

The stories in this collection of the Mormon faithful show that while moats may be good at keeping people out who want to come in, they are also quite effective at keeping people in who want to get out. And the stench from their fetid waters often proves unbearable.

The Moat Around Zion

by Johnny Townsend

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A photograph of a stone tower with a pointed roof standing in a body of water, with a forested hill in the background. The tower is made of light-colored stone and has a dark wooden balcony. The hill behind it is covered in trees with autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and red. The water is calm and reflects the surrounding landscape.

The Moat around Zion

Johnny Townsend

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Faithful Friends

On the last day of the school year, my first grade teacher thought she'd teach our class one final lesson. Mrs. Teicher was retiring, and this would be her last chance to impart wisdom to the younger generation. She marched twenty-two students half a mile to a nearby strip mall in Sandy, just outside of Salt Lake, and over the next hour sold us to random shoppers who seemed only too eager to help teach us an object lesson. We were forced into the cars of complete strangers, taken to their homes, and ordered to do chores. After two hours, our "owners" delivered us back to the school grounds. I suppose we were lucky that none of these strangers molested or abused any of us, but we were all still pretty traumatized. Of course, that had been the whole point of the activity, to make us face a tiny amount of the lifelong trauma experienced by slaves over hundreds of years.

Some of the parents tried to have Mrs. Teicher's pension revoked since they couldn't technically get her fired, but I remember my own folks hadn't been too perturbed by my being sold into slavery. "Joanna," my father said, "now you know why the Mormons were so hated in Missouri. Because they were anti-slavery in the middle of a slave state." As if at the age of six I had any clue what had happened to the early

saints in Missouri or even knew anything about slavery to begin with.

As the summer progressed and the years passed, I eventually forgot all about Mrs. Teicher's lesson, but after what happened to Clark and me over the past week, the lengths some Mormons would go to in order to teach others a lesson all came rushing back to me. The techniques used in Girls Camp and in the Missionary Training Center would have made my first-grade teacher proud. But this latest "lesson" started when my neighbor Samantha knocked on my door Thursday afternoon. "Hey, Sam," I said, "how're you doing today?"

"I can't stay," she replied coolly. "I just came by to drop off that Mickey Mouse cake pan you loaned me." She thrust the pan at me, turned around, and stalked off. I cocked my head as I watched her leave. She wasn't usually this surly. Maybe the cake simply hadn't turned out the way she'd hoped for her six-year-old son's birthday. Whatever. Perhaps I'd bake her a loaf of banana bread on Saturday. The cake pan looked clean, but I washed it anyway and then put it away, thinking no more of the incident.

An hour later, the phone rang. I could see on the Caller ID that it was my friend Debra, who I hadn't seen since she'd married and moved to San Diego twenty something years ago. But we kept up on Facebook and with the occasional phone call. "Hi, Debra!" I said. "What a pleasant—"

"I thought I knew you." That was all she said before she hung up.

What in the world was going on?

As the Holy Ghost whispered to me, my suspicion started to grow, and I went to Clark's computer to find out if someone had said something mean about me on Facebook. What I found, though, was even worse. Someone had hacked into my account and typed a scandalous post saying Clark and I had left the Church. The post said lots of nasty things and made me look like a terrible apostate. Coffee was an elixir from the gods. Church leaders fighting against the legalization of pot proved they weren't truly in touch with God. Quoting Mark Twain's assessment of the Book of Mormon. The post went on and on, saying things even more horrible than that. Fifteen different friends had already posted replies calling me to repentance or advising me they were going to Unfriend me. I tried to respond to each friend individually but then gave up and just wrote a succinct post letting everyone know my account had been hacked. I then contacted Facebook and let them know as well. I was sweating, and my heart was beating fast as the adrenaline kept flooding my system minute after minute.

But I wasn't only shaken by what had happened. I was also angry. Who could have done such a thing? And why in the world had so many friends, people who *knew* me, believed that nonsense? I was a returned missionary, for goodness' sake, having served in Ohio near Kirtland. And Clark had served in upstate New York, near Palmyra. We probably knew more about Church history than most members. We'd be the last people to complain. And RM's didn't leave the Church. What were my friends thinking?

