

“He Would Deliver Us”

By Reid Tateoka

The earthquake that struck Japan in March of 2011 measured 9.0 on the Richter scale—it was one of the most powerful earthquakes in recorded history. At the time, I was serving as president of the Japan Sendai Mission, the part of Japan nearest the quake’s epicenter. More than 16,000 people died and hundreds of thousands of homes and buildings collapsed in the quake and the ensuing tsunami.

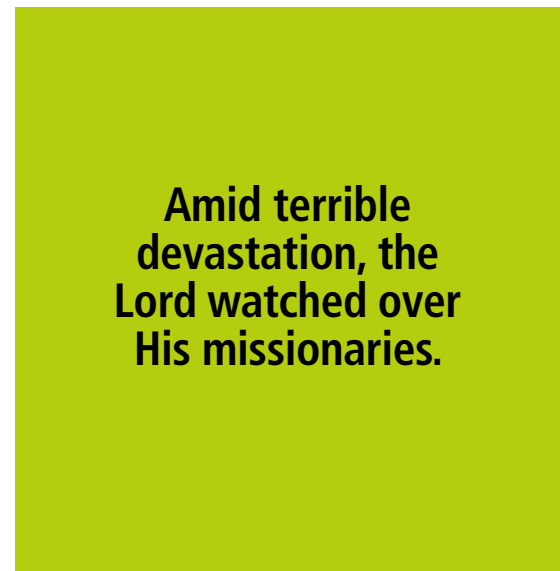
Despite the widespread devastation, we did not lose a single missionary. In the days and weeks that followed, I saw miracles in the lives of the missionaries we served with. Both before and after the quake, a loving Father put into place a series of events that would save His missionaries.

Led to Protected Places

Leadership meetings for the Koriyama Zone of our mission almost always took place on Thursday. This

time, however, the meeting was scheduled for Friday, March 11, 2011—the day of the quake. Leadership meetings typically included only zone and district leaders. In this instance, all the missionaries in the zone were invited to leadership meeting. This meant that on the day of the earthquake, the Japan Sendai missionaries who lived closest to the nuclear reactors damaged by the quake and tsunami were far away from their apartments, safely attending leadership meeting in the Koriyama chapel. The Lord had moved them to safe ground.

The missionaries in our leadership meeting were not the only ones who had been led to safety before the quake hit. Missionaries learn early to rely on the Lord and on the promptings of the Spirit. When the earthquake hit, there was no time to call leaders for directions. The other missionaries survived because they had already followed the Spirit, which led them to



Amid terrible devastation, the Lord watched over His missionaries.

protected places that Heavenly Father had prepared for them.

After the quake, many missionaries made their way to evacuation centers. Some zones instinctively moved to the chapels, which sustained comparatively little damage and where they felt more strongly the peace from the Holy Ghost. A fortunate few could remain in their apartments, without heat, water, electricity, or food. But all were safe.



PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY THE AUTHOR AND MICHAEL REMINGTON



Guided by Roadblocks

Initially, not knowing of the damage to the nuclear power plants, I tried to send the missionaries at our leadership meeting back to their apartments immediately after the quake. But the Lord hedged up the way. There were no buses or trains running. So Heavenly Father continued to keep the missionaries safe in Koriyama.

I thought I would be needed in the mission home near the epicenter of the quake. But after eight hours of driving on damaged and congested roads, we found that our way too was blocked. It turned out that by remaining in Koriyama, we were better able to help with the evacuation of our other missionaries, a process that provided further evidence that the Lord was watching over us.

Following the earthquake there was a run on gasoline. The fuel trucks that could maneuver over broken roads traveled very slowly, resulting in three-hour waits for gasoline, if any was available at all. But the Lord provided for us in miraculous ways. For example, while evacuating sisters and elders to safety in Niigata on the other side of the island, we realized we had driven 18 hours on a single tank, with a gas gauge that always registered “full.” As we neared Niigata, the gas gauge immediately dropped to “empty.”

