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Robert A. Hasara, 1953

Blessed by Seminary

Robert A. Hasara

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I was born in Virden, a small farm town on the flat cornfields of central Illinois. Virden is 150 miles from Nauvoo, but I would not understand the significance of that place until I was a teenager. My father, Andy Hasara, was a math teacher and track coach at the high school in our town, where he had been a star athlete when he went to school there as a boy.

When Pearl Harbor was attacked, Dad immediately took a job with the DuPont Chemical Company in Joliet, which is near Chicago. During World War II, Dad supervised a department in a TNT explosives manufacturing facility for DuPont, where he had several thrilling and dangerous moments.

A month after World War II ended, in September 1945, when I was ten years old, we packed everything that would fit into a 1940 Ford sedan and moved to California. My parents had lost two infant children after I was born, so the three of us, with our meager possessions, headed down old Route 66 for Los Angeles, California. My father planned to go into the construction business with his brother. Among the tightly packed goods, I had a tiny space that I could call my own in the back seat of the old car for the five-day ride across the country.

I had never been in a city the size of Los Angeles before. Going from a small country town school to the huge Raymond Avenue Elementary School in the center of Los Angeles was a tremendous adjustment for me.

My father started working in the construction business and purchased a building lot in Inglewood, California, with money saved from U.S. Savings Bonds he bought during the war. For several months while Dad built the house at night, we lived in an attic, sharing the kitchen with a cranky landlady at odd times of the day. I remember he did everything but the plumbing and the electrical wiring, with Mom and me helping many evenings and on weekends. The house was less than a mile from the old Inglewood Ward building on Centinela Avenue, which came to play such an important part in my life just a few years hence.

Looking back, I can easily see how the Lord was guiding my parents' steps from the day we got into that old Ford sedan in Illinois until we finally moved into the house my dad had built. His construction jobs, my schooling in Inglewood, and the completion of the new house were steppingstones to great future blessings the Lord had in store for our small family. We were sort of modern-day pioneers. Our covered wagon was the old Ford sedan on Route 66.

It was necessary for the garage part of the house to be finished first because we moved out of the rented attic when we couldn't stand it any longer. I remember the two-burner hot plate on the workbench in the garage and meals cooked in the fireplace of the still-unfinished house.

Finally, the house was completed, and I had a real room of my own. I remember the airplanes flying over all the time because we were only four miles from what would become Los Angeles International Airport.

As I grew up, my parents did not go to church meetings together. Dad came from a staunch Slovak Catholic family, and Mom was a Protestant. I was raised with the understanding that when I was old enough, I could choose what church I wanted to affiliate with. That was the way they kept religious peace between them. Most of the time I went to church with my dad. When I was about thirteen years old, Dad arranged for me to take some catechism lessons for confirmation into the Catholic faith because I felt that was the right decision for me at that time. I had to take the bus or walk three miles every Saturday morning to meet with an old priest at the parish downtown at 8:00 a.m. He would give me scriptures and prayers to memorize for twenty or thirty minutes each Saturday and send me home expecting me to recite them perfectly the next Saturday morning. For reasons I didn't understand until later, the old priest and I, a young boy of thirteen, had a real personality clash. He didn't seem to like my being there that early, and I didn't like all the memorization. I told my Dad I wasn't going to continue the Saturday-morning meetings.

I finished elementary school, went on to junior high school, and then attended Inglewood High School, which was very large, with sev-

eral hundred students. Most days I walked two miles each way to school by myself. I got involved in student government and social activities. I always had an interest in making new friends, maybe because I had no siblings at home.

During my junior year of high school, Gary Smith and Kent Thompson became my close friends. We worked on school committees, went to athletic and social events together, and visited each other's homes. I didn't know until later that Gary's dad was bishop of the Inglewood Ward and Kent Thompson's dad was his first counselor. After a few weeks, Kent asked me if I would like to go to a religious class with him. I was on the track team at the time. Several of the team members and I would walk from school uptown to the same Catholic parish I had gone to earlier to pray together before a big track meet. So religious activity was not a strange thing to me. I still had not felt it important to join a church after the Saturday morning experience I had had before. I told Kent I would love to go and asked where they met. He said, "Every school day morning at 6:00 a.m." I said, "What? You mean you go to church every weekday morning—at 6:00 a.m.?" I was never an early-morning person as a teenager. In fact, when I finally agreed to go with Kent, I told my mother about my plans, and she laughed right out loud. "You—getting up to go to church at 5:30 a.m.? Whom are you going with? What church is it?"

"I don't know, Mom. It's just a group of kids at school that go to a church class before school every morning."

"Well, I'll have to see it to believe it—you, up at 5:30 a.m." She told me I could go "as long as it didn't interfere with my schoolwork." A couple of days later I set the alarm and packed my own lunch for the first time, and Kent Thompson picked me up for what became a very important event in my life.