I thought about calling Clark at work, but I didn't want to ruin his day. It turned out that he learned what happened soon enough, though. Bishop Meeks called the house during dinner, not ten minutes after Clark walked through the door. I

almost didn't answer the phone, but I could see that Clark would if I didn't, and I hadn't had a chance to warn him yet. "Bishop," I said in my sweetest voice, "it's so good of you to call. Can I help you?"

"I'd like to see you and your husband in my office on Sunday after Sacrament meeting," he said curtly.

"Bishop," I said, "it's not true. Someone hacked my Facebook account."

"We'll talk more about this on Sunday. My wife has dinner on the table. I can't have something like this taking away from my family time."

"But Bishop—"

He hung up.

"What was that all about?" asked Clark, a forkful of peas on its way to his lips. I explained what had happened, and he nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world. "It's just a misunderstanding," he said. "Everything will work out." Had he actually heard me, I wondered? As dear as he was, Clark sometimes dismissed my worries as female hysteria.

I turned to Ricky, our fourteen-year-old, the last child still at home. He'd stopped eating and was staring at his plate. "You okay?" I asked. "This has nothing to do with you. It's our problem. You don't have to worry about anything. Your Dad and I will fix this."

He shook his head slightly, not looking up.

“What is it, son?” asked Clark. A man’s trouble was always worth solving, I noted.

Ricky finally looked up, but barely. “Steve’s mom wouldn’t let me come in after school to play computer games with him.” He looked down at his plate again. “I thought maybe she’d just cleaned the house or something, so I invited Steve to come over here, but she wouldn’t let him come. She booted me out and shut the door in my face.”

I’d never liked Steve’s mom. “I’ll call later and explain what happened,” I said. I’d have to wait a while, though, or I might say something which could get Ricky banned forever.

But soon the disaster began to widen into even more horrific proportions. As I was putting away the leftovers, the phone rang again. I somehow felt the need to bear the brunt of the problem myself, I guess because it was my account that was hacked, and I grabbed the phone before Clark could answer it. “Valerie,” I said with relief when I realized it was my daughter, “it’s such a relief to hear a kind voice. You can’t imagine the kind of day I’ve had.”

“I expect it’s the kind of day you deserve,” she said icily.

Oh, no, not Valerie, too! “Valerie...” I began.

“I have a one-year-old daughter,” Valerie said, cutting me off.

Did she think I didn’t know that?

“And I can’t take the risk of you contaminating her. Her eternal welfare is my responsibility.”

She was telling *me* what it meant to be a parent?

“So I don’t want you guys coming over anymore. And you won’t be babysitting in the future.”

“Valerie! Someone hacked into my Facebook account. It’s not true. None of it’s true.”

“I always suspected you weren’t real Latter-day Saints. Ever since I saw you cheating that one time on Fast Sunday when I was a kid. Now I’ve seen your true colors.”

“Valerie!”

She hung up.

I was horrified by what had just happened, but I found I was angry again as well. The audacity.

I remembered all the times I’d said judgmental things about church members I’d seen at Starbucks. Or sisters wearing sleeveless dresses. Or mothers who couldn’t control their children in Sacrament meeting.

“She’ll calm down,” Clark said in a soothing tone. “It’ll be okay.” But he was looking doubtful now, too. I found it irritatingly validating.

Ricky had gone to his room, and Clark had the TV on, watching the last of the nightly news. I almost thought I’d see our pictures plastered on the screen. I sat beside Clark on the sofa and tried to put my grief in perspective by seeing what real problems looked like, when suddenly I bolted upright.

“What is it?” asked Clark.

“Gordon!” I said. “What if someone says something to him?” Our son had been on his mission to Florida the past

eight months. “I’m going to email him right now.” I jumped up and hurried to Clark’s office to type out a quick note. He’d sounded so depressed in his last couple of emails. The last thing he needed was to hear these terrible lies about his parents. I breathed a sigh of relief when I hit Send, sure that I’d preempted another disaster.

