

A JOURNEY OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

LEADING
in the
LORD'S
WAY



ERNEST LEE DAVIS

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CHAPTER 1

Emulating Jesus Christ: A Call to Serve and Love

Our ability to lead and our capacity to serve are not measured by where we were born, the color of our skin, our gender, or socioeconomic status. Some of you have been homeless. Some of you have risked family rejection to pursue your dreams. Many of us have lain awake at night wondering how we were going to support our children while still paying rent, the mortgage, or monthly bills. Many of us know what it is like to live not just month-to-month or day-to-day but meal-to-meal. Never be embarrassed by those struggles. We should never view our challenges as a disadvantage. Instead, we can faithfully understand that our experience of facing and overcoming misfortune is one of our most significant advantages. I know this because I experienced it myself as I traversed the streets of Los Angeles.

During my tenth grade year of high school, I faced suspension due to some poor choices—missing class, walking the hallways with the Eight Trey Gangsta Crips, and shooting dice (street craps). In response, my mom sent me to the park rather than letting me stay home. There was a park with a basketball court nearby, and I spent the entire day there. As I left the park, I encountered missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We spoke briefly, and they gave me scriptures as another testament to Jesus Christ. Despite my lack of faith at the time, I remember feeling no resistance to the sincerity of their message. I recall praying, albeit unsure of how to do so, asking for spiritual confirmation about the truthfulness of the words I had read in the Book of Mormon. I anticipated a profound response that would unequivocally confirm or deny its truth. However, I did not receive an immediate answer. Truth didn't come to me in a moment of clarity; it unfolded gradually through life's experiences, strengthening my testimony over time. Years later, during my senior year of high school and my time at Los Angeles Southwest Community College, I found myself homeless, feeling demoralized and resentful toward life.

Despite life's challenges, through Christ, we can emerge victorious through unfavorable circumstances with an indomitable will to finish. God has given us the gift of Christ's Atonement, making us unbeatable under the weight of adversity. We become leaders when we go about life doing good with love toward all people, emulating the reverent steps of Christ. Testifying of His goodness, Dr. King said:

I know a man—and I want to talk about him a minute, and you will discover who I'm talking about as I go down the way because he was a great one. And he just went about serving. He was born in an obscure village, the child of a poor peasant woman. And then he grew up in still another obscure village, where he worked as a carpenter until he was thirty years old.

Then for three years, he just got on his feet, and he was an itinerant preacher. And he went about doing some things. He did not have much. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never owned a house. He never went to college. He had never visited a big city. He never went two hundred miles from where he was born. He did none of the usual things the world would associate with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. . . . Today, he stands as the most influential figure that ever-entered human history. . . .

All of the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of [people] on this earth as much as that one solitary life. His name may be a familiar one (Jesus). Today I can hear them talking about him. Every now and then somebody says, He's King of Kings. And again, I can hear somebody saying, He's Lord of Lords. Somewhere else I can hear somebody saying, In Christ there is no East nor West. And then they go on and talk about, In Him there's no North and South, but one great Fellowship of Love throughout the whole wide world. He did not have anything. He just went around serving and doing good. . . . You can be on his right hand and his left hand if you serve.⁴

When I felt displaced, had no words to express myself, and had no worldly influence whatsoever, I learned to sing "I Am a Child of God," which strengthened me when my burdens got too heavy. Through the life of Jesus Christ, there is a "balm of Gilead to heal the soul."⁵

When we live the gospel of Jesus Christ, we will have peace flowing from us like a river. My passage of life, like a river, has had many stoppages. The way forward was hedged up, but with every blockage, I was determined to dig out a path that would allow water to flow through seamlessly. One vivid memory stands out as I reflect on traveling across the river of life—a trip with my wife and children to Lower Lewis Falls. As we finally reached our destination after hours of travel, we rested, frozen by the breathtaking sight of the waterfall. After a while, we ventured across the river's edge, eager to explore the hidden wonders on the opposite side of the cascading waters. We had never before sought to cross a river or to witness the beauty of a waterfall up close, and we soon began to feel rocks and boulders concealed under the water hidden by the sun's reflection. While other families crossed the river quickly, some families did not. The path across the river grew increasingly difficult as we reached the midway point, causing our children to contemplate retracing their steps.

Undeterred, we pressed on, determined to conquer the obstacles before us. Obstacles, however, are problems, and problems are opportunities to improve and grow. Each attempt to cross proved challenging as our feet struggled for stability on the slippery rocks. The splashes and our apprehension grew larger with each stumble, and, unaccustomed to such challenging circumstances, our daughter Athena stopped. Overwhelmed by the obstacles before her, she cried out for assistance. At that moment, as parents, we found ourselves navigating the dangerous terrain beneath our feet while extending our hands toward the children, helping them over the rocks. That is what friends and family do; they help each other over the rocks when one person cannot do it alone. Servant-leadership encompasses the heartfelt desire to help others overcome their obstacles, reaching with sincere concern, like parents reaching out to their children. Unaided, some challenges may seem impossible, but together—as friends, leaders, and followers—we can overcome the formidable rocks that stand in our way.

