

## *Building a Kauri Tree–Like Testimony*

VERNON L. HEPERI

**M**y dear brothers and sisters and fellow students, I am grateful for the opportunity I have to share some of your time today. I realize that with final exams just around the corner you could have chosen to use this hour for other purposes. Yet you have come to the devotional to listen and continue your education in another way. Congratulations for being here and for balancing your college experience with other important activities.

As you prepare for finals and wade through the stress and tension that often accompany such preparation, I remind you that the hard work you are now doing will pay off some time in the future. Let me give you an example.

A story is told about a man who couldn't start his car:

*The car simply would not run. The mechanic who was called in lifted the hood, reached inside, gave a twist of the wrist to a little mechanism—and all was well.*

*"What do I owe you?"*

*"One hundred and ten dollars," said the mechanic.*

*"Good heavens!" said the car owner. "That seems like an awful lot for just twisting a little gadget. How do you itemize it?"*

*"Well," said the mechanic, "ten dollars for twisting the little gadget. A hundred dollars for knowing which little gadget to twist."<sup>1</sup>*

I hope the career you finally choose will adequately compensate you for knowing which little gadget to twist, which chromosome to identify, which notes to play, or which financial model to apply. The list goes on and on. However, I also hope that the financial compensation you receive will not be the only focus you have in your chosen profession. At certain times opportunities will arise for you to give service to others. When those opportunities knock, I encourage you—metaphorically speaking—to open the hood, reach inside, fix the problem, start the car, smile at the owner, and extend your hand—not for money, but to give a warm handshake of fellowship and service to another.

I would like to share another short story that may also prompt you to think carefully about the secular and spiritual education you are receiving during these years at BYU:

---

*Vernon L. Heperi was dean of students at BYU when this devotional address was given on 6 December 2005.*

When James A. Garfield, once president of the United States, was the president of Hiram College, a father brought his son for admittance as a student. The father wanted the boy to take a course [of study] shorter than the one offered and exclaimed: "He can never take all that in! He wants to get through quicker. Can you arrange it for him?"

"Oh, yes," replied President Garfield. "He can take a shorter course. It all depends on what you want to make of him. When God wants to make an oak, he takes one hundred years, but he only takes two months to make a squash."<sup>2</sup>

My guess is that we are all about growing oak trees here at BYU, not squash. (No offense to the humble squash.) It is clear that constant effort and attention over an extended period of time is required to graduate from this institution. It is also clear that BYU has a personal interest in the development and graduation of good leaders who have strong testimonies and who will make meaningful contributions in the Church, in their homes, and in their local communities. This type of development will obviously take more time than is required to grow a squash.

Now, if we were in New Zealand, my home, we would exchange the type of tree under discussion from oak to kauri—the kauri being the largest tree in the forest there. When I think of an individual who embodies all of the characteristics of the kauri tree, I automatically think of Elder Matthew Cowley.

For many, the stories about Elder Cowley's work in New Zealand—first as a young missionary, then as a mission president, and finally as an apostle—are legendary. I wish we could spend all day laughing and crying about his experiences in the mission field, but time will not permit. However, I mention Elder Cowley here because he was much loved by the Maori people of New Zealand. They loved him because of his testimony and the tremendous spiritual power that his testimony gave him. Here is a short excerpt from Elder Cowley's

patriarchal blessing that can help us better understand his prophetic calling:

*Thou shalt become an ambassador of Christ to the uttermost bounds of the earth. . . . You shall be sent as a delegate to the ten tribes and will become a leader and an interpreter in the midst of that people, and because of the power of God that shall be with you, and the blessings of the Almighty, you shall be greatly beloved by that people.*<sup>3</sup>

The love and adoration the local people had for Elder Cowley often caused them to draw analogies from nature about his great abilities. For example, the people would often refer to him as Matiu Kauri, rather than Matthew Cowley. The name *Kauri* was a direct reference to the mightiest and strongest tree in the forests of New Zealand. Because the kauri tree takes many hundreds of years to grow to maturity, many of the local people consider it to be wise and sacred because of all that it is able to observe while growing. Using the name *Kauri* instead of *Cowley*, therefore, was an intentional effort to identify Elder Cowley's great humility and wisdom while also describing his understanding of sacred matters and his ability to provide shade and protection through the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who sought shelter from the world. The name *Kauri* was also an expression of respect from the people, who knew that Matiu Kauri always stood tall, without fear, in defense of truth. They knew that Elder Cowley had an unshakable testimony, and they believed him, especially when he proclaimed his witness of Jesus Christ, living prophets, and the Book of Mormon.

