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Dear Oscar, There Are No Free Helicopter Rides

Ohio Faulkner

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I still remember the wide smile on your face. The inflection in your voice revealed your excitement. Mom had dragged the whole family together for another tooth-pulling Family Home Evening. Sunshine and green grass. No school. And yet Mom imprisoned us to the dining table. Except for you, the family was as impatient as a dog on its first night at obedience school. Mom was the master and we were the dogs, but you were smiling. You held that Book of Mormon in your hand as if it were one of your fingers. Someone said a prayer. Then the time belonged to you to give the lesson. "Open your books to Alma 17. I read this earlier this morning," you said. "This is the chapter where Ammon defends King Lamoni's flocks from being stolen." Anxiously, you told of how you thought it was "so cool" that the Lord gave Ammon the strength to defend Lamoni's flocks. We laughed as you recounted how Ammon smote off the arms of the attackers. You said, "I think it would be pretty funny if you were King Lamoni, and your servants brought you a pile of slain arms." I laughed but I wondered why Ammon mattered. I often think of that Family Home Evening. I often think of that Family Home Evening when I pray that you will soften your heart and return to God.

As you know, going to church was pretty much a forced issue in our family. And yet, our religion believes in

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freedom of choice. We claim that every man has the right to choose good or evil. As a kid, I didn't know any of that. I just put on a warm white shirt ironed by Mom and got in the station wagon like the rest of the family. I didn't rebel. We'd go to testimony meetings and listen to our friends say, "I know Jesus Christ is our Savior. I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen." I remember saying those things in Primary.

When I was too young to offer my own testimony, the Primary president whispered those sentiments in my ear and I, frozen in anguish, repeated them to a rowdy class. Why do we have to "bear testimonies," I wondered. With each uttered phrase, I hoped the Primary president would whisper, "In the name of Jesus Christ, amen" so I could sit down. I watched my friends as I repeated the words verbatim. They weren't paying attention. They played with their clip-ons and made cool noises with their velcro-strapped shoes. Their distractions looked like a lot more fun than my testimony bearing. I wasn't saying the things I said because I knew they were true. I said them so I could sit down.

The Primary president instituted a "Reverence Award." Each Sunday, five or so kids were selected as being the most reverent. The weekly Reverence Award winners received a treat and got a star sticker placed by their name on a cardboard chart in the front of the room. At the end of the year, the kid with the most star stickers would be given a Bible and a triple combination and I was presently winning. My amount of star stickers doubled or tripled all the other kids' totals. No one was more reverent than me.

I remember a Primary lesson at Easter time. The Primary president wanted someone to play Jesus as he lay dead in the tomb. I volunteered. I was an easy pick since I was such a reverence All-Star so the Primary president selected me. She laid me across three of those orange topographically fabricated chairs that smell like dried apple-sauce. Someone spread a white sheet over me. As I lay there, I started thinking I could probably make my friends laugh. I had a white sheet and could play a ghost. Thoughts of the Reverence Award raced through my mind and delayed my entrance as a funny ghost. Then I thought, "Ah, I'm so far ahead. I can take a Sunday off from being reverent. I'll just be really reverent again next week and I'll still have enough star stickers to win the scriptures." So I propelled my body upward, and with arms stretched in front of me like a mummy, I yelled, "Boo!"

Hopes of a spiritual lesson died as all the kids spit laughter. I was a hit with everyone except the Primary president. She frowned while saying that I had been irreverent and had made fun of Jesus. That made me feel bad even though I hardly knew who Jesus was. How could I make fun of someone whom I didn't really know? Besides, everybody had more fun when I played the ghost.

Our family's religious activity differed from that of our friends. As a kid, I didn't know that until I waited in the lunch line with my best friend, Scott Geckel. He told me, "Your religion stinks." He didn't have to give talks or play Jesus under a white sheet. He didn't compete for Reverence Awards. The Geckels just sat in a pew for an hour and then went home. A three hour block of church boggled his mind.

Whether being LDS stunk or not, I didn't really know. Now, I figure when you were eleven, you didn't know either. We just went to church because our family went to church. As the youngest of five boys, I aggressively watched what you did. You went to church with no visible complaints, so I did too. I wasn't a childhood prodigy of spiritual things, only a follower. Your excitement about Ammon told me the Book of Mormon was a thing to check out even though I didn't know it to be true. I didn't read the Book of Mormon except with the family, but your vigor about Ammon caused me to have faith in something I knew virtually nothing about.

