Brigham Young on Life and Death

Donald Q. Cannon

As an examination of the journals of nineteenth-century members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints shows, disease and death took their toll much more frequently than they do today. Childhood death occurred more frequently than it does today, and men and women died at younger ages than they do today. In short, sickness and death were much more commonplace among early Saints than among twentieth and twenty-first century members of the Church.

Brigham Young's Experiences with Life and Death

In his younger years, Brigham Young was fortunate that he did not succumb to the normal illnesses of childhood and youth. Throughout his adult years, he experienced his share of sickness but in time recovered. His death at the age of seventy-six was above that of most men in his time—a fact that he subscribed to the preserving power of the hand of the Almighty.

An examination of the record of Brigham Young’s life with attention focused on health and sickness shows that Brigham’s life was spared on several occasions. As a member of Zion’s Camp, Brigham witnessed the sudden onslaught of cholera in June 1834. He saw other men die like flies, but his own life was spared.1

In the fall of 1842, he faced a much more rigorous test. This “near-death” experience is best told in Brigham Young’s own words:

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November 26, 1842. I was suddenly attacked with a slight fit of apoplexy [a loss of consciousness]. Next morning I felt quite comfortable; but in the evening, at the same hour that I had the fit the day before, I was attacked with the most violent fever I ever experienced. The Prophet Joseph and Elder Willard Richards visited and administered unto me; the Prophet prophesied that I should live and recover from my sickness. He sat by me for six hours and directed my attendant what to do for me. In about thirty hours from the time of my being attacked by the fever, the skin began to peel from my body, and I was skinned all over. I desired to be baptized in the river, but it was not until the 14th day that brother Joseph would give his consent for me to be showered with cold water, when my fever began to break, and it left me on the 18th day. I laid upon my back, and was not turned upon my side for eighteen days.

When the fever left me on the 18th day, I was bolstered up in my chair, but was so near gone that I could not close my eyes, which were set in my head—my chin dropped down and my breath stopped. My wife [Mary Ann], seeing my situation, threw some cold water in my face, that having no effect, she dashed a hand full of strong camphor in my face and eyes, which I did not feel in the least, neither did I move a muscle. She then held my nostrils between her thumb and finger, and placing her mouth directly over mine, blew into my lungs until she filled them with air. This set my lungs in motion, and I again began to breathe.2

Brigham Young Family Cemetery,
2nd East on First Avenue, Salt Lake City, Utah
Gravestone of Brigham Young (right), and wives,
Mary Ann Angell (center), and Lucy Decker (left).
Photo by Alexander L. Baugh
Fortunately for Brigham, his wife was ahead of her time in being able to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

During the 1847 trek, Brigham fell ill on more than one occasion. En route to the Salt Lake Valley, he contracted mountain fever. This illness was serious enough to cause him to delay his journey while the majority of the vanguard company pressed on to the valley. This illness is called Colorado tick fever, a nonfatal illness. Returning to the Missouri River in the fall, Brigham became ill again. On 21 November 1847, he recorded that he was sickly.

During the 1850s and the 1860s, Brigham’s health was basically good. By the 1870s, however, he became victim to ills associated with his advancing years. He suffered, for example, from urinary problems and rheumatism. During the early summer of 1877, he felt somewhat well; but in August, his health took a turn for the worse. On 23 August, he fell ill with cramps and vomiting. His doctor, Seymour B. Young, diagnosed the condition as cholera morbus. During the following week, several remedies and treatments were administered, but Brigham Young died on 29 August 1877. He apparently died of appendicitis, which at the time was unknown to medical science.

Brigham Young’s instructions for his funeral service reveal his personal views concerning death, burial, and mourning. The instructions contained in his will drawn up in 1873 are as follows:

I, Brigham Young, wish my funeral services to be conducted after the following manner:

When I breathe my last I wish my friends to put my body in as clean and wholesome state as can conveniently be done, and preserve the same for one, two, three or four days, or as long as my body can be preserved in a good condition.

