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### "By Small Means"

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## Chapter 15

# “BY SMALL MEANS”

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*And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things. (1 Nephi 16:29)*

With these words, Nephi described the working of the Liahona, the ball or director that led Lehi's family during their travels in the wilderness. The theme was taken up several centuries later when Alma explained the workings of the Liahona to his son Helaman. “And it did work for them according to their faith in God,” he said, “Nevertheless, because those miracles were worked by small means it did show unto them marvelous works [and] they were slothful, and forgot to exercise their faith and diligence and then those marvelous works ceased” (Alma 37:40-41). Alma also told Helaman that

By small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise. And the Lord God doth work by means to bring about his great and eternal purposes; and by very small means the Lord doth confound the wise and bringeth about the salvation of many souls. (Alma 37:6-7)

The Lord expressed the same idea in a revelation to the prophet Joseph Smith: “Be not weary in well-doing, for ye are laying the foundation of a great work. And out of small things proceedeth that which is great” (D&C 64:33).

### **“SMALL” EXAMPLES**

When the great Syrian general Naaman sought a miraculous cure for his leprosy, he came to the Israelite prophet

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Elisha. He expected that the prophet would make some dramatic gestures and call on God to heal him. Instead, Elisha instructed him to dip himself seven times in the muddy Jordan river. Naaman was greatly disappointed and prepared to return home to Damascus, where there were much cleaner rivers in which to bathe. But the words of a servant girl changed his plans. She asked, “if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? how much rather, then, when he saith to thee, Wash and be clean?” (2 Kings 5:13).

It is said that J. Golden Kimball, a president of the Seventy, once asked a Latter-day Saint congregation how many would be willing to die for the Church. All hands were raised. He then asked how many would be willing to donate fifty cents. It seems that we are all willing to perform great works for the Lord’s work, but we often ignore the small tasks, such as daily prayer and scripture reading, family home evening, and home teaching.

We mortals sometimes belittle our callings in life—including church callings—because they seem too insignificant to make an impact in the “grand scheme of things.” Paul saw this problem among the early saints at Corinth, and told them that, like a body whose various parts must all perform their role in order to maintain health and be effective, each office in the church was important to the Lord’s work (1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

We can take a lesson from the biblical Joseph. As a son, he did not hesitate to do his father’s bidding (Genesis 37:13). Sold into slavery in Egypt, he was determined to remain faithful to God and to his mortal master even in the face of unjust accusations and punishment (Genesis 37:1-19). Falsely accused and imprisoned, he became the most reliable prisoner by retaining his dignity and convictions (Genesis 39:21-23; 40). When released and promoted to the second-highest office in the kingdom of Egypt, he served his king and his people to the very best of his ability (Genesis 45). In other words, Joseph was determined to do the very best job regardless of his position in life. The result was that his actions blessed the nations of Egypt and Israel.

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The role that can be played by seemingly insignificant things was stressed by James when he wrote, “Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm” (James 3:4). The prophet Joseph Smith drew upon this imagery in a letter written to early church leaders: “You know, brethren, that a very large ship is benefited very much by a very small helm in the time of a storm, by being kept workways with the wind and the waves” (D&C 123:16).

Consider some of the great advances to the Lord’s work that have resulted from small, seemingly insignificant acts of devotion to duty. Jesus placed mud on the blind man’s eyes and told him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam, whereupon the man recovered his sight (John 9:1-7). David, too young to serve in the army with his elder brethren, pitted his simple sling against the most advanced weaponry in the ancient Near East to defeat the Philistine Goliath (1 Samuel 17).<sup>1</sup> Joseph Smith, with the simplest possible kind of faith, went into the grove of trees near his father’s home and saw the heavens opened for the first time in nearly two millennia. Simple acts of faith, relying on the Lord to do the rest, have resulted in miracles whose stories will live through all eternity.

Nephi’s experience with the Liahona led him to reflect on earlier events in the history of Israel in which faith was the only requirement for the performance of a miracle. One short chapter after describing the operation of the Liahona, he wrote of the brass serpent constructed by Moses to heal Israelites who had been bitten by poisonous serpents in the wilderness (see Numbers 21:6-9). Nephi noted that “the labor which they had to perform was to look; and because of the simpleness of the way, or the easiness of it, there were many who perished” (1 Nephi 17:41).

Nephi had carefully chosen his words, noting that the

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<sup>1</sup> In David’s time, the Philistines held a monopoly on iron (see 1 Samuel 13:19-22).

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Israelites had only “to look.” He undoubtedly had in mind the words of the Lord to his father Lehi, “Look upon the ball, and behold the things which are written” (1 Nephi 16:26). This brings us back to Alma’s admonitions to Helaman regarding the Liahona:

O my son, do not let us be slothful because of the easiness of the way; for so was it with our fathers; for so was it prepared for them, that if they would look they might live; even so it is with us. The way is prepared, and if we will look we may live forever. (Alma 37:46)

The essential element in performing these simple acts is faith in the word of God. Jesus stressed the importance of even a small amount of faith in accomplishing great works: “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you” (Matthew 17:20).<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The exercise of faith does not require that we perform great deeds. Rather, it requires that we call upon God to accept our small deeds and our faith and to use us as instruments in performing his great work. It was, after all, not Moses who parted the Red Sea and performed other miracles in Egypt. He merely held up his rod and repeated what the Lord had told him. In like manner, our small but righteous acts can lead to great and marvelous results.

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<sup>2</sup> The Book of Mormon notes that the brother of Jared once used his faith to move a mountain (Ether 12:30). Enoch and his people moved mountains and changed the courses of rivers by means of faith (Moses 7:13-14). See also Mormon 8:24.