

# *We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet*

ROBERT L. SIMPSON

## **A Newfound Hope**

One of the thrilling experiences of traveling the length and breadth of this Church is to hear new members in the uttermost bounds sing with enthusiasm, "We thank thee, O God, for a prophet to guide us in these latter days." During the past couple of years it has been our privilege to be in such places as the outback of Australia where aborigines are being led out of a primitive existence into a new way of life; in faraway New Guinea where curiosity about a new faith, just five years ago, has rapidly developed into several successful branches accommodating more than a thousand new members; in a refugee camp in Southeast Asia where thousands are clustered in quest of political freedom. We don't do proselyting work in those camps, but there were a few observing our sister missionaries who were working as social workers in the camp who recognized their difference, kindness, and gentleness. Thousands of these refugees have accepted the restored truth that promises not only political freedom, but a *total* freedom, for the truth shall make them free.

There is a poverty-stricken village near Coimbatore, India, where everything looks bright for the first time because there is newfound hope in a church led by a living prophet.

Then there's that coconut atoll in the middle of the South Pacific where the people's tradition of happiness and faith has been added upon and been given even deeper meaning and a new purpose for living.

Finally, we have been to a remote mountaintop of South America where some of the sons and daughters of Father Lehi are being tenderly led back to the Church of their forebears.

Yes, hundreds of new voices are being added each month to the worldwide chorus of the Lord's faithful, singing with great sincerity, "We thank thee, O God, for a prophet."

How thrilling it was to sustain a new prophet in general conference. Thousands of us raised our right hands in unison as a special Book of Mormon scripture was reenacted, "A choice seer will I raise up" (2 Nephi 3:7).

## **In True Prophet Fashion**

How remarkable is the Lord's process of preparing and calling his key leaders. No two prophets have been exactly alike. Each has his

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unique gifts and talents, each has his special mission to perform, each has been able to conform to the Lord's will based on his own particular preparation.

This point was made so well by Elder Boyd K. Packer, who related this touching parable during the transition that took place at the death of President Harold B. Lee and the sustaining of President Spencer W. Kimball.

A brand-new locomotive is all ready for its initial run. It is perfect in every detail—bright, shiny, well lubricated, and with a full head of steam. This locomotive bears the name "Church Correlation." President Harold B. Lee, who had dedicated the final fifteen years of his ministry to the perfecting of Church correlation, was poised with his foot on the first step all ready to pull himself into the driver's seat when all of a sudden a kindly hand fell upon his shoulder and a voice said, "No, Harold, you have done a superb job getting things ready, now I want Spencer to drive it." And Spencer W. Kimball put Church correlation into motion.

Dr. David L. Clark, one of our prominent Church educators in Wisconsin, has made the following observation about calling prophets:

*In the dark stillness of the almost empty temple, a voice called "Samuel," and Samuel replied, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears," and a prophet was called. In the solitude of a New York woods, a young boy asked for help, and in reply the Lord answered, "This is my beloved Son, hear Him," and the first prophet of the last dispensation was called. Different times and different prophets, but the history of God's dealings with His people is marked by the calling of prophets for essentially the same purposes whether 2,600 years ago, in 1820, or in 1986.*

*The fact that prophets perform prophetically and that people's need for such promptings is continuous does not mean that all prophets have been formed in the same mold. A prophet's position in the society that needs him may range from that of outcast to King, from principal priest to a voice in*

*the wilderness. Even the manner of call to the position may differ from one generation to the next.*

*Joseph Smith's call as a prophet came in answer to a request; Samuel's call came as a surprise.*

*Jeremiah, one of the giants of Judah, was eighteen years old when the Lord put forth His hand and touched Jeremiah's mouth and said, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth and have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." [David L. Clark, first counselor in Madison Wisconsin Stake. Excerpts from stake conference address delivered 24 May 1986]*

Prophets have been most anxious to share the will of God with all the people. They have also felt an obligation to attack the evils of society. After hearing President Ezra Taft Benson in our recent general conference, there can certainly be no doubt where we stand as a people relative to the many character-corroding influences that are so rampant in the world today. President Benson has raised his voice both frequently and fearlessly against every evil practice. Some of these evils are so blatant that the victims are subdued with one lethal blow. But perhaps we should regard with equal concern those evil influences so subtle, so gradual, that we are gently led away hardly realizing what is happening. The subtle influence of evil must surely be among Satan's most powerful tools.

