

# The Extraordinary Life of



## Parley P. Pratt

BY MATTHEW J. GROW

*"I have lain months in gloomy dungeons, and been loaded with chains. I have been visited there by visions of Angels and Spirits, and been delivered by miracles."*



The extraordinary life of Parley P. Pratt began two centuries ago this month. In 1853, a boyhood friend requested from Parley, then age

46, a "history of [his] life." Parley responded that a full account "would overload the mail" and would seem "far more strange . . . than the thousand volumes of modern fiction."

Nevertheless, Parley obliged his friend, explaining that devotion to the gospel of Jesus Christ had taken him far from his youthful home in New York. He had "crossed the Atlantic six times" on missions to England, explored the western United States, visited gold rush California, and eaten "figs fresh from the trees" in Chile. As a minister of Christ, Parley had "been honored and received as an Apostle, and scorned as a Devil." Indeed, his beliefs had entangled him in a wide range of difficulties: "I have lain months in gloomy dungeons, and been loaded with chains. I have been visited there by visions of Angels and Spirits, and been delivered by miracles." During his life, he said he had been a farmer, a servant, a fisher, a digger, a preacher, an author, an editor, a traveler, a merchant, an elder, and an Apostle of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup>

Parley concluded that the gospel of Jesus Christ had transformed his own life, and he invited his friend to seek out the Church.

### Early Life

Born on April 12, 1807, in Burlington, New York, Parley was the third of five sons born to Jared and Charity Dickinson Pratt. Jared was a weaver and farmer who occasionally taught



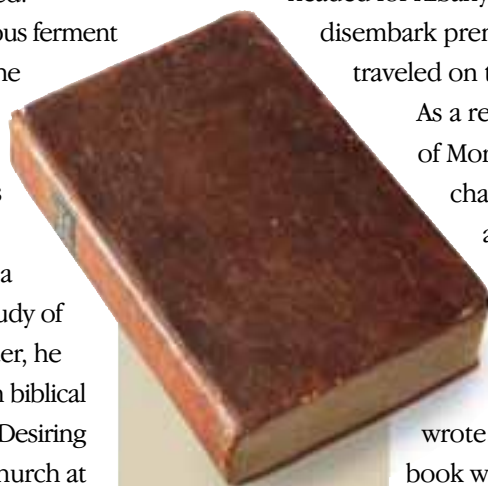
*The greatest gift to man—Eternal life.  
But who could ever live without a wife?  
Eternal life, without the Eternal sealing  
is Hell. — Or man Eternal has no feeling  
P. P. Pratt!*

**Left: Parley P. Pratt, about 1853. Above: Elder Pratt and his wife Belinda B. Marden.**

school. In the generation following the American Revolution, new technology and expanding transportation networks revolutionized the economy, propelling many towards success but consigning others to poverty. As with Joseph Smith's family, prosperity always seemed just out of reach for the hardworking Pratts, causing them to move several times in search of better prospects. Despite their toil, debt hounded Jared and Charity. As a consequence, in 1822 they boarded Parley, then 15, and his younger brother Orson, 11, with local farmers as hired help. Parley compensated for a limited formal education through reading. "I always loved a book," he remembered.<sup>2</sup>

At a young age Parley faced the religious ferment that bewildered Joseph Smith at about the same time. Jared and Charity did not belong to a church, though they frequently attended various denominations and taught their sons a respect for the Bible and Christian faith. Parley became a religious seeker, beginning a serious study of the scriptures at age 12. As he grew older, he wondered at the discrepancies between biblical teachings and contemporary churches. Desiring to follow God, Parley joined a Baptist church at age 18, though he remained dissatisfied.

