

Your value is not diminished by returning home early from your mission.

If Your Mission Ended Early, Don't Give Up

By Alex Hugie

If you're reading this, you probably already know how overwhelmingly difficult it can be to come home early from a mission. Young adults who serve may experience physical injury, mental health issues, civil emergencies, worthiness concerns, serious conflicts with others, or disobedience to mission rules, causing them to leave their mission before their expected release date.

Regardless of the reason, God would not want this setback to leave any of His children spiritually crippled. So how can early-returned missionaries move forward from such a jarring transition? And how can parents, Church leaders, and loved ones help?

A Book of Mormon Missionary

One story from the book of Alma gives us a helpful example. The Nephite prophet Alma directed a mission to the wicked Zoramites, accompanied by a number of trusted individuals. One of these individuals, his son Corianton, “fors[ook] the ministry, and did go over

into the land of Siron among the borders of the Lamanites, after the harlot Isabel” (Alma 39:3). Consequently, Alma sharply reproved Corianton and called him to repentance, noting, “I would not dwell upon your crimes, to harrow up your soul, if it were not for your good” (Alma 39:7).

Corianton received his father's chastening humbly, repented of his sins, and returned to serve as a missionary among the Zoramites to “declare the word with truth and soberness” (Alma 42:31). The account goes on to say that after Alma had spoken with his sons, “the sons of Alma [both Shiblon and Corianton] did go forth among the people, to declare the word unto them” (Alma 43:1).

Returning with Potential

What do we learn from this story? First, a missionary who leaves early—even for preventable reasons—is still capable of accomplishing great things. Corianton may have made

grave mistakes, but he still went on to accomplish a great work. Likewise, even missionaries who return as a result of their own actions shouldn't feel as if they've destroyed their spiritual potential. Corianton learned from his mistakes and came to build God's kingdom in tremendous ways, and that same capability rests within everyone no matter how much they feel like they've failed.

Second, we learn the crucial role others play in an early-returned missionary's spiritual recovery. Alma—Corianton's father and priesthood leader—counseled Corianton with sharpness but also with confidence in his ability to still achieve his spiritual potential. As with Corianton, consequences for disobedience on a mission must come, but any discipline should be accompanied by love,

forgiveness, and mercy (see Doctrine and Covenants 121:41–44).

Returning to Heal

This same message of hope for early-returned missionaries is echoed today. Marshall, who returned early due to physical and mental health challenges, at times felt regret for both health obstacles and personal inadequacies that kept him from being a fully functional missionary. Nevertheless, he feels that his service was absolutely worthwhile.

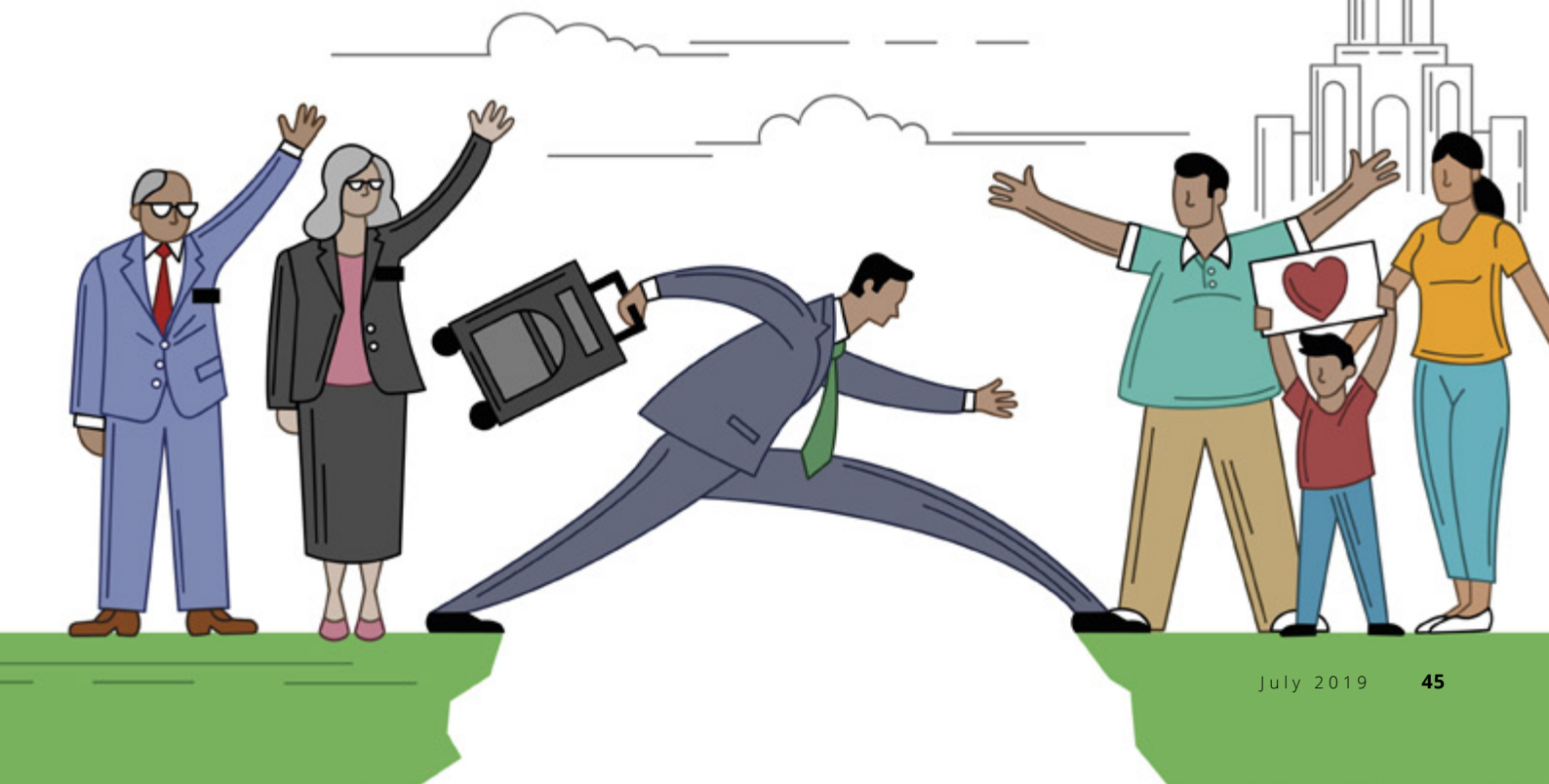
"As missionaries, we're not perfect," Marshall says. "We're still subject to temptation; we can still sin. But your imperfections are probably what Satan wants you to focus on—to feel like your offering isn't accepted by the Lord because of those times when you weren't the best missionary."

