

Episode 18

Why I Believe

THOMAS AND PIA SAVOLDI

NARRATOR: The views and opinions expressed here are those of the guests and are not the official position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

[BEGIN MUSIC]

MALE VOICE: We believe in God, the Eternal Father, and in His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost.

MALE VOICE: We believe the Bible to be the Word of God...

FEMALE VOICE: We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men...

MALE VOICE: We believe that through the Atonement of Christ, all mankind may be saved...

MALE VOICE: We also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.

FEMALE VOICE: We may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things...

(Music)

RICK STARR: Welcome to Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel. My name is Rick Starr, and today our guests are Elder Tom Savoldi and his wife Pia Savoldi who are missionaries here on Temple Square currently, and it's so good to have you with us today. Thank you for being with us.

PIA SAVOLDI: Thank you for inviting us.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: You're right. We're glad to be here. [LAUGHTER]

RICK STARR: Now today we're going to talk about your conversion story on Why I Believe, which is very interesting. But before we begin, a little bit of congratulations to both of you. You were just called to be first counselor in a mission here on Temple Square. Tell us a little bit about that.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: The mission is the Family and Church History Mission, which has like 450 full-time missionaries and about another 1500 Church-service missionaries involved in it so—and we cover not just Church history or and not just family history but both and we interlock those together so that people can create an entire picture of their not just genealogical research, which is just names and dates, but their family history also.

RICK STARR: That is a huge mission. It is a huge mission.

PIA SAVOLDI: And we also serve the headquarters too; the missionaries who are called to serve in Church headquarters also are in this mission.

RICK STARR: Now the missionaries who are in your mission are, they are spread all over the place, aren't they?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

RICK STARR: Many of them are working from home.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Many do work from home, especially the Church-service missionaries. And they're not just all in the area right here; we have some in Colorado, we had them in Oregon, Canada, we had them in England. That's being kind of phased out right now. But we work in the Church History Library, the Family History Library, the Church History Museum and the Joseph Smith Building, we have several zones there. We have 20 zones in our mission.

RICK STARR: Oh my goodness.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: So each of the counselors in the presidency splits that and we each have ten zones that we worry about.

RICK STARR: That is great. It sounds like it's gonna be a fun mission. When do you begin?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: We are formally, well, it was announced last Monday and we will formally begin on the 28th of June.

RICK STARR: And it's a one-year assignment, is that correct?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: It should be mentioned that you're just coming off another mission here on Temple Square.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: So you're just finishing one mission and—

PIA SAVOLDI: It was extended for another year.

RICK STARR: Extending, yes. Well, congratulations. Well, we're here to talk about your conversion story, which I've read a little bit about and it's very interesting. You were raised—both of you—in Indiana.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Correct.

RICK STARR: Talk a little bit about your upbringing.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Okay. I was born into a family of seven. I was the second from the youngest. I was born at the start of World War II so as I went through those five years of that war, just hardly remembering anything but I certainly remember the day it ended.

PIA SAVOLDI: And I was born near Chicago, Illinois but in Indiana. My parents were both born in Italy and came to this country and met each other as teenagers or near twenties and married here, so I was—grew up in the northern part of Indiana.

RICK STARR: Both of you have very Catholic and very Italian backgrounds, is that correct?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Correct, though my mother was English, German, you know, all of the area there, can't say they're really Irish, but I suspect Irish also, my mother was, but my dad was full-blooded Italian.

RICK STARR: You mentioned in your devotional that being raised in central Indiana—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

RICK STARR: Catholic—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

RICK STARR: Was almost as different as being Mormon in central Indiana. Why is that so?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: In the 1940s, there were very few Catholics in central Indiana. And I was, I'm a farm boy so I was out in the country, and in my school, I would guess there was two other Catholic families, so we were, we were strange, so—and it was, we were the odd man out. We really were.

RICK STARR: How was that, being raised? Did you, were you made fun of or did people look at you differently or was it just another religion?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: They looked at us differently but they looked at us with respect. Much like LDS people today that are in Indiana and in other places. They look at us very differently but with a great deal of respect. Very little—I can't remember anybody making fun of us.

PIA SAVOLDI: I didn't have that experience because I grew up in the northern part of the state near Chicago where there are a lot of ethnic groups; a lot of Polish, a lot of Italian, lots of Jews even and so that was—and because I went to a Catholic grade school and a Catholic high school, I never felt ostracized. I felt like one of the group, so it wasn't as strange for me growing up Catholic as it was for him.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: I guess the only time it really stood out is the high school graduations were always accompanied with a Baccalaureate ceremony and that was generally held in a Protestant church and we weren't allowed to go. I mean that was against our church's rules to even enter a Protestant church building.

RICK STARR: Interesting.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And that kind of created a problem or two.

RICK STARR: Well, you were both not just traditional Catholics, you were very church-going Catholics, isn't that correct?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Oh yes, very much so.

RICK STARR: In fact, you—in your devotional you had mentioned that you truly believed that the Catholic Church was the one and only true church.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: That's correct.

PIA SAVOLDI: Very true.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Never doubted it. If anybody tried to talk to us about religion, we would dismiss them very quickly by saying, "We're not interested. We're Catholic." And we'd go on to something else. [CHUCKLING]

RICK STARR: Well, I was reading before we started today's program, and one of the things you mentioned in your devotional was that—a little bit of history, in 1962, Pope John XXIII convened an ecumenical council in Rome to review canon law—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Correct.

