

“A Cloud of Witnesses”

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My brothers and sisters, it is an awesome sight to look at you and realize that I have the assignment to say something, beyond what you have already heard today, that will be of some assistance to you. It is a marvelous thing to realize that there are people such as you who are faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ—faithful enough to attend a special meeting of this type on a very busy Sabbath day. I pray that the Spirit of the Lord will be with me so that I might say some things that will be of value to all of you. My wife told me to stand up here and pretend that I had a basketball in my hand and just to forget the rest of you. I wish something besides my heart were bouncing right now.

In a few hours, the first Sunday of May 1979 will become history. The closing of this day, a fast and testimony day to most members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, brings to an end the fasting, praying, singing, learning, and testifying activities conducted in Mormon congregations throughout the world. It is conceivable that many members will mark this day as just another Sabbath. For others, particularly those who actively participated in the bearing of personal testimony, this day will be recorded as something special and memorable.

According to my calculations, approximately ten thousand separate groups of Saints will have met today in fast and testimony meetings. If some fifteen persons per ward or branch expressed their testimonies, a mighty chorus of more than one hundred fifty thousand testimonies will have resounded over earth's surface during these past twenty-four hours. This means that a host of Saints large enough in number to fill seven and one-half Marriott Centers testified of God and of his goodness. If you were to add to that the full-time missionaries in the field, there would be more than enough to fill another Marriott Center.

It is thrilling to realize that so many testimonies can be borne in such a short time. I rejoice in the assurance that we are encompassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, and my heart swells with pride to be numbered among those who have the desire to believe, the faith to know, and the courage

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to declare. How pleased our Heavenly Father must be to have observed and heard the expressions of testimony on this his holy day! He who responds to the fall of a single sparrow to the earth most assuredly responds to the single testimonies borne by his children.

As this day of stated testimonies closes, I wonder about tomorrow. I wonder if the Monday, the Tuesday, the Wednesday, and the other work days to follow will be filled with unstated testimonies. It is one thing to acknowledge evidences of a supreme being and to testify of God's existence, but it is a far better thing to live in accord with his divine will. Many people mouth the Sunday testimony, but all too few model it. We read in the New Testament:

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers [and I would add speakers] only, deceiving your own selves.

For if any be a hearer [or a speaker] of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass:

For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was [or was purported to be]. [James 1:22–24]

When a member of the Church stands at the pulpit and shares his testimony with others, he does, in a real sense, place himself before the mirror—a mirror that reflects his desires, his faith, and his commitment to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. I might add that few men or women look better than when observed bearing their testimonies.

To turn away from the mirror of testimony and live in contradiction to one's stated belief is an affront to Deity and a serious form of mockery. We read of those who mocked the Christ during his mortal ministry, and we ask, "How could they do it?"

The rulers . . . derided him, saying, He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God.

And the soldiers also mocked him, . . . offering him vinegar,

And saying, If thou be the king of the Jews, save thyself. [Luke 23:35–37]

Such accounts of mockery are heartrending, and we wonder how people could be so hard-hearted and cruel. Yet we display the same hardness—and some cruelty of our own—when we engage in serious mockery. When we, the professed believers, take the name of God in vain, we mock. When we desecrate the Sabbath, we mock. When we curse God during tribulations, we mock. When we permit any form of hypocrisy to enter our lives, we mock. We mock or ridicule Christ when one day we testify of his holy nature and calling and the next day abuse his teachings. It would be well for us to speak less condemningly of the Jews and the passersby at the Crucifixion who mocked God until all traces of mockery are erased from our own behavior.

Earlier today, I sat in a meeting north of here and heard several people express love for the Savior. Their testimonies were most touching. As I listened I thought of another congregation gathered nearly two thousand years ago to consider the matter of Christ. The congregation of which I speak looked to Pilate for direction. Pilate's instructions centered upon the question, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:22). These words from Pilate's lips opened the floodgate to all the whipping, the scourging, the slapping, and the spitting that the Jews and the Roman soldiers administered to Jesus; as the record attests they "spitefully entreated" him (Luke 18:32). When we read of these indignities inflicted by the Savior's persecutors, we wonder, "How could they do such wicked things?"