The following year the Pratts lost their farm, prompting Parley to move to frontier Ohio, where he envisioned conducting missionary work among Native Americans. After spending a winter in a "small hut" with only the Bible and a "few other books" for companions,<sup>3</sup> he returned to New York the following spring to see Thankful Halsey, whom he had previously courted. Parley shared his religious views with her and asked her to marry him. Thankful, 10 years his senior, accepted, telling him, "I never can be happy without you."<sup>4</sup>



**In September 1830 Parley P. Pratt first encountered the Book of Mormon.**  
*"I read all day; . . . I preferred reading to sleep. I knew and comprehended that the book was true. . . . My joy was now full."*

## The Book of Mormon

Returning to Ohio, Parley was swept up by the religious teachings of Sidney Rigdon, a minister of the Campbellite movement, which sought to restore the practices of New Testament Christianity. In Rigdon, Parley found someone who taught the "ancient gospel in due form." Still he felt that "one great link" was missing: the "authority to minister in holy things—the apostleship."<sup>5</sup>

In 1830, then 23, Parley felt a call to abandon his farm and preach the gospel, believing that God would provide financially for him and Thankful. After selling their property at "great sacrifice," the young couple, with \$10 in their pockets, took a boat from Cleveland, Ohio, to Buffalo, New York.<sup>6</sup> At Buffalo they took passage on the Erie Canal, headed for Albany. But Parley followed a prompting to disembark prematurely at Newark, while Thankful traveled on to their final destination.

As a result, Parley was introduced to the Book of Mormon, an experience that forever changed his life. He later recalled: "I read all day; eating was a burden, I had no desire for food; sleep was a burden when the night came, for I preferred reading to sleep." Feeling the confirmation of the Holy Ghost, Parley wrote: "I knew and comprehended that the book was true. . . . My joy was now full."<sup>7</sup> Determined to meet Joseph Smith, Parley traveled to Palmyra, where he instead found Hyrum Smith, who instructed him about the Restoration. In the Church of Jesus Christ, Parley recognized the authority, simplicity, and purity he had long sought. On September 1, 1830, he was baptized by Oliver Cowdery.

## Missionary Labors

From the moment of his conversion, Parley became a tireless missionary. The Sunday after his baptism, Parley wrote that he preached





*Parley P. Pratt (left) organized a School of the Prophets in Jackson County, Missouri.*



*Left: In 1834 Parley recruited for and served in the Zion's Camp expedition.*

GO INTO THE WILDERNESS, BY ROBERT BARRETT



***Parley P. Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer Jr., and Ziba Peterson walked more than 1,500 miles on their 1830 mission to the Indians in Missouri.***

before “a large concourse of people. . . . The Holy Ghost came upon me mightily . . . and four heads of families came forward expressing their faith, and were baptized.”<sup>8</sup> Soon after, Parley baptized his younger brother Orson; eventually, his two older brothers would follow.

In October 1830 Joseph Smith received a revelation directing Parley and three other missionaries (including Oliver Cowdery) to take the gospel to Indian tribes on the western frontier in Missouri (see D&C 32:1–2). Over the next four months, Parley and his companions traveled some 1,500 miles, mostly on foot, to Missouri, preaching to various tribes. They also stopped in Mentor, Ohio, not far from Kirtland, where Parley taught his former religious mentor, Sidney Rigdon. Kirtland quickly pulsed with religious excitement; within weeks, Rigdon and more than 100 others in the region had converted. The center of Church membership quickly shifted from New York to Ohio. The Lord, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, soon directed the entire Church to gather to the Ohio (see D&C 37).

Over the next few years, Parley served short preaching missions, organized a School of the Prophets in Jackson County (see D&C 97:3), experienced the tumult of Missouri persecution, and recruited for and marched in

Zion's Camp. In 1835, along with his brother Orson, he received a call as one of the original Twelve Apostles. The following spring, Parley—deeply in debt and with Thankful seriously ill—hesitated about serving another mission. Heber C. Kimball, a fellow Apostle, blessed Parley with specific promises: Thankful would be healed and would give birth to a son, their first after nine years of marriage, and Parley would fulfill a mission in Canada which would serve as a stepping-stone for the gospel to be taken to England.<sup>9</sup> Elder Kimball's blessing proved prophetic. In Canada, Parley helped convert several individuals who became some of the first missionaries to England, including John Taylor, later the third President of the Church, and his wife Leonora. Following Parley's return, Thankful gave birth to a son in March 1837, though she died a few hours later.

