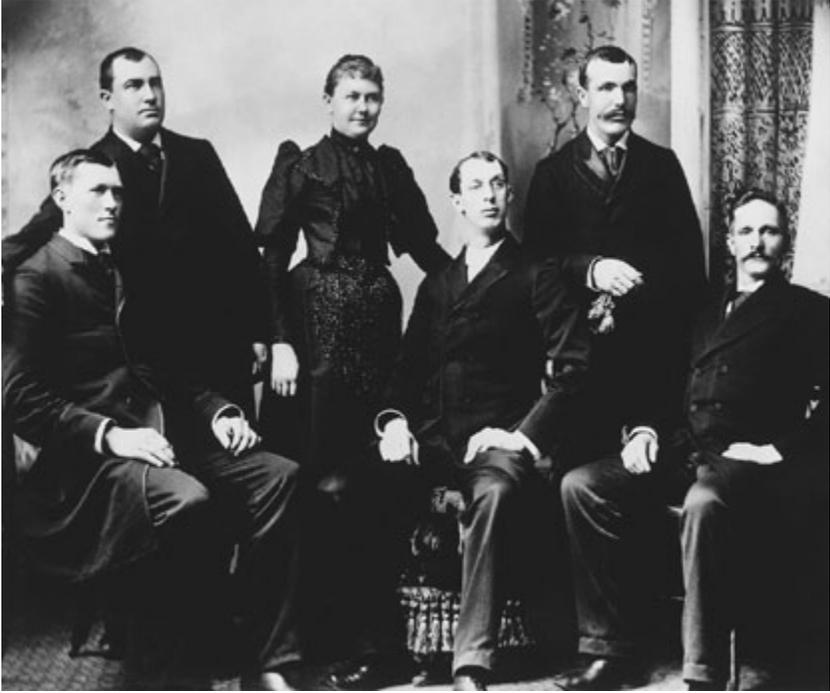
Lucy Emily Woodruff Smith

But Lucy had many admirers of her own, and some of them were very well-to-do and offered her extravagant gifts. George Albert, on the other hand, attracted Lucy with his dedication to the Lord. He wrote to her, “If you are interested in marrying someone for money it would not be me, because I have long ago decided that I will not devote myself or my life or my time to making money but toward serving the Lord and toward helping His children in this world.”⁹ Lucy

made her choice, and on May 25, 1892, she and George Albert were married in the Manti Utah Temple. George Albert’s father performed the ceremony. On that day Lucy gave her husband a small locket with her picture inside. He kept the locket on the chain of his pocket watch, where it hung close to his heart, and wore it nearly every day for the rest of his life.¹⁰

The newlyweds had less than a month together before George Albert departed for another mission, this one a proselyting assignment to the southern United States. Even though they had known his departure was imminent—the call had come three weeks before they were married—the separation was still difficult. They were both overjoyed when, four months later, Lucy was called to serve by her husband’s side in the mission office, where Elder Smith had recently been assigned to serve as mission secretary.

The president of the Southern States Mission was J. Golden Kimball, who at the same time was serving as a member of the Seventy. Twice during the period of Elder Smith’s service, President Kimball had to leave the mission to take care of important matters back in Salt Lake City—once shortly after Elder Smith became the mission secretary and again about one year later. On both occasions, President Kimball left the tremendous responsibility for leading and



*Missionaries in the Southern States Mission.
Newly married Lucy (third from left) and George Albert Smith
(seated next to her) served together in the mission home.*

administering the mission with Elder Smith, offering support and counsel through numerous letters. In all, Elder Smith served as acting president of the mission for approximately 16 months. It worried President Kimball to be away so long, but he trusted his young assistant. He wrote in a letter to Elder Smith, “I think my discernment and intelligence, however limited it may be, enables me to value your integrity and worth, which I assure you I do.”¹¹ In another letter he wrote, “Always let this one idea stand uppermost: that I appreciate your labors, zeal, and good spirit.”¹²

President Kimball had many opportunities to witness Elder Smith’s zeal and good spirit. On one occasion the two were traveling together and had been invited to spend the night in a small log home. George Albert Smith later recalled:

“About midnight we were awakened with a terrible shouting and yelling from the outside. Foul language greeted our ears as

we sat up in bed to acquaint ourselves with the circumstances. It was a bright moonlit night and we could see many people on the outside. President Kimball jumped up and started to dress. The men pounded on the door and used filthy language ordering the Mormons to come out, that they were going to shoot them. President Kimball asked me if I wasn't going to get up and dress and I told him no, I was going to stay in bed, that I was sure the Lord would take care of us. In just a few seconds the room was filled with shots. Apparently the mob had divided itself into four groups and were shooting into the corners of the house. Splinters were flying over our heads in every direction. There were a few moments of quiet, then another volley of shots was fired and more splinters flew. I felt absolutely no terror. I was very calm as I lay there, experiencing one of the most horrible events of my life, but I was sure . . . that the Lord would protect me, and he did.

