



George A. Smith

1817–1875

D&C 124:129; 136:14

At age nine, George suffered a severe blow to his head. Physicians diagnosed the problem as a skull fracture and wanted to perform surgery. George’s father, John Smith, refused to allow surgery and dismissed the physicians, claiming that his faith could heal his son. When George got better, George was convinced his father’s faith had healed him. Turning his life to religious matters, George attended the Congregational Church with his parents in Potsdam, New York. Not being satisfied with the Congregational doctrine, he attended revival meetings. George recalled one preacher at a revival meeting sealing him up to “eternal damnation” for not publicly expressing his conversion.¹

George’s search for religious truth was not realized until August 1830 when his uncle Joseph Smith Sr. and cousin Don Carlos made a visit to his family. They brought with them a copy of the Book of Mormon. After reading a few pages in that sacred book, George

¹ Andrew Jenson, *LDS Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1901), 1:38.

desired to enter baptismal waters. He was baptized on September 10, 1832, in Potsdam, New York, by Joseph H. Wakefield.

In 1833 George moved with his family from New York to Kirtland, Ohio. In that city of the Saints, he labored on the Kirtland Temple. In 1834 he was the armor bearer and personal guard for the Prophet Joseph Smith as Zion's Camp marched to Missouri. When he was called to serve his first mission in 1835, his father gave him a pocket Bible and Brigham Young gave him a pair of shoes. Joseph and Hyrum Smith gave him a Book of Mormon and a gray cloth for a coat. The Prophet Joseph advised George to "preach short sermons. Make your prayers short and deliver your sermons with a prayerful heart."² On that first mission, young George journeyed 1,850 miles and led eight people into the waters of baptism.

When he returned to Kirtland, George was suffering from inflammatory rheumatism and expressed to the Prophet Joseph that he felt discouraged. Joseph admonished him,

You should never get discouraged, whatever your difficulties may be. If you are sunk in the lowest pit in Nova Scotia and all the Rocky Mountains piled on top of you, you ought not to be discouraged but to hang on, exercise faith and keep up good courage, and you will come out on top of the heap.³

George served another mission to the southern states. On this mission he met Bathsheba Bigler, the young woman he would marry in a few years. After the mission, George joined the main body of the Saints in northern Missouri and endured religious bigotry and much suffering due to a government-sanctioned extermination order. He served on the Adam-ondi-Ahman High Council and on April 26, 1839, in Far West, Missouri, was called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

His first assignment as an apostle was to labor in the British Isles, but poor health hampered his possibility of fulfilling the mission. When Joseph Smith Sr. saw his emaciated form, he asked, "Who's been robbing the burying yard?" George replied, "I am determined to go to England."⁴ Joseph Smith Sr. blessed him, promising George that if he would go to England, his health would improve. The promise was fulfilled.

² Merlo J. Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom: George A. Smith, John Henry Smith, George Albert Smith* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1981), 19.

³ Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom*, 21.

⁴ Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom*, 37.

In 1841 George returned to the United States and married his sweetheart Bathsheba Bigler in Nauvoo, Illinois. He said of their marriage, “[We] dedicated ourselves to God, for life, praying for His blessings to rest upon us during life and that prosperity might crown our labors.”⁵ His devotion to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and loyalty to Joseph Smith led the prophet to say on May 15, 1843, “George A., I love you as I do my own life.” George replied, “I hope, Brother Joseph, that my whole life and actions will ever prove my feelings and affection toward you.”⁶

Following the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, George helped finish the Nauvoo Temple and was present at the laying of the capstone. “My feelings were such that I could not suppress a flood of tears,” George said of that occasion.⁷ He then joined the Latter-day Saint exodus from Nauvoo to the Territory of Iowa. In April 1847 he joined the Brigham Young vanguard pioneer company and journeyed across the plains to the Rocky Mountains. On the journey, George “narrowly escaped death when he slipped in the mud and the horse he had been watering stepped on [his] foot and then twice on his chest.”⁸ He rode in a wagon much of the way to the valley.

George later served as the historian and general Church recorder for many years. In these capacities, he journeyed extensively throughout Latter-day Saint settlements in the Intermountain West, gathering information of great value to the Church. From 1868 to 1875, he served as first counselor to Brigham Young in the First Presidency of the Church. In that capacity, atop of the Mount of Olives, George rededicated the Holy Land. In his dedicatory prayer, he prayed that Palestine “might become fertile, and the early and late rains descend upon it, and the prophecies and promises unto Abraham and the prophets be fulfilled.”⁹

George died of a lung ailment on September 1, 1875, at age fifty-eight. Of him, Brigham Young said, “The death of Pres. George A. Smith has cast a gloom over the entire community. ... He has gone with as good a record, I believe, as any man who ever lived upon this earth.”¹⁰

⁵ George A. Smith Journal, in Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom*, 45.

⁶ George A. Smith History, 154, in Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom*, 47.

⁷ Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom*, 56.

⁸ Pusey, *Builders of the Kingdom*, 67.

⁹ See Blair G. Van Dyke and LaMar C. Berrett, “In the Footsteps of Orson Hyde: Subsequent Dedications of the Holy Land,” *BYU Studies* 47, no. 41 (2008).

¹⁰ Dean C. Jessee, ed., *My Dear Son: Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 219–220.