

Plucked from the Ashes

Clem Bear Chief

WHILE GROWING UP ON THE BLACKFOOT RESERVATION near Gleichen, Alberta, Canada, I lived with my grandparents. On Sundays around noon, two well-dressed white men would drive up to our home. For some unknown reason, I always ran for the nearby forest and hid until they drove away. I learned from friends, neighbors, and our church ministers that these well-dressed men were Mormon missionaries, and not welcome. From then on, and although they had done nothing to me, I had a great hatred for these outsiders and their church.

After getting married and entering the white man's world to earn a living, my wife, Theresa, and I had occasional visits from the Mormons. They had good visits with my family when I wasn't home, but when I was, I either frustrated them out of our house or simply told them to leave. It seemed that this happened about once a year. One time some of our good friends met with the missionaries. I was furious. I told my friends everything I could think of to turn them against the Mormons, and it worked—they told the missionaries not to come back.

Like many of my friends, I became addicted to alcohol; the quality of my life began to drastically decline. By 1975, my marriage was barely holding together; our quarrels were frequent, and Theresa often felt the brunt of my unhappiness. In the late spring of that year, we had a bitter spat during which I chased her and the children out of our house. They went to live with Theresa's parents on the Blood Reservation. I was alone with the house and little else.

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Since my family was no longer with me, and since I still had money, I decided to go downtown and drink myself to death. For many days I was never sober and often awoke to find myself in some back alley. I finally sobered up and went home. It was then that I realized just how empty and alone I truly was. I felt so helpless. Who could I turn to? In my despair, I again headed downtown to drink. During this binge something very odd happened to me, something which, to this day, still causes me to wonder.

Although I had no money, I managed to find friends who bought me enough drinks to start me on my self-destructive path once again. When the alcohol didn't kill me, I went back to the bar and deliberately provoked a fight with some strangers. One of them threatened to cut me up with the knife he held under his table. I thought I had wanted to die, but, when faced with the reality, I backed down and apologized to the strangers. Things seemed okay again, but I sensed they were still angry. I excused myself to go to the bathroom but instead, I went out the rear entrance. To my horror, I now stood face-to-face with the very men with whom I was at odds inside the bar. The one with the knife came towards me and swore that he would teach me not to pick a fight with them. Just then, two men emerged from the shadows. I could not see their faces, but they seemed to be wearing either overcoats or some kind of long robes. When my assailants saw these men, they ran away as if they were frightened. Immediately I approached the two men to thank them for their help, but as I moved closer they too disappeared into the shadows. I tried to follow them but walked straight into a solid wall—there was no door. Now scared and quite sober, I was able to catch the bus home. Throughout the night, I wondered if what I had experienced was real or just a hallucination. And although I was terribly hung over, the next morning I went to town to survey the spot where the previous night's incident had occurred. It was just as I suspected. There were no doors within a block of the door leading into the bar. This caused me to more deeply question the reality of the two men, and what the experience meant. Again, I had no answers.

After a time, I began to suffer the withdrawal symptoms of an alcoholic. I suffered alone with no one to comfort me. I called our local parish priest, but he told me that I must work out my marriage and drinking problems by myself. I called the pastors of other churches that in the past had shown an interest in my family. They offered no solutions, only excuses. They claimed to be either too busy or simply untrained in marriage and alcohol counseling. In desperation, I took out my Catholic missal of prayers and rosary and knelt before a crucifix and a picture of Mary, the mother of God. I recited a number of

"Hail Marys," "Our Fathers," "Acts of Contrition," and whatever else I came to in the missal. Over and over again, hour after hour, I prayed from the prayer book, still utterly alone in my empty house. In spite of my pleadings, I felt no sense of relief. I decided that God must be very angry with me and was simply not listening. He must have given me up to Hell to suffer out my last days. I thought of suicide again. My family was gone, I had no friends, and even the priests and pastors, men who were supposed to be my spiritual guides, had offered me no word of comfort.