When you gave the Ammon lesson, I was ten. My religious views were apathetic at best. When Scott Geckel said "Your religion stinks," I responded, "I know." I didn't care. I never wondered whether the Church was the only way to go or not. I played second base for the green baseball team and forward for the blue soccer team. I wanted glowing grass stains that had to be lathered with soap and scratched by scouring fingernails to come clean. I wanted diving catches, header goals, and double plays. I wanted dried mud to crack off my knees as I left the field that soiled me. I wanted the drain to be full of dead grass and dirt clumps when I emptied the tub. I wanted to smell my name in newsprint for scoring goals. I wanted fame. I didn't lie awake in bed pondering a blood atonement. And I definitely didn't whistle "I Hope They Call Me on a Mission" during recess. I didn't care. And yet, I knew who Ammon was because of you.

The years passed. You went to church as did I. You went to youth conferences, and Mom forced you to tell me about them. You graduated

from high school and joined Jerry at BYU. Jerry turned nineteen and went to Japan on a mission. You turned nineteen. You turned twenty. I wondered why you hadn't gone on a mission. Jay was turning nineteen soon and anxiously awaited the time when he could turn in his mission papers. People went on missions at nineteen, didn't they? The boys in our family were all going to go on missions, weren't they? Were you?

I remember the tension in your face. I did not know then what it meant. I just watched. I thought the choice should have been easy for you. You were nineteen. Mormon boys go on missions when they are nineteen. I flexed my silent jaw and mentally urged, "Just go, Oscar!" Shortly after your twentieth birthday, you submitted your mission papers. You were going on a mission.

Rodger and I were lying in front of the TV when Mom came in and asked if she could turn the TV off. "Sure Mom." Maybe we didn't answer so willingly. I don't remember. "Oscar's mission call came in the mail today," she announced. My food-full mouth tripped curiously over the words, "Where's he going?" I erected my body up from our carpet that was as dusty as it was brown to learn of your news. Mom explained how she had read your call to you over the phone since you were at BYU. "Yeah, yeah. Where's he going? Germany?" She looked so disheartened. I wondered why. We were all smiles and laughs when Jerry got his call to Japan. The tears Mom had then had dried long before this moment. Mom cried at stuff like this. Why not now? "Where's he going?" As if testifying at court, she stated, "He got called to the Utah Ogden Mission and he's a little disappointed about that." We couldn't believe it. Utah! Of all places, you got called to Utah! Maybe our religion did stink. You had studied German for a couple years with hopes of being called there. You had no such luck. That must have been an insult. I thought it was, and your solemnity would later tell me that you also thought so. I learned to not tell people about your mission call unless I was trying to make them laugh.

As a young deacon, I didn't doubt that your mission call had come from the Lord. At the same time, I didn't boldly claim that it had. I didn't know and didn't really care. To me, mission calls were bragging rights. Young boys go to far off lands. The bishop proudly reads letters from him to the ward during sacrament meeting. Mothers with boys out at the same time hug and weep, telling each

other they know how hard it is to watch the belly of a plane swallow their boys. What a clique! These mothers tell younger mothers, "Someday, you'll know the pain of being a missionary's mother." I've often thought to myself, "What a strange hierarchy."

No one from our Greensburg Ward had ever gone to Japan, so when Jerry got called there, it was cool. His letters home were wrapped in those thread-thin brown envelopes. "He uses those to save postage," Mom would say. Jerry sent pictures of himself standing by Buddhist temples and one with the frog-like fish that could kill a person if it wasn't cooked right. I wonder how people learned that! Mom slipped those pictures between the glass and the wooden pane of our hutch. For my birthday, Jerry sent me Japanese chocolate and bubble-gum. Cool! I couldn't decipher the labels, but they tasted good. Long after the candy was eaten I still smelt the wrappers. Japanese gum smelled like American doughnuts. The sweet lingering of the smells satisfied me almost as much as the candy itself. You got called to Ogden. I wondered what you could possibly send me from Ogden.

The night before Dad drove you cross-country to the MTC, we traded temple pictures. You busily crammed two year's worth of possessions into your coffin-sized suitcase. You wanted to take a picture of the temple, but you had no room for your D.C. temple picture with the blood-red sky. My smaller D.C. temple picture had a rigid cold-blue sky and easily fit into your luggage. I happily traded for the big picture, thinking it had more possibilities.

Two months into your mission, we moved to Idaho. No one in Idaho believed us when we told them you were in Ogden. Your mission boundaries were only two hours away by car. My recollections of your mission are few. Nothing you wrote in a letter sticks out. If you sent pictures, I can't remember them. I do remember that you called home a lot. I knew your frequent calls violated mission rules because Jerry only called on Christmas and Mother's Day. Mom and Dad always fussily anticipated Jerry's calls.

Of course I remember when Rodger drove to Willard to spend P-day with you and didn't return. Mom and Dad traded worry for sleep that night. I didn't care. I slept. Mom woke me up. She squeezed her head into the bottom of the bunk bed saying, "We need to go to Willard, so you're going to miss school today." I had no qualms about that.

