

Beloved Parents. I am now about to leave my parental home for a while but I know not how long—but not without grateful feelings for the kindness which I have received from my infancy until the present hour—but Providence seems to order it otherwise now than it has been—Let us commit all these things into the hands of Providence and be thankful that we have been permitted to live together so long under so favourable circumstances as we have, believing that all things will work for our good if we love God supremely—Let us realize that we can pray to one God who will hear the sincere prayers of all his creatures and give us that which is best for us—May we strive to have that spirit in us that raised Christ from the dead that our mortal bodies may be quickened and come forth in the morning of the first resurrection to reign with Christ a thousand years whose parading will be no more—Whom though I may it ever stimulate us to be diligent in keeping all the commandments of God and not count our trials here too much to give us such a prize—Mother I believe it is the will of God for me to go to the west and I have been convinced that it has been for a long time—now the way has opened and you seem to be reconciled to it which is the greatest consolation to me of any thing can be I believe that it is the spirit of the Lord that has done it which is sufficient proof for all things—O be not anxious for you while the Lord will comfort me I believe that the Lord will take care of me and give me that which is best for me if it is for the best for me to go there and lay down this body I think I feel willing and what matter is it where this body lays until the resurrection when I hope and trust we shall all rise above all the trials of this life, but it not to be to you as though I had come some where and was obliged to leave my home which would be far worse if I know my heart I can say I go because my Mother calls—he has made my only plan, believe not that all these things are against you for they are not, although the ways of Providence seem dark, I shall come home to see you the first suitable opportunity whether I like or not

I have taken this method of speaking my mind because it is easier than verbal conversation—Have written many times than I expect, so must be you good bye better not to say so—  
 Brother Saban and Sister Rhoda hope that you will see me to that light which will have respect and regard that you may let me know what the Lord is doing for you would you give me a letter and obey his commands, I believe that there is peace in obeying the commandments of you and I have hope that you will be diligent in keeping the commandments and make known his will to you that you may have a part in the tree of life which is through the gates into the city of God  
 My love to all  
 Good bye  
 Good bye Sister Rhoda hope that you will allow to that spirit which has enlightened your mind from here to time so those that you which cannot be taken from you that we may be united more strongly than ever and meet never more to part—  
 Sister Sarah I hope that you will ever be united with the goodness of God to you and I hope your gratitude to him by keeping his commandments and walking in his footsteps if you feel that you need wisdom ask it of God by prayer and faith and you will receive it—Never deny what God has done for you, but ever believe that the kingdom of God has come nigh to you so must bid you good bye until I see you again  
 Sister Mary I must say to you be not discouraged but be diligent in keeping all the commandments of God and it will be well with you—and you shall receive a great reward  
 Good bye

## 8. PHOEBE WOODRUFF FAMILY LETTER

— Private Collector —

Although the life of Wilford Woodruff, fourth prophet of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is well known, relatively little is known about his first wife, Phoebe Carter Woodruff, and her equally remarkable journey of faith.<sup>100</sup> Phoebe’s journey began in the year 1834 when, at the age of twenty-seven, she came into contact with Latter-day Saint missionaries and embraced the message of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>101</sup> Like many converts of her generation, she felt compelled to leave her home in Maine and join with the gathering Saints in Kirtland. Her parents, still unconvinced of the truth of their daughter’s newfound faith, were grieved at the thought of losing her to the Latter-day Saints. Her mother in particular, much opposed to Phoebe’s conversion, told her that “she would rather see her buried than going thus alone into the heartless world, and was especially concerned about her leaving home to cast her lot among the Mormons. ‘Phoebe,’ she asked impressively, ‘will you come back to me if you find Mormonism false?’ To this Phoebe answered thrice, ‘Yes mother I will.’”<sup>102</sup>

On the day of her departure, one year following her conversion, Phoebe “dared not trust herself to say farewells,” so she wrote a goodbye to each member of the family, the many errors of spelling and punctuation a testament to her haste. Leaving

the letters on the table, she rushed out the door and into a waiting carriage. “Thus I left my beloved home of childhood, . . . to link my life with the saints of God.”<sup>103</sup>

Only recently have the letters Phoebe wrote that day come into circulation. A treasure trove of Church history, they highlight the faith and conviction of this new convert. "Mother," she writes, "I believe it is the will of God for me to go to the west and I have been convinced that it has been for a long time." Phoebe's parting words were characteristic of her emphatic faith and obedience, "I go because my Master calls." And at the close of the letter she leaves this counsel to her family: "You know not what the Lord can do for you until you give up to him and obey his command."<sup>104</sup> Having given up home and family, embarking on the 1,000-mile journey alone, Phoebe proved that she was indeed willing to obey.<sup>105</sup>

