

# Make Every Day Count

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***Forerunner, "Ready Answer," November-December 2012***

***"I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." —  
Philippians 3:14***

Back in 1975, an American singer named Freddy Fender had a hit song called "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights," in which he bemoaned the fact that he was wasting time on the wrong girl. King Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 9:10, "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going."

Wasted days cannot be recovered; they are gone. Lost opportunities are just that—lost! We say to ourselves, "I'll pray later or study tomorrow," or "I'll write that card when I get time." In Psalm 89:47, the psalmist beseeches God, "Remember how short my time is."

We are all guilty of wasting time, but perhaps the story of the famous Donner Party will inspire us all to be more cognizant of how short life is and how we must make every day count. There are numerous physical lessons here, but we should cast it into spiritual terms to see how it might apply to our own lives. The instruction will be obvious, but because our lives vary so much, we will likely take different lessons from it. This story has false prophets, friends turning on each other, people seeking the easy way, and a slide from energy and enthusiasm into fatigue and complacency.

## **Journey to a New Life**

In the late eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries, caravans of wagons carried settlers emigrating from the eastern United States to various areas of the West. On April 16, 1846, nine covered wagons pulled by oxen left Springfield, Illinois, on the 2,000-mile journey to the area around Sutter's Fort, California, present-day Sacramento. The leader of this group was James Reed, a successful businessman who hoped for even greater fortunes in California.

Along the way to Independence, Missouri, the jumping-off point for wagon trains in those days, other families joined the caravan: George Donner, along with his brother, Jacob, and their large families; the Graves; Breems; Murphys; Eddys; McCutchens; Kesebergs; and Wolfingers. These people left behind family and comfort to seek a new life and—they hoped—a better one. The trip was to take four months, and they would cross rivers, plains, deserts, and mountains. A difficult journey, to be sure, but thousands of others had made the trek already by then and left a trail to follow.

What made this wagon train different is that both James Reed and Jacob Donner had read a book, *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California*, by a promoter named Lansford Hastings. It told of a shortcut to "paradise" called the Hastings Cutoff that would trim 350 miles from their journey. Trouble was, no wagons had ever taken this course, and even Lansford Hastings himself had yet to try it, on foot or horseback!

The group, now comprised of about eighty folks, reached Independence in three weeks, where they resupplied then immediately struck out on the trail in the middle of a thunderstorm. They had such a sense of urgency that they did not wait for the storm to pass! A week later, they caught up to a larger wagon train and joined with them. They were making good time.

Their first delay came at the Big Blue River in present-day Kansas. The waters were too high to cross, forcing them to wait a week. They made Fort Laramie in what is now Wyoming on June 27. There, James Reed ran into an old friend from back home, James Clyman.

Mr. Clyman is a story unto himself, a famous explorer, Indian fighter, and mountain man. He had just traveled the Hastings Cutoff, west to east, with Lansford Hastings. Clyman told James Reed the route was barely passable *on foot*, and it would be impossible with wagons. Reed chose to ignore the warnings of a man he knew and respected to follow a man he did not know. He then used his persuasive powers to sell his family and others on this shortcut as well.

At this point, the Donner Party was still traveling with the larger wagon train they had joined, but on July 19, they parted with the majority of the wagon train taking the known path to California. The 74 people taking the Cutoff elected George Donner as their captain, adding his name to the history books. They felt that James Reed was a little too high-handed and haughty to be their leader. The very fact that they could not elect the man whose advice they followed should have been a strong indicator of trouble to come. Bad fruit, as it were.

On July 28, the Donner Party rolled into Fort Bridger, in what is now southwest Wyoming, near the Utah border, expecting to meet Mr. Hastings, but he had left with another wagon train some days earlier to try his own shortcut. He left a letter extolling the virtues of his "cutoff" and encouraging them to follow. More bad fruit.

Enter Jim Bridger, a famous mountain man and proprietor of the fort and trading post. He also knew that taking this route was foolish, but he figured that, if enough wagon trains took it, they could carve out a road and make it passable, increasing trade at his post. He encouraged the Donner Party to go.

They chose to rest four days at Fort Bridger. Remember the seven days waiting for the waters to subside on the Big Blue River? Now the party had lost eleven days. Their sense of urgency should have been heightened, but instead, it appears to have waned.

### **The Critical Cutoff**

Their first week on the Cutoff, they made good progress. On August 6, they reached the Weber River, finding a note from Lansford Hastings stuck on a forked stick. He wrote that the canyon ahead was virtually impassable and that they should take another trail through Salt Basin, in what is present-day Utah. Another bad sign! They were following a man who had only just taken wagons down this trail, and now he advises them to go another way!

Another group had already gone down Weber Canyon, and while it may have been bad, at least something of a trail had been carved. This wagon train made it through to California, and history barely remembers them. The Donner Party sent three men on horses ahead to find Hastings, but when they did, he would not come back and lead them. Instead, he took the three men up on a peak and pointed out the alternate route—one never used!

While all this went on, the Donner Party waited five days. While waiting, more wagons pulled up to join them, bringing their numbers to 87. Sixteen days had been lost to this point, but Hastings assured the men that this alternate route would take a week, and then they would rejoin his cutoff.

When they found Hastings' note stuck on a stick, they were only a week out of Fort Bridger. They could have admitted that they were following a self-promoting blowhard and backtracked, but they took a vote and decided to head off even further into the unknown—all in the mistaken belief that they were taking a shortcut. They were 87 men, women, and children, without a guide or a map, over two weeks behind schedule, heading into the wilderness, desert, and mountains.