But it turned out that no one seemed to listen to apostates. The next day was Friday, Gordon’s Preparation Day, and I received an email from him around 10:00 in the morning. “I love you,” he wrote, “but I need to be able to feel the Spirit if I’m going to have any success, so please don’t email me anymore.”

Just who in the hell had written that damned Facebook post anyway? Who hated us enough to do such a cruel thing? A couple of months ago, Pauline, a woman I’d taught in Cleveland, messaged me that she’d learned the “truth” about the Church and felt it was her duty now to tell me. But I’d blocked her, so how could she have access to my profile? Was it that obnoxious teenage boy at church I’d told to stay away from my son?

I thought about Steve’s mom.

I contacted Facebook again to see if they were able to track down who the culprit was, but they had nothing. I tried to write another post myself, but I was distracted by reading what my friends and relatives were saying about me in *their* posts. It was all just too awful. I logged out and lay on the bed to cry.

I tried calling a couple of friends and family members in the afternoon, but no one answered.

People didn't always answer, I knew. Sometimes, they were busy. Mormons were always anxiously engaged in a good cause.

Clark looked as if he'd aged ten years when he returned from work. My stomach lurched. "What happened?" I asked.

He plopped down at the kitchen table, and I poured him a glass of Talking Rain. "My boss took me off the project today," he said. "After two months as the second in command. He didn't say why, but I could see it in his eyes."

My jaw tightened. "He's in the High Priest group in his ward, isn't he?"

Clark nodded slowly and then took a sip of his water.

"You didn't get fired, did you?" I asked, realizing perhaps for the first time what a truly precarious situation we were in.

"No, just taken off the project."

"This has got to stop," I said. "We'll have to tell the bishop to make an announcement or something." I realized that we weren't even scheduled to speak with him until after services, so that announcement, if it came at all, was at least another full week away.

None of us talked much during dinner. It was clear Ricky was upset by something that had happened at school, but I didn't want to make things worse by talking about it at the table, especially since I had no solution yet. After Ricky went off to his room, I put my hand on Clark's. "I thought Mormons looked out for the lost sheep," I said, "and tried to bring it back into the fold. I didn't realize they were the ones driving the sheep away in the first place."

“Oh, it’s not like that, honey. People are just scared. They’ll come around.”

“I’ve been scared before,” I said, “without being mean.”

But I’d been mean before, too, I realized, without being scared.

Clark frowned and rubbed his chin, looking at me thoughtfully. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe you’re right.”

Saturday morning around 9:00, the phone rang. It was Marcy, of course. I’d been expecting her. “Wilma, Alicia, and I decided it would be best if you didn’t come to Book Club from now on,” she said. “I expect you don’t like reading books without profanity anymore, anyway.”

There didn’t seem to be any point in denying my manufactured apostasy any longer. “You girls have fun,” I said and hung up. “Clark!” I called out. “Ricky!” They came to the living room, both looking a little frightened. “Let’s go to the mall and see a movie,” I said. “Something fun. A comedy. Or an adventure.” They had genuine smiles on their faces for the first time since all this started. Was that only two days ago?

We saw *Justice League* at noon, and then I suggested we stop in the food court for a malt. I liked the smiles I was seeing. My own smile faltered a bit though when I saw Sister Drummond walk by with her nose in the air. Fortunately, I didn’t think either Clark or Ricky saw her.

That afternoon, my husband and son played basketball in the driveway while I read the scriptures. Ricky hadn’t wanted

to play much with his father for the past year. He always wanted to be with his friends instead. So I wasn't sure if his playing with his dad now was a good thing or a bad one. Tiring of the scriptures, I decided to look up "anti-Mormon lies" on Google and see what came up. I figured I might as well know what all our friends were thinking I believed now.

After dinner, the three of us played Guild together in Ricky's room. I didn't understand how people ever got addicted to this stuff. I found it utterly boring. But I didn't want to lose Ricky, so I played.

