

Lessons Taught by Two Prophets

CECIL O. SAMUELSON

Welcome back, as we begin another semester at the start of a brand-new year! For me these new years are coming very quickly, but my enthusiasm for them hasn't lessened. My optimism, particularly for you, is enhanced, and I look forward to an exciting semester that will include lots of hard work, fun, faith-enhancing experiences, and deepening special friendships and relationships. It is a great blessing in my life to be with you at this remarkable place and at this important time.

Occasionally I am asked by students and by others if I get to see the president of the Church very often. I respond that I do see the prophet fairly regularly. In my current assignment I am in meetings with him at least two times each month, and on occasion more frequently. I have had various interactions with President Monson over several years and have always been uplifted by his teaching, kindness, and support. I've learned that it doesn't take prolonged exposure to benefit from his counsel and concern. I've also learned that few, if any, of even the smallest details escape his attention. For example, he quickly observed and has never forgotten that I am left-handed.

His reputation for concern for the one—particularly the widow or the wounded, the poor or the persecuted—is widely known.

Perhaps you would also like to know, if you don't already, that he is also very interested in and concerned about students. He continues to be most supportive of BYU and is particularly demonstrative when it comes to students. Even in these difficult times he wants you to be well housed, and shortly you will see the tangible results of his desire for more and better student housing on campus. I could say much more about our beloved prophet but will forebear for now.

When President Monson gave his most recent devotional address on September 15, 2009, a thought crossed my mind about what I might say to you today. You remember that he reviewed lessons learned and principles taught by all the presidents of the Church whom he has known from Heber J. Grant to Gordon B. Hinckley. When he mentioned his experiences with President David O. McKay, who called President Monson to be an apostle in September of 1963, I remembered some marvelous but limited exposure that I experienced with this extraordinary prophet of my youth.

As President Monson mentioned how considerate President McKay was of everyone,

Cecil O. Samuelson was BYU president when this devotional address was delivered on 5 January 2010.

I recalled my own personal witness of that positive characteristic of the prophet. Although very different from President Monson's close, frequent, and intimate association, my memories of President McKay have been very meaningful to me, even though from a much greater distance. Because I'm sure he would have treated all of you just as he did me, if you had been in my shoes, I'd like you to understand that those of us who had the chance to interact with him personally were in a real sense just proxies for everyone else. The same is the case today with President Monson. Whenever I see him, I recognize that I am representing you.

When I was about your age, I had a few brief interactions with President David O. McKay, and I thought it might be instructive and interesting to share some experiences that are very poignant to me. At the outset, I must be clear that we were not close in the typical sense. In fact, on the few occasions when I met him personally, I always had to tell him my name because he would have had no reason to otherwise know it or remember ever seeing me. Like many of you with President Monson, I knew him, but he didn't know me, except as he knew everyone he had the opportunity to meet.

I believe we as members of the Church always have tender feelings about the prophet, but with our family it was particularly so with President McKay. He was not only the prophet and president of the Church but also a dear friend of many years to my maternal grandparents.

Although President McKay was 13 years younger than my Grandfather Mitchell, they were called at the same time to serve as missionaries together in Scotland. They associated with one another frequently during their missions and continued their friendship throughout the years. President McKay spoke at my grandfather's funeral and also married and sealed my parents and some of my mother's

siblings and companions in the Salt Lake Temple.

I was in the presence of President McKay on at least two or three occasions in my youth. One such opportunity occurred when I was a teenager, and he dedicated our new ward meetinghouse. Although we didn't know each other at the time, I was interested to learn that Dr. Kim B. Clark, current president of BYU–Idaho, was also in that dedicatory service as a member of the other ward meeting in the same chapel.

My first conversation with President McKay happened when I was 19 years old. I had received a mission call and was attending the Mission Home, the predecessor to the MTC, in Salt Lake City near Church headquarters. In those days the missionaries-in-training ate their meals at the Hotel Utah, which is now the Joseph Smith Memorial Building on South Temple and Main Street.