Perilous Journey

Fortunately, our loving Father continued to direct an orderly evacuation amid severe devastation. Long-distance travel was dangerous. There were continuing aftershocks. Public

transportation was shut down. Water and electrical supplies were interrupted, and it was nearly impossible to buy gas or food. Sister Tateoka and I understood very well that we were the only ones able to reach two elders in a mountainous area and two other elders over the mountain on the other side of the island. Freeways were closed, so this last trip would require a five- or six-hour drive one-way north up the mountain on back roads, another two to three hours over the mountains and down to Tsuruoka, and four more hours back to safety.

We left early on the morning of March 16 and arrived at Elder Ohsugi’s and Elder Yuasa’s apartment around 5:00 p.m. To pick up the last two elders, we needed to travel back

south, over a mountain summit, and down to the city of Tsuruoka. With less than half a tank of gas, we knew that we could not turn back. As we began traveling to pick up the last two elders, snow began to fall. Soon, we found ourselves in a blinding snowstorm, traveling at less than 15 miles (24 km) per hour. I could not see the lines on the highway.

At 7:30 p.m., as we finally reached the summit, we were stopped by the police. An officer informed me that an avalanche had blocked the road and closed the mountain pass. He told me that we could go no farther; we had to turn around and take an alternate route to the other side of the island around the avalanche. Without enough gas to go around the avalanche, it appeared we had no way to reach Elder Lay and Elder Ruefenacht in Tsuruoka.

Miraculous Journey

Dejectedly, we turned back as directed by the police. I asked the elders in the van to call every member of the Yamagata Ward to see if we could find someone who could give us some gasoline. We stopped and prayed earnestly, drawing upon all of the power of heaven we could. We prayed for another miracle and again turned to the Lord.

The missionaries called every active member. But no one had gasoline. Gas stations had run out of supplies and were closed. Then the elders were

impressed to call an less-active friend, Brother Tsuchihashi. Our Heavenly Father had once again directed our path. Brother Tsuchihashi could give us 20 liters (5 gallons) of gas. But to meet this good brother, we had to travel another hour north, the opposite direction of where we wanted to go. The quantity of gas would be helpful but not sufficient to allow us to travel around the avalanche.

Having faith, we traveled north, still not knowing how we would pick up the other two elders. We made it to Shinjo City, where we received the 20 liters of gas. Soon thereafter, I received a call from President Yoshida, my counselor, who by now was very worried that we had not yet returned. He asked where we were, and when I told him Shinjo, he was shocked that we were so far out of our way. It was beyond his ability to reach us and help us return.

Then he looked on his map, and in a broken voice stammered, "There is a little-known mountain pass that will take you from Shinjo to the elders in Tsuruoka." The Lord had prepared a way for us to be precisely where we needed to be to drive around the avalanche. The gasoline we were given was exactly the amount necessary to make the trip safely around the avalanche to pick up the elders.

When I contacted each missionary after the earthquake and learned how they had all been directed to safe ground just prior to the earthquake



THE SPIRIT WILL LEAD US

"As part of God's divine plan, we are blessed with the gift of the Holy Ghost. . . . As we navigate the seas of life, following the impressions of the Holy Ghost is essential. The Spirit will help us avoid temptations and dangers, and comfort and lead us through challenges."

Elder Quentin L. Cook of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, "Shipshape and Bristol Fashion: Be Temple Worthy—in Good Times and Bad Times," *Ensign*, Nov. 2015, 42.

and tsunami, I felt so grateful. Two missionaries, who had been protected from the tsunami by climbing to an evacuation center's fourth floor, expressed their gratitude for being kept safe in a time of great peril.

They felt that the words of Helaman described their situation: "The Lord our God did visit us with assurances that he would deliver us; yea, insomuch that he did speak peace to our souls, and did grant unto us great faith, and did cause us that we should hope for our deliverance in him" (Alma 58:11). ■

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