On the drive down, Mom and Dad told me what had happened. Some members in Willard knew that Rodger, you, and your companion set out to climb Mt. Willard. They grew concerned when night came and your mission car still sat in their driveway. They called the mission president and he called Dad, suggesting that we come to Willard that morning. The drive to Willard wasn't pleasant. Mom feared the worst.

Upon arriving in Willard, we were instructed to drive to the base of the mountain. The chaotic scene reminded me of scurrying ants trying to salvage a piece of stranded picnic cheese. Two news helicopters patrolled the sky. Reporters and cameramen tripped over their cords. The clouds eclipsed the sun. The smell of storm accompanied the darkened day. Supposedly, you guys were alive on that mountain. When missionaries get lost, it's big news in Utah.

Hungry clouds rolled slinkily toward Mt. Willard. They already swallowed the neighboring peaks. In only a few minutes, the clouds would engulf Mt. Willard too. The helicopters would have to land leaving you helpless under the storm.

But just in time, the helicopters spotted you and carried you to safety. With wet eyes, Dad later told me and Mom of your rescue's timing. His emotion trembled, "Those clouds were moving quick. If the helicopters didn't see them soon, they would have been stranded. President Wayne told me that he went to pray; he told the Lord, 'A storm is moving in. We need to get those missionaries off that mountain now!' He came out from where he was praying. Almost immediately we got word that one of the helicopters had spotted them."

You've always been glad about that helicopter ride, figuring it would be your only free one. After your interview with Channel 5 News we returned to your mission apartment. The light on the answering machine beat like a runner's heart. Your district leader had left five or six different messages. Each message sounded more urgent. Laughing at his repeated messages of concern, you told us of the peril you faced on your return journey from Mt. Willard's peak. You came down a different path than you had climbed. The new path led you to a succession of three waterfalls. An attempt to climb down the waterfalls in the March weather would have been fatal. You had to return to your original path. The snow was as deep as your waist so the going was slow. You went so far on the wrong path that night came before you could return to the path that led home. Sleep

would have to be on the mountain, far from the warmth of home. You still claim that you knew exactly where you were, that you were never lost. Looking around your apartment, I couldn't find my picture of the D.C. temple with the cold-blue sky.

I was fifteen years old and in ninth grade when you came back from your mission. I found my first year of experiences in seminary enlightening. We studied the Book of Mormon that year and I didn't come any where close to achieving the ideal of daily scripture study. However, I did find one significant scripture, Mosiah 2:33. I am still strengthened by it. Some nights I'd be about ready to jump in bed when I would realize I hadn't read my scriptures. I'd often read Mosiah 2:33 and call it good. From my first reading, the line "he receiveth for his wages an everlasting punishment having transgressed the law of God contrary to his own knowledge" stuck with me. I've often wondered how much of our misdirected behavior God will dismiss because we knew no better. I've often wondered if you stopped going to church because you didn't know such action was contrary to the will of God.

I believe my knowledge of God took root in ninth grade. My trust in God became mine and not my trust in Mom and Dad's trust in God. A peace had overcome me when Dad explained how President Wayne's prayer for your escape from Mt. Willard was so promptly answered. I remember that feeling. It is like someone washed my soul with a scrub brush. The feeling is unhurried and not anxious. My soul felt white without any threat of stain. I felt that same peace several times during ninth grade. I cared now. Scott Geckel was wrong; it didn't stink to be LDS. I wondered if my actions toward God went against my knowledge of Him. I wondered if yours did.

Your immediate inactivity in church after coming home bewildered me. I asked Mom about it. My questions ignited tender emotions and sometimes tears. I learned not to ask those questions anymore because I didn't know how to comfort Mom. I just quietly observed you. If your name and the Church came up in the same sentence, all heads nodded with a determined frown. It seemed that our family had passed policy on you: everyone in the family needed to be sorry that you didn't go to church but needed to be relatively silent about it. I wondered why, so I just watched you.

I remember an afternoon a few days after you came home from Ogden. Mom came down the stairs. She hugged you and began to cry. Your hesitant arms crawled around her waist. Mom couldn't see me

because I stood facing you. As Mom embraced you, your eyes rolled. Your head shook back and forth in disgust. I wondered why.

You delivered your homecoming address. The sentiments were pure cynicism. You said, "Maybe some of you are wondering why I went on a mission. My younger brother Jay was getting ready to send in his mission papers, so I figured I should too." I sat in the pew wondering why you'd say that.

Jerry got married in Manti. Since Rodger was on his mission, he was the only member of the family who didn't make the trek. Being the only unendowed Faulkner, I prepared myself for a long wait in the temple's lobby, but Mom said you'd wait with me. I wondered why, so finally I asked. Mom said, "Oscar doesn't really feel worthy to go through the temple." Later, as we ate lunch alone at probably the only diner in Manti, I quoted Mom's explanation. It was nerve-racking for me to tell you that. I wasn't only questioning the level of your faith. I was telling you that the level of your faith bothered me. You laughed and said, "Worthy? No. It's not that."