Although I managed to get some sleep, my rest was interrupted by terrible nightmares which kept waking me up. During the times I was awake, I knelt before the crucifix, crying and pleading for comfort. As I lay exhausted on the couch, my thoughts went back to my boyhood and to my grandmother. I remembered the times when I would listen to her talking to an unseen being whom she always addressed as "nin'non." My people use this term, meaning "dad" or "daddy," whenever they approach a loving father for some favor or request. As a last resort, I resolved to call on this being from the unseen world. I sat up and addressed "Nin'non" in much the same way as grandmother would: Daddy, Daddy, look down on me with compassion. Look upon me with pity. I am so lonely. I am so sad. I am so sick. If you are real and do exist, please hear me. I have been very bad. I have driven my family out. I have no more family to comfort me. Daddy, Daddy, I want to change. I want my family back with me. If you are real, if you are here, please hear me. If you bring my family to me, I will try my best to be a good father and a good person. Please do this for me if you are real and can hear me. Please send us one of your churches so we can join it without question this time. For the first time that night, I felt comforted and somehow peaceful.

I made a similar plea the next day. However, when the third day came and my family had not returned, I began to doubt. On that same day, the phone rang and I was very relieved to hear my wife's voice. Though I had called before to plead for her return, this time she said that she could no longer live on the reservation because of the overcrowded house, lack of privacy, and the pervasive alcohol. She would rather put up with me than remain where she was. As a condition for her return, she made me promise that I would not repeat the circumstances which led to the split. I agreed.

That same evening, my family came home. As we sat up talking, Theresa and I agreed that we needed God in our marriage and in our personal lives. We wanted to join a church which would truly help us better ourselves. We also agreed that since the Four-Square Gospel Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the United Church, the Bahai's, and

the pentecostal churches had all shown great interest in us, we should probably join with one of them, one had to be right for us. We resolved to join, without hesitation, the first church that sent representatives to our door.

Days passed and no one came. I was about to call (without Theresa's knowledge) the Jehovah's Witnesses since they had been quite nice to me on their previous visits. For some reason, though, I never made the call, and that omission would greatly affect our lives. However, that same evening we heard a knock on the door. I was excited because I thought perhaps the Jehovah's Witnesses had decided to visit us. I asked my wife to answer the door. She returned and hesitantly told me that a man and his wife were asking to come in to talk to us. She said that they were Mormon missionaries.

My heart sank to the bottom of my soul, and anger welled up inside me. I thought to myself, "Oh, *Nin'non*, how could you have sent the very people I hate so much?" I rationalized that I could still chase them away since they were not considered Christians and did not count. I then remembered what I had said in my prayer and told my wife to invite them in. I would listen to what they had to say, but I decided to give them as hard a time as I possibly could.

As the weeks went by and they continued to visit, I unloaded all my prejudices on them, but it didn't seem to bother them. They kept on with their lessons and patiently answered all my questions. I asked them all the questions that had stumped representatives of the other churches. These Mormons seemed to have the answers for what the other churches called "holy mysteries," questions pertaining to the unseen world, this world, and the world above. They took us to their Sunday services and to other meetings which were uplifting and inspiring. The other members were so friendly and helpful. Suddenly I began to love the very people I had hated so much. I was sometimes almost afraid to attend because I would be hugged, even by the men. They were ordinary people like us and faced the same difficulties, temptations, and problems that we did. I was also filled with remorse. I wanted to meet all the missionaries who had ever knocked at our door and apologize for the rudeness I had shown them. My chance was lost, though; they had already come and gone. The only thing I could do was express my thankfulness to these new missionaries, Elder and Sister Andrus, for coming to us.

In August 1975, the Andrus's asked us to be baptized, and by then I was convinced that this was the church for us. However, the night before our baptism, something happened that almost shook me to a point of backing out. Theresa and I had stayed up late wondering about our decision when we heard noises we had never heard before.