In the basement of the Hotel Utah was a barbershop, and after lunch one day my companion and I passed the barbershop door and saw President McKay having his hair cut. We also saw that there did not appear to be a back door to the establishment, so we decided to wait until he came out to try to shake his hand. While we waited, about a dozen more missionaries came by and saw what we were doing—so they also waited. When the prophet finished with the barber, out he came. He went from one missionary to another, shaking hands, smiling, and asking each one a question or two about their names, hometowns, and missions. He was able to connect someone or something he knew with each missionary, and everyone felt a special relationship with the president of the Church.

I was the last in the line. Because my surname is different from my mother's maiden name, I had been instructed to tell President McKay if I ever met him that I was the grandson of Joseph Mitchell, which I did. He

dropped my hand and hugged me with both arms. He then told all the missionaries that my grandfather had taught him how to be a missionary. I don't know whether this was an exaggeration or not, but I know how it made me feel. He then asked me which mission I had been called to. With some pride I told him the North British Mission because I knew that Scotland was included in the mission and it was also where he and my grandfather had served together.

President McKay then said something to me that I thought was quite unusual. He mentioned that in the near future the Brethren planned to divide the North British Mission, and he instructed me to tell President Brockbank, the mission president, that I was to serve in Scotland. I didn't think you were supposed to tell the mission president anything!

Several days later I found myself at the mission headquarters in Manchester, England, with the other new missionaries. I had a brief two- or three-minute interview with the mission president, and before I knew it or had any idea how to raise the issue, I was whisked out the door and the next new elder came into the room. I thought that surely I would have another opportunity to fulfill my charge, but I still didn't have any idea as to how to present the matter. As I waited with the others, the secretary to the president came out and informed the group that she had been instructed to give us the assignments to our new areas. She did this alphabetically.

As the first nine or 10 assignments were announced, only one elder was assigned to Scotland, and my spirits sank lower and lower. It was not that I objected to serving in England, which I would have otherwise welcomed, but I had been given only one specific instruction by the prophet in my whole life and I had muffed it! When my name and assignment were finally announced, I learned with great relief that I had been assigned to the Kirkcaldy District in Scotland. That night as I said my

prayers, I committed to Heavenly Father that if the president of the Church ever again gave me a specific assignment, I would do it whatever the cost. With all of my imperfections, I think in this one thing I have been fully faithful.

Some time later, after the mission was divided, President McKay came to Scotland, and all of the missionaries serving in Scotland at that time—I think approximately 40 in number—had the privilege of being taught by him for several hours. Time does not permit an account of the impressiveness of this master teacher except for one very remarkable episode.

During this time the new mission was being established, and we met with considerable opposition and some hostility. As President McKay was teaching us, a small phalanx of newspaper reporters barged right into the room and confronted the prophet. I think most of us young men felt disposed to physically remove the intruders, but President McKay motioned for us to remain seated and in a direct but kindly way answered their question as to whether or not he was really a prophet. He responded by asking the reporters a question that caused them to bow their heads and withdraw from the room without further comment. He simply and quietly said: "Look me in the eyes. Can you tell me that I am not a prophet?" It was a tremendous moment in my life because I knew then better than ever before that he truly was the Lord's prophet and we as young, inexperienced, and unpolished missionaries were really on the Lord's errand.

In August of 1962 President McKay visited our mission again to organize the first stake in Scotland—the Glasgow Stake. He was accompanied by other General Authorities, and it was a Pentecostal experience for all of us in attendance. I don't remember many of the specifics that he taught, but I do remember with electricity that persists to this day one statement he made. He was reviewing the challenges and difficulties of his first mission in

Scotland some 65 years before. He told of the few but faithful Saints, of the sacrifices and struggles they all experienced, and of his great affection and respect for the missionaries with whom he had served. At that time he was in his late eighties, and he mused that all of his brethren save himself were on the other side of the veil. However, he felt the presence in our meeting of three whose names he mentioned. One name he expressed was that of my grandfather. To make sure I had heard correctly, I later looked for the text of his speech, which was published shortly thereafter in the *Church News*. Sure enough, there was the name of Brother Mitchell.