In her autobiography Elder Cowley's wife, Elva, identified the source of her husband's strength and testimony when she wrote:

*He had prophetic vision. He had a strong character and knew what was right. He didn't waver from the truth. . . . He was morally clean and hated*

*dishonesty and infidelity. He had . . . faith that helped him perform miracles.*<sup>4</sup>

Today as I speak and encourage you in your academic efforts, I also remind you to give equal attention to your spiritual development during this time of great growth. Your spiritual development, particularly the development of a firm Matiu Kauri-like testimony, will be of great value to you in perilous times.

### **Introduction**

Let me now speak specifically about testimony. On this subject Elder Richard G. Scott said:

*As you fortify your own personal testimony, you will have power to make correct choices so that you can stand unwaveringly against the pressures of an increasingly vicious world. Your personal security and happiness depend upon the strength of your testimony, for it will guide your actions in times of trial or uncertainty.*<sup>5</sup>

What a wonderful blessing a testimony can be if we are willing to exercise the faith necessary to acquire one and then live accordingly to strengthen it. As we strive to strengthen our testimonies, we are promised additional power to withstand the temptations of the world—a world that has forgotten the commandments of their Creator and Savior. Because personal security and happiness are dependent upon the strength of our testimony, our view of troubling world events will then be tempered by the quiet assurance that comes from actually knowing that God is in charge of the program.

No wonder, then, that as the challenges of the world increase, the voice of a living prophet, President Gordon B. Hinckley, remains calm and steady in a time of great turmoil. In response to some of the challenges that have recently come upon us, he said:

*There is still so much of conflict in the world. There is terrible poverty, disease, and hatred. Man is still brutal in his inhumanity to man. Yet there is this glorious dawn. The “Sun of righteousness” has come “with healing in his wings” (Malachi 4:2). God and His Beloved Son have revealed Themselves. We know Them . . . “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). We love Them. We honor Them and seek to do Their will.*<sup>6</sup>

How different President Hinckley’s message is compared to that the doomsdayers and alarmists who run around screaming that the sky is falling. Instead of being caught up in the motivated mass of indirection that these individuals create, we would be wise to carefully listen and obediently follow the counsel of a living prophet. In doing so, we can find peace, security, and happiness.

### **Elements of a Living Testimony**

Now, if we are to gain and sustain a testimony that will “guide [our] actions in times of trial or uncertainty,” what, then, are the basic elements of a living testimony? More than 40 years ago Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote the following:

*Three great truths must be included in every valid testimony: 1. That Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of the world (D. & C. 46:13); 2. That Joseph Smith is the Prophet of God through whom the gospel was restored in this dispensation; and 3. That The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is “the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth.” (D. & C. 1:30.)*<sup>7</sup>

More recently, in a general conference address entitled “Pure Testimony,” Elder M. Russell Ballard also taught us about these important truths and further emphasized the need for us to develop a testimony of the Book of Mormon. He said we need to

*testify God is our Father and Jesus is the Christ. The plan of salvation is centered on the Savior's Atonement. Joseph Smith restored the fulness of the everlasting gospel of Jesus Christ, and the Book of Mormon is evidence that our testimony is true.*<sup>8</sup>

### **Example of a Testimony**

As an example of how these important elements of testimony can be organized, I now would like to bear my testimony to you. I realize that the format of a testimony is already familiar to most of you. Nevertheless, I hope that you will be patient with me. As you listen, ask yourself three questions:

1. How can I acquire or fortify my own testimony?
2. How can my testimony guide my actions and help me to make good decisions in times of trial or uncertainty?
3. How can my testimony help me to find true peace and happiness in this world?

### **Jesus: The Son of God and Savior of the World**

My dear brothers and sisters, I know that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He was born into this world as the Only Begotten of the Father. He died for us. He was resurrected. And He will soon come again to reign upon this earth. I know that through the Atonement and the Resurrection He provided a way for me to return home to the Father. I do not understand the depth or breadth of His great atoning sacrifice. Nor do I claim anything close to a complete understanding about the suffering that He endured in Gethsemane. But I do know that the Atonement has had influence upon me in a very personal way.

The metaphor of the olive press has been helpful to me in describing the great suffering that began in Gethsemane and ended on Calvary. Through this metaphor my finite mind is given "spiritual spectacles," which allow me to see and better understand the infinite and eternal nature of the Atonement.

From what I have learned, the process of extracting oil from olives begins with the picking, bruising, and crushing of the fruit. The crushed and broken fruit is then collected into baskets, which are stacked one upon the other. These are then placed under the press, where tremendous pressure is applied to them. This process slowly crushes the oil from the fruit. The pressure that is applied is firm and fierce, steadily increasing over time until the red-stained oil contained therein is extracted from the once unblemished fruit.