There were footsteps, creaks and groans, and we felt a presence in the room which we had also never felt before, an unwelcome one. We saw with our own eyes a box move by itself along the hallway and into the kitchen. We saw a knife leave the fireplace mantle and embed its blade in the wooden floor. It seemed that something evil wanted to stop us from joining the Mormons. We were shaken but went ahead with our baptisms on 16 August 1975.

Around September we went to a stake conference. At the time I had no idea what that was, and so I agreed to tell the conference about my conversion. When we arrived, I became frightened. I had never seen so many people. I thought this was something more than I could handle and wanted to back out. However, the missionaries assured me that it would turn out for the good. By the time my turn came, I had this warm pleasant feeling like I was half in the air. While I was talking, I saw myself, whether imagined or not, standing across a river from Satan himself. He stood before what appeared to be an army that was ready to attack. He pointed the tip of his sword at me and shouted a warning that he would try to kill me. For some reason I felt uncomfortable, rather than afraid of his warning. I did not respond, and the scene disappeared. I do not remember much of what I said to the congregation, but as I left the podium I noticed a lot of people with tears in their eyes. I felt extremely ashamed and went back to the safety of the missionaries. I whispered to Brother Andrus that I wanted to leave because I must have said something bad to make these people cry. He tightened his grip around me and whispered back in a reassuring way that I had not said anything out of place. Although this gave me some comfort, what happened in the following months made it seem as if Satan's warning had come to pass.

On 4 October of the same year at 2:30 A.M., we received a telephone call that my wife's father was critically ill and was near death. We gathered ourselves together, knelt, and prayed that he would stay alive at least until we got there. We rushed to his bedside, but he had already passed away. I was very disappointed. I asked the missionaries why he had died after we joined the Church. Why didn't he die before we joined it? Why now? Then a warning from the past came back to haunt me, a warning that our priest had given us years ago. God would punish us, he said, if we ever left the Catholic church. Had God cursed us for joining the Mormon church? The missionaries explained to us that this was a trial of our faith, and I was pacified. Two weeks later, we received another phone call in the morning telling us that my wife's auntie's daughter had been shot to death. I thought about the warning again. I told my wife that for sure God had cursed us and the curse was now spreading to her relatives and maybe will spread to

mine until we renounce our membership in this church. Again the missionaries managed to help me understand.

However, things did not improve. On 7 November 1975, we received another urgent call from my wife's family that her mother was very ill and close to death. Once again we prayed for her recovery or for her to stay alive till we got there. By the time we arrived at the hospital, she had died. This really shook me. I told the missionaries that I now knew that this church was not right and that we must go back to the Catholic church because God was punishing us for leaving. I told them I wasn't going to church anymore and wanted out. With great patience, the missionaries talked to me, explaining and comforting us. Their understanding and love calmed and strengthened us. These missionaries, Doug and Vea Andrus of Idaho Falls, Idaho, stood with and by us throughout all these difficulties and doubting periods, reassuring us that all this should pass and that the Lord would bless us yet.

As the times of trial passed and the year progressed, I came to see that this was true. Before joining the Church, I had accumulated a sizable debt, due primarily to my alcohol problem. The Christmas season was approaching, and I found that I was quite a bit behind on some of my payments, especially my rent. My landlord and the other creditors were constantly hounding me for payment, causing me great pain and worry. In desperation, I confided in the missionaries, hoping that they could help me. Elder Andrus suggested that I should go and ask our bishop for advice.