While pondering about Christ and his mistreatment two thousand years ago, I felt

confident in my own heart that the Saints whose testimonies I heard this morning would treat him more kindly if he were to visit them today. But reflecting further, I wondered, “Am I and are all of the witnesses of Christ free from tendencies to scourge and mistreat the Savior of mankind?” It occurred to me that we too stand guilty and in danger of serious condemnation when we abuse our spouses and children, when we show disrespect to our parents or the aged, when we mistreat the Lord’s servants—his missionary and priesthood leaders—when we neglect the poor or the disadvantaged, or when we offend any of our friends or speak evil of them. How do I justify such a statement? Did not Christ say, in reference to the last judgment, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40)?

From this and other scripture, I conclude that we in sense whip Christ when we whip innocent children. We slap Christ when we strike another in anger. We scourge him when we scourge his followers. Christ prayed to the Father that he would forgive the Jews and the Roman soldiers for spitefully entreating him, saying, “They know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Will he be so lenient with us when we stand before congregations and bear our testimony, declaring his divinity, and then turn away and mistreat his children? I feel strongly that this morning’s testimonies must be supported by tomorrow’s deeds.

I would guess that most testimony meetings held today included some ward or branch business. I am certain that most of us heard a priesthood officer read aloud names or ward members. I am sure you heard him cite positions of call and invite members to sustain the action taken by the bishopric or branch presidency. As we raised our arms to the square in the usual sustaining fashion, were we really involved in this action? Did we really pledge our support of officers and teachers? Late in

the meeting did you or someone else pay tribute to a teacher or a bishop? Did you express thanks to an associate or to a family member? I would suspect that many voiced promises of loyalty to God, to family, to servants in the Church, and to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If all of these things occurred in today’s testimony meetings, what will occur in tomorrow’s living? Will we remain true to our pledges to sustain the Lord’s work and the Lord’s workers?

In a bygone day, Christ’s disciples expressed their love and devotion to him time and time again. On the occasion when Christ washed the feet of his disciples, Peter objected. Jesus said, “If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me.”

The chief apostle’s quick response was, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.” Total commitment and total loyalty to the Savior were the intent of these words and those that follow: “I will lay down my life for thy sake.” (See John 13:5–9, 37.) Yet after all these fine words, Peter and the others forsook the Savior at the time of his trial and crucifixion. The record states simply, “All the disciples forsook him, and fled” (Matthew 26:56). As predicted, even Peter, the rock, denied him thrice (see Matthew 26:69–75).

Now before we condemn Peter and the others, should we not ask if we are in danger of similar kinds of acts? Should we not check to see if we ourselves are above the temptation to forsake or deny? It is my strong feeling that we forsake the Savior when we vote to sustain his priesthood officers but then turn down invitations to serve. When we testify that the gospel is true but refuse to share that testimony with nonbelievers, we are also denying; we are turning away. When we wilt before temptation, when we fail to stand for the truth, we betray and turn away.

I would hope that, after all our fine words and hand-raising, we are riveted to the gospel and to its author. I would that we all rally in defense of Christ and pledge to him our all, as did Peter and his associates.

Our testimony meetings today included an ordinance of great significance: the sacrament. We ate bread and drank water in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, and as we did so we made specific promises. We in turn received the promise that his Spirit would always be with us. May I remind you that as we partake of the bread and water we witness unto God that we are willing to bear his name and to keep his commandments. Though two Aaronic priesthood holders pronounce the prayers, we are parties to that testament; we act as witnesses. While participating in sacrament or fast and testimony services on this and other days, I have often wondered about my worthiness and about the worthiness of others to do what we do in this sacred ordinance. I have wondered about purity of spirit, cleanliness of body, and singleness of purpose.

Years ago a certain Judas Iscariot participated in a sacred ordinance. In the course of conducting this ordinance, Christ said to his disciples, "Ye are clean, but not all" (John 13:10), for he knew who would betray him. Later, after the sop had been dipped, Satan entered into Judas. Still later Judas covenanted to deliver the Master to his tormentors for thirty pieces of silver. It seems obvious that impure motive, the worship of worldly goods, uncleanness, and related factors caused Judas to betray the Savior. His deed was wicked, inexcusable, and out of harmony with his calling as a chosen disciple.