RICK STARR: And as a result of that, your diocese in Lafayette, Indiana decided that you would review those teachings and develop a plan to implement those within the diocese. And you were appointed as a member of a 12-member committee to both review these teachings and, I guess, decide how to implement them. Isn't that correct?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: That's correct.

RICK STARR: Talk about that process you went through 'cause you were reviewing Catholic teachings and how to get them out to the people and what happened in your mind as you were reviewing those teachings.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Okay. Each parish had this 12-person committee, so every parish did the same thing. And we would meet twice a week for about three hours at a time and we would read these documents and decide, you know, what we should do to implement them in that diocese. And through the course of that study we realized how very little training that the Catholics gave their pastors. The priests were, they had almost no training in family life whatsoever because they were not married, of course, and little understanding of what family life was like. And then it became more and more obvious that there was no, they had no real claim to being the one true church. I mean it just became obvious to me that they didn't have that. It was a power structure. You had the deacon, the lower priest, then you had the head pastor, or the, what was he called?

PIA SAVOLDI: The reverend.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: The reverend for all that and then he reported to a bishop and then it went right on up the line all the way to Rome.

PIA SAVOLDI: So the more we studied, it became obvious to us it was more an organization structure, organizational structure, and the doctrine became less important, and there was less to substantiate that we could see. And so it began to raise questions in our minds.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: As we grew up in the Catholic Church, we were not allowed to read the Bible. I mean that was just something we were told, “Don’t do that because you may misinterpret it.” So we had only what we did at mass which contained scriptures, which we did not understand. But they were in there and they just controlled it all the way.

RICK STARR: Yeah, you had mentioned in your devotional that you had a Bible at home—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes, we did.

RICK STARR: But that you were encouraged—or not encouraged—to—

PIA SAVOLDI: To read it.

RICK STARR: To read it—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Exactly.

RICK STARR: Because of the fear of misinterpretation.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Exactly.

RICK STARR: So there was kind of a hierarchy of—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Right.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: Of those who are, I guess, are allowed to—

PIA SAVOLDI: The theologians were the ones who were the teachers—the ecclesiastical teachers—and so that theology was left to them. We were just to be obedient and come to church on Sunday. [CHUCKLING]

RICK STARR: Which you did.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: The Bible—

PIA SAVOLDI: Which we did.

RICK STARR: Very religiously.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: The Bible in the home was meant to record marriages, births, deaths. And that’s the pages we used. That’s all we got to use.

RICK STARR: As you were on this committee and you were reviewing some of the teachings, were there any specific teachings that just didn’t quite ring true to you or that caused concern?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: The basic teachings of the church were not really all that much discussed but what was, what happened there was how the organization ought to operate. For instance, they didn't have the law of tithing, okay? So people would contribute. And you were a major contributor if you gave \$5 a week. So they didn't have an understanding of that and they would always publish that. You know, at the end of the year, your name was listed right there and how much you contributed.

RICK STARR: Oh, I see.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: So—

RICK STARR: Very publicly.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Very public. Very publicly. So that was always a problem that many people had trouble with. But then the lack of understanding by the, by Monsignor Ward of what it cost to raise a family. He had no idea. One of the brethren had several small children. He said just to buy stockings for them cost this amount of money and he was shocked, totally shocked, had never even considered those kinds of things. So that was also another problem. The organization of the church was totally in the past, prior to that, controlled by that priest. He had no parish council, no advisors, no first or second or third or fourth counselor. And that's what this whole purpose was, was to try to establish putting members and getting them involved in the organization, the finances, all of that kind of thing, in the operation of the church. I guess the thing that bothered me the most that came out of that was when we tried to implement that, the bishop basically said, "It's not gonna change. You will have no say." And that's when we said, "Okay, it's a power structure."

RICK STARR: [CHUCKLING] Well, talk about—it was soon after that that the missionaries came to you. And you mentioned in your devotional that in some ways, all the experiences that you had in the Catholic Church, not only the traditions that you'd had of attending the church every week but then the questions that came to mind as you were on this committee, all kind of came together to prepare you for when the missionaries did arrive. Is that correct?

PIA SAVOLDI: That's correct. They just came knocking on our door just right about that time. He had actually decided—my husband had actually decided that he could no longer attend church because he felt like a hypocrite attending church, and this was the beginning of the 1960s and the flower children and the freedom of promiscuity I guess and we were, I was, we were both very concerned about how to raise our children with good moral standards in such an environment and how we were going to teach them the things that were necessary for them to be able to withstand some of the things that were going on in the world at the time. And so we had for the first time in our lives a little disagreement about attending church. I still felt that religion was very important to a family, that we needed to attend together, and yet he had this conflict that he could no longer attend because he felt so hypocritical and that's when the missionaries knocked on our door.

RICK STARR: So you were kind of in a commotion.

PIA SAVOLDI: Very much so.

RICK STARR: How do we raise a family, and you mentioned that many of the Catholic leadership didn't understand family life.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: They did not.

RICK STARR: What was it that the missionaries brought into your home that helped you, that rang true to you?

PIA SAVOLDI: Well, first of all, they brought this love and that was just—you could feel it, this genuine care, and they started teaching us, and of course, we were very apprehensive, you know, it was like we had a wall that was placed between us and them but, you know, they just initiated by trying to get to know us, and of course they fell in love with—we had three little children, they were—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Six, five—

PIA SAVOLDI: Five and—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Three.