I realized with a start that I wasn't dreading the following day only because of our scheduled meeting with the bishop but also because church was just so boring, too. As bad as this game and as clearly designed for males. It was as if the thought had never occurred to me before. Could you be addicted to something boring? Was it possible not to even realize for years what one felt? I wondered if a person could sell oneself into slavery without even knowing it. I wondered, too, if it would be the worst thing in the world to skip Sunday attendance for a few weeks. Maybe a few months. Then when we came back, people would think we'd repented, and perhaps they'd talk to us again.

Around 8:15, the doorbell rang. We all looked at each other nervously, and I stood up, motioning for them to keep playing. I looked through the peephole in the front door and saw my friend Nancy from Relief Society. She was one of the best Mormons I'd ever known, always did everything she was supposed to, even her Visiting Teaching, with total commitment.

Was she here to spit in my face?

I opened the door. “Joanna!” she said, “I just heard! Here!” She thrust a plateful of homemade chocolate chip cookies at me. I took them, confused. Was she trying to love bomb me back? Was I a service project now?

“Thank you,” I said, frowning.

“Can I come in for a minute?”

“Oh, sure, sure.” I led her to the sofa, wondering what to say.

“I want you to know that your leaving the Church won’t have any effect on our friendship,” she said. I thought about denying the rumor again but didn’t feel totally sure it wasn’t true now. “You know my sister left,” she went on, “and I’ve seen first hand that leaving doesn’t have to change anything.”

“Thank you, Nancy,” I said softly.

“Look,” she said, “it’s a little late in the evening now, but why don’t we get together for lunch on Monday and have a good talk?”

“Okay,” I said. I still wasn’t sure if she was going to try to convert me back, but I felt the first wave of relief I’d felt in days. We stood up and Nancy gave me a long, long hug.

“Love you,” she said.

I couldn’t seem to make any sound come out of my throat in return. I led her to the door, finally managed to thank her for the cookies again, and closed the door behind her.

If I knew a hundred fellow Mormons, who could have expected that the “one” which wandered away from the flock

was the good one? Perhaps it was the stray that had to go after the ninety and nine.

For the first time, I believed that Clark might be right when he said that everything would eventually be okay. People would come around. Maybe I'd talk to another couple of faithful friends tomorrow at church.

But I also wondered what I'd say if anyone asked me why I'd lost my testimony. I'd found out this afternoon that some of the early Church leaders did own slaves. And not only back in the Missouri. Brigham Young worked to legalize slavery in Utah, both of blacks and of Native Americans.

What else had I been taught that wasn't true?

Clark flossed his teeth before bed. He always brushed, but he only flossed in the evening if he wanted sex. I needed to feel intimacy tonight, too, so I prepped myself as well. But I wasn't prepared for Clark burying his head enthusiastically in my crotch. He'd never done that before. The bishop who'd interviewed us before we married had told us oral sex was a sin. Neither of us had ever done it in all these years.

"Clark!" I said.

He looked up at me. "May as well," he said, "if we're going to hell anyway."

When he finished, I tried it out on him, too.

It was clear that our early bishop had been wrong.

When we were done, I lay my head on Clark's chest and soon felt his steady breathing telling me he was asleep. I lay awake a little longer, looking at a beam of moonlight

streaming through the window and striking the foot of the bed, wondering just what I was going to say to Bishop Meeks in the morning.

Or if I was going to tell him anything at all.

Maybe I'd write to Pauline in Cleveland instead.

Amen

“Dear Heavenly Father,” I began, “please help me do well on this test.” I was on my way to the Garfield Community Center in the Central District to take a skills test for a City job as a cashier. “Please help me to—”

Stop it, Ron, I told myself. There’s no God. Stop praying for stuff. It’s a simple math test. Just take it.

I looked at my watch. The 106 was due any minute. If it had come early, though, I’d have to wait another twenty minutes for the next bus. “Dear Heavenly Father,” I prayed, “please help the bus be on time.”

Stop it.