Our hearts break when we review the events surrounding the betrayal, and we cry in our minds, "Judas, how could you have done such a thing?" However, before we condemn the man, should we not search our own souls and determine whether we are free of all tendencies to betrayal? I fear that we betray the Lord when we entertain impure thoughts and allow ourselves to be led by motives contrary to those of glorifying God and building his kingdom.

When we set our hearts upon the treasures of the world and live mammon-centered lives, we betray. When we pollute our bodies, our tabernacles of flesh, and permit satanic influences to enter, we are vulnerable as was Judas.

There is no place among testifiers of the Lord Jesus Christ for mockery, scourging, forsaking, or betraying in any way. Oh, how I pray that we will bear testimony—pure testimony—and then live accordingly, that we might mouth the testimony on Sabbath and then live and model that testimony all the days of our lives! We should be filled with the desire to testify, but we should be filled also with the determination to live according to our testimonies. We should be faithful; we should be pure.

Earlier I made reference to a scripture recorded in Hebrews, and I would like to quote it again, this time adding to it.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses [the one hundred fifty thousand or more that I mentioned who have borne testimony today], let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us. [Hebrews 12:1]

When I read those words, I feel that it is our holy obligation to lay aside these weights and sins and to go forward as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I am reminded that all of us were made in the likeness and image of God; all of us were made just a little lower than the angels (see Psalm 8:5). It is our challenge to keep ourselves clean and pure and to become like him. Did Christ not challenge us to be perfect, even as his Father in heaven is perfect (see Matthew 5:48)? Did he not also challenge us to be even as he is (see 3 Nephi 12:48)? That is the challenge, and that is what we will do if we really believe and want to testify with conviction.

I love the words written by James Talmage, as recorded in *Jesus the Christ*, wherein he talks of our divine mintage:

Every human soul is stamped with the image and superscription of God, however blurred and indistinct the line may have become through the corrosion or attribution of sin; and as unto Caesar should be rendered the coins upon which his effigy appeared, so unto God should be given the souls that bear his image. Render unto the world the stamped pieces that are made legally current by the insignia of worldly powers, and give unto God and his service yourselves—the divine mintage of his eternal realm. [James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 23d ed. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1956), pp. 546–47]

All of us have had the experience of noting in the countenances of people the effects of sin. It is obvious—it can be observed—and it is heartbreaking. A few years ago my wife and I had the privilege of serving a mission in Texas. As we returned from visiting a stake in the eastern part of that state, we stopped at a café for lunch. We took places in a booth and began to order our meal, but were annoyed by the conversation in the booth next to ours. In that booth was a very ugly and very dirty woman. The smoke billowed around her, her language was foul, and her treatment of the people who were attending her was very abusive. It became so annoying to us that we decided to leave; but as we were getting up to do so, she left. She was in a wheelchair, apparently crippled. Since she had gone, we settled back and finished our meal. When it was over we went up to the register to pay the bill and were shocked to see her behind the counter; she owned the place. As we paid the bill we looked behind her and saw on the wall a lovely, almost life-size portrait of a very beautiful young girl. We studied that picture as we waited for her to give the change, and I noticed a similarity between her eyes and the eyes of

the girl in the painting. I asked the old woman if the picture was of her, and she replied proudly that it was indeed a picture of her during her youth. In questioning her further, we discovered that she was somewhat near my wife's age. But it was heartrending to note how her beauty had been spent and lost through sin. It was obvious that she had abused her divine mintage and that she was bogged down with sin.

My brothers and sisters, it is imperative that we—as sons and daughters of God, as testifiers of the Christ—lay aside the weights, rid ourselves of sin, and become like him. How do we do that? We do it by setting our eyes single to his glory. We do it by making certain that truth passes through our lips. I find it interesting, in reading the Book of Mormon, that we are told how to speak. The 32nd chapter of 2 Nephi, verses 2 and 3 reads:

Do ye not remember that I said unto you that after ye had received the Holy Ghost ye could speak with the tongue of angels? And now, how could ye speak with the tongue of angels save it were by the Holy Ghost?