I went for an interview with the bishop, a man who had been very friendly to us since our baptism. I sat across from him and related my problems. He listened without showing much emotion. He looked at me with compassionate eyes and then asked, "Brother Bear Chief, have you paid your tithing since you were baptized?" I thought to myself, "Oh, oh. They got my soul. Now they want my money, too." I asked him if he heard me correctly the first time. I could not possibly pay tithing. All my money went to debts and rent and food. He seemed to ignore my problem and again asked me if I was paying my tithing. I thought again to myself, "I came to you for some help and all you can ask is if I pay tithing." I became angry and was about to walk out when he stopped and explained tithing to me. He asked me to set aside 10 percent of my paycheck each payday to hand in as tithing and see what happened. I reluctantly agreed to try to do as he suggested.

It was getting close to Christmas, and my landlord and creditors increased their pressure on me. However, I was determined to find out what would happen if I paid my tithing. I admit that I did so more out of curiosity than from any great faith. A week before Christmas, noth-

ing had happened. I was about to complain again when one evening the doorbell rang and the children ran to answer. There was no one at the door, but someone had left two bags of groceries. The next evening the same thing occurred. This time, however, I found an envelope in the mailbox containing a check that was large enough to cover all my bills and the rent.

The next day more groceries arrived at our doorstep. At work, I was approached by a co-worker who was a United Church lady. She asked if we could use some groceries for Christmas because they had some left over from their annual giveaways. That evening the United Church members arrived in a pickup whose bed was loaded with groceries of all kinds. We ended up with so many groceries that we did not have the room to store them. We had to leave some in the hallways and in the living room. I was able to provide presents for my children in addition to those that were mysteriously left at our door. For days, my eyes watered my desk at work. My co-workers wondered if they could help me with whatever was bothering me. All I could say to them was, "No thank you." The Lord and his people were truly good to us, and I have grown to love them and have come to know the kind of people they are. All the bad things I heard about Mormons were dashed to pieces.

At this point it seemed that God had blessed us with more than we deserved. However, he was not yet finished with us. About this time, I began to have experiences which prepared me for even greater blessings. Not long after the holidays, I had a strange dream. I was in an open field lit only, it seemed, by moonlight. A man in white clothing stood beside me and asked me to go with him. I followed until we came to a hole in the ground large enough to walk in. I saw that there were stairs leading down into the ground. We went down the steps to the bottom where we entered a long, dark hallway. I immediately noticed a lot of commotion which seemed to be coming from the walls themselves. Above the sound of all the other voices, I heard people calling my name. I tried to answer, but they could not hear me. I recognized some of the voices as those of friends and relatives who had passed on long ago. For a moment, it seemed that the walls were transparent and that I could almost make out who these people were. Finally we came to a small, dimly lit room where I had to squint in order to see. I recognized friends who had recently died. Though I waved to them, they made no move to indicate they knew me.

We then came to a huge, open room which resembled a church cultural hall. Many people were sitting around the room holding their personal belongings. Occasionally a voice called out a name over what sounded like a loudspeaker. When this happened, one of the people

would get up and ascend some stairs leading to an upper room. As they opened the door, a very bright light poured out, a light so bright that it almost blinded me. I turned and asked my guide what was happening. He explained that all these people were waiting for people on the other side of the room to be baptized on their behalf so that they could enter that brightly lit room. As I had not been to the temple nor been instructed about it, this seemed quite strange. I was curious and asked if I could go up to that room and just look in. He told me that I could not go in since I was not dead. He then motioned that it was time for me to go back.

As I passed back through the rooms and the hallway, I again heard the people calling my name and again I tried to answer them, all to no avail. They knocked on the wall as they called my name. I'm not sure why, but I avoided them. For no apparent reason, I became very sad and started to cry. My companion and I climbed the stairs to the open field where once again I found myself alone. I felt afraid and very sad, and I wept for those people down there. It was then that I awoke from this dream to find that both my pillow and my eyes were wet with tears. As I mentioned I had no idea what the dream meant because I knew nothing about temple work. Much later, my wife and I did some temple work for our parents, grandparents, and others. We were seated on some benches around the temple baptismal font when I suddenly had the strange feeling that I had been there before. My mind wandered back to the dream, and as I looked around me, it appeared that this must be the same place. This time there were no people waiting, but I noticed the stairs leading up to a door which led to the main part of the temple. I could not help but feel that I was doing the work that those on the other side desired of me. I dare not say that this was the same room, but I knew that those who had been calling my name could now hear me answer through the work I was doing for them. God had allowed me to see what must be done, and granted me the opportunity to do so.

