

Six Spiritual Lessons from the Natural World

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I am humbled to be asked to speak to you. I pray that you will feel the Spirit as I share my message and testimony with you. We were all spiritually fed this past weekend during general conference. I hope that you might still have room in your hearts for my message today.

As was said in my introduction, I have been a faculty member here at BYU for almost twenty-seven years. I completed both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree at BYU. I am pictured here with my master's advisor, the late Kimball Harper, before I went on to the University of Utah for my PhD. [A photo was shown.] BYU hired me directly after I had completed my PhD program, and I have been on the faculty ever since. If you think about it, I have spent the greatest number of years of my life on the campus here at BYU.

For my academic research, I study the ecology and conservation of rare and/or endangered plant species. During my almost three decades as a professor, I have had the opportunity to study a wide variety of plant species in many diverse and beautiful places around the world.

Those who know me know that I have a deep love for all of Heavenly Father's creations. I gained my love for the natural world when I was a young girl. The summers of my childhood were spent camping in the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming with my immediate family and my grandparents. My mother and grandmother love wildflowers. On our drives up the mountain, we would regularly stop the vehicles so that my mom and grandma could try to identify any new wildflowers they saw. From them I learned to appreciate the beauty and diversity of Heavenly Father's creations. Even today—to my children's chagrin—I have to stop the vehicle to identify any new plants that I see.

I married my eternal companion, Steve Flinders, a wildlife biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, eight years ago. Together we have six children and four grandchildren. All of our children and grandchildren have a love for the outdoors and enjoy spending time in nature. My love and appreciation of the natural world have continued to increase over my life. I find that I often feel

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closest to Heavenly Father and the Savior when I am out in the natural world.

My research takes me out in the field with my students to study the ecology of rare plants. Sometimes as I am tediously working and taking measurements on plants, I forget to look up. I am focused on the task in front of me and forget to take in the bigger picture or bigger view.

Elder Rafael E. Pino said these important words:

Perspective is the way we see things when we look at them from a certain distance, and it allows us to appreciate their true value.

It is like being in a forest and having a tree in front of us. Unless we step back a little, we will not be able to appreciate what a forest really is.¹

When I stop to look up, I gain perspective and realize that I am just a small part of the miraculous Creation. As I look up, I am in awe of this beautiful world that, as the Primary song says, “Heav’nly Father created for me.”²

This coming Sunday is Easter. Around Easter, we often sing one of my favorite hymns, “All Creatures of Our God and King.” Verse four of this hymn reads:

*Dear Mother Earth, who day by day
Unfoldest blessings on our way, . . .
The flow’rs and fruit that in thee grow,
Let them his glory also show.³*

One of the purposes of the divine Creation is to testify and witness of Him, to “let . . . his glory also show.” In Psalm 19 we read, “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.”⁴ In Alma, we further read:

The scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator.⁵

Sister Susan L. Warner explained it this way:

Because our Heavenly Father wants us to know Him and to feel His love, He planned a world filled with magnificent creations that bear record of Him and His Son, Jesus Christ. Have you ever counted all the things that bear record of the Savior? There are sunsets and seashells, lilacs and lakes, insects and animals, miraculous mornings and star-strewn skies.⁶

President Russell M. Nelson clearly taught:

The Creation itself testifies of a Creator. We cannot disregard the divine in the Creation. Without our grateful awareness of God’s hand in the Creation, we would be just as oblivious to our provider as are goldfish swimming in a bowl. With deep gratitude, we echo the words of the Psalmist, who said, “O Lord, how manifold are thy works! in wisdom hast thou made them all: the earth is full of thy riches.”⁷

About nine or ten years ago, I went through a traumatic event in my life. Around the same time, I also went through a divorce. During this time I was beset by stress and anxiety. My physical body also rebelled against the trauma. I had trouble eating and sleeping, I was plagued by nightmares, and I developed recurring shingles, caused by a remnant of the chicken pox virus that I had as a child. My immune system was compromised, and I caught every illness that was being passed around.