I cannot comprehend the absolute loneliness that accompanied our Elder Brother that night—a loneliness that by itself was terrible, a loneliness that increased from Gethsemane to Calvary as the sins of a dying world were heaped upon Him and ransomed one by one. In section 19 of the Doctrine and Covenants we read a very personal account of this sacred experience:

*For behold, I, God, have suffered these things for all, that they might not suffer if they would repent. . . .*

*Which suffering caused myself, even God, the greatest of all, to tremble because of pain, and to bleed at every pore, and to suffer both body and spirit—and would that I might not drink the bitter cup, and shrink.*<sup>9</sup>

I also know that three days following the death of Christ, in stark contrast to the physical and spiritual suffering of Gethsemane and Calvary, came the good news of the Savior's empty tomb. As reported in the book of Matthew, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, visited the sepulchre where the body of Christ had been laid:

*And, behold, . . . the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door. . . .*

*His countenance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow:*

*And . . . the keepers did shake, and became as dead men.*

*And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified.*

*He is not here: for he is risen.*<sup>10</sup>

The declaration “He is not here: for he is risen” carried with it a new understanding of a physical resurrection and the hope of a spiritual redemption made possible by the Savior’s personal triumph over both deaths. He will come again—in great glory and majesty—in a way that will cause our minds to open and reflect upon all that He has done for us. Elder Neal A. Maxwell said of that day:

*No wonder, when Christ comes in power and glory, that He will come in reminding red attire . . . , signifying not only the winepress of wrath, but also to bring to our remembrance how He suffered for each of us in Gethsemane and on Calvary!*<sup>11</sup>

My dear brothers and sisters, my testimony is that I know God lives and He will come again.

### **Joseph Smith: A Prophet of God**

I also know Joseph Smith is a prophet of God. Heeding sacred promptings by the Spirit, this young boy responded to a seemingly obscure biblical passage in the book of James that reads:

*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*<sup>12</sup>

This prompted a humble prayer and a mighty revelation that would change the world. Oh, how lovely was that morning when Joseph, “humbly kneeling, sweet appealing,” prayed to a God the world had forgotten!<sup>13</sup> How appropriate that his humble prayer was

answered with a splendid vision of God the Eternal Father and His Son, Jesus Christ.

This First Vision and the accompanying doctrinal significance of the actual appearance of a living, tangible God was no small matter, especially considering the variety of religious ideas—mixed with the philosophies of men—that were circulating through Joseph’s community. Much like Paul and his experience among the idol worshippers of Athens, Joseph would soon be criticized and persecuted by modern-day philosophers for his beliefs. If you reflect back on Paul’s experience in Athens and compare it to Brother Joseph’s experience in New York, you’ll see that things do not change much when you challenge the philosophies of men.

In Acts, chapter 17, Paul discussed the nature of God with some of the local philosophers referred to as Stoics and other prominent leaders of the time. Soon, frustrated with Paul, some of the Athenian elite began referring to him as a “babbler,” saying:

*He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.*<sup>14</sup>

Still others questioned, saying:

*May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?*

*For thou bringest certain strange things to our ears: we would know therefore what these things mean.*<sup>15</sup>

Paul, standing on Mars’ hill, an area where the highest judicial authority of Athens met regularly in council, said to his dissenters:

*Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.*

*For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.*<sup>16</sup>

Again, Joseph’s experience with modern-day Stoics and unbelievers finds a number of interesting parallels with Paul’s experience centuries ago. For example, after hearing about the First Vision, preachers in Palmyra soon claimed that the heavens were closed, that Joseph was a false prophet, and that he, too, like Paul, was “a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.” As Joseph described it, certain individuals

*treated my communication not only lightly, but with great contempt, saying it was all of the devil, that there were no such things as visions or revelations in these days; that all such things had ceased with the apostles, and that there would never be any more of them.*<sup>17</sup>

Like Paul of Tarsus, Joseph also stood in the midst of a hill—not Mars’ hill but a heavenly appointed place of council called the Hill Cumorah. From that position he proclaimed the religious teachings of his time to be, at the very least, superstitious, if not completely founded upon the philosophies of men. His report was rejected as heresy, but it remains as an undeniable testimony of the truth that has been restored in these latter days. Joseph said of this experience:

*I saw two Personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, yet it was true. . . . I had seen a vision; I knew it, and I knew that God knew it, and I could not deny it.*<sup>18</sup>

Having investigated a number of religious sects and having familiarized himself with their various devotions, altar inscriptions, and teachings about an unknown god, Brother Joseph and his vision burst upon the world and opened the minds of men long darkened by apostasy. His testimony, through the gift and power of God, declared to the religious

leaders of his day and ours: “Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.”

Brother Joseph represents the fulfillment of prophecies made long ago by biblical and Book of Mormon prophets. I add my voice to the many who have sung, who are singing, and who will yet sing:

*Praise to the man who communed with Jehovah!  
Jesus anointed that Prophet and Seer.  
Blessed to open the last dispensation,  
Kings shall extol him, and nations revere.*

*Hail to the Prophet, ascended to heaven!  
Traitors and tyrants now fight him in vain.  
Mingling with Gods, he can plan for his brethren;  
Death cannot conquer the hero again.*<sup>19</sup>

My testimony is that I know Joseph Smith is a prophet of God and he restored the fullness of the everlasting gospel in these latter days.