I also traversed the broken roads of inequality before reaching the river's edge as a teenager. When I had arrived, there was not a clear pathway easily marked for me, and the vision of a daunting river unfolded before me. As I overlooked that metaphorical river ahead of me, I failed to realize the immediate blessings that protected me daily while traversing the streets of Los Angeles.

Broken Dreams and Renewed Faith

As I navigated the river of life, I eventually found myself in Moscow, Idaho, with Eric at the University of Idaho, on an athletic scholarship with unforeseen opportunities and challenges ahead of me, with deprivation behind me. The summer of my second year at U of I, however, I ruptured my patellar tendon while at football practice. As I rounded the corner, sprinting at full speed, a sudden snap echoed through my right knee, sending me tumbling to the ground. I looked down at my leg as my kneecap rolled into my thigh like a window shade. Desperation surged through me as I pounded the ground repeatedly with my fists. I could no longer move my leg. My brother Eric and friends carried me off the football field. I remember lying on the table, the team doctor coming to me and telling me, "Ernest, you tore the tendon connecting your leg. Your season is over, and maybe your career." Tears welled up instantly as I glanced at my brother, who shared in my sorrow.

At that moment, my world shattered. The pain I experienced was beyond words. How could this happen? I had invested tremendous time and effort in overcoming my obstacles on and off the field. The consequences of my injury meant the end of my college football journey. Football had helped me overcome homelessness; it had given me identity when the world did not notice me. This career-ending injury seemed unendurable and was a trial of my faith.

During my time of need, I could not hear the voice of the Lord saying, "I love you. You did your best. I am here for you. Be faithful." When I injured my knee, negative thoughts whirling around fear and anxiety encompassed my mind, and I felt trapped by walls of depression, blocking the Light of Christ.

Over the next year, however, I faithfully studied the scriptures with my beloved Ruth and became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I realized that I had additional obstacles to overcome and needed to see another path forward despite my pain. The gospel of Jesus Christ was my ensign after navigating a mountain of challenges. Learning that Christ could atone for my pain and shortcomings allowed me to be hopeful in my immediate future, illuminating my darkest moments of depression. Once I realized God's love for me, I could recognize it like trees easily seen from far distances. I recall the voice of the Lord finding me in the dark and reassuring me. Knowing I was a son of God gave me the drive I needed to succeed without football, venturing into new opportunities afforded me by following the path of Christ. As I looked upward, I felt the heavens open. Gradually, I began to smile, and my joy was full.

Ruth and I first met through mutual friends at a college party at Washington State University. At the time, I was selling weed to make extra money and had my last twenty-ounce sack to sell. So, I went to the party with my friends while hosting U of I recruits. I remember that night clearly. I had a backpack on, tightly secured to my back. Inside I had my weed supply and a couple of old English 40-ounce beer bottles. As I arrived at

the party, I noticed Ruth exiting another car. She was the designated driver for her friends. Our eyes met as we entered the party.

When I got Ruth's phone number, I didn't have a phone, so I used my friend's instead. Rather than saving her number, I called the number so that it would be recorded in his phone's outgoing call history. The following day, I frantically searched through the phone's call history. All the numbers called on the phone had a similar 509 area code for Pullman, Washington. Fortunately, I picked the correct number. Unsure it was Ruth's number, I left her a voicemail. When she called me back the next day, she shared with me that she was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Coincidentally, our paths had crossed numerous times at the University of Idaho before that fateful night. I would often see Ruth from a distance, not knowing it was her studying. Her best friend was dating my roommate, giving us a shared social circle. We both originally lived in the Los Angeles area, a commonality that allowed our relationship to grow.

I have found myself in circles, environments, and a family where we took Ls (losses) without a second thought—navigating life without fatherly leadership, enduring the cold, harsh walls of incarceration within the justice system, facing the relentless grip of scarcity, and wandering the unforgiving streets of LA, where homelessness painted our days with shades of unhappiness. I define taking an L as allowing life's circumstances to overwhelm you, causing you to lose the determination or hope to achieve when progress stops. As children of God, any failure will eventually become a significant blessing if we wait upon the Lord, allowing His tender mercies to give us victory. In my adolescence, I took Ls daily for years until I encountered Christ's unconditional love.

The Apostle Peter, when speaking of trials, said, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as [we] are partakers of Christ's [atonement]; that, when his glory shall be revealed, [we] may be glad also with exceeding joy."⁶ Until the spirit of Christ, the comforter, fell upon me, what had initially appeared to be a significant trial during that time eventually became the most profound blessing, affording me a strong testimony of Jesus Christ. I immersed myself in the life-giving waters of the gospel in July 2005.

Ruth helped me prepare for baptism through her example and by sharing her testimony of the gospel. Her influence allowed me to feel the gospel light and find hope while navigating life to find personal meaning beyond the streets and blades of grass. During this time, I decided to "bury my weapons of war,"⁷ setting aside my aspirations of playing professional football to follow a different path. I chose to follow Christ and found more happiness in going to school, spending time with Ruth, and attending church.

