

“Earth’s Crammed with Heaven”: Reminiscences

LEGRAND RICHARDS

I greet all of you wonderful students and your teachers here this morning and tell you how proud I am of all of you and of this great institution and of your desire to be here for what this institution can offer to you. I appreciate the music and I appreciate that lovely prayer by Brother Ricks; I need it badly. So I pray the Lord will bless me while I stand here this morning.

In trying to think what I might say to you that would be of most interest, I decided that I would not preach doctrine to you. (I could do that—if you do not believe it, read *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* and *Israel! Do You Know?*) I imagine that I might be the oldest person here this morning (there could be others, but I doubt that), so I figure that I have seen more things during my period of mortality than any of you have. You know that it is a habit of old people to reminisce—I thought that first I would tell you a few things out of ancient history; and then, with all these missionaries over here, I might end up with some missionary stories.

First, you have already been told by President Oaks that I am the oldest living General Authority. I want to tell you that I have known all of the General Authorities of this Church since the days of Wilford Woodruff,

and I think I have heard all these Brethren preach. That is a good many General Authorities when you count all the members of the Twelve that there have been, and all the presidents of the Church. My father raised us in the country, out in Tooele, and there never passed a conference after we were old enough to sit still when he did not bring his boys—three of us—in to attend the general conferences. Of course, we did not have automobiles in those days, nor paved roads; but with the old white-top and our team we would drive in. My father wanted his boys to know all of the General Authorities of the Church, so he wanted us to attend all the conferences so we could hear them speak.

I was in the Salt Lake Tabernacle when Wilford Woodruff delivered what I think was the last talk he gave before he died, that in which he told how marvelously the Spirit of the Lord had guided and directed him through the years of his life. It has been over eighty years ago, but I can remember to this day some

LeGrand Richards was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 11 October 1977.

of the things that he spoke in that conference. I am going to mention a couple of them; you have heard them, but I heard *him* give them.

While he was traveling with his wife in the South, once in the middle of the night the Spirit said, "Get up and move your team and wagon." He got up out of his wagon and moved his team from where it was tied to an oak—then along came a twister and picked that oak up and threw it right where his wagon had been standing. That oak had stood a hundred years, and yet while he was in his wagon that night a twister came and picked it up. And I can hear Brother Woodruff saying, "If I hadn't listened to the Spirit of the Lord, it might have cost us our lives." Then he told, in that same conference, about bringing a group of converts from Great Britain. They landed down in New Orleans and he was negotiating with a captain there to take them up the river to St. Louis, where they had arranged to cross the plains to these valleys of the mountains. And, he said, while he was negotiating, something said, "Don't go on that boat, neither you nor your people." So he thanked the captain and they did not embark. That boat had no more than sailed up the river when it caught fire and burned, and not a soul on it was saved. And I can hear President Woodruff as he stood there, all these eighty years ago, saying, "If I hadn't listened to the promptings of the spirit of the Lord, we wouldn't have had Brother So-and-so [naming one of the good Brethren] and Brother So-and-so"—another of the good Brethren who was with him in that group he brought from Europe.

Well, there are things one never forgets. There are impressions in my youth that have remained with me from that time to the present. My grandmother was the wife of Dr. Willard Richards who was in Carthage Jail with the Prophet—you may have heard this story—and at that time the Prophet turned to Dr. Richards and said, "If we go into the cell, will you go in with us?" And Willard said,

"Brother Joseph, you did not ask me to cross the river with you—you did not ask me to come to Carthage—you did not ask me to come to jail with you. . . . But I will tell you what I will do; if you are condemned to be hung for treason, I will be hung in your stead. . . ." But the Prophet said, "You cannot." (*History of the Church* 6:616). I have a copy of a letter that the Prophet wrote in which he said that he had found a man who could be trusted in all things, and that man was Dr. Willard Richards.

When I came home from my first mission in 1908 my grandmother was still alive, and when I visited with her I said, "Grandma, tell me about the Prophet Joseph." And she told me what a wonderful man he was and how the people loved him and how he loved them; she told me how he used to take little children on his lap and sing to them and tell them stories; and then she told me about being in the meeting when Sidney Rigdon claimed that he ought to succeed the Prophet. She said, "When Brigham Young stood up he looked like the Prophet Joseph, he sounded like the Prophet Joseph, and we all knew who the Lord wanted to succeed the Prophet as the President of the Church." These are experiences of the past that have meant much to me in my life (even though I don't know what to say next).