It was only a mile to the old Inglewood Ward church building. There was a parking lot across the street where we all parked our cars for quick getaways after seminary to nab the best parking places at the high school. When I walked into the seminary class for the first time, I was amazed to be greeted by the peer group of my high school. Several varsity athletes, a couple of the prettiest varsity cheerleaders, and several other "big people on campus" were in the room. There were, as I remember, about twenty in the class whom I had seen on campus but was not acquainted with, much less have any idea about their church affiliation. The class opened with singing a hymn, and one of the varsity football players gave an opening prayer that astonished me because it was as sincere and thoughtful as anything I had heard before—and without any notes!

The seminary teacher was a telephone company executive who really connected in a special way with the class. He was immediately very friendly to me, completely different from my early Saturday-morning experience a couple of years before. This fellow had a captivating, almost constant, smile on his face, and all the kids thought he was really special. His name was Robert L. Simpson. A few years later, in 1961, he was called to serve as a counselor in the Presiding Bishopric of the Church and was a General Authority for twenty-four years.

Brother Simpson told us many stories about his missionary experiences among the Maori people in New Zealand. They were always accompanied by a Maori war chant or dance step that made them so memorable I can still see him doing it in my mind after more than fifty years. I became really interested in the scriptures for the first time in my life because of the way he made them come alive for us kids. Needless to say, I began going to seminary every morning, enjoying my new friends. I particularly began to watch them at school because of the way they acted on campus. Their example, plus a great seminary teacher who took an interest in me, got me going to church with them almost every Sunday. Because of the positive influence that seminary had on me, my parents kept their word and never offered any resistance to my becoming a member of the Church.

In the spring of 1952, just before school was out, I had a very memorable experience that has stuck with me throughout the years. Early one morning, we all arrived at the chapel and settled into the usual routine of singing a hymn and having an opening prayer. But this day was different. Sitting in the corner of the room, to one side of Brother Simpson, was a kindly looking, neatly dressed, elderly gentleman—I remember he had on a brown suit and conservative tie. He sat there making eye contact with us and offering a friendly glance as we sang and prayed together. He looked attentively at Brother Simpson as he conducted regular announcements and really seemed to enjoy being with us. I remember thinking, “Who is this little fellow?” I noticed he was kind of short. A couple of the kids whispered, “Who is he?”

We were all about to have one of the greatest experiences of our lives. Brother Simpson told us that we had a special visitor that morning and that we would not be having a regular lesson. He motioned the man in the brown suit to come up beside him and said, “I want to introduce you to one of my New Zealand missionary companions.” We then got to spend the next two hours with Elder Matthew Cowley of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

He first bore his testimony and then told us stories about him and Brother Simpson serving together in New Zealand. Brother Simpson

had been one of his assistants when Elder Cowley was president of the New Zealand mission just before World War II. We were all riveted on him in rapt attention as he told stories, with a lot of humor, even asking Brother Simpson to demonstrate a certain Maori war whoop that made us all laugh. I remember he talked a lot about Jesus Christ, referring to special scriptures as he did so.

At the end of two hours—we were all an hour late to school—we each got to shake his hand, and Brother Simpson introduced me as the only investigator in the class. Elder Cowley told me, “It is the truth,” and testified that he *was* an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. I remember I was very impressed with his whole demeanor. I came to find out that every time Elder Cowley came to Los Angeles on Church business, he liked to stay in the home of his missionary assistant, so we were able to have this marvelous experience one spring morning in 1952, which, looking back, secured my testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel.

That summer, on July 5, 1952, I was baptized in the old Inglewood Ward font and confirmed the next day by the future General Authority, Robert L. Simpson.

I had a good job that summer but looked forward to school starting again so I could get back into seminary. Little did I realize what a special year my senior year would be. A new student from a neighboring ward started coming to class. She had graduated from high school in the spring of 1952 and was baptized a few months after me. Her name is Vickie Jeffrey. She wanted to learn more about the Church and got Brother Simpson’s permission to attend seminary before going to work each morning. We began dating when I came home from BYU for the summer.

We were married in the Salt Lake Temple in 1954. Being the only members of the Church in our families, we had to make the trip without family members but with Kent Thompson and his new wife as our chaperones.

We will have been married for fifty-one years this August. When we started having children, my parents took the missionary lessons several times and finally joined the Church. A few years later, I baptized Vickie’s mother and brother.

A trip in the old Ford got the family to California, where we wound up just a mile from the Inglewood Ward chapel. An invitation by friends, a special seminary teacher, meeting an Apostle of the Lord for the first time, and especially meeting my wife have brought great joy and happiness into my life. Anyone can see why seminary has such a special place in my heart. **RE**