Where could I turn for peace amidst this storm of pain and turmoil in my life? During this time I found peace and refuge from my storm in two sacred places: out in the natural world and in the Lord’s holy temple. Thus, desperately seeking that peace, I spent a lot of time in both places.

One of my favorite movies from my childhood is *The Sound of Music* (1965). In that movie, the star, Maria, receives words of wisdom from the Mother Abbess at the convent, who repeated prophetic words from Psalm 121: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.”⁸

Today I would like to share with you some lessons that I learned from Heavenly Father’s creations that helped me weather the storm from this traumatic event. As I lifted my eyes unto the hills, I gained a more eternal perspective from the natural world.

As Elder Pino said:

*The eternal perspective of the gospel leads us to understand the place that we occupy in God's plan, to accept difficulties and progress through them, to make decisions, and to center our lives on our divine potential.*⁹

I learned how to accept this difficulty in my life and progress through it. I was able to better center my life on my divine potential. I attribute my progress during this time to six important lessons that I learned from the natural world that I study and love so much.

Lesson 1: Grow Toward the Light

The first lesson from nature is grow toward the light. Plants exhibit phototropism. *Photo* means "light" and *tropism* means "turn" or "growth toward." Have you ever noticed a plant growing toward a window in your house? Have you ever seen a plant growing up and around a rock to acquire more light? Plants grow toward light. Light is essential for photosynthesis, which produces carbohydrates from carbon dioxide. These carbohydrates are necessary for plant growth but are also the basis of the food chains or food webs for all other life on earth. Without the carbon fixed from light energy, there would not be energy for further life in the ecosystem.

Just as light is essential for life in the natural world, the Light of Christ is necessary for our spiritual survival. Examples from the plant world have shown me how to actively grow toward the Light of the World.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read, "I am the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world."¹⁰

Sister Warner said, "Wherever we live in this world, we see the glorious rising sun, which bears record of the Light of Christ that fills our hearts and enlightens our minds."¹¹

Growing toward the Savior and focusing on Him made all the difference during my time of struggle. I focused on His light. I grew toward it. How did I do it? I made a choice to keep my focus on the Savior every day. I consciously chose to look up, to grow away from the sadness and

darkness in my life, and to bathe in the warmth of the Savior's light.

President Henry B. Eyring added this insight: "When you walk in the light, you will feel at that moment some of the warmth and the happiness that will finally be yours when you are welcomed home again."¹²

As I chose to grow toward the Savior—His light—I felt His warmth and love. I learned how to use the Atonement more fully in my life, and I felt Him carry my burdens and sorrows. I gained a broader perspective of the eternities and now look forward with hope for the time—as President Eyring said—when I might be welcomed home.

Lesson 2: Remain Deeply Rooted in the Living Waters

Water is also essential for photosynthesis. Plants use light energy to split a water molecule, providing the molecular energy necessary to fix carbon dioxide into the carbohydrate that the plant can then use for growth and survival. Because it is essential, many plant species have great adaptations for taking up water and preventing water loss, especially in desert systems. One strategy is to root deeply. This allows the plant to draw life-sustaining water from deep reservoirs in the soil. This water doesn't easily evaporate, unlike the water on the soil's surface. Deep roots also function as anchors for the plant against storms and strong winds.

During this challenging time in my life, I went on a horseback ride into the mountains and saw a tree uprooted from a storm. The tree roots were not deep and firm enough to withstand strong winds.

Besides light, another symbol of the Savior is living water. As I looked at this uprooted tree, I asked myself, "Am I deeply rooted and anchored in living waters?"

From the story of Jesus and the woman at the well, we read:

Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give

him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.¹³

Plants have many strategies for taking up and maintaining water. How much effort do we put into obtaining living water? What are some of the strategies we can use to remain deeply rooted in living water?

One way is to keep the commandments.

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read, “But unto him that keepeth my commandments I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and the same shall be in him a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life.”¹⁴

Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin said, “By living the gospel of Jesus Christ, we develop within ourselves a living spring that will quench eternally our thirst for happiness, peace, and everlasting life.”¹⁵

An additional way to remain deeply rooted is to make and keep sacred covenants. I made the choice to keep my sacred covenants and renew my covenants each week by partaking of the sacrament.

