

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin

Committed to the Kingdom

On a memorable Christmas Eve in 1937, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin, then a full-time missionary, and his companion walked from Salzburg, Austria, to the village of Oberndorf, nestled in the Bavarian Alps. While visiting the village known as the inspiration for the hymn “Silent Night,”¹ they paused in a small church to listen to Christmas music sung by a choir.

“A crisp, clear winter night enveloped us as we began our return trip,” Elder Wirthlin recalled. “We walked under a canopy of stars and across the smooth stillness of new-fallen snow.”²

As they walked, the young missionaries shared their hopes, dreams, and goals for the future. In that heavenly setting, Elder Wirthlin renewed his commitment to serve the Lord: “I made up my mind that I would magnify any callings I received in the Lord’s kingdom.”³

Elder Wirthlin kept that commitment for the rest of his mortal life, which ended on December 1, 2008, when he died peacefully at age 91 of causes incident to age.

Of his service as a bishop, counselor in a stake presidency, counselor in the Sunday School general presidency, Assistant to the Twelve, and member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, he declared, “I’ve loved every assignment I’ve ever had in the kingdom.” Upon being sustained as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on October 4, 1986, he explained, “And in that service, every day seemed like Sunday, because it was in the service of the Lord.”⁴



Faith and Football

Joseph Bitner Wirthlin was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, on June 11, 1917, the first of five children born to Joseph L. Wirthlin, who served as Presiding Bishop, and Madeline Bitner Wirthlin. Joseph’s father supported the family as head of Wirthlin’s Inc., a wholesale and retail food business, while his mother encouraged their children in a variety of pursuits, including music and sports. Joseph and Madeline taught their children humility, honesty, diligence, service, compassion, and faith.

Young Joseph had many talents but eventually gravitated to sports, lettering in high school football, basketball, and track. After playing quarterback at East High School, he went on to play running back for three years at the University of Utah.⁵

From the pulpit, Elder Wirthlin enjoyed sharing lessons he had learned as a football player. One important lesson came at the bottom of a pile of 10 players during a conference championship game. After attempting to score what would have been the winning touchdown, Joseph was tackled just short of the goal line.

“At that moment I was tempted to push the ball forward. . . . I would have been a hero,” he recalled. But then he remembered the words of his mother: “Joseph,” she had often said to him, “do what is right, no matter the consequence.”



Above: For three years Joseph B. Wirthlin (number 4) played running back for the University of Utah football team before giving up football and postponing his schooling to become a missionary (below) in 1937. **Right:** Joseph B. and Elisa Young Rogers Wirthlin on their wedding day, May 26, 1941.



Joseph wanted to be a hero in the eyes of his mother more than in the eyes of his teammates. So, he said, “I left the ball where it was—two inches from the goal line.”⁶

After the end of the 1936 football season, Joseph’s father approached him about serving a mission. War was brewing in Europe, and if Joseph didn’t leave soon, he could lose the chance to serve.

“I wanted to pursue my dream of continuing to play football and to graduate from the university,” Elder Wirthlin said. “If I were to accept a mission call, I would have to give up everything. In those days a mission call was 30 months long, and I knew if I accepted, there was a good chance I would never play football again—perhaps I would not even be able to graduate.”⁷

But Joseph had also dreamed of being a missionary, and he knew what he must do. A few months later he was on his way to Europe, where he would serve in the German-Austrian and the Swiss-Austrian Missions from 1937 to 1939.

He never played football again, but he did graduate from the university, majoring in business administration. “Even so, I’ve never regretted serving a mission and committing myself to serving the Lord,” he said. “By doing so, my life has been filled with adventure, spiritual experiences, and joy that surpasses understanding.”⁸

“A Perfect Marriage”

Among the resolutions Elder Wirthlin made that Christmas night in Oberndorf was that he would marry a spiritually strong woman who lived the gospel. He described her physical traits to his mission companion: five-foot-five (1.6 m), blonde hair, and blue eyes. Two and a half years after his mission, he met Elisa Young Rogers. She fit his description perfectly.

“I remember the first time I met her,” Elder Wirthlin said during a conference address in 2006, two months after she died. “As a favor to a friend, I had gone to her home to pick up her sister, Frances. Elisa opened the door, and at least for me, it was love at first sight.



“I think she must have felt something too, for the first words I ever remember her saying were, ‘I knew who you was.’”

Elder Wirthlin joked about that grammatical error because she was majoring in English. But, he said, “I still cherish those five words as some of the most beautiful in human language.”⁹

They married in the Salt Lake Temple on May 26, 1941, and for 65 years shared what Elder Wirthlin called “a perfect marriage.”¹⁰ They strengthened, encouraged, and sustained each other, and they counseled together when making decisions. Elder Wirthlin never left the house without kissing Elisa good-bye, and he



would call often each day to check on her.¹¹

Elder Wirthlin's father was called to the Presiding Bishopric in 1938, so Elder Wirthlin took over the family's food business when he returned from his mission. Later, while he and Elisa were raising their children, he put in long hours meeting the demands of work and Church responsibilities. Elisa and their seven daughters and one son, however, remained Elder Wirthlin's pride and joy. At his passing, he had 59 grandchildren and nearly 100 great-grandchildren.

Loving Others

Elder Wirthlin, whom President Thomas S. Monson called "a man of great innate goodness,"¹² was loved by all who knew him. For 33 years while he served as a General Authority, including 22 years as an Apostle, that goodness manifested itself as he shared his testimony—in both word and deed—of the Savior and His restored gospel.

