

The Greatest Lessons of my Mission

Shawn Wheelock

New York, New York South, Korean Speaking, 9/97-9/99

shawn@watergeek.net

Like most others, my mission was truly a roller coaster, filled with glorious heights, in which my spirit would seem to soar with the angels of the almighty, and with devastating heartbreak, which would leave me crying far into the night. Each was absolutely essential in my growth, and the Lord, in His infinite kindness doled me just as many of each as I needed. He changed me in more ways than I could possibly enumerate, and blessed me more than I could ever deserve. The inspiration for writing this comes from my last zone meeting in the mission, in which the zone leader asked me to give a talk on this theme. I spent a great deal of time pondering, trying to figure out how to encapsulate two years of growth and incomparable learning into a few trite phrases. I decided to stay away from such ubiquitous experiences as learning to rely totally on the Lord, to trust in His timing, and the incredible joy of service. While very true, these are things that every missionary that served well will have learned. I wanted to address some that I thought might be a little more unique to my experiences. I finally was able to come up with a few, and will elaborate on each on them.

The List

- 1) It is the heart that matters most.
- 2) It is all about progression
- 3) We are all walking different paths, comparison is invalid
- 4) The true measure of discipleship is capacity for love
- 5) Balance is the key to success

1) From my Journal 9/14/99 “It is the heart that matters most, not anything else that the world may esteem as of great value. It is our heart that the Lord looks at and that we need to learn to look at as well if we are truly to become more like Him. Robert really taught me that. He was absolutely clueless about everything, had no social skills, memory, or just about anything else, but he loved with Lord and his heart was made of pure gold.”

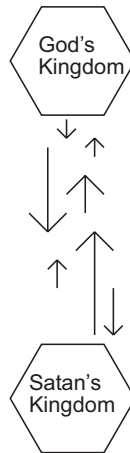
When I got transferred into my second area (I only had two), the zone leader had told me that I was going on splits with Robert, and I said that I wasn't. He eventually made me, and it was a thoroughly miserable experience. All of my life, I had judged people based on their intelligence and intellect. This was the ultimate measure of worth. Robert was the absolute antithesis of the articulate intellectual, and although it pains me to say it now, seemed to me like nothing more than a big burden to society. I avoided him like some insidious strain of the Black Death for weeks, and had intentions of doing so until I was healthy enough to be put back in the Korean program. As usual, the Lord had other plans, and infinitely more power. He forced me to interact again and again with Robert and slowly began changing my heart. I began to see that his heart was a radiant diamond, gloriously reflecting the one true light. Mine, on the other hand, had been a rather unappealing blob of swamp scum. I spent eight months in this branch, in which I would repeatedly forget, and be re-taught this magnificent lesson.

2) Also from my journal: “ It is all about progression. The Lord has commanded us to be on the road TO perfection, not to be without flaw this very second. Moreover, he does not care so much about where we are as where we are going and how hard we are trying to get there. He is much more pleased with a sinner who is trying to change and repent than a formerly righteous person who slowly is falling away.” One of my companions was an amazing person who taught me this principle in ways that few others ever could. While not a story of strictly spiritual progression, it illustrates the point wonderfully. He was a little strange, always somehow off kilter socially, not very smart at all, didn’t read all that well, and so forth. Teaching with him was truly a chore. My inclination was to be really annoyed with him most of the time. I am just like – “gee, another dumb hick from Utah. Oh happy day.”

Eventually, I found out his story and was in awe. When he was born, he was constantly having seizures every 10-30 minutes. He never learned to talk because of this and was never able to interact with other children. By age eight, he was finally talking, but was still having significant problems with just about everything else. His doctors finally concluded that since the seizures were so severe, they would have to do surgery and cut the corpus callosum in his brain. Not only did this not stop the seizures, it; of course, made it so that he was not able to put images from his eyes and sounds from his ears together. He said he saw something like six images at a time. Then, one day, almost at his 14th birthday, his vision became normal, his hearing also became normal, and his seizures went away. The doctors said that was impossible. A short time later, he haltingly read a sentence to the doctors, and they were in total disbelief – it was quite literally medically impossible for him to have done so.

The faith of him and his family had allowed the Lord to heal him. He then, in this state, went straight into inferno that is high school. And from there, on a mission to serve his Father. I was completely dumbfounded at the obstacles that this man of God had overcome, at the incredible progression that he had made in his life. I began to respect him more than any other elder in the mission, and began to feel truly ashamed of myself for judging him unkindly. With whom was the Lord more pleased? I had overcome many trials, certainly, and was trying to do my best. But I could just imagine the incredible joy that filled our Father’s bosom when he looked down upon His humble servant whose companion I got the privilege of being. This is both a temporal and spiritual example. I maintain that the same principle applies across all of life experience. Indeed, one of my most effective teaching examples (it is dumb in its simplicity, but always seemed to get the point across well) is included below.

With Whom is the Lord most Pleased?



3) Again, from my journal: "We are all walking different paths, and comparison is completely invalid. We all have the same destination, the Celestial Kingdom, but we all have our own strengths and weaknesses that are uniquely crafted for us. We each need different experiences in order for the Lord to forge us into a mighty heir of eternal life." As a missionary, I would get depressed that so-and-so spoke Korean better than I, or that they performed more baptisms. Surely this meant that I was a failure. I spent much of the early months of my mission engaged in these hollow comparisons which just led me into a chasm of feelings of inadequacy. It is through experiences like those I spoke of above that I really began to see that we all have different starting points, different talents, and completely different trials. A side by side comparison could never work. This realization, when I was able to keep it in my mind and not slide back into worldly comparisons, enabled me to find great peace and satisfaction in the missionary who I was and in the service which I presented unto the Lord.