President Nelson said:

[Our] covenant[s] will lead us closer and closer to Him. . . .

. . . God will not abandon His relationship with those who have forged such a bond with Him.¹⁶

And Elder Neil L. Andersen stated, “Making and keeping covenants allows the love of the Savior to sink more deeply into our heart.”¹⁷

Attendance at the temple was yet another thing that helped me to remain deeply rooted. I made a specific choice to attend the temple at least once per week. I often went during my lunch break. Sometimes I would sit in the celestial room and stare at the picture of the Savior. Not only did I find peace there, but it helped me to remain deeply rooted in His living water.

I found myself clinging onto the iron rod¹⁸ for dear life, partaking freely of the living water. I am thankful that throughout my life I had developed a deeply rooted testimony of the Savior—the Living Water—for it sustained me during that difficult time.

Lesson 3: Find Effective Ways to Tolerate Stress

A few years ago, I published a paper with my husband and one of his U.S. Forest Service colleagues on a new population of Great Basin bristlecone pine, *Pinus longaeva*, that we had discovered in a unique place in the Tushar Mountains of southern Utah.¹⁹

The bristlecone pine falls into a category of species that we call “stress tolerators”—plants that live with the highest amounts of stress.²⁰ Bristlecones are the ultimate stress tolerators. They grow at and just below the tree line in a few of the mountainous regions of California, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado. These trees thrive on adversity by living in the harshest conditions at high elevations where little else survives. Bristlecones are often called “extremophiles” by scientists.²¹ They survive extremely cold temperatures, extremely dry soils, high winds, and short growing seasons. These pines also live extremely long lives. They are “near prehistoric.”²² Many trees in our newly discovered population ranged from 1,000 to 1,500 years of age. Nevada has populations with trees more than 3,000 years old. The two oldest known bristlecone pine trees are found in California and are about 4,850 and 5,060 years of age, respectively.²³

Think about that for a moment: those individual trees were there before the Savior walked the earth, and they are still living today. And these trees have fought the extreme elements all that time—for millennia.

As Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf said:

*One of the things we learn from studying the growth of trees is that during seasons when conditions are ideal, trees grow at a normal rate. However, during seasons when growing conditions are not ideal, trees slow down their growth and devote their energy to the basic elements necessary for survival.*²⁴

How do bristlecones survive such extreme environmental conditions? They do this by growing slowly and devoting their energy to the simple basics for survival. Notice how tight the rings are on this cross section of a trunk of bristlecone pine—most are less than one millimeter wide. [A photo was shown.] The trees grow so little each

year that it is difficult to see the growth rings without a microscope. The particular trunk shown in the photo is from a tree that lived to about 2,000 years old. Bristlecones do very little else but survive.

I learned some important lessons from these pines on how to survive my stress.

Elder L. Tom Perry suggested, “In our search to obtain relief from the stresses of life, may we earnestly seek ways to simplify our lives.”²⁵

Elder Perry also said:

*We can't predict all the struggles and storms in life, not even the ones just around the next corner, but as persons of faith and hope, we know beyond the shadow of any doubt that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true and the best is yet to come.*²⁶

Elder Uchtdorf noted, “We learn over and over again the importance of four key relationships: with our God, with our families, with our fellowman, and with ourselves.”²⁷ He then gave this counsel:

If life and its rushed pace and many stresses have made it difficult for you to feel like rejoicing, then perhaps now is a good time to refocus on what matters most. . . .

*Let us simplify our lives a little. Let us make the changes necessary to refocus our lives on the sublime beauty of the simple, humble path of Christian discipleship—the path that leads always toward a life of meaning, gladness, and peace.*²⁸

During my stressful time, I learned from the bristlecones that I had to simplify my life and concentrate on the basics. I focused first on my relationship with God and on my relationships with my children. I focused on what was most important—personal scripture study, personal prayer, family prayer, and family home evening—and I let the less important things slide. I did only the basic things. I found that I had no energy for anything more than that. I just survived. Doing this was hard for me because I am someone who tries to do everything for everyone. However, as I focused on what was most important and simplified my life, I drew even closer to my Savior,

which further helped me during this stressful time. I was able to tolerate the stress.

