

## “Out of Obscurity”

By Elder Neal A. Maxwell  
*Of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles*

My brothers and sisters, the Church is at one of those hinge points in its history—the ending of one era and the beginning of another, each with its blessings and its challenges. If we are prepared, we shall neither fear nor fail in our particular time. (See D&C 38:30.)

Among other things, the past obscurity of the Church is giving way to visibility. Obscurity denotes that which is “generally unknown” and “withdrawn from the centers of activity”: hence, the obscure is often misunderstood.

The Lord described how He will bring His latter-day work “forth out of obscurity and out of darkness.” (D&C 1:30; see also 1 Ne. 22:12; 2 Ne. 1:23; 2 Ne. 27:29.) Thus, as foreseen, Christ and His work are becoming a light which can no longer be hidden. (See D&C 14:9.) This emerging reality brings with it its own set of challenges and opportunities. For instance, though the gospel light is small, the adversary knows what it signifies, hence his disproportionate efforts to dim it.

Furthermore, God has chosen to work through those whom the world regards as weak and foolish. (See 1 Cor. 1:27; D&C 1:19, 28; D&C 133:58–59.) With heightened visibility, this fact, too, then creates its own set of challenges. Nevertheless, “God hath chosen the foolish ... to confound the wise; ... the weak ... to confound the ... mighty.” (1 Cor. 1:27.)

Disciples need not be embarrassed by considerations of scale any more than by the infrequency of prestigious converts, since, as Paul said, “Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” (1 Cor. 1:26.)

But there is still more to be allowed for!

As if comparative obscurity, smallness as to scale, and ample human imperfection in the membership of His Church were not enough, the Lord wants a humble as well as a pure people. Thus, the lesson taught ancient Israel is still relevant: only three hundred warriors were used by Gideon to triumph over Israel’s enemies, “lest Israel vaunt themselves.” (See Judg. 7:2.)

The Lord chastens so that we will remember Him (see Hel. 12:3), trying our patience and our faith until we, too, learn that “none could deliver [us] but the Lord [our] God.” (Mosiah 23:23.)

As to scale, what occurred in the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane is of enormous significance to all mankind, but it was inversely proportioned to the tiny plots of earth on

which those eternity-shaping dramas were played out!

Truth, as Mount Sinai showed, transcends the importance of the terrain on which it is given. The Holy Land was a comparatively small strip of sand, about two hundred by seventy-five miles! Even so, therein occurred the central drama of all human history.

Yet consider: the wondrous four Gospels tell us vital, salvational truths, but not what the Persians, Chinese, and Indians were about during Jesus’ mortal ministry. Yet these, and all other peoples, will be indelibly and irrevocably blessed by Jesus and His atonement. They, no less than we, are children of an Almighty God and are fully included in His redemptive plans.

However, unlike our time, ancient nations and cultures were often unaware of each other. Furthermore, secular history is usually silent concerning spiritual things.

The Chinese in the Ch’in Dynasty were busy with stones and the Great Wall of China. They could scarcely be expected to know about Daniel’s stone cut out of the mountain without hands. (See Dan. 2:31–45.)

About when Lehi and his pioneering party landed in the Americas, Solon, the Greek reformer, was striving to end economic distress caused, partly, by an 18 percent interest rate.

As Pompey conquered Jerusalem, two thousand stripling warriors were fighting for Nephite liberty. Approximately when Jacob was tediously engraving on the plates, a physician in India reportedly performed cataract surgery.

About when Ammaron hid the sacred records witnessing of God’s introducing His resurrected Son, Jesus Christ, to the Nephites—Constantine convened a council to discuss whether or not God and Christ were of the same substance. As lonely Mormon, whose only music was in his soul, moved toward culminating Cumorah, Bishop Ambrose of Milan instituted hymn singing in church.

Japan began its recorded history about when Nephite history was winding down, and likewise the Roman presence in Britain.

A few examples of the secular silence about spiritual things will suffice.

Precisely which pharaoh was in power during the time of the great and tumultuous events associated with Moses and the Exodus? There is little in the secular record to affirm those events which Christians and Jews alike regard as being of major significance.

There appears to be precious little secular history which records the drama associated with the arraignment, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus—for Pilate, just more trouble but temporary political gain:

“And the same day Pilate and Herod were made friends together: for before they were at enmity between themselves.” (Luke 23:12.)