PIA SAVOLDI: Three at the time. And so, you know, they were really good with the children, and we talked about them and how we were concerned about raising them in this world and that's when they taught us about family home evening, right at the very beginning. And right away, we looked at each other and thought that was the greatest program we had ever heard. Because the whole time we grew up, I don't think either one of us ever heard our parents talk about religion or bear their testimonies of the Catholic Church or even teach us any of the principles or doctrine of the Catholic Church.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: We would have prayers over meals but it was the memorized little prayer that, that was always used, that was the standard prayer, and that's the one you used.

PIA SAVOLDI: And we would have the 40-day fast, you know, during lent, and we practiced those things, you know, the stations of the cross and all of those things, so family home evening was just, that was probably the beginning of the light bulbs going off in our heads.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: But that's truly a good statement, the light bulbs were going off in our heads, because we would sit on this couch and we smoked a lot, and I've—ever since I've thought, "Oh, they must have had it hard to even wanna come back" [LAUGHTER] but they would teach us a principle and we'd say, "Well, that's what we believe," and they'd say, "Yeah, but your church doesn't," [CHUCKLING] and they would teach us about the Godhead or teach us about all the various precepts of the Church that are so near and dear to us now, the plan of salvation and so forth, and the thing that I guess impressed me the most was, beyond that, was eternal marriage and that families can be together forever and how great a concept that is, because it provided a steadying device throughout our entire marriage. I mean it gave us a perspective that we didn't have before.

RICK STARR: Yeah, it gives great purpose to a marriage, doesn't it?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: It does.

RICK STARR: Great meaning.

PIA SAVOLDI: That's right.

RICK STARR: If you're just joining us, this is Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel and today we have Elder and Sister Savoldi, who are currently missionaries on Temple Square and soon to be in the mission presidency on Temple Square, talking about their conversion story. You had mentioned in your devotional that your walk through the Sacred Grove was an eye-opening experience for you, and it's interesting that you put things that way. You mentioned that things rang true to you that the missionaries were teaching you. Talk a little bit about that. I think it's so interesting that the promise of the gospel is that you don't have to believe what somebody else is telling you about the gospel. You can actually find out for yourself and you talk about it as though it were your own sacred grove. Talk a little bit about what you went through in your understanding of the gospel and how you came to know that it was true.

PIA SAVOLDI: Well, after the missionaries would teach us every night—they'd leave about nine, they were very obedient, 9:00 or 9:30, and the children by that time were already in bed and we would, you know, clean up and hop in bed and just, it was 1 o'clock in the morning before we could sleep because all of these ideas, these new principles we were learning just made so much sense, and we struggled through, especially I did, with why this all occurred to a person by the name of Joseph Smith. Why was he the one appointed? It just seemed like such a simple man and with a common name and it was just hard for me to understand and accept and so it took a lot of prayer and a lot of thought and some studying as well, but it wasn't until after we were baptized that I fully gained a testimony of the prophet. That was probably the hardest for me to understand, but it was after prayer and fasting and it just all made sense to me. Why not a simple man with a simple name? Why not someone who is very humble? He was exactly the individual that the Lord would come to.

RICK STARR: Yeah, and if not—if a simple man such as a 14- or 15-year-old boy could understand this truth, why can't I?

PIA SAVOLDI: Why can't I? Exactly.

RICK STARR: Brother Savoldi.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: But to the Sacred Grove part, when they taught us about Joseph's going into that grove and kneeling down for prayer after having read the James verses that you could ask and not be upbraided, and then for Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, to both appear to him and They had bodies of flesh and bone, because I had almost always thought that God was like a cloud or something up there, we had no concept of Him being like us, even though we knew we were made in His image, we still didn't have that concept, but that was such great knowledge for us to think that we had a loving Heavenly Father—in fact, Heavenly Parents—that we could turn to and know were interested and cared about us.

RICK STARR: Yeah, it's comforting, isn't it?

PIA SAVOLDI: It is comforting. There is a verse in the Catholic mass where—or a time in the Catholic mass when—they read the verses from John, “And the Word was God and the Word was with God,” and it never ever made sense to me until the missionaries taught us about the Godhead and who they were and I thought, “Oh, that’s what that means.” [CHUCKLING] “That’s what it’s saying,” and so every principle they taught, it was just like another answer, another revelation, another piece to the puzzle of all of these things that we knew in our heart but never really had an understanding of until they taught us.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And they provided us with an overall plan, not just for this life, not just until we die, but that we go on, that resurrection is a guarantee, I mean, it’s ours, it’s free, we can do whatever we want and we can all still be resurrected; and be exalted is a little different than that but that life goes on and that we can be as families. That was so important.

RICK STARR: Yeah, that is wonderful. Well, now you mentioned that all of these things rang true to you, but you weren’t actually baptized on your first set of missionaries, were you, when they asked you to commit to baptism?

PIA SAVOLDI: They were asking us to change our lives 100%. I mean, not just the smoking thing but everything, and plus, we loved our families dearly—we still love our families dearly—and we did not want to offend them, so we had to be sure, and that’s why we asked so many questions, I think. I think we must have been exasperating for them, now that we look back, they must have been frustrated at one point. And I remember that during this process, one young man was a, had had a very successful life before his mission, he was a professional baseball player and a little, you know, you could see a little bit of that pride, not that I wanna accuse him but he and I clashed and then the missionaries never came by again. Little did we know at the time that they actually had closed our area ’cause we were in a small community and they needed the missionaries elsewhere but also now looking back, a very significant thing happened. My father passed away rather unexpectedly, and I think that had to have happened before I could join the Church because I could not have done anything to hurt him. He was very important—is very important—in my life.