When Parley returned to Kirtland from his Canadian mission, he found himself embroiled in various conflicts that threatened the Church, resulting from a combination of internal divisions, persecution, and a national financial panic. The crisis jeopardized his faith, leaving him temporarily disillusioned with the Prophet Joseph Smith. Soon, however, Parley humbled himself and begged Joseph's forgiveness.

### **Imprisonment**

When Missourians forced the Saints from the state in late 1838, Parley was arrested with other Church leaders



**Left: In 1835 Parley P. Pratt and his brother Orson were ordained members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Right: In November 1838 the Prophet rebuked the guards at the Richmond Jail. The guards ceased their blasphemous talk and begged his pardon.**



and imprisoned for eight months in Richmond and Columbia, Missouri. Temporarily detained with President Smith and others in a hotel in Independence on the way to Richmond, he slipped out unnoticed one snowy morning and quickly reached the woods outside the city. However, when he realized that his escape might subject his brethren to a “storm of trouble, or even of death,” he chose to return to the hotel.<sup>10</sup> Though homeless and imprisoned, with his family and the Saints exiled from the state, Parley felt “more firm than ever in the *faith* of Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

His love and respect for the Prophet Joseph also deepened. One night in the Richmond Jail, as guards in “dreadful blasphemies and filthy language” boasted of their participation in the Saints’ persecution, Joseph rebuked them in the name of Jesus Christ in a “voice of thunder”: “SILENCE, ye fiends of the infernal pit. . . . Cease such talk, or you or I die **THIS INSTANT!**” The “quailing guards . . . begged his pardon.” Parley wrote, “Dignity and majesty have I seen but *once*, as it stood in chains, at midnight, in a dungeon in an obscure village of Missouri.”<sup>12</sup>

Following the transfer of Joseph and other prisoners to Liberty Jail, Parley remained in Richmond Jail. While imprisoned, he especially felt the absence of his family, writing his second wife, Mary Ann Frost, “Locks and bars, rivers and distance separate us, and still I love you, but am doomed to languish out long months and perhaps years deprived of your society while my little ones grow, and change their size and appearance without one sweet kiss or fond embrace from a father who loves them dearer than life.”<sup>13</sup> Parley had a dream in which his first wife, Thankful, comforted him and promised his eventual release. His brother Orson helped him escape, fittingly, on Independence Day, July 4, 1839, from the jail in Columbia, after which they joined the Saints at Nauvoo.

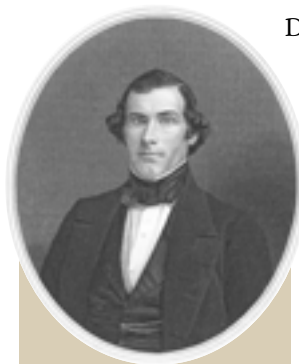
## The Written Word

The month after his escape, Parley, along with most of the Twelve Apostles, left on a mission for England. Upon arrival, Parley enthusiastically wrote Mary, “Here is a boundless harvest for the next 15 to 20 years, . . . and here, if the Lord will, I expect to spend 5 or 10 years at least.”<sup>14</sup> Soon joined by Mary, Parley remained in England until October 1842. Though he overestimated his stay, his optimism proved well-founded. During the mission of Parley and the other Apostles, missionary work in England exploded, and shiploads of emigrants were soon headed for Nauvoo. In England, Parley served as the founding editor of a newspaper, the *Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, which continued in publication until 1970.

In his missionary labors throughout his life, Parley turned instinctively to writing and publishing.