“Apparently the mob became discouraged and left. The next morning when we opened the door, there was a huge bundle of heavy hickory sticks such as the mob used to beat the missionaries in the South.”¹³

Years later George Albert Smith shared this experience with his grandchildren to teach them to trust the Lord. “I want to impress on you,” he said, “that the Lord will take care of you in times of danger, if you will give him the opportunity.”¹⁴

Family Life

George Albert and Lucy were released from their mission in June 1894. A few months after their return to Salt Lake City, Lucy received a blessing from her grandfather, President Wilford Woodruff, promising her that she would bear children. On November 19, 1895, she gave birth to a daughter they named Emily, and four years later another daughter, Edith, was born. Their last child, George Albert Jr., was born in 1905.

George Albert Smith was an affectionate father, adored by his children. Edith wrote of him: “To me my Father had all of the attributes that endear a father to his daughter. He fulfilled all of my expectations of fatherhood.” Especially impressive to the children

was the way George Albert treated his beloved wife. "Father's affection and consideration for mother were beautiful," Edith wrote. "He never lost an opportunity to show his appreciation of her. Everything they did, they did together, after well-laid plans and teamwork. She was precious to him. . . . While we all adored Mother, I am sure that his thoughtfulness and tenderness toward her made her even more beloved by us children."¹⁵

As a father, George Albert Smith tried earnestly to help his children experience the joy he felt by living the gospel. One Christmas Day, after the gifts had been opened, he asked his young daughters how they would feel about giving away some of their toys to children who had not received any Christmas presents. Since they had just received new toys, the girls agreed that they could give away some of their old toys to the needy children.

"Wouldn't you like to give them some of the new ones, too?" George Albert gently suggested.

His daughters were hesitant, but eventually they agreed to give up one or two of their new toys. George Albert then took the girls to the home of the children he had in mind, and they delivered the gifts. The experience was so uplifting that as they left, one of the girls said with excitement in her voice, "Now let's go and get the rest of the toys for them."¹⁶

Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, 1903–45

On Tuesday, October 6, 1903, George Albert Smith had a busy day at work and was unable to attend the sessions of general conference that day. By the time he left the office, the afternoon session of conference was nearly over, so he started for home with plans to take his children to the fair.

When he arrived at his house, he was surprised to find a crowd of visitors, one of whom stepped forward and congratulated him warmly.

"What is all this about?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" she responded.

"Don't I know what?"



The Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1921. Standing, left to right: Joseph Fielding Smith, James E. Talmage, Stephen L Richards, Richard R. Lyman, Melvin J. Ballard, and John A. Widtsoe. Seated, left to right: Rudger Clawson, Reed Smoot, George Albert Smith, George F. Richards, Orson F. Whitney, and David O. McKay.

“Why, you’ve been sustained as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles,” the visitor exclaimed.

“That couldn’t be right,” George Albert said. “There must be some mistake.”

“I heard it myself,” she countered.

“It must have been some other Smith,” he said. “Not a word has been said to me about it, and I can’t believe it is true.”

Confused, the visitor returned to the Tabernacle to find out whether she was mistaken. There she was informed that she was right—George Albert Smith was the newest member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.¹⁷

His daughter Emily later recalled the scene at the Smith home: “It seemed like the whole Tabernacle was streaming across the lawn into our house, crying and kissing mother. They were all saying that

Father was an apostle, and we thought that being an apostle must be the worst thing that could possibly happen to you.”

Even after the report had been verified, George Albert determined that he would still take his daughters to the fair as promised, “although he didn’t see much of it,” Emily remembered. “He spent the whole time with his back to the wall talking to people.”¹⁸

Two days later, on October 8, 1903, George Albert Smith was ordained an Apostle in an upper room of the Salt Lake Temple by President Joseph F. Smith. After the ordination he was invited to share his feelings with the members of the Quorum of the Twelve present. “I feel weak and lack judgment compared with men of maturer years,” he said, “but my heart is right, and I desire sincerely the onward progress of the work of the Lord. . . . I have a living testimony of the divinity of this work; I know that the gospel has come to earth under the direction and guidance of the Lord himself, and that those chosen to preside were and are His servants in very deed. I desire and pray that I may live pure and humble, so that I may be entitled to the promptings and admonitions of the Spirit to guide me throughout my life.”¹⁹

George Albert Smith served in the Quorum of the Twelve for nearly 42 years, including 2 years as President of the Quorum. During this time he filled many assignments and blessed people around the world in numerous ways.