With humility and often with humor, Elder Wirthlin encouraged Latter-day Saints to make the most of mortality by emulating the example of the Savior. To do that, he taught, focus on the one, cultivate kindness, and love others.

"The most cherished and sacred moments of our lives are those filled with the spirit of love," he taught. "The greater the measure of our love, the greater is our joy. In the end, the development of such love is the true



measure of success in life." To truly learn how to love, he added, we need merely reflect on the life of the Savior.¹³

"We are all busy," Elder Wirthlin said on another occasion. "It's easy to find excuses for not reaching out to others, but I imagine they will sound as hollow to our Heavenly Father as the elementary school boy who gave his teacher a note asking that he be excused from school March 30th through the 34th."¹⁴

Elder Wirthlin also encouraged members of the Church to "live in thanksgiving daily," regardless of adversity.¹⁵ "If we will consider the blessings we have, we will forget some of our worries," he taught.¹⁶

A Parting Testimony

"There may be some who think that General Authorities rarely experience pain, suffering, or distress. If only that were true," Elder Wirthlin said during his last general conference address. "The Lord in His wisdom does not shield anyone from grief or sadness."¹⁷

Above: The extended Wirthlin family in June 1999. Left: Elder and Sister Wirthlin greet Church members following an Education Week devotional at Ricks College (now Brigham Young University-Idaho) in 1998. Below: A 1999 painting of Elder and Sister Wirthlin.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE WIRTHLIN FAMILY. EXCEPT AS NOTED: LEFT: PHOTOGRAPH OF FOOTBALL BY CHRISTINA SMITH; RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH OF SISTER AND ELDER WIRTHLIN BY MICHAEL LEWIS; BYU-IDAHO, MAY NOT BE COPIED; PAINTING BY CLOY KENT

Elder Wirthlin's "greatest sorrow" came with the death of his beloved Elisa. During the lonely hours that ensued, he drew strength from "the comforting doctrines of eternal life" and from his testimony that the dark Friday of the Savior's Crucifixion was followed by the bright Sunday of His Resurrection.¹⁸

Because Elder Wirthlin had a firm testimony of the Savior's atoning sacrifice, he knew that death is not the end of existence and that a reunion awaits the faithful who have made promises in holy temples.

"We will all rise from the grave," he testified in October 2006. "On that day my father will embrace my mother. On that day I will once again hold in my arms my beloved Elisa."¹⁹

And on that day, a commitment made on a cold winter night long ago will have made all the difference. ■

NOTES

1. "Silent Night," *Hymns*, no. 204.
2. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Lessons Learned in the Journey of Life," *Liahona*, May 2001, 36; *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 7.
3. *Liahona*, May 2001, 37; *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 8.
4. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Pulling in the Gospel Net," *Ensign*, Nov. 1986, 59.
5. See Don L. Searle, "Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin: Finding Happiness Serving the Lord," *Ensign*, Dec. 1986, 10.
6. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Life's Lessons Learned," *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2007, 46.
7. *Liahona*, May 2001, 36; *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 7.
8. *Liahona*, May 2001, 37; *Ensign*, Dec. 2000, 8.
9. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Sunday Will Come," *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 28.
10. *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 28.
11. See *Ensign*, Dec. 1986, 10.
12. Quoted in *Ensign*, Dec. 1986, 13.
13. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "The Great Commandment," *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 30.
14. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "The Abundant Life," *Liahona and Ensign*, May 2006, 101.
15. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Live in Thanksgiving Daily," *Ensign*, Sept. 2001, 13.
16. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "One Step after Another," *Liahona*, Jan. 2002, 27; *Ensign*, Nov. 2001, 25.
17. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Come What May, and Love It," *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2008, 26.
18. See *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 29.
19. *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2006, 30.



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"I loved him as a brother. I miss him. Over the years, Joseph and I served together in many assignments. We were more than colleagues, however; we were close personal friends. . . . There was no chink in his armor. There was no guile in his soul. There was no flaw in his character. Elder Wirthlin loved the Lord with all his heart and soul and served Him with all his might to the very end of his mortal life. . . . Joseph knew the Lord, and the Lord knew Joseph."

President Thomas S. Monson

After reading an article and testimony by Elder Wirthlin (see "Silent Night, Holy Night," *Church News*, Nov. 29, 2008, 8–9), President Packer suggested that the family have it "printed in such a way that members of the Wirthlin family yet unborn will come to know the great man who was their grandfather and was an Apostle."

**President Boyd K. Packer,
President of the Quorum
of the Twelve Apostles**



"He and I sat side by side on the [stake] high council. . . . For a total of 11 years, Joseph served as my counselor [in the stake presidency and the general superintendency of the Sunday School]. Every assignment he completed well. . . . Little did we know then that we would later sit together in the Quorum of the Twelve. . . . He never sought the limelight. He personified the statement of the Master, who said, 'He that is greatest among you shall be your servant.' Now Joseph will experience another promise of the Lord: 'He that shall humble himself shall be exalted' (Matthew 23:11–12)."

**Elder Russell M. Nelson of the
Quorum of the Twelve Apostles**

"When I contemplate the legacy that Dad left his family and the Church, his humility stands out. Dad just never saw himself as anyone special. When President Monson ordained him an Apostle, he prophetically declared to Dad, 'Your humility will endear you to the people.' And so it has."

Joseph B. Wirthlin Jr.