To know God’s truth was Levi W. Hancock’s desire from childhood. Once he found the gospel, he followed the Lord’s prophet no matter the sacrifice.

As early as age four, Levi W. Hancock was concerned about his standing before God and about his salvation. Later, it weighed on his young mind when his baby sister died and the minister who conducted her funeral offered little hope for her salvation because she had not been baptized. And when at about nine he had a “curious dream” of the Savior offering him salvation, his brothers began calling him “the little Christian.”

Thus, knowing God’s will was a priority for him as an adult, and in the fall of 1830 when he first heard the gospel preached, he recorded this reaction: “It is the truth, I can feel it.”

This testimony would stay with him throughout a life of service and sacrifice for the kingdom of God on the earth. His strong faith and willingness to labor were manifest from the day he was baptized. Whenever the growing Church or its prophet needed him, Levi Hancock was there. Elder Hancock would serve as a General Authority for nearly 50 years, continuing in his faith long after the martyrdom of Joseph Smith. Because Brother Hancock liked to write, the record of his personal labors is more extensive than that of some other members, yet his sacrifices represent for us the devotion of many Latter-day Saints who toiled selflessly during that era while the restored Church was being established.

Learning to Work and Believe

Levi Ward Hancock was born 7 April 1803 in Old Springfield, Massachusetts, a son of Thomas Hancock and Amy Ward. His father later moved the family to Bristol, New York, then Chagrin, Ohio. At one point he lived with a brother who “sent me to school long enough to learn the letters,” he recorded. At 14, employed by an expert woodworker, Levi had already built his own turning lathe and learned to make furniture. His lifelong trade would be making furniture and cabinets, but he would also construct houses and buildings.

Looking back later, he wrote: “At the age of four, I began to call upon the Lord seriously. My mother was a praying woman and trusted the Lord to hear and answer her prayers.” He learned from her example. The “curious dream” he wrote of fed his faith. In it, the Savior offered him a decanter filled with white liquid, saying, “Drink of this, it is for you.” Levi wrote: “When I tasted it, it … filled me with the love of God until … [i]t cast out all fear of death.”

By age 19, through industry and effort, he had helped pay off his father’s farm along with a small place of his own “and had cash in my pocket. I had all the things I wanted to make me comfortable.” At one point, he tried the role of merchant with the help of a man who owned a store. “But I gave away my goods to the poor and never made one cent.”

Finding the Truth

In November 1830 Levi first heard of the restored gospel. His brother, Alvah, told him of four men who had come with a book they said was a record of the people who inhabited the Americas in ancient times. These men preached the same gospel Jesus Christ had taught to His followers in the Old World, Alvah said, and “they lay hands on those they baptize and bestow on them the
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Holy Ghost.” Levi recalled: “At these last words I gathered faith and … [i]t seemed like a wash of something warm took me in the face and ran over my body which gave me a feeling I cannot describe. The first word I said was ‘it is the truth, I can feel it.’”8 The man who was preaching was Elder Parley P. Pratt. Two days later, Levi followed the men to Kirtland and was baptized by Elder Pratt. (Levi’s father and sister had already been baptized, and other members of his family would join later.) A few days after baptism, Levi was ordained an elder and soon began to preach the gospel in the town where he lived.

The following month, December 1830, he had a vision that would confirm the course of his life. In it, he saw a personage he knew to be the Savior holding a small yoke in his hands. “This is the yoke of Christ,” He said, and told Levi, “You are my servant.” Levi later recalled, “I realized many things that I am not able to write or express with my tongue. I was told by the spirit to … bear testimony to the world of the truth of the work.”9 He bore that testimony to the end of his days.