Now I will skip to 1906 when my father was called to be a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. There were three men appointed in that same conference, in this order: George F. Richards (my father), Orson F. Whitney, and David O. McKay. I was at that time serving as the secretary of the Netherlands Mission, and just a few days before that conference was held, I received a letter from my father that read like this: "My son, I had a remarkable dream last night. I dreamed that the Savior came and took me in his arms, and as I found me in my Master's embrace, the love that filled my heart can't be compared with the love that a man

feels for a woman. I feel the meaning of the words of the song, 'I Need Thee Every Hour.'"

Then, just two or three days after I received that letter, a cablegram came to our office, the mission headquarters. It was addressed to President Grant, who was then president of the European Mission, and he was up in Berlin. We used to open the telegrams to see if they were important enough to try to relay. As for this telegram, I can quote you the exact words. It read this way: "Cowley and Taylor deposed. Richards, Whitney, and McKay appointed." When I read that, I figured that the dream my father had just had, of which I had just received word in that letter, was to let him know that he was being called by revelation.

President Grant was due in Rotterdam the next morning so I went to the station to meet him. I handed him the telegram—I had sealed it up again—and he opened and read it, and he said, "Well, well. Cowley and Taylor deposed. Richards, Whitney, and McKay appointed." Then he said, "I wonder who this Richards could be." I could have told him but I waited for him to tell me. "There's your father, your uncle Charlie, your uncle Franklin"—and then he said, "I guess it's your daddy; Brother Lyman thinks he's the salt of the earth." Well, these are experiences that one does not usually forget. (Let's see what I want to tell you next.)

Out in the little country town where I was raised we used to have Sunday School conferences; I do not know whether we have them anymore. But I can remember a conference held there about eighty years ago when the visiting brethren from the Sunday School General Board were Brother Karl G. Maeser and brother George Goddard. I thought I would mention that because of the fact that Brother Karl G. Maeser was the man who organized this institution under the direction of President Brigham Young. I cannot remember to this day what Brother Maeser preached about in that conference, but I can remember old Brother George Goddard with his great singing voice

and long beard, and I can remember the songs he taught us to sing in that conference. The first one—I do not think it is in the hymnbook anymore—went like this: "Take away the whiskey, the coffee, and the tea, cold water is the drink for me," and then it repeats and goes on. That made such an impression upon me as a boy that I can hardly drink anything but cold water. I was traveling on the train headed for Los Angeles a few years back, and I went into the diner for breakfast and the waiter said, "Are you ready for your coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"Would you like a glass of milk?"

"No, thank you."

"What do you want to drink?"

I said, "A glass of cold water, please."

He said, "You're the funniest man I ever did see."

The next song that Brother Goddard taught us to sing in that Sunday School conference (that was when I did not know that I could not sing, so I tried to sing with them) is still in the hymnbook. It goes like this: "Who's on the Lord's side? Who? Now is the time to show; We ask it fearlessly: Who's on the Lord's side? Who?" (*Hymns*, no. 175). And, brothers and sisters, right there as a boy I resolved, the Lord being my help, that I'd try to be on his side as long as I lived.

I was up in Wyoming some years ago talking in a conference of the young people, and between the morning and the afternoon meetings—we used to hold an afternoon meeting then—a little fellow about six or eight years old came up and, looking up into my face, asked, "Bishop, could I shake your hand?"

I said, "I can't think of anything I'd rather do than shake yours."

And while we were shaking on it, he looked up into my face, and he said, "Bishop, my bishop will never need to worry about losing me." I could have hugged the little fellow. Isn't it wonderful to think that this little boy, in his youth, had resolved that he would be on the

Lord's side all the days of his life? Well, these are great experiences. (Let's see what else I want to tell you.)

Now I think I'll skip over some of my missionary experiences. This one might interest you. While I was laboring as a district president in Amsterdam on my first mission, my companion and I were invited to the home of one of the Saints. She wanted to invite her neighbor in and wanted us to come and teach her the gospel. When we arrived, the neighbor was there, but she had brought her minister along with her to make sure that we told her the right things. Well, the minister and I had a little difference of opinion on the subject of priesthood and right there he challenged me to a debate in his church. In those days we were not advised not to debate, and so I accepted the challenge—I was young and had plenty of fight in me.