Sharing the Gospel and Making Friends for the Church

Elder Smith had a natural talent for putting people at ease and turning enemies into friends. A local businessman, not a member of the Church, said of him at his funeral: “He was an easy man to know. He was a man you would just like to know. His friendly smile, his hearty handclasp, and the warmth of his greeting made you feel inwardly, in your heart, the sincerity of his friendship for you and for his fellow man.”²⁰

This talent was valuable at a time when the Church was still largely unknown throughout the world and held in suspicion by many. Once, while fulfilling an assignment in West Virginia, he learned that city officials had threatened to arrest anyone caught preaching Mormonism. Elder Smith met with the city clerk, Mr. Engle, to try to

change the policy. He later wrote in his journal: "When I first called on Mr. Engle he was very sharp in his manner and curtly informed me that we would not be tolerated in that city. . . . I told him I believed he was misinformed and would like to sit down with him and have a chat. . . . We spent some time discussing Mormonism. He melted down considerable before I left and shook hands with me and gave me his card. I left feeling sure I had removed some prejudice."²¹ Three days later Elder Smith paid him another visit and this time left a copy of the Book of Mormon with him.²²

Elder Smith was always looking for opportunities to talk to people about the Church. Whenever his assignments required him to travel, he took with him copies of the Book of Mormon, Church magazines, and other Church literature that he hoped to give away. Because the Book of Mormon bears powerful witness of Jesus Christ, Elder Smith considered it an ideal Christmas gift and often mailed copies to friends of other faiths and even to prominent people he had never met.²³ In a letter accompanying one such Christmas gift he wrote: "In a few days the Christian world will celebrate the birth of the Saviour and it is customary at that time to remember our friends. I trust therefore that you will accept from me a copy of the Book of Mormon. . . . Believing that you will be glad to have this in your library I am sending it to you as a Christmas present."

He received the following response: "The book will have place on our shelves and will be read [from cover to cover] with open-minded thoroughness. It cannot fail to broaden the views and increase the spirit of tolerance of all who read it thoughtfully."²⁴

Civic Involvement

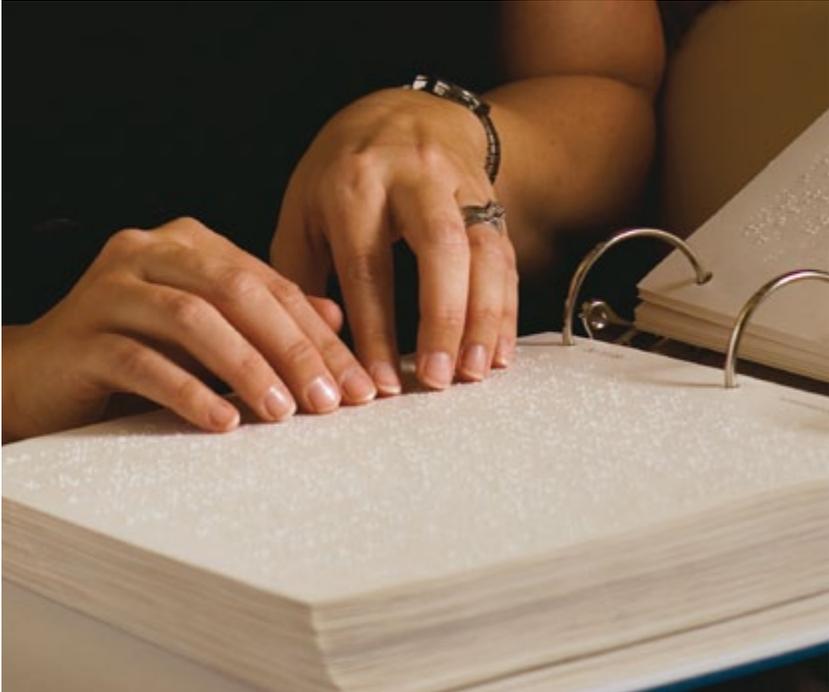
Elder Smith encouraged Church members to be involved in their communities and to use their influence to improve conditions in the world. He himself was involved in several civic organizations despite his demanding calling as a General Authority. He was elected president of the International Irrigation Congress and Dry Farming Congress, and he was elected to six terms as vice president of the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution. A strong proponent of aviation as a way for General Authorities to fulfill their

travel assignments more efficiently, Elder Smith served on the board of directors of Western Air Lines. He was also actively involved in the Boy Scouts of America and in 1934 was awarded the Silver Buffalo, the highest honor given in Scouting. In the years after World War I he served as Utah state chairman of the Armenian and Syrian Relief campaign and as the state representative at the International Housing Convention, whose purpose was to find shelter for those left homeless by the war.²⁵

Before his call as an Apostle, George Albert had been active in politics, earnestly campaigning for causes and candidates that he felt would improve society. Once he became a General Authority, his involvement in politics declined, but he continued to advocate causes he believed in. For example, in 1923 he helped introduce a bill in the Utah State Legislature that led to the construction of a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients.²⁶

Elder Smith's compassion for others was particularly evident in his service as president of the Society for the Aid of the Sightless, an office he held from 1933 to 1949. As one who suffered from visual impairment himself, Elder Smith felt a special sympathy for those who are blind. He supervised the publication of the Book of Mormon in braille, and he instituted a program to help people who are blind learn to read braille and adapt to their disability in other ways. His efforts endeared him to those he served. One member of the Society for the Aid of the Sightless expressed her appreciation through a poem that was presented to Elder Smith on his 70th birthday:

When Life beats hard with stormy hands,
And bitter teardrops fall;
When friendless Winter chills my soul,
And empty echoes call—
'Tis then I turn, with eager hope,
My steps though spent and lame,
To find an understanding heart,
Where burns a friendly flame—
A heart where gentle Wisdom dwells,
Compassionate and kind,



*Elder George Albert Smith supervised the publication
of the Book of Mormon in braille.*

Whose faith in God and man has taught
A like faith to the Blind. . . .

