

A Testimony of Prophets

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It is a joy for me to be here and also to be mindful of those young people joining us for the first time since their graduation from high school. The message today is going to be one of a testimony of prophets and why we should listen to a prophet's voice. Yesterday the drive by the cortege to Whitney, Idaho, was a touching tribute to a prophet of God.

There was a tribute by members of the Church as they lined the highway and stood on the overpasses along the road. Some were dressed in their Sunday best on a Saturday afternoon. Others paused in respect, stopping their cars and standing reverently, waiting for the prophet to pass. Farmers stood in their fields with their hats over their hearts. Probably more significant were the young boys taking their baseball hats off and putting them over their hearts. Flags waved good-bye as the prophet went by as well. There were signs that read, "We love President Benson." Others said, "Read the Book of Mormon."

As we spontaneously sang "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet" at the closing of the graveside service in Whitney, the beautiful refrain bore record of the privilege we have to be led by prophets in these latter days. I'd like to read the words:

*We thank thee, O God, for a prophet
To guide us in these latter days.
We thank thee for sending the gospel
To lighten our minds with its rays.
We thank thee for every blessing
Bestowed by thy bounteous hand.
We feel it a pleasure to serve thee,
And love to obey thy command.*

*When dark clouds of trouble hang o'er us
And threaten our peace to destroy,
There is hope smiling brightly before us,
And we know that deliv'rance is nigh.
We doubt not the Lord nor his goodness.
We've proved him in days that are past.
The wicked who fight against Zion
Will surely be smitten at last.*

*We'll sing of his goodness and mercy,
We'll praise him by day and by night,
Rejoice in his glorious gospel,
And bask in its life-giving light.*

Robert D. Hales was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this fireside address was given at Brigham Young University on 5 June 1994.

*Thus on to eternal perfection
The honest and faithful will go,
While they who reject this glad message
Shall never such happiness know.*
[“We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet,”
Hymns, 1985, no. 19]

With the passing of President Benson, our prophet, on Monday, May 30, at 2:35 p.m., the events that have transpired have presented me with solemn, spiritual experiences and personal participation as a witness in sacred priesthood governance.

When the president of the Church dies, the First Presidency is dissolved, and the counselors take their place in seniority of calling in the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. The Quorum of the Twelve then presides over the Church until the First Presidency is reorganized. The president of the Quorum of the Twelve is automatically the presiding officer of the Church when there is no First Presidency.

On Tuesday morning, May 31, the Quorum of the Twelve met with President Hunter, presiding as the senior member of the Quorum. It was a beautiful meeting with honor and testimony given in brotherhood for the loving memories of President Benson.

On Thursday morning all the General Authorities who were in Salt Lake City attended a fast and testimony meeting in the temple in honor of President Benson. The testimonies were rich in expressions of love and gratitude for the teachings and example of President Benson’s life of service. It was interesting that each one of us had been touched in our lives as we had served with him.

Thursday evening we had the opportunity of bringing our families to pay homage to our dear departed prophet at the Church Administration Building, where President Benson lay in state. My choicest experience was an opportunity of being able to bear

testimony to my children and grandchildren of prophets in these latter days.

Friday, for twelve hours, from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., thousands of devoted members of the Church and citizens of the community paid their respect as they filed by President Benson’s casket in the rotunda of the Church Office Building. I took some time to observe those who came. The love and devotion they expressed for President Benson as they reverently waited and filed slowly past was touching. Many expressed to one another in hushed tones their personal witness of the prophet’s goodness.

Saturday’s funeral services expressed a rich outpouring of the Spirit being manifest in honor of one of the great servants in this dispensation. The Quorum of the Twelve and the seven Presidents of Seventy served as honor guard as the casket entered and departed the Tabernacle.

After the funeral the honor guard drove as a cortege to Whitney, Idaho, to participate in the graveside service. President Benson’s loving son dedicated the grave site. President Benson was then placed to rest beside his beloved Flora—reunited with his companion of sixty-five years.

It was an eventful week, one I shall never forget because of the spiritual experiences that strengthened my testimony of the truthfulness of this great work.

A solemn assembly will be held during October conference. Each of us will have the opportunity to sustain the officers of the Church. President John Taylor taught us regarding the sustaining of officers:

We hold up our right hand when voting in token before God that we will sustain those for whom we vote. . . . For when we lift up our hands in this way, it is in token to God that we are sincere in what we do, and that we will sustain the parties we vote for. . . . If we agree to do a thing and do not do it, we become covenant breakers and violators of our obligations,

which are, perhaps, as solemn and binding as anything we can enter into. [JD 21:207]

A sustaining vote is a public commitment of our own willingness to be obedient and to consecrate our lives to furthering the work of the Lord. The sustaining of officers is called *the law of common consent*. Sustaining is a principle of agency. Church officers are chosen by the spirit of revelation resting upon those priesthood holders set apart to call and ordain.