Besides, important as Pilate was, locally and briefly, he was not Caesar!

And why no secular confirmation by historians such as Tacitus, concerning Paul’s part in the drama of the Christians, Rome, and Nero?

Mostly, brothers and sisters, these great spiritual events went unseen by eyes spiritually untrained; therefore, they were lost in the swollen sea of worldly cares, a sea which never rests. One day, the historical record will be complete; but, meanwhile, the scriptures will be our guide concerning those transcending spiritual events in human history which are saturated with significance.

In any event, world leaders are busy with the world’s business. In 1910–11 a young Home Secretary defended, in Parliament, the proselyting rights of LDS missionaries in Britain. Amid parliamentary pressures, Winston Churchill held fast for religious tolerance. Major biographies on Churchill are silent on those episodes, the outcome of which was vital to us, but not the stuff of secular history.

The same general disregard attends those whom God chooses as His leaders; moreover, their imperfections are duly noted.

Moses was described as the most meek man upon the face of the earth. (See Num. 12:3.) Yet Moses had a brief moment when he rashly declared, “Hear now, ye rebels; must *we* fetch you water out of this rock?” (Num. 20:10; italics added.) Even so, the Lord readied remarkable Moses for later service, including that atop the Mount of Transfiguration. (See Matt. 17:1–4.)

After Paul wrote his touching epistle on love to the Saints at Corinth (see 1 Cor. 13), he wrote to Galatian members, using some stinging and sarcastic language. Furthermore, companion Barnabas apparently heard Paul’s tongue when it was not the tongue of an angel. (See Acts 15:2.)

Paul even noted his tendency to boast (see 2 Cor. 10:8, 13, 15; 2 Cor. 11:1, 16, 21; 2 Cor. 12:1), reminding us of the wisdom of yet another prophet who wrote: “I do not boast in my own strength, nor in my own wisdom; ...

“But I will boast of my God.” (Alma 26:11–12.)

Only Jesus was perfect in all things, including love and meekness. Even the greatest of mortal prophets fall short of Christ’s high and perfect standards.

Thus, as members of the Church, if we can see the life of discipleship, whether for ourselves or for the prophets, as a combination of *proving*, *reproving*, and *improving*, we will be much better off.

Throughout scriptural history, we see recurring efforts to demean prophets in order to dismiss them—to label them in order to diminish them. Mostly, however, they are simply ignored by their contemporaries and by secular history. After all, early Christians were merely called “the sect of the Nazarenes.” (Acts 24:5.)

Like his predecessors, Joseph Smith reflected some of the anxieties and activities of his time and period. Yet a torrent of truth came through that good, but imperfect, conduit—more than Joseph could communicate, as he once declared:

“It is my meditation all the day and more than my meat and drink to know how I shall make the saints of God to comprehend the visions that roll like an overflowing surge, before my

mind.” (Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds. and comps., *The Words of Joseph Smith*, [Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1980], p. 196.)

Some followers became disaffected, but later returned—including once-statusful men like Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, and Thomas B. Marsh. Yet these men voted with their feet to rejoin and reconcile with the kingdom. The true doctrines drew them back, however, and the only status sought or conferred was membership, once again, in the Lord’s church.

In all this, there is great cause for hope and even gratitude. Moroni prescribed:

“Condemn me not because of mine imperfection, ... but rather give thanks unto God that he hath made manifest unto you our imperfections, that ye may learn to be more wise than we have been.” (Morm. 9:31.)

And Lorenzo Snow practiced:

“I can fellowship the President of the Church,” he said, “if he does not know everything I know ... I saw the ... imperfections in [Joseph Smith] ... I thanked God that He would put upon a man who had those imperfections the power and authority He placed upon him ... for I knew that I myself had weakness, and I thought there was a chance for me ... I thanked God that I saw these imperfections.”

From Elder B. H. Roberts, who loved the Prophet dearly, there were these words:

“Joseph Smith ... claimed for himself no special sanctity, no faultless life, no perfection of character, no inerrancy for every word spoken by him. And as he did not claim these things for himself, so can they not be claimed for him by others. ...

“Yet to Joseph Smith was given,” said Brother Roberts, “access to the mind of Deity, through the revelations of God to him.” (*Comprehensive History*, 2:360–61.)