I want my coffin made of plump 1 1/4 inch redwood boards, not scrimped in length, but two inches longer than I would measure, and from two to three inches wider than is commonly made for a person of my breadth and size, and deep enough to place me on a little comfortable cotton bed with a good suitable pillow in size and quality. My body dressed in my Temple Clothing and laid nicely into my coffin, and the coffin to have the appearance that if I wanted to turn a little to the right or left I should have plenty of room to do so; the lid can be made crowning.

At my interment I wish all of my family present that can be conveniently, and the male members to wear no crepe on their hats or their coats; the females to buy no black bonnets, nor black dresses, nor black veils; but if they have them they are at liberty to wear them.

The services may be permitted, as singing and a prayer offered, and if any of my friends wish to say a few words, and really desire, do so.

And when they have closed their services, take my remains on a bier and repair to the little burying ground which I have reserved on my lot east of the White House on the hill, and in the southeast corner of this lot have a vault built of mason work large enough to receive my coffin, and that may be placed in a box if they choose, made of the same material as the coffin—redwood. Then place flat rocks over the
vault sufficiently to cover it, that the earth may be placed over it—nice, fine, dry earth—to cover it until the walls of the little cemetery are reared, which will leave me in the southeast corner.

This vault ought to be roofed over with some kind of a temporary roof. There let my earthly house or tabernacle rest in peace and have a good sleep until the morning of the first resurrection; no crying nor mourning with any one, that I have done my work faithfully and in good faith.

I wish this to be read at the funeral, provided that if I should die anywhere in the mountains, I desire the above directions respecting my place of burial to be observed. But if I should live to go back with the Church in Jackson County, I wish to be buried there.8

At this funeral, there was to be no weeping and wailing. Brigham wanted people to remember him for his life’s accomplishments and to look forward to a reunion in the resurrection.

Brigham Young’s Experience with the Deaths of Others

In light of his large family and his position as Church leader, Brigham Young obviously experienced the deaths of friends and relatives many times
during his lifetime. The way in which he reported these deaths and his expressions about the people who died tell us something of his own emotional response to death. This dimension adds something to our understanding of his attitude toward life and death.

As a teenager, Brigham had to deal with the death of his mother. In those days, by the age of fourteen, children were expected to behave like adults, but Brigham did grieve over the loss of his mother. He had developed a special closeness to his mother, and although they were separated by her death, he frequently referred to her in later years in a tender manner.9

The premature death of Miriam, Brigham's first wife, occurred at a crucial time in his life. They had both been baptized only a few months earlier, and their new religion gave them hope even in the face of death. It was this newfound faith to which he turned as she departed. Indeed, Brigham Young's devotion to the cause of Mormonism never faltered. In a sense, the Church became kind of a substitute for his wife. Brigham Young sought companionship with others in the Church and with the area in which he lived.10

The day Joseph Smith was martyred at Carthage, 27 June 1844, Brigham was in Boston. He wrote in his journal that he felt a heavy depression of spirit, although he could not account for what might have caused it. He did not receive any news of the death of the Prophet until 9 July when he was in Salem, where he heard rumors about the Prophet's death. Finally, on 16 July in Peterboro, New Hampshire, a letter was read reporting the death of Joseph and Hyrum. Brigham controlled his emotions for a few days; and then, in Boston where others of the Twelve had assembled, he gave vent to his feelings and openly wept. Brigham later said that more than five barrels of tears had been shed for the Prophet Joseph.11

Death was a frequent visitor in the Young household. In a period of less than five years in the 1840s, Brigham lost six children, including twin boys Alvah and Alma born to Louisa Beaman Young. Their sorrow was somewhat lessened by the subsequent birth of twins to Louisa.12

Quite often, Brigham simply recorded in his journal entries the deaths of individuals or groups without any further comment. The fact that these deaths were recorded is, however, an indication of his concern for those who died and for those left behind. Thus, we see him recording the deaths of Mormon missionaries, immigrants, or settlers, whenever and wherever such deaths occurred. He wrote, for example, of the death of sixty immigrants from England who had succumbed to cholera while on board a steamboat from St. Louis to Kanesville.13

