

CHAPTER 12

LISTEN TO LATTER-DAY PROPHETS

The Lord speaks to us through His prophets.

One of the things I have learned in my life is that some of the greatest sources of security, and some of the most reliable sources of unassailable truth, are prophets of God. Considering the fact that I have served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles since 1984, I am sure this statement does not come as a surprise. But I learned this truth long before my call to the Twelve.

During my life, I have learned that prophets see ahead. They see the harrowing dangers the adversary has placed, or will yet place, in our path. Prophets also foresee the grand possibilities awaiting those who listen to prophetic counsel with the intent to obey. Perhaps two experiences will illustrate my point of view.

In late 1965, I received an unexpected but intriguing invitation. The University of Chicago medical school made me a too-good-to-be-true offer to join their acclaimed university as professor of surgery and chairman of the Division of Cardiovascular and Thoracic

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Surgery. Dantzel and I traveled to Chicago to assess the opportunity, and the school rolled out the red carpet. The opportunity seemed like a dream come true.

A young, highly respected law professor at the university by the name of Dallin H. Oaks, with his wife June, hosted us during our stay. We loved every moment with them and were overwhelmed by the university's generous offer.

Dantzel and I decided to accept the offer. Because I was serving as president of the Bonneville Stake in Salt Lake City, I told my high council that I would be moving. Brother Joseph Anderson—a member of our high council who was then serving as secretary to the First Presidency—pulled me aside after the meeting and suggested that I talk about this move with President David O. McKay. I couldn't imagine that the President of the Church would concern himself with the occupational move of a stake president, but Brother Anderson insisted that I talk with the prophet.

So, on December 14, 1965, I met with President McKay and told him about the Chicago offer. President McKay listened intently and asked many questions: Why were we considering the move? How many children did we have? What would this mean for them? Was this about fame or money? What impact would it have on my career? The prophet left no stone unturned.

I will never forget what happened next. President McKay leaned his head back on his chair and closed his eyes for a prolonged period of time. Finally, he opened his eyes and said, "Brother Nelson, it doesn't feel good to me. Your place is here in Salt Lake City. People will come from all over the world to you here. I don't think you should go to Chicago."

Though surprised by his counsel, we turned down the offer. Over the following years, everything President McKay said would happen did in fact occur. Our children prospered in Salt Lake City,

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and I did in fact have opportunities to influence the global cardiovascular surgical community.

Another interaction with a prophet of God helped spur my professional career further. In 1979, while serving as Sunday School General President, I was invited to attend a Regional Representatives' seminar during which President Spencer W. Kimball delivered a landmark address about opening the doors of nations that were then closed to the Church, including China. He challenged everyone present to study the Mandarin language so that we could communicate with the Chinese people.

That evening I asked Dantzel if she would be willing to study Mandarin with me. She immediately agreed, and we found a tutor to help us. Of course, we didn't learn to speak Mandarin very well, but we learned enough that, when I was invited the next year—through a series of highly unexpected events—to go to China as a visiting professor to teach open-heart surgery, I was in a position to accept the invitation.

I subsequently made many professional trips to China and made friends with many colleagues there. In fact, the year after I was called to the Quorum of the Twelve, I received an urgent request to go to China to perform open-heart surgery on a famous opera star there—a man regarded throughout China as a national treasure. I explained that my full-time ecclesiastical responsibility prevented me from fulfilling their petition, but the doctors in China pleaded with me to reconsider.

After discussing this request with my quorum president and the First Presidency, they encouraged me to make the trip. Gratefully, the operation was a success! That operation in China proved to be the last open-heart procedure I ever performed. It was in Jinan, China, on March 4, 1985.

Fast-forward thirty years later, to October 2015. Wendy and

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I were invited to return to the Shandong University School of Medicine in Jinan. There we were overwhelmed when I was warmly welcomed as “an old friend” of China and reunited with surgeons I had taught thirty-five years earlier, as well as *their* students. The highlight of that visit was meeting the son and grandson of the opera star on whom I had operated. These remarkable experiences—and many more—were possible for one reason: I had heeded the counsel of a prophet to study Mandarin.