My freshman year at BYU seemed to revolve around mission calls. Would I choose to go? Some of the guys I knew at Deseret Towers shamelessly voiced their choice not to go. Others proudly said they would go. Certainly Mom and Dad expected me to go. They never said so directly to my face, but I could feel their urgings. But it was my choice. I needed to go if I wanted to go. I went.

As I prepared for a mission, I wondered how you felt before your mission. Did you want to go on a mission? Did you feel you had a choice? One night, we battled a snowstorm on our return to Provo from Logan. There had been accidents the whole way. Our progress moved slowly. We had a lot of time to talk.

We talked off and on, but I kept avoiding what I really wanted to talk about: missions. It seemed to me that our family looked at your life as a fragile vase. If we handled the vase too much by talking, we'd break it. You never began religious talks so I was intimidated to do so now. But I felt justified since I would be on a mission in a few months. You knew I was leaving, so it should have been only natural to for us discuss missions. You'd been on one and I hadn't. Finally, I interrupted the silence. "Are you glad you went on a mission?"

"The mission wasn't good for me. I never should have gone," you said.

"Why not?"

"I just don't believe in the religion."

"Yeah," I said. "Some of it, like Joseph Smith's vision, seem pretty spectacular."

"You're telling me."

"Did you ever believe in it?"

"Yeah, when I was a little kid."

"I believe in it," I declared.

"I know. I'm the only one in the whole family who doesn't."

"So why did you go on a mission?"

"I don't know. I didn't believe in Joseph Smith and all that when I left. I told the stake president and he just told me to go anyway. He said a testimony would come. I prayed and all that stuff, but I never felt anything and I never told anyone on my mission that I had."

I wanted to defend the Church. I wanted to share a testimony that would convert you right there. If you never felt the spirit, I wanted you to now. I wanted something I could write up for the *Ensign*. But I had no clue what to say, so I was silent.

I left on my mission and figured it may be easier to convert you from a distance. I fasted and prayed for you. I sent you those evangelical letters full of stream-of-conscious testimony that I am sure you remember so well. It all must have sounded the same to you. When I called on Mother's Day, Mom paused awkwardly and told me I didn't need to write those letters to you anymore. I felt embarrassed. Had I failed in writing you those letters? If you had gone back to church I would have been a family hero. But now I felt like I'd been punished. Mom said you didn't like the letters. "Just tell him about your mission experiences and that you love him," she directed. I stopped writing you those proselytizing letters.

Now I realize that maybe the purpose of those letters was to rob you of what you may feel has been robbed from you your whole life: your choice. Mosiah 2:33 says we receive an everlasting punishment if we transgress the law of God contrary to our own knowledge of God. As I think about you, I think about going to church as kids without really understanding why. I think about agreeing with Scott Geckel's assertion that being LDS stinks, and I think about nineteen-year-old Mormon boys going on missions. As I think about these things I realize there are no free helicopter rides. I realize that a Reverence Award misrepresents the daily struggle of the gospel. A

person can't do good for a while and then coast and still come off the winner. I realize that when we get off of the path we often have to walk in waist-deep snow to return. The snow makes the return-trip slow, but teaches us not to go down that path again. We know the danger.

I wonder what caused us to go to church as young boys. Were we there for more reasons than Mom and Dad? Were we more than puppets? I wonder what caused you to be excited about Ammon. I wonder what caused you to go to youth conferences. I wonder what caused you to attend BYU your freshman year. I wonder what caused you to delay a mission and then eventually go almost as much as I wonder what caused you to hate it. I consider many of your actions to be sinful. I would even claim to know that they are sins. I wonder why I consider many of your actions sinful and perhaps you don't. At the same time, I wonder whether your transgressions of the laws of God have been contrary to your knowledge of God. I wonder. I wonder.

In my mind there are two ways to make a choice. We can choose to act against God contrary to our own knowledge of him or we can make choices without knowing God. You made choices to go to church. You made a choice to be excited about Ammon. You made a choice to go on a mission. Did you make those choices knowing that God wanted you to make them? I've wondered.

After your rescue from Mt. Willard you claimed, "We were never lost; we knew exactly where we were the whole time." Could you say you feel the same way in your relation with God—that you're not lost, but know exactly where you are?

Where were you when you came home from your mission? Where are you now? Are you not lost as the family silently believes? Do you know exactly where you are? I'd like to know because I pray you will return to where the family waits. I pray and pray that you will find the true path home, but more importantly, I pray you will know it's the true path home. The family loves you, Oscar. Although it would be comforting for Mom and me and everyone else, no helicopter ride is going to give you a free ride this time.

Love,
Your brother