



10-1-1975

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Ronald K. Esplin

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Recommended Citation

Esplin, Ronald K. (1975) "Sickness and Faith, Nauvoo Letters," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol15/iss4/5>

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Sickness and Faith, Nauvoo Letters

Ronald K. Esplin*

The following exchange of letters between John and Leonora Taylor reveals in striking detail the weight of sickness upon the Church and specifically upon the Taylor family in the late summer and fall of 1839. These letters are also important as illustrations of the dedication and faith required for the apostles to answer the call to England at that difficult time, with their families suffering from poverty and disease.

At the passing of Joseph Fielding Smith, these letters came to the Historical Department of the Church with a body of papers that belonged to his father, Joseph F. Smith. They are now with the John Taylor collection of the Department. For publication here the letters have been edited according to the following policy: Spelling has been transcribed exactly, although abbreviations have been expanded. Some capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing have been provided to improve readability.

During the previous winter the Taylors, like the rest of the Saints in northern Missouri, had been driven from their home by violence and persecution, forcing abandonment of many of their possessions. Then in July and August malarial chills and fevers and other illnesses visited them and other families along the banks of the Mississippi, bringing death and debilitation to a people already struggling with too little means to build new homes and new towns. When the Church had faced severe trials in Kirtland, Joseph Smith responded by sending Heber C. Kimball and Orson Hyde to England to launch foreign missionary work. Now, again looking ahead from the difficulties in Nauvoo to the blessings of the future, he similarly responded

*Ronald K. Esplin, a Ph.D. candidate in history at Brigham Young University is an historical associate in the Church Historical Department.

with a positive program. This time not only Elders Kimball and Hyde but all of the Twelve would go to England to expand and invigorate that important work.

The story of the departure of the Twelve in the midst of poverty and sickness is well known. Some of them were sick when they left; others, like Elder Taylor, succumbed to illness along the way. They left penniless, for the most part, and their families were no better off. These revealing letters depict in some detail the specific hardships and suffering of one family, deepen and particularize our appreciation of the faith and determination that sustained them, and portray the weight of sickness that devastated the Church that first season on the Mississippi.

John Taylor and Wilford Woodruff were the first to answer the call. In preparation, Elder Taylor blessed his family and dedicated them to the Lord.

The thought of the hardships they had just endured [he remarked] the uncertainty of their continuing in the house they then occupied—and that only a solitary room—the prevalence of disease, the poverty of the brethren, their insecurity from mobs, together with the uncertainty of what might take place during my absence, produced feelings of no ordinary character. These solicitations, paternal and conjugal, were enhanced also by the time and distance that was to separate us.¹

Leonora Taylor and her three children lived in a log room in the broken-down barracks of abandoned Fort Des Moines—Montrose, as they called the area. Baby Joseph would be two years old, Mary Anne would be four, and George would be six, all in January next.

On 8 August 1839, Elders Taylor and Woodruff left the Mississippi for New York. John Taylor wrote his family once during the first month, a letter that apparently arrived in Montrose sometime before Leonora commenced to write. She began her letter on 9 September, finishing the last installment nearly one month later. In the meantime, after a serious illness which he describes in the letter, Elder Taylor wrote another letter on 19 September, this one from Germantown, Indiana. It

¹B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963 George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1892), pp. 67-68. Roberts had access to the Taylor diaries, the present whereabouts of which is unknown, and perhaps other sources. On page 68-71 Roberts relates from an independent source some of the information that Taylor included in his letter to his wife which is reproduced below.

was still en route when Leonora finally sent her letter in October, so the two letters crossed in the mail. Without concrete news of each other, each with a private burden of sickness and loneliness, they share their experiences and feelings.