During his era the availability of cheap pamphlets and newspapers rapidly increased, and opponents of the Church used the printed word to condemn the Saints and misrepresent their beliefs. Parley also understood the power of print and used publishing to advance the cause of the gospel, printing and distributing pamphlets by the thousands. He was blessed with a poetic mind, a romantic spirit, and an engaging style, and his voluminous writings ensured that the Latter-day Saint message received an eloquent defense.

Parley was comfortable with various literary genres and wrote poetry, fiction, hymns, short essays, and expansive books. Three of his hymns appeared in the first Latter-day Saint hymnal in 1835. In England he received an assignment to publish a new hymnal. Parley told Brigham Young, “As to hymns, I am writing several new ones every day, and am in hopes to contribute 100 new ones to the volume we now print.”<sup>15</sup> While he did not reach his goal, the new hymnal contained nearly 50 of his hymns. The current hymnal contains



**Inset: Elder Orson Pratt, 1853.**

**From the moment of his conversion, Parley P. Pratt became a tireless missionary. Just a few weeks after his own baptism, he baptized his younger brother Orson. Eventually their two older brothers, Anson and William, were also baptized.**





**Left: From 1839 to 1842, Elder Pratt served a mission in England with other Apostles. They baptized thousands, and shiploads of emigrants were soon headed for Nauvoo.**



**Left: While in England Elder Pratt founded a newspaper, the Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star. He served as its editor until his return to the United States.**



COLD MISSOURI NIGHT, BY JOSEPH BRACEY

**On October 31, 1838, the Prophet, Elder Parley P. Pratt, Elder Sidney Rigdon, Lyman Wight, and George W. Robinson were taken prisoner by Missouri militiamen.**

seven of Parley's hymns, including "The Morning Breaks," "An Angel from on High," "Come, O Thou King of Kings," and "Jesus, Once of Humble Birth."

Three books particularly depict the power and range of Parley's writing. In 1837 Parley penned *A Voice of Warning*—after the scriptures probably one of the most widely read works among Church members for the next half century. Instrumental in the conversion of thousands, *A Voice of Warning* clearly laid out Latter-day Saint doctrines. In 1855 Parley published his *Key to the Science of Theology*, the first comprehensive exposition of LDS theology. In a more personal vein, his lively autobiography, written soon before his death but published thereafter, captures the spirit and excitement of the early decades of the Restoration.

### The Later Years

Returning from England, Parley's family shared in the hardships and the poverty of the Saints. In Nauvoo in 1843, his family—"consisting of wife and her sister, five children, hired girl, and hundreds of goers and comers"—lived in "one small room."<sup>16</sup> Poverty, however, was preferable to separation, which he experienced often in his life as a "wandering Pilgrim."<sup>17</sup> Aboard a ship on his way to a short English mission in 1846, Parley groaned, "I am Alone! Alone! Alone! O Horrible!"<sup>18</sup> The joy of the ministry compensated in part for the long absences. In addition, Parley was comforted by the doctrine of eternal family, which taught him to love "with a pureness" and "an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling, which would lift my soul from the transitory things of this grovelling sphere and expand it as the ocean."<sup>19</sup>

In June 1844 Parley learned of the assassination of his beloved Prophet. Hurrying home to Nauvoo, he arrived before any other Apostle (except John Taylor and Willard



**Left: Parley and his family were among those who left Nauvoo in frigid weather in February 1846. Right: Elder Pratt was murdered in May 1857 while serving a mission in the eastern states. He is buried at Fine Springs, Arkansas.**



Richards, who had been with Joseph Smith in the jail at Carthage, Illinois). Parley opposed attempts by his former teacher, Sidney Rigdon, to reorganize Church leadership in the absence of the Twelve Apostles. This helped ensure that Brigham Young, not Rigdon, would become the next leader of the Church. In February 1846 Parley and his family were part of the forced exodus from Illinois. Like so many other Saints, he spent his last minutes in Nauvoo traveling down Parley Street before ferrying his family across the Mississippi River.