The bus was either about to come or it wasn’t. Even if there were a God, he could hardly create an extra bus complete with bus driver and passengers. If the bus came on time, great. If not, I’d have to deal with it. I’d left the house with plenty of time to spare.

The sun was hot on this late August afternoon. But we’d had a decent summer here in Seattle, only eight days above 90, most days in the upper 70’s to about 80. It could have been worse.

“Thank you, Heavenly Father,” I began.

Oh, good grief.

I’d been raised Mormon, taught to “pray always.” Even after being excommunicated thirty years ago, I’d kept my belief in God, despite all evidence to the contrary. The last few years, though, I simply found it was impossible to believe anymore.

Ah, there was the bus coming over the top of the hill. I breathed a sigh of relief and grabbed my Orca Lift card which let me pay half fare. I’d only been able to find a part-time job the past year and a half after losing my full-time job at the bank, and every month was a struggle to pay the bills, even with Jeremy’s help. I needed that cashier job. It would require constant traveling to a dozen or more locations, some job sites requiring me to board three different buses to get there, but at least the position had benefits.

“Dear Heavenly Father—”

I climbed onto the bus and found a seat.

I’d loved the Mormon idea of eternal progression, taking as long to reach perfection as my personality required. God had always been a benevolent force in my life. The bad things in the world happened because of Satan.

But there sure were a lot of bad things.

What kind of god worth worshipping was weaker than Satan, or gave him a free hand, allowed him to cause so much misery to both humans and animals? And plants and insects, too, for that matter. I’d always accepted that “there must needs be opposition in all things,” that misery helped us to

“grow,” but the absolute degree of suffering that existed was far too great to justify. I remembered seeing on TV once a clip from a home movie shot by a murderer as he promised a handcuffed couple that he’d torture and kill their baby before killing them, hitchhikers who’d accepted the wrong free ride. The look on their faces was a pitiful combination of both despair and resignation. I was still haunted by it.

What possible “growth” experience could this family need to justify what they were about to endure? And what did it say about a God whose best plan to “help” his children was to allow such horror?

The bus pulled onto Rainier, and I thought about switching to the 7. It would probably be a little faster, but I hated transfers, and I still had one more bus to catch at a minimum. I decided to stick with the 106.

I sure hoped I did okay on this math test. It would be simple arithmetic, after all, and I did have a Biology degree, giving me plenty of practice in both physics and chemistry. I could certainly add up a few figures. But what if my calculator died? What if I hit the wrong button in my arrogance? What if my pencil broke?

“Dear Heavenly Father, please—”

I felt so guilty for not finishing my prayers. Wouldn’t these half-finished pleas irritate Heavenly Father?

What kind of God would want to be pestered non-stop even by completed petitionary prayers that did nothing but emphasize my selfish needs and desires? I’d heard a rabbi say once that only prayers of praise were appropriate. But what kind of god needed to have his ass kissed every day? I

thought maybe prayers asking god to help others, the poor, the sick, those in war-torn countries, those in prison, might be acceptable, but what kind of God withheld his aid from the needy until some random third person requested he step in?

I saw an East African immigrant in a hijab running for the bus on Martin Luther King. There was no way she was going to make it on time. I wanted to pray for her, but it was pointless. She'd either make it or she wouldn't.

She didn't make it.

Was it my fault?

Oh, Ron.

I'd been fighting the compulsion to pray for six months now. I sometimes went long stretches, five hours or more, without being tempted, but whenever a real "crisis" came along, I found myself reverting to my old habits. Like when I had to have blood drawn and wanted the phlebotomist to hit the vein right on the first try, or when someone wanted to return an item to the drugstore but didn't have their receipt and I had to satisfy both the customer and the manager.

I needed to do well on this test.

Before long, we were at the Mount Baker Transit Center, and I stepped off the bus and walked over to the 48 sign, checking the schedule. The bus should be here in just two more minutes. Unless it had come early.

"Dear—"

Deal with it, Ron, I told myself. Deal with it.