Montrose Sunday Sep 9th 1839

My very Dear John

I write in hopes this may find you in New York. This has been a distressed place since you left, with Sickness. Almost evry individual in evry Family sick; George got well of his fever but has a little sore on the edge of the sight of his Eye that has given me great anxiety. I have tried evry thing all most for it. It seems better to day but poor dear he is seised with chils and fever to-day again. My poor little Joseph has had chils and fever twice; this is his well day. Sister Orson Prat[']s Baby is dead. She died on Sunday. The day following we were expecting Joseph would die but the Lord spard my dear Child in answer to Prayer. Mary Anne is well and I keep upon my Feet *grunting about*. Brother Williams Family are all sick, Mary has not been with me 2 days since you left.

Brother [Brigham] Young Family are all sick, him and all. The[y] could not get a drop of watter. I feched them several Pails. Brother [Alanson] Ripley and I were there the other day [and] Brother Young said it was a Greivous *imposition* that the[y] could not have the Room I was in. I made answer I did not know where to go. I did not like to intrude upon a Family and I was tired of it. He said he would lie in the Street if he was me before a Family should be situated as theres was, that Mrs. Young was Sick. The first I heard of it, I imediately got a strange Man that was here to move my things into Sister [Sarah] Prats Room where I now am—Sister [Phoebe] Woodruff is at Sister [Martha?] Smoots. Sarah got better and came back, Sister Woodruff got chils and Feaver and moved into Sister Smoots, Sarah is sick again. I heard today Sister Woodruff is better.

We have hear[d] [unclear] how you were to get on to Cleaveland. Pray write *soon* and *often* to me My Dear John. I never needed more grace, patience or your prayers than I do at present. The[y] have promised to put my [me] up a House near Sister Woodruff. Father Morley is a good Man. I am waitting for Brother Smith Brother to William Smoot to make his House more comfortable and then I shall move there until my *place is prepared*, if I get anny. If I dont Sister Woodruff says I shall live with her, I believe her House is not up. If I do we can *croak* together. I do feel thankfull to the Lord my health is as good as it is.

Brother P[arley] Prat left here on the 29 of August with his Family for New York where he means to leave them.

Brother Orson [Pratt] went with him. Brother [Heber] Kimbal was here yesterday and says he and Brother Brigham will start next week if able. Brother George Smith is still very feeble. I need not tell you who is sick for *all* are sick with very few exceptions. Brother Smith from [undecipherable] came to see me soon after you left. Your Friends were all well. He proposed my going there untill the sickly season was over. B. Young thought *I ought to go*; he was present when he spoke about it. Bishop Knight is still sick. So is Brother Ripley. I have had no wood since you left but what I borrow. Foulks all so sick Brother Ripley can get no one to haul it. Mr. Young has got a little Girl. Seventy five Papers came to the Post office for me for which I paid 7 s[hillings] 2d [pence]. I sold five of them there a bit a piece. Father Haily [Morley?] got to Springfield the Evening after you left in the Morning. He brought up the Papers you sent. I wondered you did not send me a line from there. I got the Letter you sent after you left here.

This is Monday Night. Dear little Joseph has had no fever for two days. Georges Eye seems nearly well for which I do feel more thankfull than I *ever did before*. I pray continually for you and my dear children, I know that the Lord hears and answers me and want that you should do the same for us. I shall direct this to the care Brother Orson Pratt in case you do not get it. Write me long letters, all about your Journey, enny thing perticular in a line at the Bottom; people will snatch a Letter cut of your hand in this part and read it without asking leave—if you send anny thing I should like to have some flanel for *particular* use, red and yellow, a bit; net fore lase for my self, and Quilting, checkd Muslin or plain, a little; a yard $3/4$ of black Silk for Apron. I intended to send Money for them, if you could get it and send them I might pay Brother Fordham or some one here. If Brother Woodruff sent anny thing the[y] might come to-gather, a few yards of cheap Calico for Childrens Frocks and some low priced diaper. Sister Prat bought some that was not a bit a yard. You can get nothing here and what the[y] have is double priced. If you cannot aford Dear John do not mind my mentioning those things to you. If it is not quite conveneint do not try to send anny thing what ever but *Letters* and dont let me have cause to complain for *want of them*.