Many of the well-known episodes in Church history involving death were noted in his records. Most often, he not only recorded the deaths but also made comments concerning his feelings. His comments on those who
died in the handcart companies are instructive:

Some of those who have died in the hand-cart companies this season, so I am
told, would be singing, and, before the tune was done, would drop over and breathe
their last; and others would die while eating, and with a piece of bread in their
hands. I should be pleased when the times comes, if we could all depart from this life
as easily as did those our brethren and sisters. I repeat, it will be a happy circum-
stance, when death overtakes me, if I am privileged to die without a groan or strug-
gle, while yet retaining a good appetite for food. I speak of these things, to forestall
indulgence in a misplaced sympathy.14

When John D. Lee reported the horrible events that transpired at
Mountain Meadows, President Young wept.15 He later said that those who
had carried out the massacre ought to be hanged.16 After Captain John W.
Gunnison was killed by Indians during a surveying expedition in 1853,
Brigham’s compassionate nature became evident. He wrote a personal letter
to Gunnison’s widow and enclosed a lock of her husband’s hair.17

His tenderness and sympathy were also evident when close associates
died. Thus, when George A. Smith died, Brigham’s tender feelings were near
the surface. As his biographer, Leonard Arrington, wrote: “Brigham’s long
and happy association with George A., and his sense of loss in death of this
loyal, articulate, and jolly counselor, caused him to weep openly during the
funeral. For many Saints, it was the first time they had seen Brigham cry.”18

Brigham Young’s responses to the deaths of family, friends, associates,
and even strangers reveal a soft-hearted, sensitive personality as opposed to
the hard, unfeeling person so often portrayed. Although opposed to exces-
sive mourning, he could mourn and weep himself. He had tender feelings
and emotions just like many others around him.

Brigham Young’s Views on Life and Death as Revealed in His Funeral
Sermons

During his lifetime, Brigham Young undoubtedly attended numerous
funerals. Unfortunately, available historical evidence records a much small-
er number. Historical evidence indicates that Brigham preached fifteen
funeral sermons. Twelve of those sermons are retrievable in text forms,
whereas the others have no textual record.

The earliest sermons are also the ones without a text. These three ser-
mons were all preached in 1847, two on the plains and one in Salt Lake. The
very earliest was a funeral sermon given in honor of John Neff’s son in
March 1847.19 During that same month, Brigham buried his wife, Mary
Pierce.20 The third sermon was for Mr. Thirlkill’s son in August 1847. The
record does not have a text, but it indicates that Brigham Young preached
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The young man had drowned unexpectedly in City Creek. Probably President Young desired to show the permanence of family relationships as a means of comforting the family.

Wilford Woodruff recorded the funeral sermon given by Brigham Young at the funeral for the daughter of Brother Brown (probably John Brown of the Mormon Battalion). In this sermon, given February 1848, President Young explained that in at least one respect, the dead are better off than the living. The dead have moved “beyond the reach of pain, sorrow, wicked men, devils, and devilish spirits.” For them, death is a blessing and not a curse.

In February 1853, Brigham Young gave a funeral sermon in honor of Sister Rhodes, who had died in childbirth. In attempting to explain why she had died in giving birth, he reminded the congregation that most women do not die in childbirth—but the risk of death is always there because death is all around us and is part of our mortal experience.

When Jedediah M. Grant died in December 1856, Brigham Young preached a lengthy and meaningful sermon in the Tabernacle on Temple Square in Salt Lake City. In praising Brother Grant, Brigham said that Jedediah had lived a hundred years in the space of twenty-four—the time that Jedediah had been in the Church. In other words, he had lived life to the fullest.

Explaining why we mourn, Brigham Young said: “Why do we mourn? Perhaps it will be difficult for me to tell you, yet I know. It is not the knowledge that God has given you or me, that causes us to mourn; it is not the spirit of the Gospel that produces within us mournful feeling; it is not the Spirit of Christ, the knowledge of eternity, of God, or of the way of life and salvation. Our mourning proceeds from none of those causes. What causes us to mourn? Neither more nor less, to me and so far as I can convey my idea by language, than the earthly weakness that is in us.”