RICK STARR: You were both very close to him, right? Your whole family was.

PIA SAVOLDI: Both of us, yes.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

RICK STARR: So your father’s passing, did that cause concern in your life, questions to come up again about life after death and that kind of thing? Was that another troubling time in your life that maybe prepared you for missionaries again?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: You know, I don’t—I think we’d already learned that lesson and we knew there was gonna be more and that he was in a better place and that he was going to be res—we already knew those things for him so that didn’t bother us.

RICK STARR: From the previous missionaries.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Correct.

RICK STARR: Okay.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: But it didn't make us want to run to the Church any quicker though. We went that whole year—another, a whole year passed before they came back and we didn't ask for them to come back, they happened to come by.

PIA SAVOLDI: They just happened to knock on our door so our Father in Heaven gave us two chances—

RICK STARR: Another opportunity—

PIA SAVOLDI: It was really, as we look back now we are so grateful that we—

RICK STARR: Now you still had some habits that were challenging. You had some Word of Wisdom habits—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: Smoking, drinking coffee, tea. You were raised that way.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: I think you started smoking, Elder Savoldi—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: At 14.

RICK STARR: And 19 for you, Sister Savoldi?

PIA SAVOLDI: 19 for me. And I started drinking coffee when I was about five. The lattes that they have now—Italian moms would give their children milk with just a little bit of coffee in it and that warmth would help them go to bed at night, go to sleep at night. [CHUCKLING] So I, you know, was a heavy coffee drinker before I joined the Church.

RICK STARR: From a young age.

PIA SAVOLDI: From a very young age, yeah.

RICK STARR: So overcoming those habits—you had the missionaries come back in your home. They were teaching you.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: What helped you to overcome those things and then the other concerns that you had about making those changes?

PIA SAVOLDI: First of all, they taught us well. And Elder Stott, sweet Elder Stott, who was wiser than his 19 years, asked us one time, "Don't you want to have these questions resolved once and for all?" And I very, and proudly said, "Well, sure," thinking that there was no way that they could resolve all the questions that we had, and he, they proceeded to tell us about fasting and prayer and the power that could come from fasting and prayer and so we agreed upon a date; it was March 31, they would come and start a fast with us and we would kneel together and pray and then begin the fast, and I can remember him in our

home just pacing the floor, and we were anxious to get it started. You know, we wanted these questions resolved, and finally I said, “Well, Elder Stott, are we ever going to start?” And he said, “Well, just one more thing that we need to talk about. We need to make sure you understand that when you fast and pray, that you really shouldn’t smoke.” And we had figured that out and we said, “Well, Elder Stott, we think you taught us well and we’ve just taken our last pack of cigarettes out and burned them.” [CHUCKLING] And the relief that came over his face was just something we’ll never ever forget. But you know, that was it. We never, now that’s not to say—my sweet husband, it was hard for him. Hard for me to, the coffee was. The smoking wasn’t as difficult. The coffee was very difficult, but Heavenly Father took care of that. At our next family gathering, which was just that spring, the coffee pot, the big coffee pot that I had in my home, broke [LAUGHTER] so I never had to buy another one and that was fine. I never was tempted beyond that point.

RICK STARR: [LAUGHTER] That’s interesting.

PIA SAVOLDI: But he needs to tell you his story that occurred for, still occurs, I think.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Well, occasionally. Like I said, I was a very heavy smoker. Four packs a day.

RICK STARR: Oh my goodness.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And on March 31, that was the last day that I smoked in my life. But that didn’t mean that it went away. I would, I didn’t smoke anymore but I would dream. And I had these dreams and I would wake up in the middle of the night thinking, “Oh, my gosh,” and I was dreaming that I was smoking and always there would be a Church leader standing nearby and I was thinking, “Oh, no.” So I was always glad to wake up [LAUGHTER] and know that it was a dream. [LAUGHTER]

RICK STARR: You’re listening to Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel. And today we have Elder and Sister Savoldi talking about their conversion story. Now you overcame the habits of the Word of Wisdom concerns that you had and this was early spring, April 1st, April Fool’s, wasn’t it?

PIA SAVOLDI: Yes, April Fool’s Day.

RICK STARR: Talk a little bit about the challenges you had at this point now that you had made the decision to commit to baptism and you went through that process. Tell us a little bit about the family concerns that you had and what happened.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Well, we were concerned about our families. We knew that it was going to be difficult for them. I mean, they knew how we had been raised and how we’d always gone to church and so forth and we knew we had to make a change. It wasn’t something we’d done quickly, so we decided the only thing we knew how to do would be to choose our words very well and write them. So we wrote letters explaining to them exactly why we were doing what we were doing and telling them how much we love them and so forth and prepared them. They got to be rather lengthy—I think three pages—but we decided that we would drop them in the mailbox on our way to our baptism because we were fearful if they knew about it ahead of time, they’d come and try to stop us [LAUGHTER]. So that’s the way we handled that.

They then—we didn't hear from them for a few days. Probably it was the middle of April that we finally got a phone call from them. Well, actually a little later than that. And my parents had actually come to visit us that day and my father was and mother were not happy that we'd made this change but they also didn't condemn us. As a matter of fact, my father's only real concern was, he said, "It's okay, it doesn't matter what church you belong to as long as they don't want 10%." [LAUGHTER] So we didn't tell him about tithing [LAUGHTER] or budget or fast offering or all the other things that were involved and they were okay. But while they were there, her mother calls on the phone and I was in the habit of coming home for lunch in this small town, which I did and when I got to the door, she met me at the door crying and crying, saying, "Come in, you got to help," 'cause her mother had my mother on the phone telling her what a bad person I was for making her daughter do this, and so I got on the phone and we talked with her and she let us know that she was, we were no longer members of her family now and we'd never see them again.