On 25 August 1976, my children, wife and I were sealed in the Salt Lake Temple. Brother and Sister Andrus, who by this time were like grandparents to us, accompanied us. I remember that before I had ever heard of temples, I had seen a picture of the one in Salt Lake City. Even then I revered it above all other churches. So when the time came for my family to be sealed, it seemed the natural place.

After our sealings, we were treated to a wonderful surprise. Brother Andrus invited us to tour Temple Square, then told us that we were going to meet a very special person. We went to the Church Office Building, and Brother Andrus told us we were going to meet the Prophet of the Church. In the elevator I centered my thoughts on this

man called "Prophet." I thought to myself, "I'll bet we will be seated in a huge room with gold-covered things all around. Huge doors will suddenly open and in will come this man clad in fine golden clothing. He will be seated on a throne borne by six servants. Perhaps we will then have to bow to him and possibly kiss his huge, diamond-studded ring of authority. He will greet us and then be carried back into his comfortable quarters.

We left the elevator and met Brother Boyd Packer, who greeted us with great respect and ushered us into a small office decorated simply with souvenirs from other lands. As I entered the office, I passed a humble looking old man dressed in an ordinary suit. I paid little attention to him, thinking that he might be one of the servants, perhaps the doorman. Brother Packer brought the old man forward and introduced him as the prophet of the Church, Spencer W. Kimball. My immediate thought was, This humble, ordinary looking man is the prophet? You've got to be kidding. Where is his scepter? His cloak of authority?

He hugged each of us and shook our hands. He had us sit down, asked me to push my chair a little closer to him, and looked me directly in the eyes. Then he said something to us that I had never heard from any leader of any church or organization. He said, "Brother Bear Chief, I want you to know that I love the Indian people." This one sentence gave me more spiritual peace than any other words of comfort that I had ever been offered. Even though a man had spoken them, the words seemed to come from a higher source. In those few moments, I recalled the many times that my family had been driven from place to place, searching for good neighbors with whom we could live and work. How I had hated those who shunned us. How I had wished bad things upon them. President Kimball's words touched me so deeply that I melted inside. I felt as if I had found a long-lost father who had greeted me with open arms and would remain with me forever. I knew then that he had to be a prophet of God.

God, through his missionaries, plucked us from the ashes of a miserable existence and led us to one of joy, peace, and happiness. Although we still suffer many afflictions as a result of the environment in which we live, we praise our God for finding us and bringing us to the new life we now enjoy. Had we not passed through these many experiences, good and bad, our testimonies would have crumpled and we would have fallen away long ago. God has taken away all the hatred I had towards this church. I have come to believe that those who hate the Church do so because they still do not understand its teachings. We do not profess to fully understand it either. But we do know this: the Lord has shown us through his church and its people the real

meaning of Christian love. He has caused us to feel that we are in the arms of loving parents.

The Church has not made us rich financially. Nor has it caused us to have stiff necks toward others. It has, however, given us a fuller understanding of life, a more comprehensive view of why God bothered to create us and put us on this earth and what his total plan is for all of his children. It gives us a sense of where we really came from, what is the point of our existence here, and what happens after we leave this earth. We have learned to view life in terms of an eternal existence. Most important, the gospel gives us identity. It answers for us the slippery questions that still perplex so many of my people: What am I? An Indian? An Aborigine? An indigenous person? A grassroots person? First nation? The Church, through its prophets and scriptures, answers these questions. Because of them, and as a result of my many personal experiences, I cannot and do not doubt.