Clearly, President Young did not approve of the elaborate funeral ceremonies that had grown up among the Saints. He reminded them how simply Jesus was laid to rest. There was neither fanfare nor ostentatious proceedings. He hastened to add that in making such remarks, he intended no injury to sensitive feelings.

When someone of great accomplishment dies, we tend to think such an individual is irreplaceable. Brigham did not believe this. He taught that the young men of the rising generations would be greater than Jedediah M. Grant, Heber C. Kimball, or himself. Furthermore, he said that Jedediah Grant would be able to do more good in the spirit world than in mortal life because he would be free of his body and also freed from the effects of evil. As Brigham put it: “When the spirit leaves the tabernacle of flesh and goes into the spirit world, it has control over every evil influence with which it
comes in contact.” Continuing with the subject of spirits and the spirit world, President Young taught that spirits don’t go to some remote region of the universe. “The spirits of the just and the unjust are here.”

During the summer of 1859, Brigham Young was called upon to preach at the funeral of his sister, Fanny Young Murray. As he spoke, he raised the question of whether it is proper for a family member to speak at funeral services. In answer, he gave a resounding “Yes.” For him, it was not only appropriate but also desirable. Mere mortals cannot explain what happens when someone dies. To explain such things, we have to be inspired by the Almighty and have an understanding of eternal things. In the spirit world, his sister is no longer subject to Satan, he said. He also took the opportunity to admonish the Saints to do better. About a year later, Brigham spoke at the funeral of his oldest sister, Nancy Young Kent. Commenting on the process of death, he said that there is pain when the spirit leaves the body.
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It is the pain we fear—not leaving mortality. He praised his sister for her goodness and for her role in saving others. 29

When Charles, the young son of Jesse C. Little, died of lung and brain fever, President Young spoke at the funeral. On the matter of children in the resurrection, he said:

The question has often been asked how is it with little Children? Will they grow or not after death? Joseph once said they would, & then He said they would not. He never had any revelation upon the subject, And I have no doctrin[e] to give upon the subject. . . .

The Lord has power to give a soul or spirit as much intelligence in a tabernacle 2 or 3 feet high as in a giant 8 or 10 feet high as we find Evidences that in some ages of this world men have lived to that height. My doctrin[e] or belief is that we shall find all Children & People at the resurrection as they lie down with the same Stature. That is the way I want to receive my Children. 30

In this sermon, as in several others, President Young discussed spirits and how they accomplish their work. He said that spirits do minister to us, but we are not aware of their work. 31

Speaking at the funeral of his long-time friend and counselor in the First Presidency, Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young declared that the day of Heber's death was far better than the day of his birth. In his eulogy, Brigham described Heber as “a man of as much integrity . . . as any man who ever lived on the earth.” 32 He said he did not mourn because Heber C. Kimball died in the faith. Brigham went on to state that he would rather bury faithful counselors by the score than bury one of them in a state of apostasy. 33

It is quite clear that Brigham Young used funeral sermons to exhort the Saints to live righteously. In that connection, he said, “There is no man but what can do good if he chooses.” 34

At the funeral of Daniel Spencer, held on 10 December 1868, Brigham repeated some familiar themes. He indicated that while none of us like to part company with family and friends, our knowledge of the truth helps us understand that those among the faithful who depart this life are blessed and fortunate. 35 President Young also affirmed that we have guardian angels to watch over us. He also alluded to missionary work that will be performed in the spirit world. 36

Daniel Spencer's daughter, Aurelia, was also eulogized by President Young. Her funeral was held in the Thirteenth Ward meetinghouse on 16 September 1871. Reflecting upon the purpose of this life, he said, “This life is preparatory to a more exalted state of existence.” Further, he stated that we are here on earth “to learn to enjoy more, and to increase in knowledge and in experience.” 37 Sister Spencer had never married, but President Young promised that she would have that opportunity hereafter. 38 Describing the
advantages and opportunities of those in the spirit world, he provided a fascinating glimpse of another realm. He said that spirits can move with ease if they want to visit Jerusalem or China or see things as they once were. On the purpose of life, President Young said, “This life is given to prepare for the next.”