Parley provided crucial leadership in the trek to the Salt Lake Valley and in the early exploration of Utah. During the winter of 1849–50, he led a 50-man expedition to investigate possible settlement sites and natural resources in southern Utah. In the 1850s Parley traveled twice to California as president over a mission to “all the islands and coasts of the Pacific.”<sup>20</sup> In 1851 he sailed from gold rush San Francisco to Valparaiso, Chile, along with his wife and another missionary, making the trio the first missionaries to South America. Unfortunately, civil unrest, restrictive laws against non-Catholic religions, struggles with the language, the death of an infant son, and lack of adequate funds cut short this early effort. Parley continued to study Spanish, however, and envisioned a day when the Church would sweep Latin America.

In 1856 Brigham Young called Parley on a mission to the eastern United States. Parley had “desired, after traveling for twenty-five or twenty-six years, mostly abroad, to stay at home and minister among the people of God, and take care of my family.” Nevertheless, he accepted his call, telling the Saints, “If it is the will of God that I should spend my days in proclaiming this Gospel and bearing testimony of these things, I shall think myself highly privileged and honoured.”<sup>21</sup>

While on his mission, Parley sensed his

approaching death. He wrote home, “I long to do my duty while here and then go to rest in the paradise of God.” Indeed, Parley stated, “I neither dread nor fear death, but I anticipate changing worlds with joy inexhaustible.”<sup>22</sup> In May 1857, shortly after his 50th birthday, Parley was murdered outside the small town of Van Buren, Arkansas.

As he lay dying, Parley testified to those who had come to help: “I die a firm believer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed through the Prophet Joseph Smith. . . . I know that the Gospel is true and that Joseph Smith was a prophet of the living God, I am dying a martyr to the faith.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Parley’s testimony of Jesus Christ and the Restoration resonates down through the years and strengthens us today. ■

#### NOTES

1. See Parley P. Pratt to William Patterson, May 9, 1853, Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives. Spelling standardized.
2. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (1985), 2. For more on the Pratt family, see R. Steven Pratt, “The Five Sons of Jared and Charity Pratt,” *Ensign*, Oct. 1979, 52.
3. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 10.
4. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 11.
5. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 13.
6. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 18.
7. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 20.
8. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 27.
9. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 110.
10. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 167.
11. Parley P. Pratt to Mrs. Rockwood, Dec. 9, 1838, A. P. Rockwood Collection, LDS Church Archives.
12. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 179–80. Italics removed.
13. Parley P. Pratt to Mary Ann Frost Pratt, LDS Church Archives. Spelling and capitalization standardized.
14. Parley P. Pratt to Mary Ann Frost Pratt, Apr. 6, 1840, LDS Church Archives. Spelling and punctuation standardized.
15. Parley P. Pratt to Brigham Young, May 4, 1840, LDS Church Archives. Spelling and capitalization standardized.
16. Parley P. Pratt to John VanCott, May 7, 1843, LDS Church Archives. Spelling standardized.
17. Parley P. Pratt to Belinda Marden Pratt, Oct. 14, 1846, LDS Church Archives.
18. Parley P. Pratt to Belinda Marden Pratt, Oct. 1, 1846, LDS Church Archives. Spelling standardized.
19. *Autobiography*, 260.
20. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 355.
21. *Journal of Discourses*, 5:196–97.
22. Parley P. Pratt to Belinda Marden Pratt, Jan. 27, 1857, LDS Church Archives. Spelling and capitalization standardized.
23. John A. Peel, as quoted in Steven Pratt, “Eleanor McLean and the Murder of Parley P. Pratt,” *Brigham Young University Studies*, winter 1975, 248.



**Inset: Elder John Taylor, 1853.**

**While serving a mission in Canada in 1836, Elder Pratt helped convert several individuals who became some of the first missionaries to England, including John Taylor, who later became the third President of the Church.**