Although his tender loving face
From us is shut apart,
We see the gracious wisdom
Of his understanding heart;
We feel a peace within his soul
And know a peace our own;
We hear his silent prayer that tells
We do not walk alone;
His faith in us will give us strength,
As unseen paths we plod;
Our souls uplifted by a man
In partnership with God.²⁷

Personal Illness and Other Trials

For most of his life, George Albert did not have particularly good health. Though he enjoyed swimming, horseback riding, and other physical activities, his body was frail and often weak. Besides his chronic eye problems, Elder Smith suffered from stomach and back pain, constant fatigue, heart trouble, and many other ailments throughout his life. The stress and pressure of his many responsibilities also took a toll on him, and at first he was unwilling to slow his busy pace in order to preserve his health. As a result, from 1909 to 1912 he fought an illness so severe that it kept him bedridden and prevented him from fulfilling his duties in the Quorum of the Twelve. It was a very trying time for Elder Smith, who wanted desperately to resume his service. The death of his father in 1911 and a serious bout of influenza afflicting his wife made Elder Smith's recovery even more difficult.

Years later he shared the following experience he had had during this period:

“A number of years ago I was seriously ill. In fact, I think everyone gave up on me but my wife. . . . I became so weak as to be scarcely able to move. It was a slow and exhausting effort for me even to turn over in bed.

“One day, under these conditions, I lost consciousness of my surroundings and thought I had passed to the Other Side. I found myself standing with my back to a large and beautiful lake, facing a great forest of trees. There was no one in sight, and there was no boat upon the lake or any other visible means to indicate how I might have arrived there. I realized, or seemed to realize, that I had finished my work in mortality and had gone home. . . .

“I began to explore, and soon I found a trail through the woods which seemed to have been used very little, and which was almost obscured by grass. I followed this trail, and after I had walked for some time and had traveled a considerable distance through the forest, I saw a man coming towards me. I became aware that he was a very large man, and I hurried my steps to reach him, because I recognized him as my grandfather [George A. Smith]. In mortality he weighed over three hundred pounds, so you may know he was

a large man. I remember how happy I was to see him coming. I had been given his name and had always been proud of it.



George A. Smith

“When Grandfather came within a few feet of me, he stopped. His stopping was an invitation for me to stop. Then—and this I would like the boys and girls and young people never to forget—he looked at me very earnestly and said:

“‘I would like to know what you have done with my name.’

“Everything I had ever done passed before me as though it were a flying picture on a screen—everything I had done. Quickly this vivid retrospect came down to the very time I was standing there. My whole life had passed before me. I smiled and looked at my grandfather and said:

“‘I have never done anything with your name of which you need be ashamed.’

“He stepped forward and took me in his arms, and as he did so, I became conscious again of my earthly surroundings. My pillow was as wet as though water had been poured on it—wet with tears of gratitude that I could answer unashamed.

“I have thought of this many times, and I want to tell you that I have been trying, more than ever since that time, to take care of that name. So I want to say to the boys and girls, to the young men and women, to the youth of the Church and of all the world: Honor your fathers and your mothers. Honor the names that you bear.”²⁸

Eventually Elder Smith began to regain his strength, and he emerged from this trial with a renewed sense of gratitude for his testimony of the truth. He told the Saints during a subsequent general conference: “I have been in the valley of the shadow of death in recent years, so near the other side that I am sure that [if not] for the special blessing of our Heavenly Father I could not have remained here. But, never for one moment did that testimony that my Heavenly Father has blessed me with become dimmed. The nearer I went to the other side, the greater was my assurance that the gospel is true. Now that my life has been spared I rejoice to

testify that I know the gospel is true, and with all my soul I thank my Heavenly Father that he has revealed it to me.”²⁹

Various physical ailments and other adversities continued to afflict Elder Smith in the coming years. Perhaps his greatest trial came in the years 1932 to 1937, when his wife, Lucy, suffered from arthritis and neuralgia. She was in great pain and by 1937 required almost constant care. Then a heart attack in April 1937 nearly took her life and left her even weaker than before.

Though he worried about Lucy constantly, Elder Smith continued to perform his duties as best he could. On November 5, 1937, he spoke at the funeral of a friend, and as he sat down after his address, someone handed him a note telling him to return home immediately. He later wrote in his journal: “I left the chapel at once but my Darling wife had breathed her last before I arrived at home. She was passing while I was talking at the funeral. I am of course bereft of a devoted helpmeet and will be lonely without her.”