In fact, brothers and sisters, the Prophet Joseph, just a few days before his martyrdom, confirmingly said,

“I never told you I was perfect; but there is no error in the revelations which I have taught. Must I, then, be thrown away as a thing of naught?” (*History of the Church*, 6:366.)

Should we be surprised that prophets and people alike experience this next reality?

“For he will give unto the faithful line upon line, precept upon precept; and I will try you and prove you herewith.” (D&C 98:12.)

*Herewith* means “in this manner” or “in this way.” The same gradual unfolding will pertain to the history of God’s work. (See Isa. 28:10; D&C 98:12; D&C 128:21.)

Meanwhile, Winston Churchill’s imagery about history is helpful for us to remember:

“History with its flickering lamp stumbles along the trail of the past, trying to reconstruct its scenes, to revive its echoes, and kindle with pale gleams the passion of former days.” (Tribute to Neville Chamberlain, House of Commons, 12 Nov. 1940.)

Since living in the present, however, disciples should heed those imperial scriptures which

“spread themselves over all occasions,” and in one of these we read of stern, divine purpose:

“Nevertheless the Lord seeth fit to chasten his people; yea, he trieth their patience and their faith.” (Mosiah 23:21.)

Why those two particular trials?

Also, why not give us a lengthier Book of Mormon?

“Behold, I was about to write them, all which were engraven upon the plates of Nephi, but the Lord forbade it, saying: I will try the faith of my people.” (3 Ne. 26:11.)

Again we must wait for our full answer.

So the process of proving, reproofing, and improving unfolds; it should neither offend us nor surprise us. Meanwhile, unevenness in the spiritual development of people means untidiness in the history of people, and we should not make an individual “an offender for a word.” (Isa. 29:21; 2 Ne. 27:32), as if a single communication could set aside all else an individual may have communicated or stood for!

Some lie in wait in our day, as during the ministry of Jesus, seeking to “provoke him to speak of many things,” seeking to “catch something out of his mouth that they might accuse him.” (Luke 11:53–54.) The Pharisees actually “took counsel how they might entangle him in his talk.” (Matt. 22:15.)

The finished mosaic of the history of the Restoration will be larger and more varied as more pieces of tile emerge, adjusting a sequence here or enlarging there a sector of our understanding.

The fundamental outline is in place now, however. But history deals with imperfect people in process of time, whose imperfections produce refractions as the pure light of the gospel plays upon them. There may even be a few pieces of tile which, for the moment, do not seem to fit. We can wait, as we must, to learn later whether, for instance, Matthew’s or Luke’s account of Jesus’ Davidic descent is correct. (See Matt. 1; Luke 3.) Meanwhile, the Father has, on several occasions, given us Jesus’ crucial genealogy: “This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (See Matt. 3:17; Matt. 17:5; 3 Ne. 11:7; JS—H 1:17; italics added.)

Granted, there is not full correlation among the four Gospels about the events and participants at the empty garden tomb. (See Matt. 28:1–8; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–9; John 20:1–10.) Yet the important thing is that the tomb was empty, because Jesus had been resurrected! Essence, not tactical detail! Moreover, the faithful, then and now, understand why the resurrected Jesus did not appear to the Sanhedrin, to Caiaphas, or Pilate—but, instead, to the bands of believers at Bethany and Bountiful.

Why, for instance, did not ancient Church leaders more carefully record the fulfillment of certain prophecies of Samuel, the Lamanite? (See 3 Ne. 23:9–14.) Belatedly, at Jesus’ direction, it was written fully and precisely.

So, belatedly, the fulness of the history of the dispensation of the fulness of times will be written!

The final mosaic of the Restoration will be resplendent, reflecting divine design and the same centerpiece—the Father’s plan of salvation and exaltation and the atonement of His Son, Jesus Christ.

At the perfect day, we will see that we have been a part of things too wonderful for us. Part of the marvel and the wonder of God’s “marvelous work and a wonder” will be how perfect Divinity mercifully used us—imperfect humanity.

Meanwhile, amid the human dissonance, those with ears to hear will follow the beckoning sounds of a certain trumpet. (See 1 Cor. 14:8.)

Besides, whatever the present, do we not rightly sing of our God “We’ve proved him in days that are past”? (*Hymns*, no. 196).

This is the Lord’s work! It will roll on until all His purposes are fulfilled (see Morm. 8:22), of which I gladly testify, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.