When we arrived at his church a week from Saturday night, the church was full; all of his people were there, and all of our people. How our people had found out about it I do not know. I had not told them. I think he had spread the word around, thinking to show us up. But at any rate, he stood up and said, "Inasmuch as Mister Richards is a guest in our church we'll accord him the privilege of opening the debate, and we'll each talk for twenty minutes and continue as long as it's mutually agreeable." He asked, "Is that agreeable to you, Mister Richards?"

And I said, "Very much." I did not tell him that I would have given him the shirt off my back for the privilege of opening that debate, and he had just handed it to me on a silver platter. I did not know whether the Lord had anything to do with that or not, but I thought he did.

I stood up and said, "The last time I talked to my friend, we had a difference of opinion in regard to the principle of the priesthood. I've come tonight prepared to discuss that subject, but I do not propose to start with that subject." This is a device that has helped me in my

work: I said, "If you were going to build a house, you wouldn't try to put the roof on it before you got the foundation in, would you? Because if the foundation were faulty the house would tumble anyway so what good would the house be? I propose to open this debate tonight by laying the foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I choose for my text the sixth chapter of Hebrews, where Paul said,

Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God,

Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. [Hebrews 6:1–2]

I hurried over faith and repentance; I assumed that they believed that. I preached baptism by immersion for the remission of sins until everybody in the audience was giving me accord. Then it came to the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, and they did not believe that. They thought the Holy Ghost just came, like the breezes that blow from the heavens.

I reminded them that when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God through the preaching of Philip they sent Peter and John. When these apostles arrived, they prayed for the people, then laid their hands upon them, and the people received the Holy Ghost. When Simon the sorcerer saw that the Holy Ghost was conveyed by the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost." And Peter said, "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gifts of God may be purchased with money" (see Acts 8:14–20). Then I gave two or three other references on laying on of hands and I sat down.

The minister stood up. He never mentioned a word I had said. He started expounding on a few of the bad things that our enemies had said against us and then said, in the most courteous manner, "Now, if Mister Richards will enlighten us on these matters I'm sure this audience will be most appreciative."

I was on my feet just like that. (My companion later asked how I could think so fast; I responded, "What have you been praying for all week long?") I stood up and said, "In the days of the Savior his enemies tried to trick him with cunning and craftiness. I don't suppose there's anyone here today who'd like to see us resort to those old tactics. If I understand a debate, it's a presentation and answering of arguments. Has this man answered any of my arguments?" All shook their heads negatively. "All right, my friend," I said, "you may have your twenty minutes over again."

He would not do it. I knew he could not. His wife, who was in the audience, stood up and said, "What Mister Richards is asking is fair. You ought to answer him." And even then he would not do it.

I said to my companions, "Stand up. Give me my coat and hat." (It was winter.) "One more chance," I announced. "I am willing to remain here till ten o'clock tomorrow morning, when I have to be in my own church, provided this debate can go forward on the basis that you have set up. If not, I am going to leave and ask my companion to leave and ask our people to leave, and I shall leave it with you to settle with your people for what has happened here today." And still he would not do it. So we all walked out on him. I met him on the street time and time again after that and he would duck his head so that he would not have to speak to me. Well, that is one of my little experiences there. (Let's see what else I want here.)

Now I'll tell you one of a little more recent vintage. A year ago last June, I was asked to accompany the presidency to Denver to hold a solemn assembly, and after that we went down

to Farmington, New Mexico, to hold a solemn assembly there. As we were headed back to Denver to return from there, our plane landed at Alamosa with something wrong. The captain announced that we would not take off until some repair parts were shipped in from Denver, and we could either stay in the plane or go into the airport. We chose to stay. The First Presidency sat right in the front of the plane, I sat next to them, and Brother Neal Maxwell sat on the other side with one of the Regional Representatives of the Twelve, Brother Patterson. Then the captain came out of his cockpit, and since he knew we were all Mormons he said something about it. Brother Tanner of the First Presidency spoke up and said, "You better not let LeGrand start on him" (I'm LeGrand, you see.) That opened the door. And so I started on him.