Lucy and George Albert had been married a little more than 45 years at the time of her death. She was 68 years old. Though he deeply missed his wife, Elder Smith knew that the separation was only temporary, and this knowledge brought him strength. “While my family are greatly distressed,” he wrote, “we are comforted by the assurance of a reunion with mother if we remain faithful. She has been a devoted, helpful, considerate wife and mother. She has been a sufferer for six years in one way or another and I am sure she is happy with her mother and other dear ones over there. . . . The Lord is most kind and has taken away every feeling of death, for which I am exceedingly grateful.”³⁰

President of the European Mission

In 1919 President Heber J. Grant, who had recently been sustained as President of the Church, called Elder Smith to preside over the European Mission. During a general conference address just days before his departure, Elder Smith said:

“I would like to say to you, my brothers and sisters, that I esteem it an honor—nay, more than an honor, I esteem it a very great blessing—that the Lord has raised me from the feeble condition that I was

in a short time ago, restoring me to such a condition of health that the brethren have felt that it will be possible for me to fill a mission in a foreign land. . . .

“. . . Next Wednesday I expect to take the train to the coast and then across the ocean to the field to which I have been called. Thank God for the opportunity of going. I am grateful that the knowledge of this truth has come into my soul.”³¹

At this time Europe was still recovering from World War I, which had ended just a few months before. Because of the war, the number of missionaries in Europe was very low, and one of Elder Smith’s tasks was to increase that number. The strained economic conditions in postwar Europe, however, made governments unwilling to grant the necessary visas. To make matters worse, there was still a lot of misunderstanding about and prejudice against the Latter-day Saints. To improve the Church’s image, Elder Smith met with numerous government officials and other prominent figures. In explaining the purpose of the missionaries in Europe and throughout the world, he would often say, “Keep all the good things that you have, keep all that God has given you that enriches your life, and then let us share something with you that will add to your happiness and increase your satisfaction.”³² According to one of the missionaries who served under him, “through his masterful, kind way he won their esteem and friendship and secured concessions concerning the missionaries which had been denied before.”³³

By the end of his service in 1921, Elder Smith had succeeded in raising the number of missionaries serving in Europe and changing some misconceptions about the Latter-day Saints. He had also made friends for the Church, and he kept in contact with them through letters for many years to come.

Preserving Church Historic Sites

Elder Smith loved to tell others about the Church and the great events in its history. Throughout his ministry he did much to help preserve that history by creating monuments and otherwise marking sites of interest in Church history. As one of his associates wrote, “He has believed that by calling attention of the younger generation

to the accomplishments of their forebears he would be rendering an important service.”³⁴

As a young Apostle he went to Palmyra, New York, and negotiated the purchase of the Joseph Smith Sr. farm in the name of the Church. While in New York he also visited with a man named Pliny Sexton, who owned the Hill Cumorah, the place where Joseph Smith obtained the gold plates. Mr. Sexton was unwilling to sell the land to the Church, but he and Elder Smith nevertheless became friends. Due in part to the good relationship Elder Smith maintained with Mr. Sexton, the Church was eventually able to purchase the property and dedicate a monument there.

In 1930, the centennial year of the organization of the Church, Elder Smith helped establish the Utah Pioneer Trails and Landmarks Association and was elected as the group’s first president. Over the next 20 years, this organization placed more than 100 monuments and markers, many of them memorializing the pioneers’ trek to the Salt Lake Valley. Elder Smith officiated at the dedications of most of these monuments.³⁵

Explaining the Church’s interest in historic sites, he wrote: “It has been customary to build monuments to individuals that their memories might be retained. Great events have also been permanently established in the minds of people by building monuments. . . . There are many points of interest that are being forgotten and the people have felt that it was desirable to mark them in a substantial way so that those who follow will have their attention called to important events.”³⁶

As one whose grandfather had walked to Utah with the pioneers, Elder Smith felt deep respect for those early Church members who had sacrificed so much for their faith. In an address to the Relief Society, he shared the following experience he had while retracing the route of the handcart pioneers:

“We came to the part of the trail where the Martin Handcart Company had lost so many lives. We found, as near as we could, the place where they camped. Those who were descendants of that party were there to assist in placing a marker. Then we came to Rock Creek; a temporary marker had been placed there by us the



Monument on the Hill Cumorah, where the angel Moroni delivered the gold plates to Joseph Smith.

year before. At that particular time of the year beautiful wild flowers were growing everywhere, the wild iris was plentiful, and members of the party gathered some of these flowers and laid them tenderly upon a mound of stone that had been piled up the year before. . . . Here 15 members of this Church had been buried in one grave, they having died from hunger and exposure.

“You know there are times and places when we seem to come nearer to our Heavenly Father. As we sat around the camp fire in that little valley of Rock Creek, where the Willie Handcart Company had met disaster,—we who were descendants of the pioneers, of those who had crossed the plains in the heat of the summer and the cold of the winter—stories were told of the experiences of our ancestors. . . . It was a delightful occasion. History was being repeated for our benefit.

“. . . It seemed to me that we were in the very presence of those who had given their all that we might have the blessings of the Gospel. We seemed to feel the presence of the Lord.

“As we walked away, after we had shed our tears—for I doubt if there was a dry eye in the group of about 30 or 40 people—the influence that came as a result of that little gathering had touched our hearts, and one of the good sisters took me by the arm and said, ‘Brother Smith, I am going to be a better woman from now on.’ This woman . . . is one of the best of women but I believe she was touched as probably most of us were, by the fact that in some particulars we felt we had not measured up to the ideals that should have been in our souls. The people buried here had not only given days of their lives but they gave life itself as evidence of their belief in the divinity of this work. . . .