The funeral sermon given by Brigham Young at the funeral of Elder Thomas Williams on 19 July 1874 was one of the longest funeral sermons he ever delivered. He began by saying that death is nothing strange or new. In fact, death is necessary because without it there can be no resurrection or immortality. He warned the congregation that they should live so they are prepared to die at any moment. In his words, “No person who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ has a right to spend a day, an hour or a minute of his life or her life in a manner unbecoming the profession of a Saint; they should be ready to depart this life any moment.” Commenting on the purpose of mortality and the contrast between good and evil, he said:

Here we are, we are God’s children, and we are brought forth to give us an experience, that we may know good from evil, light from darkness; that we may know how to serve God; that we may know why and wherefore we should refuse the evil and choose the good. I ask the philosophers—and I think it is probable there are some here today—how do you prove facts? By their contrast. How do you know this or that? By its contrast. We know and prove things by their opposite; we understand the evil because the good is present with us, and the Lord sends forth his intelligent children on the face of the earth to prove whether they are worthy to dwell with him in eternity.

Describing conditions in the spirit world, he remarked, “My spirit is set free, I thirst no more, I want to sleep no more, I hunger no more, I tire no more, I run, I walk, I labor, I go, I come, I do this, I do that, whatever is required of me, nothing like pain or weariness, I am full of life, full of vigor, and I enjoy the presence of my heavenly Father, by the power of his Spirit.” Looking beyond the spirit world, he described the possibilities for the righteous: “All those who are counted worthy to be exalted and to become Gods, even the sons of God, will go forth and have earths and worlds like those who framed this and millions on millions of others.”

Brigham Young’s Views on Life and Death as Revealed in His General Sermons

Brigham Young taught about life and death not only in funeral sermons but also in sermons delivered in general conferences, in stake conferences, and on other occasions. This was an important subject, and he spoke about it frequently.
If we study these sermons, we become aware that Brigham Young often spoke of life and death as opposites—as opposing ends of a continuous spectrum. For example, in February 1853, he taught, “Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We can turn round and say—Satan is the way, the truth, and the death.”46 Continuing the idea, he later said: “One power is to add, to build up, and increase; the other to destroy and diminish; one is life, the other is death.”47 The duty of the Saints is bound up in these opposites as he expressed it: “It is life and salvation that we proffer to all mankind, and we are now struggling against the power of death.”48 Elaborating further on these opposites, he stated that “life and death, truth and falsehood, light and darkness, good and evil, the power of the Devil and the influence of God, the things of the devil, all these inducements and powers are interspersed among the children of men.”49 Stressing not only the opposites but also our duty to choose between them, he declared: “We can take the downward road that leads to destruction, or the road that leads to life. We can constantly act upon the principles that tend to death, or refuse them and act upon the principles that pertain to life and salvation.”50

Continuing this theme several years later, he said, “There are two class-
es of influences, one tends to good and the other to evil; one to truth and life, the other to falsehood and death.”51 Further, “The rule of the flesh brings darkness and death, while, on the other hand, the rule of the Spirit brings light and life.”52 Relating life and death to his own calling, he said, “I have been called to preach life, and not death.”53 Furthermore, he taught, “When a man is born into the world he is at once subject to the influences of life and death, and to the innumerable and varied vicissitudes which he meets in his passage from birth to the grave, to give him an experience which will prepare him to enter into and enjoy life everlasting. He is endowed with agency to choose either life or death, and must abide the consequences in the next life of the choice which he makes in this.”54 In facing the opposites, life and death, we are free to choose. As he put it, “All men are free to do right or to do wrong, to take good advice or reject it, to pursue the path that leads to eternal life, or to go down to death their own way.”55 Put more succinctly, “Life is before us, death is before us, we can choose for ourselves.”56 Relating life and death to conversion, he declared: “When people receive this Gospel, what do they sacrifice? Why, death for life.”57