I walked below Mr. Bissels to Night, looking for the Cow where *you used to go with me* and *felt that I was alone*. But if we suffer to promote the cause of our Blessed Lord it will end in J[oy] which no Man taketh from us. We are seperated for a short time but I hope we shall yet meet to part no more for ever.

Dear little Joseph saw Brother [Abraham?] Smoot on Sunday and thought it was you. He Jumpt of my knee, ran

to him, and clung to his Legs with so much delight you would have pitty'd the dear Lamb. When I say to him Fathers gone he says *gone* quite plain and looks as if he should see you. I found rest, comfort and delight in Praying with my dear little ones before we left *our house*, but now that is over for the present. Brother Ripley is very kind and says I shall have a house but he cannot make one and it is hard to get one. I spoke to him about what B. Young said. He told me he dreaded it worse than death his speaking to me but I must not mind it, he was sick and fretful. I tell evry one I left the Room on account of Sister Youngs confinement that speaks of it. I leave him to settle that business with my Father who has promised to take care of me and mine.

Poor Mary Anne often crys for you. If she sees me look sorrowfull she begins to cry that moment for you and I can scarce stop her. She has gone to the Store several times alone and got what I wanted since Georges' Eye has been bad. I ofended her lately and she said Daddy has gone and left you and I am *glad on it*. My Dear John, Georges Eye is quite well praise the Lord for it. Brother Ripley has been here and says there is to be a general Conferance first Saturday in October. My case will along with others be laid before it and no doubt we shall be provided for. Better than to go to Brother Morleys nebourhood, I am very comfortable and happy as *I can be without your company*. I know the Lord does all things well. Brother Young cald to say he was going tomorrow 12th of Sept Along with Brother Kimbal and Brother George Smith to start for England. I wish you to put the trifles I want on a bit of Paper and burn this when you have read it. I should have wrote another Letter but have not time.

[After writing the main letter (September 9 to 11) Leonora squeezed the following two notes in the remaining space:]

Do not take anny notice to B. Ycung that you care about my leaving his House. I hope it is for the best. The other side the river [Commerce, soon to be Nauvoo] is a Stake. The[y] have bought the citty Lots. If it is not quite convenient do not think of sending anny thing from New York. Write, my dear John, soon possible.

My dear I have heard from Sister Woodruf to day she is still very sick. A Docter who is who is here to day says it will go hard with her. Dont tell Brother Woodruff so. I do hope she will recover, she has been a great comfort to me since you have gone. The children send there love to Father and a kiss. J[oseph] gives me many for you evry day. Children are now all well and my self, bless the Lord. I look for a letter from you evry day. Write a nice long one when you get this, excuse a wreched pen.

[About three weeks later, still without having received the 19 September letter from her husband, Leonora Taylor turned the letter and wrote the following addition at right angles to and on top of the original letter.]

My dear John when I wrote last I in this, all was well. Now I am Sitting watching by the Bed side of our dear George and Joseph late at Night. On Monday last I washed, on Tuesday I went out on the Prairy some Miles after the Cow as she stays away two days together if not fetched up. The Grass wet and cold morning. At Night it poud of rain when I Milked and got wet through. On Wednesday Morning I had a sever Chile and Feaver in consequence of Cold I had taken. The next day Mary A[nne] had Chils and Feaver, thought she was going into Fits. I had to wean my sweet Child lest he should get the Chils from me. The first Night he cryd all night, afterwards he lay about the flore as if his heart was broken. On Friday he had a Chill and has evry day since and no comfort at all for it. All this time George was my only help. He went to the Well and did all he could. On Sunday he fell back to the floor in a Fit and had Chile and Feaver. I watchd him all Night. To day he came to him self so as to talk to me. About noon he fell into the most dreadful fit, and out of that into another and got his Tounge between his teeth his Fingers all turnd back. I thought I *must die*. My dear John I hope the Lord will not lay more upon me than I am able to bear. I have broke my chils and Mary Anns with [undecipherable] Pils. I sufer in My head a great deal; what I have past through since you left has hurt my Head a great deal.