“If the members of this organization [the Relief Society] will be as faithful as were those who lie buried on the plains, who met their problems with faith in the Lord, you will add to your many accomplishments and the favor of a loving Father will flow to you and yours.”³⁷

President of the Church, 1945–51

Early in the morning of May 15, 1945, while riding a train in the eastern United States, Elder Smith was awakened by a railroad official with a message: President Heber J. Grant, who was President of the Church at the time, had passed away. Elder Smith changed trains as soon as he could and returned to Salt Lake City. Just a few days later George Albert Smith, as the senior member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, was set apart as the eighth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In his first general conference address as President of the Church, he said to the Saints who had just sustained him, “I wonder if anyone else here feels as weak and humble as the man who stands before you.”³⁸ He expressed similar feelings to members of his family: “I have not wanted this position. I have not felt equal to it. But it has come to me, and I will fill it to the best of my ability. I want you all



*President Smith and his counselors,
J. Reuben Clark Jr. (left) and David O. McKay (right)*

to know that, whatever you are doing in the church, from [home] teaching to presiding over a stake, if you do it to the best of your ability, your position is just as important as mine.”³⁹

There were many who felt that President Smith’s talents were uniquely suited to this calling. One of the General Authorities expressed this confidence shortly after President Smith was sustained: “It is frequently said that the Lord has raised up a particular man to perform a particular mission. . . . It is not for me to say what particular mission President George Albert Smith has ahead of him. This I do know, however, that at this particular time in the world’s history, never was the need for love among brethren so desperately needed as it is needed today. Furthermore, I do know this, that there is no man of my acquaintance who loves the human family, collectively and individually, more profoundly than does President George Albert Smith.”⁴⁰

Helping the Needy in the Aftermath of World War II

World War II ended just months after George Albert Smith became President of the Church. The war had left thousands of people homeless and destitute in Europe, and President Smith quickly mobilized the Church's welfare resources to provide aid. President Gordon B. Hinckley later said of this effort: "I was among those who worked nights at Welfare Square here in Salt Lake City loading commodities onto rail cars which moved the food to the port from which it was shipped across the sea. During the time of the Swiss Temple dedication [in 1955], when many of the Saints of Germany came to the temple, I heard some of them, with tears running down their cheeks, speak with appreciation for that food which had saved their lives."⁴¹

President Smith also knew that there were great spiritual needs among the people of the world in the aftermath of such a devastating war. In response, he took steps to reorganize missions in countries where the war had interrupted missionary work, and he encouraged the Saints to live the gospel of peace in their personal lives. "The best evidence of gratitude at this time," he said shortly after the close of the war, "is to do all we can to bring happiness to this sad world, for we are all our Father's children, and we are all under the obligation of making this world a happier place for our having lived in it.

"Let us extend kindness and consideration to all who need it, not forgetting those who are bereft; and in our time of rejoicing for peace, let us not forget those who have given their loved ones as part of the price of peace. . . .

"I pray that men may turn to God, and give obedience to his ways, and thereby save the world from further conflict and destruction. I pray that the peace that comes only from our Heavenly Father may abide in the hearts and in the homes of all who mourn."⁴²

Increased Opportunities to Share the Gospel

President Smith continued to share the gospel with others at every opportunity, and these opportunities increased with his new position. In May 1946 President Smith became the first President of the

Church to visit the Saints in Mexico. Besides meeting with members of the Church and speaking at a large conference, President Smith also called on several high-ranking officials in Mexico and talked to them about the restored gospel. During a visit with Mexican president Manuel Ávila Camacho, President Smith and his party explained: “We come with a special message for you and your people. We are here to tell you of your forefathers and of the restored Gospel of Jesus Christ. . . . We have a book that . . . tells of a great prophet who with his family and others, left Jerusalem 600 years before Christ, and came to . . . this great land of America, known to them as a ‘land of promise, choice above all other lands.’ This Book of Mormon tells also of the visit of Jesus Christ to this continent, and that He organized His Church and chose His twelve disciples.”

President Ávila, who expressed respect and admiration for the Latter-day Saints living in his country, became very interested in the Book of Mormon and asked, “Would it be possible for me to get a copy of the Book of Mormon? I have never before heard about it.” President Smith then presented him with a leather-bound copy in Spanish, with passages of particular interest listed at the front of the book. President Ávila said, “I shall read the entire book, for this is of great interest to me and to my people.”⁴³

Celebrating the Centennial of the Pioneers’ Arrival

One of the highlights of George Albert Smith’s six years as President of the Church came in 1947, when the Church celebrated the centennial of the arrival of the pioneers in the Salt Lake Valley. President Smith oversaw the celebration, which gained national attention and culminated in the dedication of This Is the Place Monument in Salt Lake City, near the location where the pioneers first entered the valley. Since 1930 President Smith had been involved in planning a memorial to honor the accomplishments and the faith of the pioneers. He was careful, however, to make sure the monument also honored early explorers, missionaries from other faiths, and important American Indian leaders from that era.