RICK STARR: What perception of the Mormon Church did she have that caused her to feel that way?

PIA SAVOLDI: She was sure that he had made me join just so he could have another wife.

RICK STARR: Oh. [LAUGHTER]

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And that she'd be wearing black dresses and baking bread.

RICK STARR: Oh, my goodness.

PIA SAVOLDI: And you know, I learned how to bake bread after I joined the Church [LAUGHTER] but I never wore black dresses [LAUGHTER].

RICK STARR: It's interesting how some of those perceptions still creep up—

PIA SAVOLDI: They do.

RICK STARR: In the media these days.

PIA SAVOLDI: They do.

RICK STARR: It's sad. They're incorrect perceptions, but they just, they persist sometimes.

PIA SAVOLDI: They do. Yeah.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: It was an amazing thing though. About 4 ½ weeks, 5 weeks later, they were starting to plan for a Memorial Day activity that their family would get together again for one of these all-day eating things [CHUCKLING] and so she got her older sister to call us and invite us.

RICK STARR: Your mother did?

PIA SAVOLDI: My mother did.

RICK STARR: Okay. So—

PIA SAVOLDI: It only lasted about four weeks.

RICK STARR: Okay. Well, that's not too bad—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yeah.

RICK STARR: To be expelled from the family.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: No. We thought it was a good price to pay.

PIA SAVOLDI: But she never ever stopped offering coffee or tea or any of those things, you know, until she got quite a bit older, but the turnaround in her was amazing. In her own little way, she was able to see the changes that occurred in our lives were all for the good and she, there wasn't anyone on this earth that was more proud of her grandsons as this little Italian woman who welcomed back a grandson from his, our son from his mission, who was speaking fluent Italian, and she was so, she had to introduce him to all of her friends all over again and let him—

RICK STARR: Oh my goodness.

PIA SAVOLDI: So it was—

RICK STARR: So he went on a mission to Italy?

PIA SAVOLDI: He did. He was in Milano.

RICK STARR: Oh, that is great.

PIA SAVOLDI: And we had one in Germany and then one in Ogden.

RICK STARR: You had an experience later on in life with your mother who you—

PIA SAVOLDI: My mother.

RICK STARR: Affectionately called Nona?

PIA SAVOLDI: Nona.

RICK STARR: Nona—

PIA SAVOLDI: Nona.

RICK STARR: When she was 89 and she was soon to pass away.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: Tell that story, would you, please?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: She had always—her mother had always had circulation problems and she had tried all kinds of things to improve that in her life. Well, as she turned 89, it was obvious that it wasn't getting better, and as a matter of fact, in December, we had gone there to visit because she was really not doing well and one of her legs had in fact died—it was cold,

you know, you could touch it and it was cold—and the other one had a little warmth but so the thing became—the situation was, the doctor said, “If we don’t amputate her legs, she’s going to die.” And she was very firm. “I don’t want, you’re not gonna take my legs, you’re just not gonna do that, I’m not gonna allow that to happen.” And we had an interesting discussion with the doctor and told him, “You know, for her at 89 and not having legs, it wouldn’t make any sense for her” and got him to agree. And he did agree. But then he proceeded to go talk to her and tell her about how she needed to go ahead and do it. But she still refused. I admire her very much for that. But we had a, this was December 14th or so and we were there, we had a plan for our family to gather in Georgia, and this was near Chicago where she was and we said, “We’re not going to go, we’ll stay here with you” and she said, “Oh, no, no, no!” She insisted that we go because of that. She said, “I’m—you know, what’s gonna happen is gonna happen,” and she knew she was going to die. I mean, there was no question about that. But then when she—

PIA SAVOLDI: And I talked to her about the power of the priesthood and asked her if she would allow my husband to give her a priesthood blessing, and she did. And in that blessing—my mom was a very stubborn woman, I guess, to say it politely; she was the matriarch, a true matriarch of the Italian family, and so she could be a little obstinate at times, and in the blessing, she was promised that she would leave this life with a sweet spirit, and at her funeral, my brother came up to me and he said, “Sis,” he said, “Her last few days, she was the most pleasant woman I have ever been around in my whole life,” and so the power of the priesthood played a part in her life on her last, in her last days.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And that was 1996. Her husband had died in 1969 and we were pretty sure that he was up there saying, “Don’t send her yet. I can’t, I can’t take her yet.” [LAUGHTER] But then when she got that blessing, I guess that made it okay for him.

RICK STARR: She came with a sweet spirit.

PIA SAVOLDI: With a sweet spirit. [LAUGHTER] Right.

RICK STARR: Now there are other stories in your life, too, that have to do with priesthood blessings. Didn’t one of you have a sibling who died of lung cancer?

PIA SAVOLDI: My sister, yeah.

RICK STARR: And what was the story there where she was given a blessing?