Sunday Night, My dear John I begin my tale once more. My darling Joseph has been at the point of Death, he has had Fever and Bowel complaint and brought so low that I did not hear the sound of his voice for four days. Yesterday his Fever left him. He is better to day but very sick. Still no one expected he could live. Bless the Lord I begin to hope he may be spard. I have not had my Clothes of for five nights. I have watcht by him alone all the time. I cannot tell the sorrow of my Heart at the thoughts of loseing my sweet Child. George is better, thank the Lord for his Mercy. I hope the next Letter I send will be different to this, this is like Jeremiah role [woe?] within and without, lamentations and Woe.

John Mills and his Wife came to see me to day—I was glad to see them. The Conference begins next Saturday and after that I shall know my Fate. Mr. Kilburn has opened a very full Stove [store?] in that corner House we wanted so much. Brother Rogers has turnd Docter and goes round giveing Pills by wholesale to the People. Brother Joseph is

very angry with him and told him to go Home and mind his work. Brother George Smith, [Reuben] Hadlock and [Theodore] Turley started last week for England. Robert Walton has come down from Far West to fetch Mary Anne. He left Brother [Isaac?] Russel Sick of Chile Feaver. All Sick up there, he says. [John?] Goodson is gone back to his Musick in St. Louis. Father Scot wrote a saucy Letter to Brother Joseph. His son in law came over from Canada and took his Wife home back with him. Good Night my dear, my Eyes ach from want of rest.

Oct 9th. I have heard my dear, dear John of your sickness and that you stopt behind. I can not tell you what I feel but trust in the Lord that you have got on your Journey. I have not had a Letter from you yet, do not my dear be so long in writting to me again. I sold 8 dollars worth of Papers at the Conference. William Prat took them for me. I have no more prospect of a house than I had. The[y] say I shall have one but when I dont know. I live in Sister Woodruffs with *Mrs. Prat*. Pray for me my dear.

Joseph is getting better but is not able to walk. I have a deal of trouble with him. Little dear Mary Ann says tell Father my Cheeks are fat with eating Puding. I am very unwell at pressent with pain in my head and Neck but hope I shall be better soon. Brother Ripley is apointed Bishop on this side and 2 Brothers Higby councilors. Father John Smith is presiding Elder on this side the River. The Counselors did not get to the Conference but believe all is right. A young Man cald here from Indiana where you stopt and took an emetick. We kept him all Night. He seems a nice Man. Brother Ripley paid me the 4 dolars and half I [owe?] B. Young. Write to me imediately if you possablely can write. The Children [send] Love to there dear Father.

I am [torn]ing dear John faithfull and affectionate Wife.

Leonora Taylor

John Taylor began his letter with the following:

I thank my heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. That I have this opportunity of addressing you, when I last wrote to you I did not know what was laying before me. you will probably recollect my remarking that

I thank my heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ that I have this opportunity of addressing you. When I last wrote to you I did not know what was laying before me. You will probably recollect me remarking that I had a slight indisposition. That was a cold which seated in my bones and brought on a violent fever which nearly terminated my existence.

The next day after I wrote the letter I felt very unwell and went to bed as soon as we got to the Tavern that night and took a sweat. We started off early next morning and travelled 14 or 15 miles before breakfast when we stayed. I felt unwell and before we started again I fainted away. I however soon recovered and travelled 40 miles that day. In the Evening we got into the neighborhood where we lived in Indiana. (I called upon Esq. Jenkins saw Dr. Wilson who was very friendly and Mrs. Zimmerman. She is strong in the faith and wanted your address. I gave it to her. She said that she would write. I also saw Eatons people who were glad to see me. I am told they are now doing well and bear a good character. I also saw Mr. Hoffman who was glad to see me. He is living in the house that we did. I did not see Brother Anderson, but am told that he is doing well and preaching around the country.) That night I stayed at Mr. Combs—they were glad to see me and treated us well. I felt middling well and stayed talking with them till ten O Clock at night. I went to bed but took no rest. I was not in pain but my nervous system was in some way affected [so] that it deprived me of rest.