Too often prophets have been turned away, shunned, and even harmed by those offended by their teachings. It is recorded that Jeremiah spent some twenty-three years in what seemed to be a futile effort—a voice in the wilderness—but how great will be his eternal reward for the valiant effort he made against such overwhelming odds. In true prophet fashion he refused to give up. No one really knows whether he even knew at the time about the sympathetic ear of one we call Father Lehi, one who was listening during those years of struggle. Certainly Jeremiah knows now about

Father Lehi, and you can be sure he is receiving his reward in full measure for all that followed that led a chosen people to a promised land and left the world its greatest legacy, the Book of Mormon.

### Prophets of All Times

To complicate the lives of true prophets, there have been false prophets along the way helping the adversary to fill his role as spoiler and enemy of truth—often using half truths as the most effective weapon. Jeremiah had his Hananiah. In our day, Brigham Young had James Strang, also several others, attempting to cloud the issues of truth and right. The great common denominator of false prophets seems to be their obsession to tear down and destroy, with practically no effort to give hope or enlightenment. This has been so evident during the past couple of years.

Without dwelling on the negative too much, perhaps we should mention Samson in particular as one who may have been foreordained but who, apparently, through his free agency, made some unfortunate decisions and failed to mature as the Lord expected him to. According to Brother Clark once more, I quote:

*Samson could not be characterized as prophet, priest or king, yet, if our record is accurate, his birth was preceded by the appearance of an angel who declared that Samson would be dedicated to God's service, possibly as prophet, at least as judge and perhaps as priest. Service was not in Samson's mind. He ignored most of his heritage, trampled tradition, and instead of dedicating himself to deity, desecrated that which was most sacred, his calling. He pursued his own selfish interests, caused trouble and death wherever he went and finally died while destroying a handful of Israel's enemies, and in doing so gained his only reputation, that of a roaring Rambo of sorts, a folk hero. In reality, his life was wasted in self-indulgence, a life that missed the mark of self-mastery and failed in a sacred call*

*to serve.* [David L. Clark, 24 May 1986 Stake Conference Address]

Prophets have been traditionally unpopular except among their own flock. A few like King Benjamin in the Book of Mormon enjoyed unusual popularity and brought peace to the land for many years. The fate of prophets has been grim at best. Several have been stoned to death. Jeremiah was left to die in a dungeon before he was rescued. Today we reflect with sadness on the martyrdom of the Prophet Joseph Smith. David L. Clark describes the Prophet Joseph as:

*One foreordained as a "Choice Seer" to be raised up, but unlike Samson who failed in his calling, our first latter-day prophet did not fail in his call. He magnified his role as religious leader and prophet. He challenged the ecclesiastical authority of his day and questioned the political motivation of the secular authority, just as Jeremiah and Samuel the Lamanite. His message was uncomfortable to society at large and often was difficult for his own flock. His message was criticized, as have been the messages of most prophets, and when his message was too uncomfortable, he was abused and finally killed. And what did he accomplish? His ecclesiastical success is measured by 6 million members 156 years after the Church was organized, and his prophetic success is measured by how you and I live our lives, how we treat our neighbor, our brother, our God, and ourselves. Our successor prophets have been effective in different manners, each filling the need of the hour differently but in characteristic, prophetic ways.* [24 May 1986 Stake Conference Address]

Modern prophets down to President Benson have been criticized by ecclesiastical and secular authority because their messages were uncomfortable. Uncomfortable messages, perhaps so, but always the epitome of truth and *never*, I repeat *never*, subject to compromise. This Church is his church and is not subject to

the capricious wishes of society or to meet a convenience of the day.

The Prophet Joseph’s martyrdom was publicized on the front page of New York’s leading newspaper. The account of what happened at Carthage Jail that day was fairly accurate. However, the final sentence read as follows: “Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, is dead—Thus ends Mormonism.” If this Church had been the product of Joseph Smith’s imagination, that would have indeed been the end. There is no doubt. But being the Church of Jesus Christ makes it another matter. Oh, that the editor of that newspaper could see into our day to witness a thriving church of 6 million members, 30,000 missionaries, 1600 stakes, and 39 dedicated temples. Oh, that he could know about a church that changes lives—a church that leads out in literacy, in educational pursuits, in Sabbath-day worship, in caring for its needy, and in so many ways demonstrating to the world the value of following those true Christ-like principles advocated by living prophets.

### **Modern, Living Prophets**

Before closing, please allow me to share a personal story or two that might help to illustrate the effect that modern prophets have had on my life.