PIA SAVOLDI: We were privileged to be with her for the last month and a half of her life and care for her. My husband gave her a priesthood blessing, and there was a reaction that we hadn’t seen for a couple of days ‘cause she was almost comatose, but we are convinced that she accepted the gospel at that point in her life.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: She was semi-comatose, but we were told by the hospice people that the last thing that leaves a person is their hearing, and so I decided, “Okay, it’s time that I teach her the gospel again,” so I sat down beside her and taught her the plan of salvation and where we came from and why we are here and what our purpose is and so forth and then I told her about that I held the priesthood and that I could give her a blessing if she would like that and so I said, “Would you like the blessing?” And she didn’t tell me no, so I went,

changed, put on my coat and tie and gave her a blessing and explained where she was going and what she was going to be doing, and as I completed that blessing and removed my hands from her head, she had a big smile across her face. So it was just a delightful experience.

RICK STARR: That is incredible. The power of the priesthood.

PIA SAVOLDI: The power of the priesthood.

RICK STARR: Let's go back and talk a little bit about after you first joined the Church, you still lived in Indiana—

PIA SAVOLDI: Yes.

RICK STARR: Is that correct? So what was the branch like? I mean you were in the mission field. I mean this was not Salt Lake City, Utah.

PIA SAVOLDI: We had the best branch in the world. [LAUGHING]

RICK STARR: Talk about that a little bit.

PIA SAVOLDI: There were only about five families in the branch. There was probably maybe 25 or 30 people total and so we were fellowshipped immediately. In fact, the whole branch, as many as were not working, were at our baptism, which was a 30-mile drive away from—we met in a little rented—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Carriage house.

PIA SAVOLDI: Carriage house that was on the Lew Wallace estate, and I don't know if you remember, General Lew Wallace was the one that wrote Ben Hur and he had a beautiful estate there in that little town that we lived in and so every Sunday we would drag the hymnals and everything in and take them down Sunday afternoon and then go back Sunday evening for sacrament and return it all and set up the, you know, sheets between the rooms to have classrooms—

RICK STARR: Oh!

PIA SAVOLDI: And right away, we were put to work. He was the Sunday School president, I think, and I was a Mia Miss, Mia Maid teacher, I think. Merry Miss. Merry Miss. That's what it was called back then. And so—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: But within a year, I was called into the branch presidency and she was in the Relief Society presidency and we all had many callings. She had more than I because I was in the branch presidency but she had the opportunity to have Primary on Tuesday and Mutual on Wednesday and Relief Society, so she had 12 or 13 callings. [LAUGHTER]

PIA SAVOLDI: At one time. If you count music—yeah.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And then we were trying to raise money for our own building so we had building fund projects on the weekend. It was, it was 6½-day-a-week fellowshipping—

RICK STARR: Wow.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Which was wonderful because it was exactly what we needed.

PIA SAVOLDI: Exactly.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And we've felt a bit of a loss since we don't have to raise building funds. I mean that was a great builder of people and members and now that we don't do that, I think we've lost some people.

PIA SAVOLDI: We have to find other ways, yeah.

RICK STARR: I remember that as a child, it was very unifying for our branch. I lived in Texas and we did the same thing. I just remember the branch coming very close together—

PIA SAVOLDI: Very close together.

RICK STARR: As we worked on that project. It was neat.

PIA SAVOLDI: One of the things that we did was we made elephant ears. I don't know what you call them here. They were kind of like scones or fried bread, and so we would go to all the fairs and sell elephant ears, great big—

RICK STARR: To raise money?

PIA SAVOLDI: To raise money. We did very well. [LAUGHING]

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Not every project was quite that successful. The worst one we had was raising sorghum. What a waste.

PIA SAVOLDI: Nobody wants sorghum these days.

RICK STARR: To sell?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes. [LAUGHTER]

RICK STARR: Well, what were your thoughts then on being in the mission field? You were a new member, you were put right to work, sounds like great training.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: It was. We were very heavily involved almost from the beginning. We were members not quite four years when I was called to be the branch president. That was a rather interesting story, if I can tell you.

RICK STARR: Sure.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: We, she was pregnant, we were pregnant. And President Glover had called us and asked us to come to Lafayette, which was forty miles away, for an interview and we got there and he finally—he talked to me for a long time, way too long, but anyway, he came out and noticed that she was pregnant, and he said, “When's the baby due?” And we said, “Well, tonight.” [LAUGHTER] So we went home and in fact, the next day, she had the baby. So— [CHUCKLING]

RICK STARR: Wow.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: I then went on—and that was on a Friday night or so and on Sunday, I was sustained into the branch presidency. She wasn't able to be there and so, but at any rate—

PIA SAVOLDI: But our life has been that way. It's just been, we've been very involved in the Church and have had the pleasure of serving in many capacities and it's great because you learn the gospel that way and we needed to learn the gospel. We're still learning.

RICK STARR: That's incredible. Yeah, you learn by doing, by immersing yourself in the gospel.

PIA SAVOLDI: I learn by doing.

RICK STARR: Yeah.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: I served in the branch presidency 9 ½ years and was released in order to go into a stake presidency, so I never ever stopped. I mean we were always busy, and that was, and that was wonderful, too, always to be busy.

RICK STARR: For those of you who're just joining us, this is Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel. I'm Rick Starr and today we have Elder and Sister Savoldi who are missionaries here on Temple Square. We've been talking about their conversion story. You've been members now forty years?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Forty years.

PIA SAVOLDI: Forty years.

RICK STARR: So how many children, how many grandchildren?

PIA SAVOLDI: We have five children; we just had our 22nd grandchild in May and we are expecting our first grandson, grandchild—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Great-grandchild.

PIA SAVOLDI: Great-grandchild—sorry, it's hard for me to believe I'm that old [LAUGHTER]—in August.

RICK STARR: That's wonderful. Well, you're certainly not slowing down. You are—this is your fourth mission, is that correct?