At the dedication of This Is the Place Monument, George Q. Morris, then the president of the Eastern States Mission, noted a spirit of goodwill, which he attributed to President Smith’s efforts:



This Is the Place Monument, which commemorates the pioneers' arrival in the Salt Lake Valley, was dedicated by President Smith in 1947.

“President Smith’s contributions to brotherhood and tolerance were reflected in the dedicatory service. . . . The monument itself had honored in sculpture—as far as possible in individual portrait sculpture—the men who had made history in the intermountain west preceding the Mormon Pioneers, regardless of race or religion. When the program for the dedicatory service was being prepared, it was President Smith’s desire that all the major religious groups be represented in addition to state, county, and city officials. A Catholic priest, a Protestant bishop, a Jewish rabbi, and representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were prominent speakers. An eastern visitor, after the program, made this remark, ‘Today I have had a spiritual rebaptism. What I have witnessed could not have happened anywhere else in the world. The spirit of tolerance that was manifest today was magnificent.’”⁴⁴

Though the 60-foot monument was impressive, President Smith taught that the best way to honor the pioneers was to follow their

example of faith and devotion. In the prayer dedicating the monument, he said: "Our Father which art in heaven, . . . we stand in thy presence this morning on this quiet hillside and look at a great monument that has been erected in honor of thy sons and daughters and their devotion. . . . We pray that we may be blessed with the same spirit that characterized those faithful ones who believed in thee and thy Beloved Son, who came to this valley because they desired to live here and worship thee. We pray that the spirit of worship and of gratitude may continue in our hearts."⁴⁵

Reflections on Life at Age 80

Despite his advancing years, for most of his presidency President Smith was able to fulfill his responsibilities without the physical ailments that had limited him in the past. In an article published in April 1950, near his 80th birthday, President Smith looked back on his life and noted how God had sustained and blessed him:

"In these eighty years, I have traveled more than a million miles in the world in the interest of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I have been in many climes and in many lands and in many nations, and from my childhood people have been kind and helpful to me, members of the Church and non-members as well. Wherever I have gone, I have found noble men and women. . . .

". . . When I think of what a weak, frail individual I am, to be called to be the leader of this great Church, I realize how much I need help. Gratefully I acknowledge the help of my Father in heaven, and the encouragement and companionship during my life of many of the best men and women that can be found anywhere in the world, both at home and abroad."

He went on to express love for the people he had served for so many years:

"Surely it is a blessed thing to be associated with such people, and from the depths of my soul I take this occasion to thank you all for your kindness to me, and I also take this occasion to say to all of you: You will never know how much I love you. I have not the words to express it. And I want to feel that way toward every son and every daughter of my Heavenly Father.

“I have lived a long time, as compared with the average of human beings, and I have had a happy life. It will not be many years, in the natural course of events, till the summons to the other side will reach me. I look forward to that time with pleasant anticipation. And after eighty years in mortality, traveling in many parts of the world, associating with many great and good men and women, I witness to you, that I know today better than I ever knew before that God lives; that Jesus is the Christ; that Joseph Smith was a prophet of the Living God; and that the Church that he organized under the direction of our Heavenly Father, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . is operating under the power and authority of the same priesthood that was conferred by Peter, James, and John upon Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery. I know this, as I know that I live, and I realize that to bear this testimony to you is a very serious matter and that I shall be held accountable by my Heavenly Father for this and all other things that I have taught in his name. . . . With love and kindness in my heart for all, I bear this witness in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁴⁶

One year later, on his 81st birthday, April 4, 1951, George Albert Smith passed away quietly in his home with his son and daughters at his bedside.

Simple Acts of Loving Service

George Albert Smith accomplished much during his 81 years—in the Church, in his community, and throughout the world. But those who knew him personally remembered him best for his many simple, humble acts of kindness and love. President David O. McKay, who officiated at President Smith’s funeral, said of him, “Truly he was a noble soul, happiest when he was making others happy.”⁴⁷

Elder John A. Widtsoe, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, recounted an experience he had while trying to resolve a weighty, difficult issue:

“I sat in my office rather tired after the day’s work. . . . I was weary. Just then there was a knock upon the door, and in walked George Albert Smith. He said, ‘I am on the way home after my day’s



President Smith in his office.

work. I thought of you and the problems that you are expected to solve. I came in to comfort you and to bless you.’

“That was the way of George Albert Smith. . . . I shall never forget it. We talked together for awhile; we parted, he went home. My heart was lifted. I was weary no longer.

“You see, love . . . is not a mere word or a sensation within. To be a worthy love, it must be brought into action. President Smith on that occasion did that. He gave of his own time, his own strength, to me.”⁴⁸

Elder Matthew Cowley, also a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and a close friend of President Smith, paid tribute at the funeral service in this way:

“Everyone in distress, everyone beset with illness or other adversity, whoever came within the presence of this son of God, drew virtue and strength from him. To be in his presence was to be healed, if not physically, then indeed spiritually. . . .