Sustaining is the public affirmation of our acceptance of priesthood authority as stated in the fifth article of faith:

We believe that a man must be called of God, by prophecy, and by the laying on of hands by those who are in authority, to preach the Gospel and administer in the ordinances thereof.
[Articles of Faith 1:5]

Yes, this has been a historic week for the Church. The passing of President Benson marks the end of an era. How appropriate that the death of our patriot prophet came on Memorial Day, when we honor those who served our nation defending our constitutional freedoms.

President Benson devoted his life to testifying about Jesus Christ and the Book of Mormon. Here are my personal remembrances of President Benson:

First was his ability to sincerely communicate one-on-one directly with each of us who served with him. He would sit at his desk. I would be seated just to his right in a chair facing his large swivel chair. He would sit there with his large from-plowboy-to-prophet hands, our knees almost touching, and look me directly in the eyes with a depth of inner feeling that touched my very soul and tell me what was important for me to know or to do in my life or calling. When I left his office there was no doubt in my mind that I had been instructed by a prophet of the Lord.

Second, President Benson was fearless in the cause of truth and right. He was a living example of the words of the hymn “Do what is right; let the consequence follow” (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 237). God bless his memory.

On one occasion in Europe I remember kneeling in prayer beside President Benson when we were at the point of selecting a stake president. What a great joy to participate with him in prayer and understand the true order of prayer and what it means to be able to call upon the Lord for revelation.

Apostles of all ages have had the character traits of courage and fearlessness. President Howard W. Hunter demonstrated his courage at this very pulpit. When faced by a terrorist threat to read a statement to which President Hunter could not agree, President Hunter calmly said, “No, I can’t read that statement”—even though his assailant stood next to him, threatening him with what he said was an explosive device. Would that each of us would have the courage to say no when we are faced with making choices that we know are not right.

Another example of President Hunter’s courage and determination to complete a task given him by the First Presidency is demonstrated by the completion of the Jerusalem Center. President Hunter purchased the land, supervised the architecture and construction of the center, and negotiated with government and religious leaders the teaching objectives for the center. During the years it took to complete the Jerusalem Center, President Hunter demonstrated a steadfastness and courage against opposition. He told those who worked with him, “Go ahead, move forward. Don’t take counsel from your fears.” How often we don’t even try, and we fail simply because of our fear of failure.

Thirty years ago President Hunter bore testimony that we should turn to the prophets of this dispensation for counsel and direction in our lives. He said,

To peoples of past dispensations and ages, the most important prophet was the one then living, teaching, and revealing the will of the Lord in their time. In each of the past dispensations, prophets have been raised up by the Lord as his spokesmen to the people of that particular age and for the specific problems of that age.

It is the present living prophet who is our leader, our teacher. It is from him we take direction in the modern world. From all corners of the earth, we who sustain him as a prophet of the Lord, express our appreciation for this source of divine guidance. We are grateful for his life, his example, his teachings, his leadership. . . .

As the prophets from the beginning to the present day pass in review before our memory, we become aware of the great blessing which comes to us from the influence of a living prophet. History should teach us that unless we are willing to heed the warnings and follow the teachings of a prophet of the Lord, we will be subject to the judgments of God. [CR, October 1963, p. 101]

President Hunter's miracle recoveries from death's door have been a testimony to all of us that the Lord has a mission for him to fulfill.

President Hunter, like President Kimball and President Benson, met adversity with a spirit of quiet, resolute determination that has strengthened and blessed all who have been close to them.

The testimonies of the Savior given by prophets are eloquent and bold in challenging each of us to bear witness. President Hunter has been an example to me since I have been in the Quorum. Here is one great testimony he gave:

Alexander the Great, king of Macedon, pupil of Aristotle, conqueror of most of the known world in his time, was one of the world's great young leaders. After years of exercising military pomp and prowess and after extending his kingdom from Macedonia to Egypt and from Cyprus to India, he wept when there seemed to be no more world to conquer. Then,

as evidence of just how ephemeral such power is, Alexander caught a fever and died at thirty-three-years of age. The vast kingdom he had gained virtually died with him.