You might not think any of these experiences to be particularly impressive, but to me they have had a very profound influence on my life that persists to this day. I am grateful for them and especially for the lessons learned and the principles taught by this great prophet. Over the years I have read and reread virtually all of his general conference talks, his books, and his other messages. I very much enjoy his quoting of Robert Burns and other classic poets and also his insightful ways of teaching and explaining the restored gospel. However—and this might seem surprising to you and probably would be to him as well—as impressive as his formal teaching and ministry were, it was in my brief personal encounters that I was taught some very important lessons that have become dear to me. What are they? Let me list a few in the minutes remaining this morning.

First, as mentioned by President Monson last September, was his consideration for others. He was a gentleman in every respect, but beyond that he also made extra effort to connect with and relate to everyone he met. I frequently think of him taking the time to shake the hands of and encourage those in that group of young missionaries of which I was a part. There are many accounts, including some related by President Monson, of his concern for the feelings of others.

Second was his loyalty to his friends and his associates. I think it mattered not to President McKay that his friend Joseph Mitchell was not highly educated in the schools of the world. In correspondence with my grandfather over the years and in his comments at Grandfather Mitchell's funeral, President McKay was unfailingly kind, complimentary, and appropriately affectionate.

Third was his ability to be who he was so naturally and yet represent so effectively what he represented as the Lord's prophet. This caused him to be admired and loved by nearly everyone he met. He could give correction without offense and genuine encouragement as he taught.

Fourth, his life gave regular and forceful evidence that he practiced what he preached. He was a perfect example, in my view, of one who wanted to be, and knew that he was, a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. Every time anyone was around him, he or she went away determined to be better.

Many of you who might have studied President McKay's life or ministry in detail would be able to add much more from the public record than I have mentioned. These reflections have been largely confined to my personal experiences and observations.

Let me add just one more that I'm convinced many of you share. That is the tremendous influence this servant of the Lord has had in so many obvious ways on our current president and prophet, Thomas S. Monson.

I'm sure President Monson's basic personality, commitment to the Savior, and orientation to service were fairly well established prior to his friendship and association with President McKay. Nevertheless, the impact of this prophet-leader on his younger friend and colleague is unmistakable. In President Monson we see the same tender consideration and feeling for others that President McKay demonstrated. President Monson is always interested in everyone he meets and makes special efforts

to cause them to know of his genuine interest and concern.

President Monson is unfailingly loyal to his friends and associates. This characteristic is seen not only in his relationships with his counselors, the Twelve, and others in his circle but also in his interactions with the leaders of the Church in past years as well as the members of today. Likewise, his friendship and loyalty are not restricted to members of his family or his faith. While never compromising or equivocating on doctrine, principle, or revealed patterns of faith and conduct, he also unfailingly reaches out to those of different faith traditions or those with no faith at all. Certainly he is loved by the Latter-day Saints, but he is also appreciated and honored by those of other churches and backgrounds because of his kindness, generosity, and genuine concern for all people.

Like President McKay, President Monson has always tried to do not only what he needed to do but also what he felt he should do as

one called to represent the Savior. I don't think President McKay was ever a bishop, but President Monson was, and he always cared for the widows, the youth, and his entire flock. After a season of service in that calling he was released, but even to this day he continues to be concerned about, serve, and watch over those for whom he was bishop.

I am most grateful for the lessons that these two great priesthood leaders have taught and are continuing to teach me. I am grateful that I can bear a solemn but happy witness that these men, and all others who have held this highest office in the Lord's Church, are true servants of our living Heavenly Father and His Beloved Son. I know they are in the same calling and position with the same keys and authority of their predecessor Joseph Smith.

Might we all continue to learn from their examples and teachings and do our best to emulate them is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.