"Captain, I can tell you two reasons why you could not be anything but a Latter-day Saint if you would just use your thinker and if you are willing to believe in the words of the holy prophets and the Savior of the world." So I told him what those two things were. They are in the fore part of *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* that I wrote. The first was this: One of our broadcasters, Edmund C. Hill, was asked what message could be broadcast to the world that would be of greater importance than any other message, and after considering the matter he decided that to be able to say to the world that a man who had lived upon this earth had returned again with a message from God would be the greatest message that could be broadcast. I said, "The Latter-day Saints are the only ones that claim such a visit, not only of one man, but many of the holy prophets, and we built a monument back in New York to the honor of one of those men who returned again with a message from God. That was Moroni."

The other point was the statement of a Catholic prelate who visited in Salt Lake. Brother Orson F. Whitney told about his visit—he said he could speak a dozen different

languages and knew all about science and religion. The prelate's comment was this:

You Mormons are all ignoramuses. You don't even know the strength of your own position. It is so strong that there is only one other tenable in the whole Christian world, and that is the position of the Catholic Church. . . . If we are right, you are wrong; if you are right, we are wrong; and that's all there is to it. The Protestants haven't a leg to stand on. For, if we are wrong, they are wrong with us, since they . . . went out from us; while if we are right, they are apostates whom we cut off long ago. [quoted in LeGrand Richards, *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, p. 3]

That is a good statement—anybody who stops to analyze it would find it as fine a definite statement of fact as can be spoken. That is why I quoted it to that captain.

The prelate went on to say, "If we have the continuation of the gospel from the days of the Savior, there was no need of such a man as Joseph Smith; but if we have not that continuation then such a man as Joseph Smith is necessary." I always add that the Catholic church and the Bible cannot both be right because the Bible definitely declare an apostasy and a restoration in the later days; that leaves The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with the only right in the world to claim to be the true church of Jesus Christ. (I still have a few minutes. Why don't you kick me on the heel if I start going too long?)

Coming back to Dr. Hart: that talk, instead of lasting just a few minutes, lasted for two hours. He had studied for the ministry and then decided to become a pilot instead of a minister. He asked, "What if I don't join your Church in this life?"

"Oh," I said, "that's all right. We'll just let you sleep in the dirt for five hundred years, a half of a thousand, and we'll come and preach it to you in the spirit world." And when I parted with him I told him I would send him a

copy of *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, the missionary book, if he would promise to read it, and he said he would. So he gave me his name and address, and I said, "The next time I meet you, you'll be an elder in the Mormon church."

The little stewardess was sitting right next to us, and I said, "How do you feel about spiritual things?"

"Well," she said, "I was raised a Catholic but I don't feel satisfied with my church."

I asked, "Would you like me to send you one of these books?" She said she would and wrote down her name and address.

Then one of the passengers sitting in the back of the compartment came up and asked, "Could I get one of those books?"

And I said, "You surely could." So he gave me his name and address.

Later, when we landed in Denver, another man came up, saw me hobbling with my cane, and inquired, "Where did you get that cane?"

I said, "I know where I got it, but I can't tell you the address or the name of the company. If you will give me your name and your address I'll write you from Salt Lake and tell you." Then, when he began to leave, I said, "Well, you don't get off that easy. I'm a Mormon elder, and I want to tell you what we believe. If you will just read the book I'm going to send you, you will want to join the Church."

Well, to make the story short, I sent the names to the mission president. He sent the missionaries to them, but the pilot would not let them give any lessons; he said, "All I need is this *Marvelous Work and a Wonder* and the Book of Mormon." So just before last June 1, he called me from over in Littleton, Colorado, where he lives, and told me he had set his baptismal date for the first day of June. Last week I received a letter from him, and in this letter—I am going to take time to read just one paragraph of it to show you what it means to call people out of darkness to the Lord's true light. Like Peter said of the Church of his day, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a

peculiar people." Why? "That you should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). This is the one paragraph:

The happiness I've experienced in my heart and soul since joining the Church is indescribable. I feel that meeting I had with you and President Kimball really set things into motion for me. Prior to that I had just been spinning my wheels and searching. Now I know that through the discovery of the restored truth of our Lord my life has meaning and direction. I want to work for him and do his will.