His testimony was strengthened by his association with the Prophet Joseph Smith. Levi wrote in his journal that he was present at the meeting in a small log schoolhouse in Kirtland when the Prophet taught that the kingdom of Christ “was like a grain of mustard seed … and some should see it put forth its branches and the angels of heaven would some day come like birds to its branches just as the Saviour had said.”10

Serving and Sacrificing

Called with others to go on a mission to Missouri in 1831, Levi accepted unhesitatingly, though it meant walking hundreds of miles. He wrote, “Although there were but a few of us, we did go to work and the Lord labored with us.”11 After hearing Levi Hancock and Zebedee Coltrin preach in Indiana, one man testified, “You are men sent to administer the words of eternal life to me and I want to be baptised.”12 They established two strong branches in the state. But they also suffered hardships on their journey. Levi fell ill because of an infection in his feet and had to spend time recuperating with a family who took him in while Zebedee went on without him. Later, in Missouri, he continued to struggle with illness and chafed at times because of his inability to do all he wanted. But grateful to serve, he wrote: “I have to be honest before God and do all the good I can for this kingdom or woe is me. I care not for the world nor what they say. They have to meet my Testimony at the Judgement seat. I mean that my conduct shall be such that my words will be believed, the Lord being my helper.”13

Later, he recovered his health enough to use his building skills in constructing the Church’s printing house in Jackson County, Missouri.

Once back in Ohio, he was “a zealous and faithful worker … [who] contributed liberally toward the erection of the Lord’s House at Kirtland.”14 He attended the School of the Prophets and worked on building projects for the Prophet, and when Joseph Smith needed money, Levi gave him what was left from the sale of his own property. “The Prophet Joseph was often in trouble. If his friends gave him money, he [was] stripped of it all by his enemies. I know for I did all I could do to hold up that good man. My heart would ache for him. He had to stand against thousands of his pretended friends seeking to overthrow him. It was terrible the abuse he suffered.”15

Through Joseph Smith, Levi Hancock met Clarissa Reed, whom he married 29 March 1833. Their first child was born 9 April 1834 and named Mosiah Lyman Hancock.16
Tutored by Zion’s Camp

Shortly after his son’s birth, Levi left to march to Missouri with Zion’s Camp. Latter-day Saints in Jackson County were being mobbed and driven by their enemies, and the small band of Zion’s Camp was going to their aid. But the mission was never one of vengeance or belligerence, Levi explained. The Prophet Joseph Smith taught those in the group that “we had to unlearn what we had learned from the world, … [T]he first lesson was … that Israel’s God was a man of reason and did not delight in the death of the sinners, but wanted [them] to turn and live.

“He was a new God to me. So, we gladly received his words and fell into ranks and went up to Missouri to see what the matter was, that our people could not stay on their land.”17

In retrospect, while “Zion’s Camp failed to achieve its ostensible purpose of protecting the Jackson County Saints,” it brought to the fore faithful men who were willing to answer, at whatever cost, “the Lord’s call. … Nine of the first twelve apostles and all of the first Quorum of Seventy (seven presidents and sixty-three members) were later called from the ranks of Camp members.”18 When these calls came in February 1835, Levi Hancock was chosen as one of the Presidents of the Seventy.

Facing Trials in Missouri

Elder Hancock was one who moved his family to northern Missouri in response to the Prophet’s call. With other Latter-day Saints, he and his family suffered through the persecutions there in the late 1830s. Because his own handwritten journal ends at that time, it is through the recollections of his son Mosiah that we see much of what occurred next.

Only a small boy at the time, Mosiah nevertheless remembered that when Far West was betrayed into the hands of Latter-day Saint enemies in 1838 and Church leaders were taken prisoner, many of the Saints went into hiding to escape the depredations of mobbers. Members of the Hancock family had several guns they had not given up. “The Hancock brothers, Levi, Joseph, and Solomon, … guarded and fed 600 men, women, and children while camped in the woods after they had been driven from their homes. They were waiting for an opportunity to get away. … Some of the brethren made three hundred tomahawks for protection.”19