Quite a different young leader also died at what seems such an untimely age of thirty-three. He likewise was a king, a pupil, and a conqueror. Yet he received no honors from man, achieved no territorial conquests, rose to no political station. So far as we know, he never held a sword nor wore even a single piece of armor. But the kingdom he established still flourishes some two thousand years later. His power was not of this world.

The differences between Alexander and this equally young Nazarene are many. But the greatest difference is in their ultimate victories. Alexander conquered lands, peoples, principalities, and earthly kingdoms. But he who is called the Perfect Leader, he who was and is the Light and Life of the world—Jesus Christ the Son of God—conquered what neither Alexander nor any other could defeat or overcome: Jesus of Nazareth conquered death. Against the medals and monuments of centuries of men's fleeting victories stands the only monument necessary to mark the eternal triumph—an empty garden tomb. [CR, April 1986, pp. 17–18]

I give my testimony of the Savior and that empty tomb and what it means to us to be able to pray to the Savior when we have a problem and to be able to get an answer. President Hunter challenges us that we cannot secretly be a disciple:

The world needs men who are willing to step forward and declare themselves. The world needs men who will lift the load of responsibility to their shoulders and carry it high under the banner of Jesus Christ—men who are willing to defend the right openly. . . .

How can men of conscience ignore the teachings of the Master in their daily affairs, in business, or in government? We stand by and wink at many things because we fear to do anything about them. We may be against crime. . . , but what do we do about it?

We may be against corruption in government or against juvenile delinquency, but what do we do about it? We may have a belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but what are we doing about it? We need to push fear into the background and come forward with a definite, positive declaration, and assume responsibility. . . .

. . . Now is the time for those who have been non-committal or who have had a halfhearted interest to come out boldly and declare belief in Christ and be willing to demonstrate faith by works. [CR, October 1960, pp. 108–9]

The Prophet Joseph Smith taught us how to overcome fear, declare belief in Christ, and be willing to demonstrate faith by works, even by giving his very life.

This month, June 1994, marks 150 years since the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, and his brother Hyrum Smith, the patriarch of the Church, at Carthage, Illinois, June 27, 1844.

Section 135 of the Doctrine and Covenants was written by Elder John Taylor of the Council of the Twelve, who was a witness to the events of the Martyrdom. Joseph Smith prophetically and willingly gave his life to certify his testimony and faith in this great work.

When Joseph went to Carthage to deliver himself up to the pretended requirements of the law, two or three days previous to his assassination, he said: "I am going like a lamb to the slaughter; but I am calm as a summer's morning; I have a conscience void of offense towards God, and towards all men. I SHALL DIE INNOCENT, AND IT SHALL YET BE SAID OF ME—HE WAS MURDERED IN COLD BLOOD." [D&C 135:4]

The Prophet's martyrdom was a voluntary acceptance of death at the hands of evil hirelings, "To seal the testimony of this book [the Doctrine and Covenants] and the Book of Mormon" (D&C 135:1) and to bear holy witness of Jesus Christ and his gospel in this dispensation. Christ himself was a martyr who, through

his atoning sacrifice, voluntarily laid his life down; according to our Heavenly Father's plan, that immortality and eternal life would become available to all who came to dwell on earth.

Jesus, too, prophesied of the events that were to happen in his life and went willingly, giving testimony of who he was:

*I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep. . . .
As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. . . .
Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again.*

No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. [John 10:14–18]

For both the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr., and our Savior Jesus Christ it can be said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

True religious martyrs are part of an eternal gospel plan and earn an eternal reward: "Whoso layeth down his life in my cause, for my name's sake [and the gospel's], shall find it again, even life eternal" (D&C 98:13; see also Mark 8:35). The pioneers who gave their lives in the westward trek are martyrs also, but not in the same way as the prophet who held the priesthood keys and willingly gave his life in testimony to seal his work in this dispensation. Brigham Young gave this teaching about the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

For they killed the prophets . . . ; and they have shed innocent blood, which crieth from the ground against them. . . .

Many have marveled because of his death; but it was needful that he should seal his testimony with his blood, that he might be honored and the wicked might be condemned. [D&C 136:36, 39]

Elder John Taylor writes of the “innocent blood of all the martyrs under the altar that John saw” (D&C 135:7).

In Revelation 4 and 5 the apostle John records that a door was opened in heaven. He saw the Lord, Jesus Christ, seated on a throne with a book in his right hand and “a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book?” (Revelation 5:1–2).

John was told he was worthy to see the book. And when the Lord had opened the fifth seal, “I [John] saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” (Revelation 6:9).

