

He Stands at the Door and Knocks

BART J. KOWALLIS

I am grateful to have been given this opportunity to speak, particularly to this wonderful group of young men and women, the students of BYU. Over the years I have appreciated the many insightful and uplifting speeches given at these devotionals, and I am not sure that I am qualified to be among that group. I do not believe that I have any great, new insights into the gospel; I do not have a new formula or list of things for you to do to improve your lives; nor do I have any particularly profound answers to gospel questions. I always admire those who do.

A few years ago I ran across an LDS book entitled *Answers*, referring to answers to difficult gospel questions. I am sure if I were to attempt such a book that it would have to be entitled *Questions*, for there are still so many that for me are unanswered. For example, how does God keep track of all of the billions of people here on earth when I can barely remember the names of my children? How does He receive and answer prayers from the millions who are praying to Him at any given moment? How does He communicate with us almost instantaneously when for us it would take four years just to send a radio transmission to the nearest star in our galaxy and another four years to receive an answer?

How is it possible for us to become like Him when the gulf between us seems so vast? I could go on for hours with questions like these for which I have no answer. The wonderful thing to me is that God has not given us all the answers, but He has given us the opportunity to learn and grow and struggle on our own, with just enough knowledge to return to Him—where we might finally receive the answers to all of these unanswerable questions.

With that preface, what I would like to share with you today is the only thing of which I am absolutely sure. That is: I know there is a God who knows each of us, who hears our prayers, and who loves us despite our shortcomings and imperfections.

For those of you who do not know me (which I imagine is most of you), let me start with a bit of my background. I grew up in the town of Pleasant View, Utah, just north of Ogden. During my early youth it was a small town with just one LDS ward. In addition to the church, we had a gas station, a small grocery store, and, when I reached second grade, our own elementary school. Surrounded by a

Bart J. Kowallis was a BYU professor of geology when this devotional address was delivered on 14 October 2003.

loving family, including grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins living only a few blocks away, it was the perfect place for me to grow up.

Our town sat at the foot of a mountain called Ben Lomond. In the hills above Pleasant View, and in the narrow canyons cut back into Ben Lomond above these hills, I discovered something magnificent—rocks. I brought them home with me. They were my greatest treasures. My mother and father encouraged my interest in rocks while I was still very young. They let me bring rocks in the house and keep them in my room! They bought me books and kits on mineral and rock identification. They took me to rock shops and to gem and mineral shows. They made stops of geologic interest a regular part of our family vacations.

At age 14, when I went to receive my patriarchal blessing, the patriarch asked me a number of questions before giving the blessing. The only question I still remember is “What do you want to be when you grow up?” My answer was “I am going to be a geologist.” So he put that into my blessing, and here I am today, having taught geology at BYU for 22 years—still teaching, practicing, and believing in the principles I have learned in my study of geology, but also having a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ and a knowledge of its power and truthfulness. Some would ask, “How is this possible? Aren’t many of the principles taught in geology contrary to gospel truths? Isn’t it true that most scientists are atheists or at least agnostic?” In fact, most scientists believe in God and find no significant contradictions between their belief in God and their belief in science. Brigham Young put it this way:

Our religion will not clash with or contradict the facts of science in any particular. You may take geology, for instance, and it is a true science; not that I would say for a moment that all the conclusions and deductions of its professors are true, but its leading principles are; they are facts—they are eternal. [JD 14:116]

I have also found this to be true in my own personal search for unity between the realms of scientific and religious knowledge. However, it is not because I have discovered the answers to all of the difficult questions. As I stated earlier, I still have many more questions than I do answers. However, I accept both the things I have been taught and learned as a scientist and the things learned from the scriptures and prophets because both of them work. As a scientist I have been trained to look for and accept those theories, ideas, and models that work. I have applied the same test to my religion and have found that the promises made in the scriptures and by the prophets are true because they work! Let me share with you a few examples of what I mean.

As I mentioned, during my early years we had only one ward in Pleasant View, and all but a couple of families in town were ward members. I really didn’t know that any other churches existed, and later in my life it came as a bit of a shock to me to learn that everyone did not belong to the church that I belonged to. I can’t say that I had a testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel because I really hadn’t thought about it much. My parents were good, kind, and loving parents, and I trusted them and their judgment.

Then it happened. One day during a deacons quorum meeting our advisor decided that we would have a testimony meeting; it may have been that he had not gotten around to preparing a lesson. It wasn’t that I hadn’t shared my testimony before; in fact, I was one of those kids who thought that bearing testimony was what one was supposed to do at every testimony meeting. But it wasn’t the cool thing to do at age 12.

I suppose that we had about eight or 10 deacons in our quorum, and slowly (although not slow enough, it seemed to me) one boy after another stood to share his testimony. I was almost panicky because I just didn’t know what I would say. I hoped that maybe the time

would run out and I wouldn't feel obligated to stand, but it did not; a small group of 10 deacons sharing their testimonies doesn't take more than about 10 minutes, so plenty of time still remained when all of the other boys had finished standing and sharing their testimonies. I stood awkwardly and recited the same basic things most of the others had said: "I love my mom and dad. I know the Church is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen."