Next morning I partook very hearty of milk which I think curdled on my stomach. I had not not gone above two or three miles before I was very ill. The waggon had to stay near Indianapolis. I got out about a mile on this side and told them to drive on and I would come up when I got out of the waggon. I was very sick, vomited but with extreme difficulty. I then after some time made out to stagger on to the waggon and when I got there I fainted away in the road. I took something to refresh me and drove on through Indianapolis about two miles and could go no further. I got onto a bed in a house and had a raging fever and a bilious affection at the same time. Father Coltron [Zebedee Coltrin] learned that we were not far from Brother [Horace S.] Eldredge, he who wanted me to go into that neighborhood when we lived at Mr. Millers. He gave me a lobelia emetic and I took medicine by wholesale for near two hours. It produced however a beneficial effect; I purged, vomited and prespired violently.

Felt myself better but weak in the morning and as Father Coltron was in a hurry to proceed I started with him next morning We travelled 40 miles that day—I found it was

too much for me. I got no sleep at night and next morning soon after we started I thought I should have died. I again fainted away. We travelled about 12 miles and I could go no further. We stayed at a tavern. They waited a day and a half for me. When I saw that there was no prospect of me continuing my journey I told them that they had better proceed. They did so—I have a very good Tavern to stay at. The Landlord and Landlady treated me as their own.

I placed myself under the care of a Docter who did all that he could for me and now near three weeks after my arrival I have got clear of my fever and am fast recovering—i[t] brought me however to the gates of death several times. It laid hold of me like a strong man armed and I was led to quail beneath the power of the adversary for I believe his hand was in it—You may ask me how I am going to prosecute my journey, with my trunk a distance of 300 miles or upwards by land, without means. I do not know, but one thing I do know, that there is a being who clothes the lillies of the valley and feeds the ravens and he has given me to understand that all these things shall be added and that is all I want to know. He laid me on a bed of sickness and I was satisfied. He has raised me from it again and I am thankful. He stopped me on my road and I am content. When my way is open to proceed I shall go on my way rejoicing. If he took me I felt that it would be well. He has spared me and it is better. The Lord does all things well. Bless his holy name Oh my soul and forget not all his mercies.

I left \$4 worth of papers for Brother Eldredge to sell. He will let you have the amount of it in boots or shoes. You can tell him that I did not get anything from Father Col-tron [undecipherable] shall I as he is gone on. Perhaps Brother Eldridge may be there when this reaches [you]. You can tell him what I say if you see him. When you write if anything particular has taken place in the church let me know. Tell who of the twelve have started and etc. If this reaches you in a week from this date send me a few lines directed to Daton, Ohio. If I get them well, if not they will do no hurt.

I am as ever your Affectionate husband

John Taylor

I am going to prosecute my journey, with my trunk a distance of 200 miles or upwards by land, without means. I do not know but one thing I do know, that there is a being who clothes the hills of the valley & feeds the ravens & he has given me to understand that all these things shall be added & that is all I want to know. he laid me on a bed of sickness & I was satisfied, he has raised me from it, & I am content. when my way is open to proceed I shall go on my way rejoicing. If he had took me I felt that I would be well, he has shamed me, & it is better. The Lord does all things well, Bless his holy name Oh my soul & forget not his mercies

A little letter to my Son George

George your Father has been sick but God has made him well. Your Father prays for you that you may not be sick—George be a good boy; do what your Mother tells you and God will love you and I will love you and your Mother. Amen.

John Taylor

A kiss for Joseph and Mother

A little letter to my Daughter Mary Ann—

Mary Ann the Lord has healed your Father from being sick—your Father prays that you and your mother and Baby may not be sick—Mary Ann do not leave your Mother when she tells you to stay at home. Be a good girl, God bless you. Amen.