Lesson 4: We Don't Need to Know All the Answers

Ecologists realize that ecosystems are incredibly complex. The more I study plant communities, the more I realize that we don't fully understand them. I have learned that there is no way to truly understand all the complex interrelationships between species and between species and the environment. Sometimes I make hypotheses about plants and their ecological communities and later find through data collection and study that I am completely wrong in my assumptions.

During the time I was dealing with my traumatic event, I asked a lot of questions. Why did I have to experience my trauma? Why did life have to be so hard? I did not have the answers.

Elder Andersen provided insight on this. He said:

*We . . . remain steady and patient as we progress through mortality. At times, the Lord's answer will be, "You don't know everything, but you know enough"—enough to keep the commandments and to do what is right.*²⁹

Not knowing everything about a particular plant species, its ecology, or its role in the ecosystem has been okay for my research program. As I spent time in the natural world, I realized that it must also be okay not having all the answers to the questions in my personal life.

I relied heavily on my favorite scriptures:

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

*In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*³⁰

Further insight is given in the Doctrine and Covenants:

*Search diligently, pray always, and be believing, and all things shall work together for your good, if ye walk uprightly and remember the covenant wherewith ye have covenanted one with another.*³¹

Realizing that I did not need to know everything helped me find peace. I could believe that all things would work together for my good if I walked uprightly and kept my covenants.

In the plant world, seeds often need to be scarified before they can germinate and grow into a beautiful plant. Simply put, scarification is a breakdown of the hard seed coat, such that water can enter. Scarification can be done through digestive tracks of animals, wind, freeze-thaw cycles, mechanically bouncing off rocks, and so forth. Maybe I needed to go through this trauma to become a bit scarified so that the living water could enter.

Regardless, I knew enough, and that knowledge sustained me.

As Elder Uchtdorf said, “Sometimes questions arise because we simply don’t have all the information and we just need a bit more patience.”³²

I have been blessed as I have learned to be patient in my prayers for answers both in my ecological research and in my personal life.

Lesson 5: Find Refuge and Stability in a Diverse Community

In ecology, we have a theory known as the diversity-stability hypothesis. Basically, this theory states that more diverse communities—in number of different species—maintain more stable ecosystem functions over periods of environmental stress, such as drought. Conceptually, it suggests that some species might be better adapted than other species to withstand specific types of disturbances, and thus the community or ecosystem retains its function in spite of the stress.³³

Elder Peter M. Johnson said in his devotional last fall, “The Lord loves diversity.”³⁴ I have come to learn the importance of a diverse community in the gospel. During my difficult time, I was surprised by the diversity of help that came to my rescue. It came from a wide variety of people and places: a former college roommate living in California provided support, a former country-band bandmate who lived in South Dakota flew out to be there for me, a retired neighbor stepped up to help me with my children when I needed her, former graduate students called during this

time and provided collaborations and research help, my bishop came by my house unexpectedly and offered a blessing—and there were many, many more. These people were from diverse socioeconomic positions, diverse educational levels, and diverse cultural backgrounds. Even their relationships with me were from diverse aspects of my life. However, each brought their own unique perspective.

Elder Uchtdorf stated, “Brothers and sisters, dear friends, we need your unique talents and perspectives. The diversity of persons and peoples all around the globe is a strength of this Church.”³⁵

Elder Chi Hong (Sam) Wong said:

*In order to assist the Savior, we have to work together in unity and in harmony. Everyone, every position, and every calling is important. We have to be united in our Lord Jesus Christ.*³⁶

I am thankful that I had built a diverse community around me. My community had a diversity of talents, abilities, and approaches. Each found their own unique way to help me. Some were better able to get through to me at different times than others. However, just like a diverse ecological community, my community came to my aid and provided me stability and refuge amidst my storm. They were able to work in unity and harmony for my rescue.