Throughout the teachings about the Martyrdom, testimony is one of the central themes. What was to become of the Church and the priesthood that the Prophet restored and of the Saints who believed in Joseph’s testimony? Elders Parley P. Pratt, Brigham Young, and most of the other members of the Quorum of the Twelve were on missions throughout the Eastern States. In Parley P. Pratt’s autobiography (*PPP*, chapter 42, pp. 290–96), he writes of the mood of the day at the time: “A day or two previous to this circumstance [the Martyrdom] I had been constrained by the Spirit to start prematurely for home, without knowing why or wherefore.” Parley, with his companion and brother William Pratt, followed the prompting of the Spirit and booked passage on a canal boat from Utica, New York, to Buffalo, New York. Parley wrote,

As we conversed together on the deck, a strange and solemn awe came over me, as if the powers of hell were let loose. I was so overwhelmed with sorrow I could hardly speak. . . . I . . . exclaimed—“Brother William, . . . let us observe an entire and solemn silence, for this is a dark day, and the hour of triumph for the powers of darkness.” [p. 292]

William and Parley then separated, and Parley took a steamer for Chicago.

The steamer touched at a landing in Wisconsin, some fifty or sixty miles from Chicago, and here some new passengers came on board and brought the news of the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. Great excitement prevailed on board, there being a general spirit of exultation and triumph at this glorious news, as it was called. . . .

Many passengers now gathered about me and tauntingly inquired what the Mormons would do now, seeing their Prophet and leader was killed.

To these taunts and questions I replied, that they [the Mormons] would continue their mission and spread the work he had restored, in all the world. Observing that nearly all the prophets and Apostles who were before him had been killed, and also the Saviour of the world, and yet their death did not alter the truth nor hinder its final triumph.

At this reply many of them seemed astonished. . . .

Landing in Chicago I found great excitement, and the press had issued extras announcing the triumph of the murderous mob in killing the Smiths. [pp. 292–93]

It took Parley two or three days to go to Peoria, Illinois. He then had a distance of 105 miles to go on foot to Nauvoo. He “walked along over the plains of Illinois, lonely and solitary,” and reflected on what he would find in Nauvoo. His thoughts turned to the grieving widows of the two martyrs:

How shall I meet an entire community bowed down with grief and sorrow unutterable? What shall I say? . . . I walked onward, weighed down as it were unto death. When I could endure it no longer, I cried out aloud, saying: O Lord! in the name of Jesus Christ I pray Thee, show me what these things mean, and what I shall say to Thy people? On a sudden the Spirit of God came upon me, and filled my heart with joy and gladness indescribable. . . . The Spirit said unto me: “Lift up your head and rejoice; for behold! it is well with my servants Joseph and Hyrum. My servant Joseph still holds the keys of my kingdom in this dispensation, and he shall stand in due time on the earth, in the

flesh, and fulfil that to which he is appointed. Go and say unto my people in Nauvoo, that they shall continue to pursue their daily duties and take care of themselves, and make no movement in Church government to reorganize or alter anything until the return of the remainder of the Quorum of the Twelve. But exhort them that they continue to build the House of the Lord which I have commanded them to build in Nauvoo.” [pp. 293–94]

Parley went on his way rejoicing and arrived in Nauvoo ready to spread his message to the people.

In confirmation that the message was right, I found them already renewing their labors on the Temple, under the direction of John Taylor and Willard Richards, who were members of our quorum, and were in jail with the prophets when they were murdered — Taylor being wounded with four bullets, and Richards escaping uninjured.

Parley Pratt concludes this chapter with the following:

President Brigham Young was unanimously chosen and upheld in the Presidency of the whole

Church; the keys of which he held by virtue of his apostleship, being the senior and President of the highest quorum [the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles] of the Church then living in the flesh. [p. 296]

In closing, may I remind each of us that we don't give our testimony and lives in death in the manner that Joseph Smith, the martyred Prophet, gave his life because that was part of his mission. Rather, we give testimony by devoted service in our lives each day to lift and to strengthen others.

In the same manner that the people sorrowed at the death of Joseph Smith, we sorrow in this day for the loss of President Benson. But, also, I bear witness that in the same manner that Brigham Young led the Church after following a great prophet, our next prophet will do the same in our day. I give you my testimony that God lives and that Jesus is the Christ. This talk today has been a testimony of prophets and of the importance that we know of their divine calling as leaders in this dispensation. That each of us may be able to be obedient and follow the teachings of our prophets, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.