“. . . God attracts the godly, and I am sure that the shortest journey this man of God ever made in all of his travels has been the journey which he has just taken. God is love. George Albert Smith is love. His is godly. God has taken him unto himself.

“. . . We can't honor a life like this with words. They are not adequate. There is only one way to honor his virtue, his sweetness of character, his great qualities of love, and that is with our deeds. . . .

“Let us all be a little more forgiving, a little more tender in our associations with each other, a little more considerate of one another, a little more generous of each other's feelings.”⁴⁹

On George Albert Smith's gravestone is the following inscription. It provides a fitting summary of his life of loving service:

“He understood and disseminated the teachings of Christ and was uncommonly successful in putting them into practice. He was kindly, patient, wise, tolerant, and understanding. He went about doing good. He loved Utah and America, but was not provincial. He had faith, without reservation, in the need for and in the power of love. For his Church and his family he had unbounded affection and served them passionately. Yet his love was not limited; it included all men, regardless of race, faith, or station. To them and of them he frequently said: ‘We are all our Father's children.’”

Notes

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3. “Mothers of Our Leaders,” *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1919, 313–14.
4. “To the Relief Society,” *Relief Society Magazine*, Dec. 1932, 707–8.
5. “After Eighty Years,” *Improvement Era*, Apr. 1950, 263.
6. “Pres. Smith's Leadership Address,” 1.
7. In Merlo J. Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom* (1981), 209.
8. Lucy Woodruff's journal, Feb. 5, 1888, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 138, book 1.
9. In Emily Stewart Smith, “Some Notes about President George Albert Smith,” May 1948, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 5, page 3.
10. See Emily Stewart Smith, “Some Notes about President George Albert Smith,” 5.
11. J. Golden Kimball, letter dated Mar. 18, 1893, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 72, folder 12.
12. J. Golden Kimball, letter dated June 30, 1893, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 72, folder 15.
13. “How My Life Was Preserved,” George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 121, scrapbook 1, pages 43–44.
14. “How My Life Was Preserved,” 43.

15. Edith Smith Elliott, "No Wonder We Love Him," *Relief Society Magazine*, June 1953, 366, 368.
16. See *Builders of the Kingdom*, 240.
17. See *Builders of the Kingdom*, 224–25.
18. Emily Smith Stewart, in "Pres. Smith Mementos At Y." *Deseret News*, Oct. 14, 1967, Church section, 6–7.
19. George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 100, folder 23, page 11.
20. John F. Fitzpatrick, in Conference Report, Apr. 1951, 172.
21. George Albert Smith's journal, Oct. 27, 1906, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 73, book 3, page 70.
22. See George Albert Smith's journal, Oct. 30, 1906, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 73, book 3, page 72.
23. See Francis M. Gibbons, *George Albert Smith: Kind and Caring Christian, Prophet of God* (1990), 208–9.
24. In Glenn R. Stubbs, "A Biography of George Albert Smith, 1870 to 1951" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 295.
25. See Bryant S. Hinckley, "Greatness in Men: Superintendent George Albert Smith," *Improvement Era*, Mar. 1932, 270, 271.
26. See "A Biography of George Albert Smith," 283.
27. Irene Jones, "The Understanding Heart," *Improvement Era*, July 1940, 423.
28. "Your Good Name," *Improvement Era*, Mar. 1947, 139.
29. In Conference Report, Oct. 1921, 42.
30. George Albert Smith's journal, Nov. 5, 1937, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 74, book 11, pages 83–84.
31. In Conference Report, June 1919, 42, 44.
32. In Conference Report, Oct. 1950, 8.
33. James Gunn McKay, in "A Biography of George Albert Smith," 141.
34. George Q. Morris, "Perpetuating Our Ideals through Markers and Monuments," *Improvement Era*, Apr. 1950, 284.
35. See "Markers and Monuments," 284.
36. Letter to Leslie O. Loveridge, Mar. 15, 1937, George Albert Smith Family Papers, University of Utah, box 67, folder 25.
37. "To the Relief Society," *Relief Society Magazine*, Dec. 1932, 705–6.
38. In Conference Report, Oct. 1945, 18.
39. In *Builders of the Kingdom*, 315–16.
40. Joseph F. Smith, in Conference Report, Oct. 1945, 31–32; Joseph F. Smith was Patriarch to the Church and the grandson of President Joseph F. Smith, sixth President of the Church.
41. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, Apr. 1992, 75; or *Ensign*, May 1992, 52.
42. "Some Thoughts on War, and Sorrow, and Peace," *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1945, 501.
43. See Arwell L. Pierce, in Conference Report, Apr. 1951, 112–13.
44. "Markers and Monuments," 284–85.
45. "Dedicatory Prayer," *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1947, 571.
46. "After Eighty Years," 263–64.
47. David O. McKay, in Conference Report, Apr. 1951, 3.
48. John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, Apr. 1951, 99.
49. Matthew Cowley, in Conference Report, Apr. 1951, 168–69.