Lesson 6: Always Remember to Thank Him

As I spent time in the natural world during my struggle, I asked myself, “Do I look up with the other creations in praise of Him?”

When my daughter Sabrina was four years old, she had terrible growing pains in her legs. I, too, was troubled by growing pains as a young girl. It was very late one evening, way past Sabrina’s bedtime. I was exhausted because she would not stop crying. When the pain medicine did not work, I told her that we needed to pray and ask Heavenly Father to help take away her pain. We knelt down together, and I offered a simple prayer that her pain would subside and that she would be able to sleep. I put Sabrina in bed next to me and rubbed her legs until we both fell asleep.

In the morning, I was awakened by squeals of delight from Sabrina. She said, “Mom, my legs don’t hurt anymore!”

But what she did next melted my heart. She immediately looked up to heaven and said, “Thank you, Father!”

In the Doctrine and Covenants we read, “And he who receiveth all things with thankfulness shall be made glorious; and the things of this earth shall be added unto him, even an hundred fold, yea, more.”³⁷

Do we remember to thank Him? Do we look up and say, “Thank you, Father?” For me, it is sometimes a challenge to remember to do this in times of hardship, and it was particularly difficult during my traumatic event.

Nephi was a notable example of someone who praised the Lord during his trials and afflictions. He said, “Nevertheless, I did look unto my God, and I did praise him all the day long; and I did not murmur against the Lord because of mine afflictions.”³⁸

President David O. McKay once stated, “We find in the bitter chill of adversity the real test of our gratitude; . . . true gratitude . . . goes beneath the surface of life, whether sad or joyous.”³⁹

My traumatic event was a real test of my gratitude.

Elder Moisés Villanueva explained it this way:

*My dear brothers and sisters, how do we react to our afflictions? Do we murmur before the Lord because of them? Or, like Nephi . . . , do we feel thankful in word, thought, and deed because we are more focused on our blessings than on our problems?*⁴⁰

Just as the Lord’s creations and Nephi did, I tried to praise Him all day long. I made a conscious choice to actively look for things to be grateful for each day. For me, maybe it was just a beautiful sunset, good weather for my commute, kids who happily ate their dinner, a class lecture that went well that day, or that none of my kids forgot their homework.

Sister Bonnie D. Parkin taught this principle:

The Lord said, “Thou shalt thank the Lord thy God in all things.” All things means just that: good things,

*difficult things—not just some things. He has commanded us to be grateful because He knows being grateful will make us happy. This is another evidence of His love.*⁴¹

President Thomas S. Monson further taught, “Sincerely giving thanks not only helps us recognize our blessings, but it also unlocks the doors of heaven and helps us feel God’s love.”⁴²

And I felt God’s love. But could I find happiness, as Sister Parkin suggested? Because I remembered to look up and say, “Thank you, Father,” each day, I gradually began to find happiness again, and I gained the eternal perspective that I so desperately needed.

I am so grateful for these six beautiful lessons that I learned from nature that helped me weather a tumultuous storm in my life and other trials since that time. There are many more lessons that the natural world has taught me that I don’t have time to share, but I am glad that I was able to look up and find answers and lessons in Heavenly Father’s creations. This has made my love of His creations grow even stronger. I feel an urgent desire to help protect and conserve the natural world.

President Nelson remarked, “As beneficiaries of the divine Creation, what shall we do? We should care for the earth, be wise stewards over it, and preserve it for future generations.”⁴³

In last October’s general conference, Bishop Gérald Caussé said:

*The divine gift of the Creation does not come without duties and responsibilities. These duties are best described by the concept of **stewardship**. In gospel terms, the word stewardship designates a sacred spiritual or temporal responsibility to take care of something that belongs to God for which we are accountable.*⁴⁴

We are commanded to care for the Lord’s creations and to be wise stewards over them. Because I have benefited so greatly from the divine Creation, I truly want to be a good steward over it. Every semester I give a lesson to my students on the importance of this principle. As a result, my students often ask me how they can be good stewards over His creations. What can they do?