Angels speak by the power of the Holy Ghost.

If our eyes are single, if we speak with the tongue of angels, if we have the clean hands and pure heart spoken of by the Psalmist (see Psalm 24:4), and if we do all within our power to take on the countenance of Christ, we then will measure up as his witnesses.

In chapter 5, verse 14, of Alma, the prophet Alma poses these questions to a group of believers: “And now behold, I ask of you, my brethren of the church, have ye spiritually been born of God? Have ye received his image in your countenances?” Have we received his image? When I look at President Kimball, LeGrand Richards, and others who have lived the commandments, who have set aside the weights, and who have rid themselves of sin,

I see purity, glowing countenances, and marvelous and effective witnesses of the truth.

Let us return to Hebrews, the twelfth chapter. Beyond what I have already read, there is something else of great importance to which I would like to refer. Starting at the beginning:

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,

[Now add this:] *Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.* [Hebrews 12:1–2]

As witnesses we certainly must look unto Christ. The scriptures state this idea clearly and beautifully, and I would like to share three in particular with you. The first is found in Helaman:

And now, my sons [all of us], remember, remember, that it is upon the rock of our Redeemer, who is Christ, the Son of God, that ye must build your foundation; that when the devil shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you, it shall have no power over you to drag you down to the gulf of misery and endless wo, because of the rock upon which ye are built, which is a sure foundation, a foundation whereon if men build they cannot fall. [Helaman 5:12]

That should be our foundation. A scripture in Alma states a similar idea:

And now, my son, I have told you this that ye may learn wisdom, that ye may learn of me that there is no other way or means whereby man can be saved, only in and through Christ. behold, he is the life and the light of the world. Behold, he is the world of truth and righteousness. [Alma 38:9]

In addition to those two, we have the following scripture, which is so beautiful and full of meaning:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

I am the vine, ye are the branches: he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

[John 15:1–5]

Brothers and sisters, this has been a marvelous testimony day. I was trying to count up all the testimonies I have heard just in the few hours that I have worshipped, and it goes beyond fifteen. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses—what a marvelous and beautiful thing that is! But it is imperative, brothers and sisters, that this cloud of witnesses be consistent, faithful, and true to all that they have expressed. Their Mondays, their Tuesdays, their Wednesdays, and the things they do on those days should certainly support all that they have voiced on Sunday. If that were so, what strength would come, and what beautiful power would accrue to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints!

I like to think of the example of the woman Mary, who during the final hours of the Savior's life came with her alabaster box of ointment and anointed his feet. Here was a woman who knew of his divine calling; I am certain that she had testified many times. But over and beyond that, she was interested in good works. The disciples tried to prevent her from what they thought was wasting the

ointment. But the Savior forbade them and allowed her to do what she did, saying that her act would be spoken of as a memorial to her.

I would hope and pray that we would support our testimonies by opening our alabaster boxes of ointment and giving to him and his cause the very best. We should give of ourselves freely; we should give of our *best* selves freely. We should give of our substance; we should give our all if we are really and truly testifiers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. May we be appreciative of that cloud of witnesses; may we lay aside our sins; may we avoid all forms of mockery; may we avoid all forms of scourging; may we avoid all forms of betrayal of the Christ by living true and in harmony with our testimonies.

I testify that the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored in this day. I know it with all my

heart; and I know that the Savior is real, that he is alive, and that he directs his kingdom through a living prophet, even Spencer W. Kimball—and, oh, how I love to hear him bear his testimony!

I testify to you, brothers and sisters, that your happiness and mine will be received in proportion to our obedience, and our faithfulness to our declared testimonies. May we be true in every way; may you students be strong and stalwart witnesses; may you missionaries go out determined to be clean and pure and to live completely in harmony with your witnesses of Christ. This is a great work, and it is a privilege to be associated with it. That God will bless you to appreciate it always and to live worthy of all the blessings is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.