So they began the grueling journey through the Wasatch Mountains. Clearing trees, filling gullies, and dislodging boulders so that their wagons could move, they made eight miles in six days. They had to abandon some of their wagons, leaving behind family heirlooms and precious memories. Morale began to sink, and they blamed Hastings *and* James Reed. Yet they still did not turn back.

On August 25, they reached the Great Salt Lake Desert. In the 21 days since leaving the Weber River, they had traveled just 36 miles. Now they had to cross the Great Salt Lake Desert, which Hastings had said would take them two days. On the third day, their water was nearly gone, and some of the oxen had run away. It took five days to cross 80 miles of desert. In doing so, they left another four wagons behind and lost 32 oxen. They should have been in California by now, but they still had 600 miles to go!

They rested a few days, took inventory, and found the food was running low. Things looked bleak. That very night, snow powdered the mountain peaks. They sent two young men ahead to Sutter's Fort to bring back supplies.

Finally, on September 26, the "new" trail joined back up with the Hastings Cutoff. The detour that Lansford Hastings told them would take one week had instead taken six—an extra 125 miles through mountains and desert. They were now over fifty days behind schedule. This late in the year, in the mountains of present-day Nevada, if ever there was a time to make every day count, this was it.

### **No End of Troubles**

On October 5, two wagons became entangled, and there was a fight. One of the wagon drivers, John Snyder, began to hit James Reed with his whip, so Reed stabbed Snyder to death with his hunting knife. Some wanted to hang him on the spot, but he was instead banished from the wagon train. Leaving his family, James Reed rode off into the west.

On October 7, with food running low and tempers running high, Lewis Keseberg put a Belgian man named Hardcoop out of his wagon. The old man had severely swollen feet and could not keep up. He sought a ride in the other wagons, but no one would take him in. He was last seen sitting under a large sage bush, completely exhausted, unable to walk, left there to die.

On October 12, the group, attacked by Paiute Indians using poison tipped arrows, lost 21 oxen. On October 16, they reached the gateway to the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Their food was almost gone, but three days later, one of the young men sent ahead showed up with seven mules loaded with beef and flour. With him were two guides from the California settlements, and he brought news of a clear but difficult path through the mountains.

This should have lifted their spirits and fired them up. They are only fifty miles from the summit, and once over the summit, it was literally downhill from there. It was the middle of October, in the High Sierras, and they were 51 days behind. What did they do?

Well, it would be nice to say that they made every day count and immediately headed for the pass, but that is not what happened. If they had, the Donner Party would be unknown, just another wagon train that endured much hardship to reach the "Promised Land." Instead, they rested five days!

*Snow was already on the peaks!* When they finally started for the summit, snow began to fall. Three men traveling out front made it to the summit but could go no farther in five feet of new snow. Twelve miles from their goal, the Donner Party was snowed in for the winter—they were one, maybe two days, from cresting the mountain and heading downhill. No doubt, they wished they had back any one of those 56 wasted days and wasted nights.

They built shelters and tried several more times to get over the pass, now buried in twenty feet of snow. They would end up spending over four months in the High Sierras, enduring a fierce winter with no food and pitiful shelter. To read the individual stories of this horrible time, left behind by diaries and interviews later, will move a person to tears.

After the normal food ran out, the oxen and mules were killed and eaten, although many had wandered off in the storms and been lost under the snow. The last of the oxen was killed on November 29. They then boiled the hides and ate those. Next, they ate twigs, bones, and bark. On December 15, the first person died of malnutrition. There would be many more. Those that survived resorted to eating the flesh of those who died.

The first relief party made it over the mountain on February 19. They found that many had died, some had gone crazy, and the rest were barely clinging to life. This was still the dead of winter, and they could not carry everyone out. They managed to get 23 of them out, but two of the children died on the way to Sutter's Fort.

On March 1, the second relief party arrived and discovered the grisly evidence of cannibalism. The relief party of March 12 found the same, as they also came across partially eaten bodies. In the end, 44 people died, mostly from starvation, and 47 survived.

### **Lessons to Learn**

If those of the Donner Party could have a "do over," they would not have gone off following someone whom they did not know over a trail that had never been used. They would have striven mightily to get along with one another. The lessons that can be pulled from this story are many: lessons on proper planning, being prepared, choosing leaders wisely, getting along with others, working as a team instead of against one another, kindness, forgiveness, faith, salvation, and the list goes on.

There is even a spiritual lesson in the Donner Party's cannibalism. Paul warns in Galatians 5:15, "But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!" We should avoid spiritual cannibalism as much as we would its gruesome physical counterpart.

Finally, we need to learn from this story to make every day count. Making every day count is different for each of us because our weaknesses are not the same. Whatever our weak spot(s) might

be, we cannot let complacency settle in. It is somewhat discouraging to note that in the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), all ten of them "slumbered and slept." We must realize that, for us, snow has already powdered the peaks (Romans 13:11)! Now is the time to press toward our goal (Philippians 3:14).

In I Thessalonians 5:1-7 (J.B. Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English*), the apostle Paul writes:

But as far as times and seasons go, my brothers, you don't need written instructions. You are well aware that the day of the Lord will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. When men are saying "Peace and security," catastrophe will sweep down upon them as suddenly and inescapably as birth-pangs to a pregnant woman.

But because you, my brothers, are not living in darkness the day cannot take you by surprise, like a burglar! You are all sons of light, sons of the day, and none of us belongs to darkness or the night. Let us then never fall asleep, like the rest of the world; let us keep awake, with our wits about us.

Moses prays in Psalm 90:12, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." *The Contemporary English Version* renders this verse, "Teach us to use wisely all the time we have." Each day that passes is one less in the physical life God has given us. Make every day count!