### **The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ**

My dear brothers and sisters, I know the Book of Mormon is true. I know through a series of heavenly manifestations, oft-repeated instruction, and a period of waiting and preparation that the angel Moroni delivered a book into Joseph’s care that was

*written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants [of this land].*<sup>20</sup>

I know that through the gift and power of God the gold plates that Brother Joseph received were translated into what we know today as the Book of Mormon.

My dear brothers and sisters, the Book of Mormon is true! It is a record of my people—

the children of Father Lehi—and of the Jaredite nation. Although I am from New Zealand, I claim Father Lehi, his hometown of Jerusalem, and the surrounding geographic areas in which he traversed and prophesied as part of my heritage. I also claim these Americas and the original peoples of this continent as part of my heritage. But that history and accompanying heritage is not the most important aspect of the Book of Mormon for me. Rather, it is the testimony of Christ contained within its pages that is most important. The Book of Mormon's role as another testament of Jesus Christ stands as its most important feature. As expressed by Elder Russell M. Nelson, "By comparison, all other issues are incidental."<sup>21</sup>

No wonder then that the testimonies recorded in its pages about the visit of the resurrected Savior to the people of this continent are so precious. After reading about the wars, contentions, conflicts, turmoil, spiritual struggles, and disobedience of my ancestors, no better evidence can be given of the Savior's love for them than when, following His Resurrection and appearance to the people of our original homeland in the Eastern Hemisphere, He personally visited and ministered to the remnant of the house of Israel here in the Western Hemisphere. Listen again to the account Nephi made of that visit:

*And it came to pass that he stretched forth his hand and spake unto the people, saying:*

*Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets testified shall come into the world.*

*And behold, I am the light and the life of the world. . . .*

*Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world.*

*And it came to pass that the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did*

*feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; and this they did do, going forth one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record, that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come.<sup>22</sup>*

Certainly Elder Nelson is correct: "By comparison, all other issues are incidental" to the multiple witnesses the Book of Mormon provides that Jesus Christ lives.

My testimony is that I know the Book of Mormon is true. It is another testament of Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion**

Now I have finished bearing my testimony and included each of the elements identified by Elders Ballard and McConkie. As you have been listening, I hope you have been thinking about your own testimony and the blessings promised by Elder Scott.

As I close, I pray the Lord's choicest blessings upon you as you strive to gain or strengthen your own testimony. I pray your testimony will become strong and firm like the mighty kauri tree and—because of your honesty, fidelity, and honorable living—that your testimony will develop within you a level of Matthew Cowley-like faith, humility, and love that will allow you to recognize and perform miracles in your own life and in the lives of others. I also pray that through your testimony you will have the power to make correct choices so that you will be able to "stand unwaveringly against the pressures of an increasingly vicious world." Finally, with the Christmas season that is now upon us, I pray you will, through a testimony of faith, find the same peace, security, and happiness the great Matiu Kauri found in the knowledge that God lives, is mindful of you, and loves you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

### Notes

1. In Linda Ririe Gundry, Jay A. Parry, and Jack M. Lyon, eds., *Best-Loved Humor of the LDS People* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 124.

2. *Quote Magazine*, 15 January 1987, 3; quoted in Joseph B. Wirthlin, *Finding Peace in Our Lives* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 144–45.

3. Excerpt of patriarchal blessing of Matthew Cowley on page 1 of “Elder Matthew Cowley,” two-page typescript biographical sketch, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, MSS 1470, box 2, folder 11 of 11.

4. From page 472 of Elva Taylor Cowley, “My Life: A Love Story,” typescript autobiography, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, MSS 1470, box 2, folder 9 of 11.

5. Richard G. Scott, “The Power of a Strong Testimony,” *Ensign*, November 2001, 87.

6. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Dawning of a Brighter Day,” *Ensign*, May 2004, 83.

7. Bruce R. McConkie, MD, s.v. “testimony,” 786.

8. M. Russell Ballard, “Pure Testimony,” *Ensign*, November 2004, 41.

9. D&C 19:16, 18.

10. Matthew 28:2–6.

11. Neal A. Maxwell, “Overcome . . . Even As I Also Overcame,” *Ensign*, May 1987, 72.

12. James 1:5.

13. “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 26.

14. Acts 17:18.

15. Acts 17:19–20.

16. Acts 17:22–23.

17. JS—H 1:21.

18. JS—H 1:25.

19. “Praise to the Man,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 27.

20. JS—H 1:34.

21. Russell M. Nelson, “A Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 69.

22. 3 Nephi 11:9–11, 14–15.