If there were a God, he wouldn't want me to depend so heavily on him, must have been annoyed as hell at me all these years. He'd want me to fend for myself, overcome my challenges and make something of my life. He'd want *me* to do that, not him. He would already know what *he* could do.

I still thought of God as a he, comfortable with this bit of patriarchy, despite what that probably said about me.

A young black woman with a baby stroller walked over to the 48 sign as well. And a middle-aged Latino man.

Just the other few people at this same bus stop probably needed more help than I did. Why should God, if there were such a being, want to help *me*? But then, why did this have to be an either/or question? Surely, if God was omnipotent, he could help everyone who needed helping.

I shook my head. One thing was clear—if there were truly a benevolent being out there, it certainly rationed its assistance.

The 48 pulled up a moment later, and I waited for the others to board. Then I found a seat in the first row past Priority Seating so I could still see out the front window and be on the lookout for the community center. I wasn't very familiar with the neighborhood around Garfield.

I'd been five days late with my last mortgage payment, and I was three months—three months!—behind on my Visa bill. If I didn't pass this test, and the subsequent interview, Jeremy and I weren't going to make it. He was a self-employed contractor but only did piddly little jobs that hardly brought home any more money than my part-time minimum wage job. We faced disaster every month, and given that

there was in fact no Supreme Being to protect us, our luck wasn't going to hold out forever. I *had* to get this job. It was up to *me*.

We passed the Northwest African-American History Museum and kept heading north on 23rd. We passed the Sojourner Truth library and kept going.

I missed Heavenly Father. Even if he wasn't real, I used to *think* he was. I talked to him all the time, not just about my immediate needs but also about my dreams and goals and what things he might want of me. I felt the way now that I had all those years ago when my mother died of leukemia.

But praying wasn't a harmless habit. It shifted responsibility from me to someone else. And it was important—essential—that I take responsibility for myself. *I* needed to fight for a \$15 minimum wage. *I* needed to fight against fracking. *I* needed to work to restore voting rights to disenfranchised ex-convicts. It wasn't enough to ask God to “help me” do these things. It was up to me to *do* them.

The glory was supposed to go to God, though, wasn't it? It wasn't right to take credit myself.

There was Garfield High School. The community center couldn't be far away. Yes, there it was. I pulled the cord and made my way to the door.

Stepping off the bus, I looked at my watch. It was 6:05. I was fifty-five minutes early. I walked into the building, located the room where the testing would take place, and then walked back outside and sat on a wooden bench in the shade. I watched a mother with two young children, about eight or

nine, enter the building. I could hear shouts from kids playing somewhere inside.

The funny thing was, it should have been clear all along that prayer was useless. I remembered a General Conference when one of the apostles had said that we should “pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on us.” Of *course* everything depended on us. Even they knew it. The problem was that if I was praying as if the solution to a given problem depended on God, then psychologically, I was going to be affected by the belief he was going to help, and I was unconsciously going to work with just a little less dedication myself.

A chunky black woman in her twenties across the street was yelling at someone down the block, quite angry about some terrible thing the other person had apparently done. Curse words flew about left and right. A child walking up to the community center seemed oblivious.

It took me a minute to realize there was no one at the other end of the block.

I still allowed myself to say one complete prayer a day. As I was falling asleep next to Jeremy each evening, I thanked Heavenly Father—or the universe, or whatever—for at least ten specific good things that had happened to me that day. It was more an exercise in gratitude than a real prayer, but I still addressed it formally.

And always felt guilty immediately afterward for doing so.

Was I ever going to grow up? I was fifty-six years old, for crying out loud. I felt guilty for praying and I felt guilty for not praying. When was I ever going to just live my life?

At 6:30, I walked back into the community center and, as I'd expected, the proctors let the candidates into the multi-purpose room early to find our seats. I'd taken this test last year, done well, and then flubbed the interview. But just before the last test, I'd chatted with a few other nervous candidates, encouraging them. I didn't want to be mean today, but I had to perform better than everyone else. I couldn't afford to be "nice."

So were atheists by definition more selfish than believers?

I'd attended a meeting last night to fight for rent control, and I didn't even pay rent.