Initially, I didn't have church clothes. I wore my blue Converse, Snoop Dogg pants with the blue rage imprint, and a white button-up shirt. Over time, Ruth bought me church clothes, which made me feel more comfortable attending church each week, allowing me to see myself in a different light—the Light of Christ.

At the age of twenty-two, I emerged from the waters of baptism. My hope for freedom seemed to sweeten, and the spirit of Christ made me glow from within. As I studied the path of Christ, I realized that He was indeed a man of rare endowments—a child of God—guilty of no crime but His unconditional love toward everyone, even me. With hope,

His ability to lead with love can become our possibility to live life more purposefully.

Elder Maxwell once wrote, “What may seem now to be mere unconnected pieces of tile will someday, when we look back, take form to reveal a pattern, and we will realize that God was making a mosaic. There is in each of our lives this kind of marvelous design, this pattern, this purpose that is in the process of becoming, which is continually before the Lord but which, for us, looking forward, is sometimes perplexing.”⁸ Growing up in Los Angeles, California, the vibrant yet challenging environment of the City of Angels exposed me, a person of color, to the harsh realities of poverty, crime, and social mistreatment. In such circumstances, individuals up and down the blocks of Los Angeles did not flaunt their faith in God; it was respected and understood. Faith could determine whether one veered toward trouble or chose a path of righteousness amidst the allure of gangs and neighborhood affiliations.

Throughout urban communities, particularly among people of color, there was a prevailing reliance on faith in God. The concept was straightforward: did this faith lead individuals away from trouble or prepare them to navigate the difficulties and challenges of their surroundings? My baptism into The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints came without the weight of judgment from my family and neighborhood. Having already experienced life on the fringes, I consciously decided to pursue a better path rather than persisting in a direction that would inevitably lead to a dead end. In my community, the measure of success wasn’t so much about making perfect choices as it was about avoiding the dire consequences of incarceration or violence.

Jesus was no mere teacher of scripture. He walked with people in need, witnessing the masses parched by the drought of depravity, with joints swollen from uncompromising labor. Jesus stood side-by-side with the downtrodden, empathizing fully with God’s children as they suffered in the throes of poverty. He strengthened those whose arms were made heavy by hopelessness, as He witnessed the stony countenance of the enslaved and the hopeful smiles generated by an initial encounter with His redeeming love. Christ stood by me, as well—the crutch restoring my broken spirit.

I felt His embrace when missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints visited me after my knee surgery because they knew I needed the encouragement of their kind words. I sat in a room with no doors, only walls. Excessive bandages wrapped my knee. No one was to the left of me, my fears were to the right of me, and my anguish paralyzed me. I sat on a couch alone, only me and my thoughts. I had occasional visitors. Eric and my friends would bring me food from football camp when they had free time. Still, at night when the shadows of depression grew, it was only me. My injury upended my aspirations, and my loneliness was at its peak. When I traversed the formidable streets of Los Angeles, Eric helped me find a path forward, but this time, the challenge was different; it was me, myself, and I.

As the gospel of Jesus Christ gradually broadened my perspective, I became captivated and deeply moved by the allure of its beauty. I realized that the loveliness of the gospel could ignite the imagination, flashing inspiration before my eyes that allowed me to navigate the streets of loneliness without fear or sorrow. I discovered beauty in the truth that I was a *child of God*, made in His image with potential to achieve any aspiration. After a long drought of belief in my potential, nothing could have been more wondrous than beginning to believe in myself, after drinking from the life-giving waters of the gospel of Jesus Christ. With each step forward, I realized I could overcome the trial of my

faith through Him. I grew as a man, became spiritually nourished, more autonomous, and free to choose the path I would travel.

Regarding the necessity of our experiences, Elder Neal A. Maxwell said, “To be untested and unproved is also to be unaware of all that we are” to become. If we do not know our potential as children of God, we will risk forgoing unforeseen blessings. Elder Maxwell continued:

Could we in ignorance of our capacities trust ourselves? Could others then be entrusted to us? . . . [God] will not allow the cutting short some of the brief experiences we have. To do so would be to deprive us of everlasting experiences and great joy. . . . Do we really want immunity from adversity? Especially when certain kinds of suffering can aid our growth in this life. . . . To deprive ourselves of those experiences, much as we might momentarily like to, would be to deprive ourselves of the outcomes over which we shouted with anticipated joy when this life’s experiences were explained to us so long ago, in the world before we came here.⁹

Had I not struggled on the streets of Los Angeles or withstood the loss of my football dreams, I would not fully appreciate Christ’s redeeming love for me as I do now. As we navigate our journeys in life, we influence the world around us by our ability to serve, and writing this work was an opportunity to serve. We have the opportunity for enormous success with no limits, but the most significant choices begin and end with us believing that we are children of God.

⁴. King and Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 266.

⁵. Jeremiah 8:22.

⁶. 1 Peter 4:12–13.

⁷. See Alma 24.

⁸. Maxwell, *But for a Small Moment*, 3–4.

⁹. Maxwell, *All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience*, 27–28.

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