Marshall believes that the Lord wants missionaries to know He is pleased with the service they offer, even when that service was imperfectly rendered by either choice or circumstance.

Marshall has learned to cope and heal by doing all he can to stay close to Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.

Returning to Repent

Another missionary, who served in Colorado, USA, was sent home from his mission for disciplinary reasons and excommunicated from the Church, but he was later rebaptized. "Coming home was hard," he says. "I felt lost and empty. At times, the most difficult part of coming home was [finding] the motivation to keep going to church,



reading the scriptures, and praying. The simple things were the hardest.”

But he found strength in the support of friends and family and in working to repent.

“Setting goals, meeting with my bishop, and going to the temple when I was worthy were keys in being able to come closer to my Heavenly Father,” he adds. “I remember times when I couldn’t meet with my bishop or accomplish some goals; the adversary was always right there, tempting me.”

His recovery was made possible by “always remembering that I have a Heavenly Father who loves me and wants me to be happy. Having a testimony of the Savior’s Atonement and of repentance, we can always come closer to God no matter how distant we might feel.”

“Looking back on my mission,” he continues, referring to the months he served before the events that led to his being sent home, “I still feel like it was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had. I learned a lot, and although it didn’t turn out the way I had planned, I was still able to see lives change because of the gospel. I made some mistakes, but my testimony has grown so much more as I’ve striven to repent and keep moving forward.”

He wants others who returned early because of their choices to know that “the world isn’t over. Coming home is a first step toward repentance. Once you go through this process of repentance, you will have

gained so much. That heavy burden will be lifted. There is no better feeling than knowing you are in the right in the sight of God.”

Loving Those Who Return Early

Both of these missionaries who returned home early emphasize how important it is for the friends and family of early-returned missionaries to love and support them.

“Give them space,” Marshall says. “But make sure you’re close by, because it can be a little depressing. Be their friend.” By listening to the Spirit, we can gauge their needs and know when to reach out and when to respect their privacy.

“Just love them,” adds the missionary who served in Colorado. “Encourage them to always remember the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.”

How others treat early-returned missionaries could help make the difference between them falling away in shame or moving forward with faith. It’s essential, then, that they be embraced without being judged.

Like Corianton, early-returned missionaries have the potential to rise from their current vulnerable state into mighty instruments of the Lord.

Finding Hope in God’s Plan

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles offers some words of comfort to early-returned missionaries. “When someone asks if you’ve served a mission, you say yes,”

he said. “. . . Cherish the service you rendered. Be grateful for the opportunity to have testified, to have been out in the name of the Lord, to have worn that missionary name plaque. . . . Please, please do not relive this; do not rehash it; do not think you’re inadequate or a failure.”¹

For those who return early as a result of sin, remember these words from Sister Joy D. Jones, Primary General President: “If we sin, we are less worthy, but we are never worth less!”² She asserts that God will help us develop confidence in ourselves in our darkest moments if we will turn to Him.

The message from the Book of Mormon, from modern early-returned missionaries, and from Church leaders is the same: Never give up hope, because God still has plans for you greater than you can imagine. For the loved ones of these missionaries, your response to their return home will make a tremendous difference in helping them to heal and reach their potential. Remember that the Atonement of Jesus Christ can heal all wounds—including those of missionaries who return home early. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.

You can find a list of resources for prospective and early-returned missionaries in the digital version of this article at liahona.ChurchofJesusChrist.org or in the Gospel Library app.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Elder Holland’s Counsel for Early Returned Missionaries” (video), ChurchofJesusChrist.org/media-library.
2. Joy D. Jones, “Value beyond Measure,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, Nov. 2017, 14.