Shortly after her arrival in Kirtland, Phoebe found acquaintance with a young man by the name of Wilford Woodruff, and, after a "lengthy" courtship of two and a half months, they were married on April 13, 1837, at Kirtland, Ohio.<sup>106</sup> In May of the same year when Wilford was called on a mission to the Fox Islands, Phoebe returned home to Maine to be in the care of her family. On July 14, 1838, while residing at home, Phoebe gave birth to their first child, a little girl named Sarah Emma.<sup>107</sup> When Woodruff received communication that he was called to be one of the Twelve Apostles and was to leave for Missouri, Phoebe's parents "pled for her to stay with them for the sake of the child, but she went on to Nauvoo with her husband to be with the body of Saints."<sup>108</sup>

Three years prior, in 1835, in the letter that Phoebe had left for her family before first leaving for Kirtland, she had written, in apparent response to her mother's concern that should she leave she might die on the journey, "If it is for the best for me to go there and lay down this body I think I feel willing."<sup>109</sup> The test of that conviction came on a Tuesday evening in early December of 1838, while Phoebe and Wilford were traveling with their infant, Sarah, to join the body of Saints in Nauvoo.

On November 23, while she and Wilford were travelling, Phoebe was attacked with a severe headache which progressed into brain fever. At the same time, their child, Sarah, also became very ill. After a week on the trail, Wilford, seeing the worsening condition of his wife, took his family to an inn. On the evening of December 3, Phoebe called Wilford to her bedside and said "she felt as though a few moments more would end her existence in this life. She manifested great confidence in the cause she had embraced and exhorted [him] to have confidence in God and keep his commandments."<sup>110</sup>

"To all appearances," Wilford wrote, "she was dying. I laid hand upon her and prayed for her, and she soon revived." However, two days later, her condition again worsened, and it appears that her spirit did leave her body. Phoebe later recounted to Wilford that whilst he and the other sisters present were gathered around weeping, Phoebe had looked down on them, on her sick infant, Sarah, and on her own body lying on the bed. While thus gazing on the scene, she had conversed in spirit with two messengers that had entered the room. They told her that they had come for her body.

One of these messengers informed her that she could have her choice: she might go to rest in the spirit world, or, on one condition she could have the privilege of returning to her tabernacle and continuing her labors upon the earth. The condition was that she felt that she could stand by her husband, and with him pass through all the cares, trials, tribulation, and afflictions of life that he would be called to pass through for the gospel's sake unto the end. When she looked at the situation of her husband and child she said, "Yes, I will do it!"<sup>111</sup>

At the precise moment of Phoebe's declaration, Wilford felt the power of God rest upon him and, for the first time during Phoebe's sickness, faith filled his soul. Acting on a strong impression, Wilford Woodruff laid hands on his wife and blessed her

that her spirit return to her body. Her spirit entered her tabernacle, and she saw the messengers exit the room.

It was a mere year and a half later when Phoebe was again faced with death. This time it came not to her but to her two-year-old daughter, Sarah Emma. When Phoebe wrote her mother to inform her of her daughter's death, she acknowledged her mother's fears that her daughter would die on the journey. In the letter, she expressed in touching verse both the death of her daughter and her unyielding faith: "My daughter first could sing away the cold, but when thin hands were still and laughter sighed, I gathered all that memory could hold. . . . I would return were this, my faith, not true, but neither child nor I can come to you."<sup>112</sup>

Despite continuing hardship, Phoebe held fast to the promise she had made at the time of her near-death, that she would stand by her husband through whatever trials he may be called to pass through. One of the greatest tests to her willingness to keep this promise came with the preaching and practice of plural marriage. Some time after her husband was made President of the Church, Phoebe was asked to address the women of the Church on this subject. "We are sealed to our husbands for time and eternity, that we may dwell with them and our children

in the world to come; which guarantees unto us the greatest blessing for which we are created," Phoebe declared. And then she continued, "If the rulers of the nation will so far depart from the spirit and letter of our glorious constitution as to deprive our prophets, apostles and elders of citizenship, and imprison them for obeying this law, let them grant this, our last request, to make their prisons large enough to hold their wives, for where they go we will go also."<sup>113</sup>

Phoebe's faith was characteristic of many of the early Saints who left family and home to join with the Church. It was that faith, inscribed deeply in each word of her letter and lived valiantly in every ensuing act of her life, that enabled her to be true to her word, standing by her husband and her faith amidst every trial through which they were called to pass and every sacrifice they were called to make.

No doubt influenced by their daughter's faith, Phoebe's parents and siblings eventually joined the Church, eventually baptized by Wilford Woodruff. In his later years, President Woodruff would remark of his devoted wife, "Phoebe possessed too much firmness and faith and confidence in God to put her hand to the plough and then look back, or to give way to trials, however great."<sup>114</sup>