If we analyze the sermons of President Young, we will realize that he had a marvelous understanding of life and death. We will find, for example, clear definitions of what death is and is not. Brigham taught that “death . . . is nothing more or less than the decomposition of organized native elements.”58 Further, “Death, in reality, is to decompose or decrease, and life is to increase.”59 Elaborating on this process, he said, “No, there is no such thing as annihilation, for you cannot destroy the elements of which things are made.”60 He later said, “what is commonly called death does not destroy the body, it only causes a separation of spirit and body.”61 In regards to the first and second death, Brigham preached that the first death is separation of the body and the spirit, and the second death is the separation of man from God through disobedience. The first death is a blessing and the second death a curse.62

In his teaching about life and death, Brigham Young frequently admonished the Saints to live life to the fullest, to do their duty, and to be faithful. In 1852, he taught, “You hear a great many people talk about a virtuous life. If you could know what an honourable, manly, upright, virtuous life is, you might reduce it to this—Learn the will of the Lord and do it; for he has the keys of life and death, and his mandates should be obeyed, and that is eternal life.”63 He encouraged the Saints to have proper goals and righteous desires when he taught, “Can we so live and direct ourselves as to receive glory, immortality, and eternal lives? We can. Then love not the world, nor the things of the world. Desire not that which is not for us, but desire only that which God has ordained for our benefit and advancement in the science of eternal life; then can we advance with accelerated speed in the
things of God."64

He lamented the fact that “there are thousands in this kingdom who are willing to die for their religion, but are not willing to live it.” Stressing what our obligations to the kingdom are, he declared, “We are not here merely to prepare to die, and then die; but we are here to live and build up the kingdom of God on the earth.”65

Conclusion

From the above consideration of Brigham Young’s own experiences with life and death, his experiences with the deaths of others, his ideas from funeral sermons and his teachings contained in other sermons, it is very evident he had an unusual and profound understanding of life and death. He recognized that life and death are opposites and that the gospel of Jesus Christ mandates choosing life rather than death. In making this choice, he set a marvelous example for all to follow. Finally, his teachings on life and death are a wonderful example of his ability to combine idealism and pragmatism.

Notes

2. Ibid., 104; see also Francis M. Gibbons, Brigham Young: Modern Moses, Prophet of God (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 92–93; hereafter cited as Brigham Young.
4. Arrington, American Moses, 143.
5. Young, Manuscript History, 77.
10. Arrington, American Moses, 33.
11. Ibid., 111–12; Gibbons, Brigham Young, 99–100.
12. Arrington, American Moses, 163; Gibbons, Brigham Young, 156.
15. Arrington, American Moses, 259.
16. Ibid., 281.
17. Ibid., 143.
18. Ibid., 371.
20. Ibid., 41.
21. Ibid., 67.
27. Ibid., 4:133.
28. Ibid., 7:172–75.
30. Ibid., 5:544.
31. Ibid., 5:545.
34. Ibid., 12:187.
35. Ibid., 13:75.
36. Ibid., 13:76.
37. Ibid., 14:228.
38. Ibid., 14:229.
39. Ibid., 14:231.
40. Ibid., 14:232.
41. Ibid., 17:139.
42. Ibid., 17:140.
43. Ibid., 17:141.
44. Ibid., 17:142.
45. Ibid., 17:143.
46. Ibid., 17:116.
47. Ibid., 2:136.
48. Ibid., 6:348.
49. Ibid., 7:164.
50. Ibid., 7:203.
51. Ibid., 9:247.
52. Ibid., 9:288.
53. Ibid., 10:27.
54. Ibid., 11:235.
55. Ibid., 12:119.
56. Ibid., 14:95.
57. Ibid., 16:161.
58. Ibid., 1:275.
59. Ibid., 1:350.
60. Ibid., 2:302.
61. Ibid., 3:276.
62. Ibid., 8:28.
63. Ibid., 5:343.
64. Ibid., 9:107.
65. Ibid., 8:282.