There is a quote from Brigham Young that I believe provides the answer to that question:

*Let me love the world as he loves it, to make it beautiful, and glorify the name of my Father in heaven. It does not matter whether I or anybody else owns it, if we only work to beautify it and make it glorious, it is all right.*⁴⁵

I pray that we can love the world as He loves it. I have grown to love His creations even more as I have learned these six important lessons. I know that if we can truly love the natural world, we will be good stewards over it. I pray that we will take the time from our busy and hectic lives to look up and gain the perspective we need. I know the Savior lives, and if we grow toward His light, remain deeply rooted in His living water, rely on the simple basics of the gospel in times of stress, remember that we don't have all the answers, find refuge in a diverse community of Saints, and remember to thank Him always, we will be able to weather any storm in our lives and gain an eternal perspective. This Easter season, I want you to know that I love my Savior, "the Master Healer,"⁴⁶ and am so grateful for the blessing of His Atonement. And, as the Primary song says, "I'm glad that I live in this beautiful world Heav'nly Father created for me."⁴⁷ I leave you with this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Rafael E. Pino, "The Eternal Perspective of the Gospel," *Ensign*, May 2015.
2. "My Heavenly Father Loves Me," *Songbook*, 228–29.
3. "All Creatures of Our God and King," *Hymns*, 2002, no. 62.
4. Psalm 19:1.
5. Alma 30:44.
6. Susan L. Warner, "Bear Record of Him," *Ensign*, November 1998.
7. Russell M. Nelson, "The Creation," *Ensign*, May 2000; quoting Psalm 104:24.
8. Psalm 121:1.
9. Pino, "The Eternal Perspective of the Gospel."
10. Doctrine and Covenants 93:2.
11. Warner, "Bear Record of Him."
12. Henry B. Eyring, "Walk in the Light," *Ensign*, May 2008.
13. John 4:13–14.
14. Doctrine and Covenants 63:23.
15. Joseph B. Wirthlin, "Living Water to Quench Spiritual Thirst," *Ensign*, May 1995.
16. Russell M. Nelson, "The Everlasting Covenant," *Liahona*, October 2022.
17. Neil L. Andersen, "Drawing Closer to the Savior," *Liahona*, November 2022.
18. See 1 Nephi 8:19–30; 1 Nephi 11:25; 1 Nephi 15:23–24.
19. See Andrew Orlemann, Steven H. Flinders, and Loreen Allphin, "The Discovery of Great Basin Bristlecone Pine, *Pinus longaeva*, in the Tushar Mountains of the Fishlake National Forest in Central Utah, USA," *Western North American Naturalist* 77, no. 1 (March 2017): 111–17.
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22. Westover, "Methuselah, a Bristlecone Pine."
23. See *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "bristlecone pine," 9 August 2022, [britannica.com/plant/bristlecone-pine](https://www.britannica.com/plant/bristlecone-pine); see also Westover, "Methuselah, a Bristlecone Pine."
24. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Of Things That Matter Most," *Ensign*, November 2010.
25. L. Tom Perry, "Let Him Do It with Simplicity," *Ensign*, November 2008.
26. Perry, "Let Him Do It with Simplicity."
27. Uchtdorf, "Of Things That Matter Most."
28. Uchtdorf, "Of Things That Matter Most."
29. Neil L. Andersen, "You Know Enough," *Ensign*, November 2008.
30. Proverbs 3:5–6.
31. Doctrine and Covenants 90:24.
32. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us," *Ensign*, November 2013.

33. See Robert MacArthur, "Fluctuations of Animal Populations and a Measure of Community Stability," *Ecology* 36, no. 3 (July 1955): 533–36; see also Kevin Shear McCann, "The Diversity-Stability Debate," *Nature* 405, no. 6783 (11 May 2000): 228–33.
34. Peter M. Johnson, "Christ's Atonement, Invitations to Act, and Promised Blessings," BYU devotional address, 15 November 2022.
35. Uchtdorf, "Come, Join with Us."
36. Chi Hong (Sam) Wong, "Rescue in Unity," *Ensign*, November 2014.
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38. 1 Nephi 18:16.
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