4) When I had one month left before going home, I spent copious amounts of time pondering my service as a missionary. I had wrestled a lot with trying to figure out what it was to be a good missionary. I wasn't a really high baptizer (nobody in the Korean program ever was), was only a district leader, had a lot of health problems and had sorta just struggled (or bled) my way along.

After praying a lot, this is what I finally came up with, and on 8/1/99 recorded in my journal: "I am of the opinion that the most important measure of how successful of a missionary one has become is by how much they have learned to love. It is by loving people that we start to learn to be like our Father... I think that the most important prayer that I can offer is a plea to teach me how to love... I love the Lord so much. I yearn so much for the kind of love that would cause me to weep as I look out over this great city of iniquity. These are my brothers and sisters who are suffering, being led by Satan. I just wish that I could feel that as they are persecuting me on the street."

The Lord had rocked my world. For most of my mission I had thought that I would be successful as a missionary only if I brought a lot of people into the church, had leadership calls and had been an example to other missionaries. The Lord finally got it through my head that while all of

these things were good and important, that I was missing the real core of it – how much had I learned to love? How much did I love my companions? My investigators and converts? The church members? The less active? The people who I was attempting to serve? Myself? And most importantly, how much did I love the Lord?

Since that time, I have become more and more convinced of the universality of this principle. I believe that love is the single most important principle in this life. It is the motivating force behind the creation of the universe, behind the atonement, behind everything that the Lord does. If we seek to become more like Him, it is only through love that we will do so. The apostle Paul articulates it much better than I ever could in these words:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.”ⁱ

5) Balance. King Benjamin hints at it with his words “it is not requisite that a man (or woman) should run faster than he has strength”ⁱⁱ. Like every other geenie missionary, I could quote this at the drop of a hat. Yet did I really understand it? Were these great words written in my heart?

When I became a senior companion, I was also called to train a new missionary. I loved the Lord and the gospel with all my heart, and I now really had the opportunity to prove it. I resolved to be the absolute best missionary I could, to not let the slightest detail get past me. I ensured that we were more obedient than I had ever been before, and had all my energies focused on the great pinnacle of “Exact Obedience” which was portrayed (along with six other virtues) on our mission flag. My companion and I walked the streets of New York for 10 and 11 hours a day talking with people, day after day. I pushed my greenie much too hard, and was going myself at about 100% for two months. Keeping of the law had become an end unto itself for me. Then it all came apart. My greenie, pushed beyond what was prudent, exploded on me. I was still holding on though, determined to loose myself in the work. Then I really did loose myself. I totally fell apart. I was so burned out that I had a really hard time even getting myself out of the door in the morning. I was extremely unhappy and quite depressed. My physical health even fell through the floor and I had to be taken out of the Korean program and placed in the mission office, which was often synonymous with hospital in our mission

Where had I gone wrong? I thought that I was placing it all on the altar, quite literally trying to loose myself in the work of the Lord. I was trying to be exactly obedient and to magnify my calling as much as I possibly could. Why had the Lord let me down? I felt as if I had done a trust fall, and there was no one there to catch me. The ground was hard indeed. I spent much time talking with my (patient) mission president as he tried to explain to me about “balanced effort”, the very concept which King Benjamin had been trying to teach me. He told me that on a scale from one to ten, with one being the least obedient and ten being the most, that he wanted his missionaries to be about an eight. I was, apparently, a twelve. He then explained that it was ok to stop for ten minutes at the park and play basketball with the locals. We then were to teach

them, of course, but the break was not only permissible, but necessary. I could not run faster than I had strength.

Parting thoughts

My mission was quite possibly the single most important and joyful event of my life. It was also, without a doubt, the hardest, and the hardest to have come to an end. Upon coming home, I spent months trying to fill my life with something else that would hold meaning, trying to let the mission that I loved so much go, and move on with my life. My mind knew it was over, but my heart cried daily in protest. Such is the life altering power of a mission. It is a privilege beyond all expression to take the Lord's hand, and in His name proclaim His gospel. The miracle of it is that as you work under His mantle, lead by His spirit, that he molds and crafts you not only into a better and more effective person, but also into an heir of His kingdom and "that joy which is unspeakable and full of glory"ⁱⁱⁱ. The ever-insightful words of C.S. Lewis seem to encapsulate much of this.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace.^{iv}

We are all beloved children of our Father in Heaven, worth more to Him than anything else imaginable. Worth more, even, than the divine blood of His only begotten. But we are not just His children, we are His artwork, and His glory. Elder Holland proclaims that, "You and I, we are his prized possessions, and we are the earthly evidence, however inadequate, of what he truly is."^v If we will allow His divine hands to touch us, to hold us, to love us, He will make of us beings of unfathomable beauty and glory – truly fit to be the offspring of God. This is His promise. It is also our choice. What will it be?

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

ⁱⁱ Mosiah 4:27

ⁱⁱⁱ Helaman 5:44

^{iv} Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*, 174

^v Holland, Jeffrey R., "Of Souls, Symbols, and Sacraments"