I stared at my calculator and pencils and eraser. I stared at the wall. I didn't make eye contact with any other candidates.

At 7:00, the proctors handed out the tests, and we turned them over and began working. I had to add and subtract these columns of simple figures. Multiply three dance classes times the fee. Decide if several rows of addresses were the same or different.

A child could do this.

I remembered that my boss at Rite-Aid had fired three new employees over the past few months because they couldn't count their till at the end of their shift.

There were thirty candidates in today's session taking the test, and this was only one of two sessions. I had to beat *sixty* people to get this one miserable job. Jeremy and I were going

to lose the house if I didn't. I'd applied for over five hundred jobs—five hundred!—in the past year. It always came down to the interview, the six times I managed to get one. I had to do better in my interviews.

“Dear Heavenly Father—”

The realization that there was no God struck me again as if for the first time, and my throat constricted. I wasn't strong enough to do this on my own. I *needed* God.

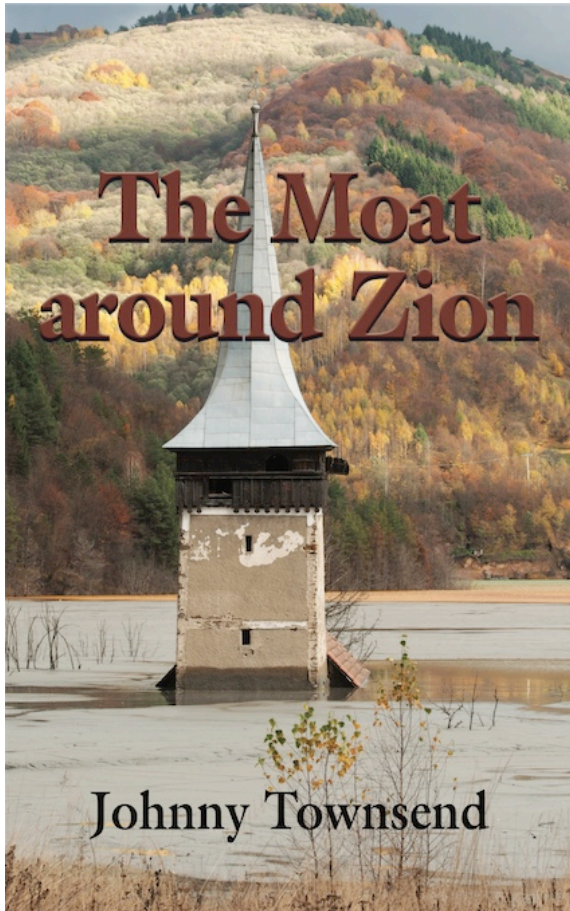
The last question indicated that I was supposed to leave a till filled with one hundred dollars in bills. The till currently had one twenty, three fives, and a ten dollar roll of quarters. What additional amount in bills did I need to leave? I smiled. Most people were going to say they needed fifty-five dollars more, but the quarters didn't count. They weren't bills.

I finished the test, sure I'd answered every single simple question accurately. I stood up and handed my test to a proctor, the first person in the room to do so. I walked back outside, crossed the street to wait for the 48 going back to Mount Baker. A frail, elderly black woman with osteoporosis waited patiently with her cart of groceries. A young white man talked loudly on his cell phone. An obese black woman who'd tested with me crossed the street and joined us a moment later. She looked at me and smiled.

I wanted to pray.

When the bus pulled up a few minutes later, I climbed on board, paid my fare, and found a seat on the shady side of the bus near the back door. A teenage black girl with huge earrings texted on her phone in the row in front of me. A forty-something black man in stained work clothes took a sip

from an old plastic Coke bottle filled with water. I stared out the window at some graffiti sprayed on a tottering wooden fence as we slowly pulled away from the curb.



The stories in this collection of the Mormon faithful show that while moats may be good at keeping people out who want to come in, they are also quite effective at keeping people in who want to get out. And the stench from their fetid waters often proves unbearable.

The Moat Around Zion

by Johnny Townsend

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