Then he went on to tell me that he had just baptized one of his daughters, that four of his family are attending our Church with him—his wife and two older daughters have not yet capitulated, but he said he would get them—and then, in the last paragraph, he asked if I would ordain him an elder next May. I suppose he had talked with the stake president, and the stake president had indicated that by May he would be ready to be an elder; and, you know, these pilots can probably fly anywhere for nothing. He said he would come to Salt Lake. So I wrote him back and told him that if he would bring a letter of recommendation from his stake president I would be glad to ordain him.

All many people need is to have someone lay things out for them so that they can understand them. I have another little story to illustrate what I mean. I toured the Colorado Mission with Brother Hinckley, a former stake president who lives here in Provo. We were holding a meeting over in Nebraska and the leader of the Reorganized church in that particular locality honored us with his presence in the meeting, and I went up to him afterward. He seemed very interested, and I said, "You have so much to be grateful for. You have the Prophet Joseph, and you have the Book of Mormon, but you only have about half of what the Prophet Joseph taught. Wouldn't you like

to know all about it? You have half a pie; we have the whole pie. I have written a book. If you will agree to read it, I'll send it to you."

A few weeks after that I received a letter back from him in which he thanked me for the book. He said, "I read it, and last Saturday my brother and I were both baptized members of your Church. Now I have sent the book to one of my friends over in Independence, one of the leaders of the Reorganized church, and asked him if he would read it." If we will just take time to tell them what we have, we do not need to worry about their joining the Church. (Let's see what else I want to tell you.)

Just a few years ago we converted a Reverend Cooke from up in the northwest—the state of Washington. He wrote a letter to my brother, who was then president of the Northwestern States mission, in which he said, "I have always thought that I had as much authority as any man to administer the ordinances of the gospel—until I met the Mormon elders. Now I have come to feel that I must accept baptism at their hands." Then, after he was baptized, he came down to Salt Lake and to my office and said this: "When I joined the Church I did not feel I could say that I knew that Joseph Smith was a prophet, but I believed that he was. But when Brother Burroughs [and I know Brother Burroughs up there] laid his hands on my head and ordained me to the priesthood I felt something go through me like I never had felt before in all my life, and I knew that no man could do that for me. It must have come from the Lord." Then he continued, "When I think of how little I had to offer my people as a Methodist minister compared with what I now have in the fulness of the gospel as it has been restored I want to go back and tell my friends what I have found. Now they won't listen to me; I am an apostate from their church." But he had given up his ministry (and that is an honorable calling) to run the elevator in our state capitol building so that he could join the Church. Through the window in my

office he pointed to the temple and said, "I can't wait until I can go there with my wife. I want to be sure I have her forever." That is what it is when people really love truth and are called out of darkness, as Peter said, unto the Lord's true light.

While I was president of a stake in California we converted a very prominent attorney, and in one of our stake conferences I asked him if he would like to tell the people what he found in Mormonism that appealed to him. He had a deep, rich voice that just penetrated a person; he stood up and said, "If you have hunted for something all your life until you have nearly decided that it does not exist, and then you just happen to stumble onto it, you do not need anybody to tell you what you have found, do you? That is what I did when I found Mormonism." And he added, "The most beautiful thing about it to me is that the more I learn about it the more wonderful it becomes." I have since had the privilege of setting his son apart to go on his mission. I feel such a close contact with that family that when that son wanted to marry down in the Los Angeles Temple I consented to go down and perform the marriage for him at his request. I do not usually do that away from Salt Lake.

Brothers and sisters, the gospel is true. We now have one of our greatest leaders that I have known, and I have known them intimately from President Joseph F. Smith through

Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, and Joseph Fielding Smith to Harold B. Lee—and now we have Spencer W. Kimball. I was thrilled with Brother Grant Bangerter's talk at the conference where he indicated, "We thought we couldn't get along without Brother Lee. He was a great man and a great leader, but look what we've got today" (see *Ensign*, November 1977, pp. 26–27). God bless that noble man. It is a miracle that he is able to do what he is doing, considering the trials he has had through the years of his life.

Now, I see, it is time to close. I know this is God's eternal truth. My, how happy I am to be a member of his Church, to bear the name of Christ the Lord! I have just been reading the New Testament again; what miracles he performed, and yet all around us are miracles every day that just thrill me. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning said (and I've quoted her before):

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.*
[Aurora Leigh, bk. 7]

God help us to take off our shoes and be true to the faith, I pray, and leave you my blessing in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.