The thing was done, but for the first time in my life I realized that it was a lie. The only thing I had said that I knew to be true was that I loved my mom and dad. I really did not know if the Church was true or if Joseph Smith was a prophet, but I knew then that I had to find out. I had to know for myself.

I don't remember exactly when I finally asked—whether it was that day or the next week or the next month—but I do remember that one night, when my two brothers who shared a room with me were sleeping, I knelt by my bed and pleaded with my Father in Heaven to forgive me for my weaknesses and to let me know if this church that I belonged to was truly His church. I had never prayed with such intent before, and I am not sure I have ever prayed with such fervor since. I did not ask for a vision or visitation; I really only wanted to know that someone was there. I was only about 12 or 13 years old, and yet I can still feel to this day the power of the spiritual witness that came to me that night confirming that this was indeed the Church of Jesus Christ and that my Father in Heaven knew me and loved me. The test had worked, just as the scriptures promised.

But how is it possible for Him to know me? How does He have the time to worry and contemplate someone as insignificant as I? I still ask these questions today and have no answers. When I contemplate God, the universe, eternity, and my place in this marvelous creation, I always struggle to

understand. Perhaps you do as well. A few years ago, when I was first called as a counselor in the bishopric in my ward, I was out monitoring the hallway during Sunday School, trying to make sure that all of our young men and women had stayed in class. As I came into the foyer, I saw one of our deacons holding his head as if he didn't feel well. I stopped and asked if he was okay. The young man replied that his head was hurting and felt like it was going to explode. I thought it might be something serious, and so I questioned him further about the problem. He told me that during his class the teacher had been talking about "eternity and everlasting life" and that as he started to think about it his head began to spin and started aching.

I knew exactly how he was feeling, for I had myself had this same experience on more than one occasion as a young boy. Nonetheless, and notwithstanding my feelings of total insignificance as I have pondered God and eternity, I have a deep assurance that He is there and that in some way unknown to me He knows who I am. He knows who you are and He will respond to your needs.

In 1977 I graduated from BYU and headed out to Madison, Wisconsin, where I had been accepted into the graduate program in geology. My major professor was a wonderful man by the name of Dr. Campbell Craddock. Cam had the reputation of almost never having seen the summer because he spent summers working in Antarctica, Alaska, or in the islands of the Arctic. Students who followed in his footsteps were sure to be cold and wet during most of their graduate fieldwork. I signed on to work in Svalbard, a group of islands about 500 miles north of Norway. It was a spectacular and wonderful place to work. Four of us from Wisconsin, including Dr. Craddock, were deposited on the shore of an island called Spitsbergen in mid-July of 1978. I was thrilled to be on shore, because for the three days of our voyage on the North Sea in the refitted

fishing boat called the *Polarstar*, I had lain in bed, only rolling over occasionally to vomit into the bag I kept by my bunk. The retching continued even long after there was nothing left in my stomach but a bit of saliva.

During this time I was almost hoping the ship would sink and my pain would be over. I prayed and asked God for relief. Again my prayer was answered. The test worked, although not in the way I wanted—for into my mind came the following words: “My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment; . . . endure it well [and] all these things shall give thee experience, and shall be for thy good” (D&C 121:7 and 122:7). I don’t suppose that Joseph Smith was looking for this as the answer to his prayer either. I know that often I tend to push aside or ignore the answers that I don’t want, hoping that the Lord will change His mind. But this does not often happen. Nonetheless, I was glad when the small moment of affliction had passed and we were able to step onto the solid earth. I was even able to smile again and realize that the experience was one that had been for my good. It had humbled me, brought me a better understanding of how much I needed my Father in Heaven, and, later in life, helped me to empathize more fully with my wife as she suffered through months of similar conditions during pregnancy.

During the first month in Svalbard we worked in teams of two as we examined the rocks and collected samples. The Norwegians who had transported us to the island had left us a radio with instructions to contact them each week at a certain time. They warned us to be on the lookout for polar bears (and for seals, the polar bears’ main food). They explained that almost every year someone in Spitsbergen was killed and eaten by a bear. The previous year a family of parents, children, and a bachelor uncle had disembarked from a tourist cruise to camp a few nights. The ship was to return

for them in a few days. (Tourists were not supposed to be off their ships camping, but some did it anyway.) While the family was camping, the uncle, thinking he recognized the children playing outside his tent door, stuck his head out. But it was not the children. The moment he put his head out, a polar bear ripped it off with one good swat and then dragged him just out of camp and ate him while the rest watched in horror. Fortunately the boat returned before the bear became hungry again.