In what was then called the Hollywood Stake in Southern California, I was performing my duties as a young deacon assisting with the sacrament service each weekend. Our new chapel had just been dedicated. It was beautiful. We were so proud. We even had a separate sacrament alcove behind the bishopric seats on the stand. Bit by bit we tried to enhance our sacrament service. Red velour drapes were installed to be drawn apart at the precise psychological moment. Smaller drapes revealing a picture of the Last Supper were drawn just before the sacrament prayers were given. All of the deacons wore white shirts and black bow ties. And last but not least, we had

worked out a system of musical chimes to signal the opening of the drapes and the sacrament prayers. It was the most beautiful and dramatic sacrament presentation ever devised in any dispensation. Even the stake president was impressed—so much so that he invited President Heber J. Grant to come and see the Church’s new “Hollywood” version of the sacrament. President Grant accepted the invitation and witnessed what turned out to be our final presentation. We were taught in unmistakable, but kindly, terms what the sacrament service should be. I’ll never forget that lesson. It was valuable not only to me, but to everyone else in that ward and in that stake.

While attending the Missionary Training Center in Salt Lake City, my companion and I went to the Church cafeteria (the Lion House) for lunch on our first day. We noticed several General Authorities eating lunch together, and we made our way quietly to the rear corner so we could see but not be seen. The next person through the cafeteria line happened to be the prophet, President Heber J. Grant. After paying for his food, he started toward the other General Authorities and then noticed out of the corner of his eye two greener-than-green missionaries sitting back in the corner. He changed his direction and shared his lunch period with us just to set us at ease, just to commend us on our new calling, and to share some stories about his own mission. How thoughtful! How kind! The scripture came immediately to mind, “But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matthew 23:11).

President George Albert Smith toured our mission in New Zealand when I was serving there as a young man. Soon after his return home, a personal letter came addressed to me from President George Albert Smith. He was asking my forgiveness as he had failed to extend a special greeting to me from my cousin who worked in the Church Office Building. His letter was so kind, so thoughtful, so gracious, and so typical of the seven modern-day

prophets that I have had the privilege of meeting and being with. Each has demonstrated that great common denominator of Christ-like love, courtesy, and consideration for all.

While I was serving as mission president in New Zealand, President Spencer W. Kimball came to tour the mission. We were immediately impressed by his efficiency and by his overwhelming anxiety to “Do It!” As we previewed the tour schedule, he noticed that provision had been made for an occasional brief detour to visit a historic site or to stop and view one of the scenic attractions for which New Zealand is so famous. He took out his pen, and one by one he crossed out the diversions with a comment like “We will be too busy for that” or “Perhaps we could see this some other time.” Then, all of a sudden, Sister Kimball spoke up and said, “Spencer, my brother Henry Eyring traveled halfway around the world to see the famous Waitomo Caves that you have just crossed out.” Without hesitation, President Kimball said, “I think we will write that one back in, and this might be nice, too.” You see, even prophets need a loving companion to help them keep a proper perspective.

Without vision the people perish. Consider this partial list of significant happenings of the past ten years or so.

The priesthood power and authority was made available to all worthy male members of the Church at the appropriate time.

Regional Representatives were called to assist in the details of Church administration in a rapidly expanding worldwide Church.

Consider how the establishment of General Authority Area Presidencies worldwide is an outgrowth of what used to be Area Supervisors and then, later, Executive Administrators.

Think about the important decision to strengthen the priesthood line for carrying out the work of the Church rather than to depend so heavily on the traditionally large auxiliary boards of yesteryear?

Then, too, there is the decision involving the auxiliaries that was a part of the more significant and far-reaching Church correlation program. Herein all teachings and activities were organized and harmonized into a unified master plan designed to bless the members of the Church more abundantly.

Soon after the correlation program was introduced came the consolidated meeting plan. Many millions of dollars are being saved as Saints worldwide have been willing to share building and classroom space.

For more than a century members heard prophecies about temples one day dotting the land, and now all of a sudden in our day we jumped from seventeen temples to the currently announced total of forty-seven temples, thirty-nine of which have been dedicated. May our voices ever blend with thousands of new members in the tops of the Andes, in New Guinea, in Africa, and in the islands of the sea as we all join in the spirit of one of our very favorite hymns, “We thank thee, O God, for a prophet to guide us in these latter days.” I testify to the truth of this work and of living prophets in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.