PIA SAVOLDI: Third mission.

RICK STARR: Your third mission. And you're going into your fourth mission.

PIA SAVOLDI: No, this is our third. This is just part of the third.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yeah, this is part of that.

RICK STARR: Oh, okay.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: It's just an extension.

RICK STARR: An extension.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes. An extension.

RICK STARR: You've served missions in Turkey/Albania, that was one of your missions.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right. That was a two-year mission, so about 13 months in Istanbul, Turkey, and then the rest of the month, the rest of the—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Ten months.

PIA SAVOLDI: Ten months in Albania.

RICK STARR: Now in Turkey, you—it's not a proselyting mission, you are not allowed to proselyte.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Correct.

RICK STARR: So share with us how you shared the gospel—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Alright.

RICK STARR: How you were able to share the gospel.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: We were called there to be Humanitarian missionaries, with the primary responsibility to teach English as an international language, and we did do that but right after we got there, the primary school that we were going to teach at was just at the start of the gulf wars and so forth, the commandant made the decision, "Well, we're not gonna have foreigners on the campus," so we go back to our apartment thinking, "What are we gonna do now?" And our area welfare representative was in Moscow and here we were in Istanbul and he says, "Well, let me come. I'll come there and we'll teach you what you need to do to have"—

PIA SAVOLDI: Humanitarian.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Humanitarian projects also. And we got to do some really neat things with that, too. We got to help the Istanbul University's hospitals with neonatal care for, what was it, 200g babies—

RICK STARR: Oh, wow!

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And so forth, and we also got to help a Catholic priest who had a school there in Istanbul—you wouldn't think that they would but they did; Istanbul was the head of the Catholic Church for many years until 1550 or so and Constantinople's name was changed to Istanbul and they ran—the sultans ran the Catholics out. But at any way, we got to do very wonderful things.

PIA SAVOLDI: We met some incredible people while we were there. Wonderful people.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: The meetinghouse was our apartment. We did have a branch of about 45 people, about half of which would come regularly.

PIA SAVOLDI: And they were from Armenia, from Russia, from the Philippines, from—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: From Turkey.

PIA SAVOLDI: From Turkey, I'm trying to think if there—I know we had some Ethiopians—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes

PIA SAVOLDI: So—

RICK STARR: Quite an international branch.

PIA SAVOLDI: It was an international branch.

RICK STARR: Right there in your apartment.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right there in our apartment, every Sunday.

RICK STARR: And so non-proselyting.

PIA SAVOLDI: Non-proselyting.

RICK STARR: How were you able to share the gospel?

PIA SAVOLDI: They would come to us. They literally would come to us. We had two young men. This is how the Lord works. We had two young men show up at our door once—Turks, so they only spoke Turkish—show up at our apartment door, and it just happened that a member of the branch was visiting us who spoke Turkish and English, and so through him we were able to teach these two young men. They had read about us on, you know, on the Internet and wanted to know more. We actually, there is a member of the Church who is now serving as the branch president over there, he's a returned missionary and he had a website that the Turkish people would go to where he bore his testimony and then there was a little place where they could order a copy of the Book of Mormon if they were interested, and we were probably sending out about 40 to 50 every month.

RICK STARR: Wow.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: To young Turkish men.

PIA SAVOLDI: To young Turkish men mostly.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: To one woman in all that time but—

RICK STARR: What do you think spurred their interest in the Church there in Turkey?

PIA SAVOLDI: They're just intrigued. Some of them just wanted to be able to read, you know, an English book translated into Turkish to see—some of them were studying, you know, English and for some, it was just scholastic, but for a lot of them, they were intrigued by the website that this young man had set up and by his testimony.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And they knew—they had some Christian leanings already so—and they wanted more. As a matter of fact, the first young man that we taught, he said, after the first discussion he says, “Why aren’t you out on the street teaching this to everybody?” And we said, “Because we are not allowed to be.” [CHUCKLING] But he was so impressed because we taught him the plan of salvation I think was the first discussion and the Turkish people are so ready to have proselyting missionaries there and that was planned, but as a result of all the wars and so forth, and especially 9/11, all those plans were called back, but it’s going to happen.

RICK STARR: Yeah, the opportunity will come again.

PIA SAVOLDI: The opportunity will come.

RICK STARR: And they’ll be even more prepared to listen.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right. Exactly.

RICK STARR: That’s amazing. And you went to Albania as part of that mission.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: What mission was your mission for Turkey and Albania? Where was the mission headquarters?

PIA SAVOLDI: We were under Bulgaria, Sofia Bulgaria was the mission home.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: It was our first mission though. Is that what you meant?

RICK STARR: Uh-huh.

PIA SAVOLDI: And Albania though we were—Tirana Albania was the mission home.

RICK STARR: I see.

PIA SAVOLDI: They are in two different areas but at the time we had been working with a young child that Albanians had sent to Istanbul for medical care and so that’s how we became acquainted with the mission president in Albania, and they had a need for an office couple rather—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Urgently.

PIA SAVOLDI: Urgent need for an office couple because they had to send theirs home, and they were about ready to get a new mission president, and so they needed a couple there and invited us to come. So that’s how that happened.

RICK STARR: That is wonderful. So you went to Turkey and Albania. What were the other missions you went to?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Italy. Italy Catania, which is southern Italy. We served ten months in Calabria, which is down at the boot of the, the—

PIA SAVOLDI: Of Italy.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Italy, and we were proselyting missionaries there.