Settling Nauvoo

Mosiah also recalled fleeing Missouri on foot with their belongings in a cart. It was winter and he had no shoes. His mother had only an old, badly worn pair and suffered terribly on the trek. Once when they stopped to rest, she took them off to ease her feet. Her husband said to her, “You shall have a pair of shoes delivered to you before long, in a remarkable manner.” When they were ready to move on, Clarissa reached for her shoes and found a new pair in their place.20

Mosiah remembered life in Commerce, Illinois, the settlement that would become Nauvoo, as very hard at first because of sickness in the swampy, humid area. “At times we children were so hungry and sick that it seemed we were destined to starve to death. … Sometimes when our parents were sick and could not cook greens, we ate them raw. I have pulled up grass and ate
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it, also basswood buds and elmbark.

“When the people began to move into Nauvoo and were dying off so fast, father would work day and night making caskets, when he was not sick.” But, “when father was able to, he preached the Gospel as often as possible.”

Levi Hancock filled a number of roles in Nauvoo, including policeman. Through associations in the community, his family developed a strong friendship with the Prophet. Joseph Smith apparently placed great confidence in his friend Levi. Mosiah Hancock recalled: “I stood on the rail of the fence in front of the mansion. When the Prophet said, ‘Brethren, the Lord Almighty has this day revealed to me something I never comprehended before! That is—I have friends who have at a respectful distance been ready to ward off the blows of the adversary. (He brought his hand down on my father’s head as he was acting as bodyguard to the Prophet.) While others have pretended to be my friends, and have crept into my bosom and become vipers, and have been my most deadly enemies. I wish you to be obedient to these true men as you have promised.”

Moving West

The martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph and Hyrum Smith was a shock and severe blow for the Hancocks. But there never was a question in Elder Hancock’s mind about the course he had chosen. His place would be with the Latter-day Saints.

When he and his family joined the exodus from Nauvoo, their journey westward was slower because he was responsible also for his wife’s aged mother and two young relatives. They caught up with the Saints just in time for him to be called to join the Mormon Battalion; he was the only General Authority to participate in the battalion’s historic trek. After their discharge in California, he traveled eastward to meet his family on the trail in Wyoming in mid-1848. Returning to the Salt Lake Valley with them, he made a place to live and took up his trade of carpentry.

His was never to be the settled life, however. He moved to Payson in Utah County, about 50 miles south of Salt Lake City, where in 1851, he represented the county in the first territorial legislature. There followed a series of moves that took him finally, in the mid-1860s, to southern Utah, where his son Mosiah had gone. Elder Hancock lived successively in three small communities there, dying in Washington (about six miles north of St. George) in 1882 at the age of 79.

Levi Hancock’s commitment to service in the gospel stayed strong throughout his life. Two years before his death, he attended the Church’s Golden Jubilee and was honored as one of the two remaining members of the original First Council of the Seventy.

But whatever recognition came to him, he might have appreciated most the tribute paid by his son Mosiah: “My father seemed a savior as he strove to bring me up in the admonition of the Lord.”

Notes
1. Levi W. Hancock, The Life of Levi Hancock, Archives Division, Church Historical Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, typescript, 1–2, 4–5.
2. Life of Levi Hancock, 24.
3. Life of Levi Hancock, 5.
4. Life of Levi Hancock, 1–2.
5. Life of Levi Hancock, 4–5.
7. Life of Levi Hancock, 23.
8. Life of Levi Hancock, 23–25.
10. Life of Levi Hancock, 33.
12. Life of Levi Hancock, 37.
13. Life of Levi Hancock, 46.
15. Life of Levi Hancock, 51.
16. Life of Levi Hancock, 51–53.
17. Writings of Levi W. Hancock, 107.
19. The Life Story of Mosiah Lyman Hancock, typescript, Historical Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1969), 10.
20. Life Story of Mosiah Lyman Hancock, 11.
22. Life Story of Mosiah Lyman Hancock, 18.
23. Life Story of Mosiah Lyman Hancock, 37.

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