As you can imagine, after hearing stories like this one, we were always looking out over the ocean and over the landscape to see if a bear was approaching. We were particularly cautious when seals came into the bay. We carried with us rifles and 45-Magnum revolvers wherever we went. We slept with the guns at our sides. There was no place to run or hide if a bear decided that we would be its next meal.

About midway through the field season, Dr. Craddock was picked up by helicopter and returned home to Wisconsin. This left three of us—myself, another graduate student named Ernie, and one undergraduate student named Jerry—to work for another month on our own. The problem was that Ernie needed to work in an area that was about 25 kilometers from our base camp. I also had work to do away from base camp, but closer. The decision was made that Ernie and Jerry would pack out together to work for two weeks in the more distant area and leave me by myself.

I don’t know how many of you have ever been truly alone for an extended period of time, but for me it was a new experience. I had, of course, hiked alone before in the mountains of Utah, but I had never camped alone and certainly had never been alone for two weeks. I was doing pretty well and feeling that this “being alone stuff” wasn’t all that bad—only talking to myself occasionally—when one evening the fog rolled in off the ocean. Of course, when I say “evening” I mean it would

have been evening in Wisconsin or Utah, but in the Arctic, where we were, it was light 24 hours a day. The fog, however, was particularly thick, and I was almost unable to see my hand when held out at arm's length.

I ate and then retired to my tent, placing my rifle on one side of the bed and the pistol on the other. As I lay in bed, the sounds of the ocean, which were usually so pleasant and comforting, were now muffled by the fog and seemed different. My mind began to interpret them differently. I was sure I heard something moving along the beach and knew it could not be my companions, who were 20 to 30 kilometers away. Fear slowly crept into my heart and soul. It was fear like I had never known before—the kind that makes a person think and behave in irrational ways. I was sure the sounds were the padding of a polar bear coming along the beach and it would not be long until I was discovered. I imagined my companions returning to camp finding a few mangled remains left from the polar bear's meal.

I sat up with the rifle in one hand and the pistol in the other in a state of panic, waiting for the inevitable to happen. It was then that I remembered I was not alone. I bowed my head and prayed fervently to my Father in Heaven to calm me and protect me. And He did. His Spirit engulfed me, the fear was gone, and I lay down and fell into a peaceful slumber. Once again the test had worked. Once again all I had been required to do was to open the door, and He had entered.

If these were the only incidents in my life when I had received answers to my prayers, then as a scientist I would probably have to reevaluate the promises and would undoubtedly be skeptical of their validity—passing these few experiences off as mere coincidences. However, such is not the case. I do not believe that I have ever had a sincere and fervent prayer that has not been answered. It is my belief that God wants us to test Him. He wants us to grow in spiritual strength by proving Him. At the

close of the Book of Mormon He exhorts us to ask and promises He will reveal the truth unto us (see Moroni 10:4–5). To Oliver Cowdery in the Doctrine and Covenants He gave the challenge to “study it out in your mind; then . . . ask . . . if it be right” (D&C 9:8). To His disciples He taught, “Ask, and ye shall receive; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (3 Nephi 27:29; D&C 4:7; 49:26; 66:9; 88:63; see also Matthew 7:7). He is knocking at the door, but it is you and I that must open it if we want Him to enter.

I believe I can truthfully say that my sincere prayers are always answered. As I mentioned earlier, that does not mean I have always liked the answer. For example, when I was about 17 or 18 years old, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. She was given many blessings, and many prayers were offered. I prayed often that she would be healed. She fought the cancer valiantly and survived for about five years. One day, after I had returned from my mission, I was visiting with her and questioned why God had not answered our prayers—particularly since her patriarchal blessing had promised her a lifetime of good health. She did not hesitate in her response. She told me that God had given her a lifetime of good health. She had rarely been sick until now. She felt that our prayers had been answered, for her life had been extended for several years when she might easily have passed away sooner. This was not the answer I wanted. But as I prayed again and pondered over what she had said, the Spirit confirmed to me that this was true. The problem was that I had not wanted *an* answer; I had wanted *my* answer!

In our communion with God we must ever be careful not just to talk but to listen. We must listen for His Spirit to guide and teach us. As we do, we must be willing always to mold our will to His will, for how can our prayers ever fail if we are willing to put our lives in His hands? I have found that

prayer works, that God never fails in His promise to us that He will be there waiting, knocking, hoping that we will open the door. It is a test that each of us can make; it requires no sophisticated equipment, nor any federal grant money. And yet the results can be as incredibly exciting as any research performed with the best, most-expensive equipment. Better yet, the results gained by experimenting on the Lord and upon His word will have consequences that reach far beyond this world

into the eternities. I challenge each of you to go to your homes and apartments, to kneel before the Lord and ask, to test and try Him, and to listen for His answer. I bear witness that the gospel of Jesus Christ is true; that prayer is a reliable means of communicating with our Heavenly Father; that even with innumerable questions that are unanswered and perhaps unanswerable in this life, we can know He lives and loves us and knows us. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.