RICK STARR: Wonderful!

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And that was very interesting. We had a wonderful branch.

RICK STARR: Now you were raised Italian.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: How was your Italian going back to Italy?

THOMAS SAVOLDI: [LAUGHTER] Hers is very good.

PIA SAVOLDI: I grew up listening to Italian but I also answered them in English and so I had the advantage of knowing what they were speaking to me about, but learning the grammar has been a challenge [CHUCKLING] and so I speak probably like a kindergartener, but they could understand me and I even taught a lesson—a couple lessons—in Relief Society, so it was fun.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: And I had to speak every month, and so I would write my talk out in English and then the missionaries and she would help me translate it into Italian and then I would try to read it, and my tongue just wouldn't move in all those directions at the same time, [LAUGHTER] but they understood.

RICK STARR: Was the response to your story in the gospel different because your background was Italian and Catholic? Were you listened to more readily?

PIA SAVOLDI: In Italy—

THOMAS SAVOLDI: I think so.

PIA SAVOLDI: Yeah.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: I think so.

PIA SAVOLDI: We had the opportunity of teaching English there. We started an English program there and became acquainted with people, you know, who normally wouldn't have been receptive to the missionaries. They were, it was not usual for them to have a senior couple there, so they had a lot of questions about that, why were we there, why not the young missionaries, and they were curious more than anything else and so when they found out that we had a Catholic background, and, of course, our name being Italian, they were curious to find out, you know, our lineage and, you know, asked a lot of questions about that. So it did open some doors but not as much as we had wanted.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: But the English class really did help because they would come and they'd get excited and they absolutely fell in love with the young men that were there teaching them, they just "Where do you find these guys?" You know, "They're not like ours." [LAUGHTER]

PIA SAVOLDI: They were very impressed with our missionaries.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: But in any way, then they would greet us on the street. When we first got there, people would look at our nametag but they would not look at us but after that, then they would come up and they would hug us and they would give us the Italian bacio where they get to kiss on both cheeks, and other people saw that happening and then they became much more friendly and willing to talk. Not to change but to talk.

RICK STARR: Change is difficult—

PIA SAVOLDI: Change is very difficult.

RICK STARR: As you experienced yourself.

PIA SAVOLDI: Right.

RICK STARR: Well, we only have a few minutes left on today's program and of course, the program is Why I Believe. And I'd like to ask you—Sister Savoldi first and then Brother Savoldi—, why do you believe?

PIA SAVOLDI: I have a strong testimony of the gospel. I know that Jesus lives. I know that He answers my prayers. He has and continues to be my Savior in many respects. I know that I have a Heavenly Father who loves me and I feel His love and I know that there's a Holy Spirit who guides me and gives me the direction that I need in my life. I know that we have leaders on the earth today. I know that we have a living prophet. I've heard him speak. I've heard all of the prophets speak to us today and every conference and every time I read one of their messages in the Ensign, I'm edified and built and I learn more as I read and study the scriptures. I'm just really grateful to be a member of this Church and I'm so grateful that my Father in heaven loves me so much that He sent those missionaries to our home twice to knock on our door and bring us the gospel and I'm also grateful that He did it at a time in our lives when our family was young enough that we were able to rear our children in the gospel, and now to see them raising our grandchildren and soon-to-be great-grandchild, it's just, the Church is true.

RICK STARR: Thank you. Elder Savoldi.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: I likewise just love the gospel of Jesus Christ that's been restored to the earth. Every morning in our prayer I express my thankfulness for the prophets of the restoration and the great work and sacrifices that they went through for us. I'm grateful for that knowledge of eternal families and to know that life doesn't end at death—it goes on—and that we'll continue to grow and progress as we serve our Heavenly Father. I'm grateful for the blessings I've seen it pour out on so many people, not just our family but those that we've had the opportunity to work with in the various stakes and branches that we've served and wards. It's just so marvelous. It's the only way, you know. I go clear back to the days when I sat on that couch and the missionaries would sit across from us

and teach us these principles and they would get so excited teaching us. One of them was, had flaming red hair and he couldn't contain himself and finally he would pull his legs up and sit on his hands just so that he wouldn't be too—[LAUGHTER]

PIA SAVOLDI: Rambunctious.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Demonstrative in his teaching. And that's the way I feel about the gospel. It is something to be demonstrative about. It's, it's wonderful. It's provided us the insight and the direction we needed in order to live this life and to be of service. That's why these missions are so, have been so great for us, because we've been able to give back. We'll never give back enough to compensate for all that has been given to us but we can try. And so that's what we're doing. The gospel is wonderful. It's treated us so very well. And the principle of tithing—when we first joined, we thought, “How are we gonna do that?” Well, we did. We had only one overdraft statement and then we fixed that and we've been able to tithe ever since, too, so it's brought us great, great blessings. I know it's true. I love our organization, I love the General Authorities, they're just marvelous, and our local leaders. What wonderful people they are, and I think that's what really burns true in my mind and heart. It is true. It is true, and I know it, and I say it in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

RICK STARR: Thank you, Elder and Sister Savoldi, thank you so much for joining us today on Why I Believe. It's been such a great pleasure to have you with us.

PIA SAVOLDI: Thank you. Thank you very much.

THOMAS SAVOLDI: Yes.

RICK STARR: This is Why I Believe on the Mormon Channel. For more information on this and other programming available on the Mormon Channel, please visit radio.lds.org.

[BEGIN MUSIC]

RICK STARR: Have a great day.

[END MUSIC]