Heeding the words of prophets is one of our greatest sources of security in today's complex world. You may not always understand the reason for every declaration of a living prophet. But when you know a prophet is a prophet, you can approach the Lord in humility and faith and ask for your own witness about whatever His prophet has proclaimed.

Prophets Are Extraordinary Role Models

While there is much to learn from the considerable leadership abilities of men and women such as Joan of Arc, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and many others, I believe that the finest leaders to walk the earth are prophets of God.

I have been blessed to know personally ten of the sixteen men who preceded me as President of the Church. I suppose that says more about my age than anything else. Nonetheless, I have learned invaluable lessons from each of them. May I share a few leadership principles I have learned from four of these remarkable men?

Joseph Fielding Smith

President Joseph Fielding Smith, the tenth President of the Church, lived just a few houses away from my boyhood home. His

two youngest sons were my friends. They often invited me into their home, and President Smith was always welcoming.

When I was called in 1971 to be the General President of the Sunday School, President Smith was President of the Church. Dantzel and I accompanied him later that year to the first area conference, held in Manchester, England. There I observed a powerful lesson in leadership as President Smith asked for reports from General Authorities who had gathered prior to the conference.

After each report, President Smith stood and expressed his love and desire to help. I was struck by the power of this leader as he expressed confidence in these General Authorities. After the area conference, when we complimented President Smith on his excellent message, he simply replied, "I did not come here to fail."¹

That statement has lingered with me through the years. President Smith had faith that the Lord would guide those proceedings. Just as President Smith did not go to England to fail, so our Heavenly Father sent each of us here to earth in this final dispensation to succeed. President Smith taught me an important lesson about the power of leaders to encourage, strengthen, and instill confidence in those they serve.

Ezra Taft Benson

President Ezra Taft Benson had been a member of the Quorum of the Twelve for only two years when, in December 1945, in the aftermath of World War II, President George Albert Smith called him to preside over the European Mission. Conditions in Europe were severe. During a ten-month mission of love to members whose lives had been upended by war, Elder Benson traveled throughout war-torn Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Scandinavia to distribute food, clothing, and bedding to suffering Saints. He repeatedly faced what seemed to be insurmountable odds. Again and

again, he demonstrated “undaunted faith in the power of the Lord to overcome obstacles.”²

Forty years later, in November 1985, when President Benson assigned me as a junior member of the Twelve to open the doors of countries in Eastern Europe, I felt unprepared for the assignment. But how could I not do as he had done? His example propelled me to work as hard as I could and then wait for the Lord to extend His miraculous helping hand.

We can learn much from President Benson, who for eight years served concurrently as an Apostle and the secretary of agriculture in U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Cabinet. How did he manage such an impossible workload, with dual priorities that sometimes conflicted? These are his words: “I work as hard as I can and do everything within my power. And I try to keep the commandments. Then I let the Lord make up the difference.”³ Those are words to live by.

Gordon B. Hinckley

President Gordon B. Hinckley was a dynamic leader whose tutoring in Church governance was unique. Prior to serving as the fifteenth President of the Church, he had been a counselor to three previous Presidents. Upon returning from his mission as a young man to England, he worked for the Church in various capacities, always under the direction of the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. Repeatedly he was asked to solve significant challenges. For example, President David O. McKay assigned Brother Hinckley to determine how to commit the endowment ordinance to film so that the endowment could be presented in multiple languages.

President Hinckley was a communicator *par excellence*. He spoke confidently about the gospel with everyone from seasoned journalists to world leaders. I witnessed him soften the heart of Mikhail

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Gorbachev, former president of the Soviet Union, who initially resisted an invitation to meet with President Hinckley in *his* office at Church headquarters. (Gorbachev wanted President Hinckley to come to Gorbachev's hotel room.) However, when the two subsequently met at Church headquarters, President Hinckley pointed out the beautiful Circassian walnut paneling in the First Presidency council room. Mr. Gorbachev was captivated because that wood came from the region of his birthplace in Russia! His mood warmed immediately.

President Hinckley was unfailingly optimistic, an outgrowth of his faith in the Lord. During nearly thirteen years as President, he led the Church through a period of innovation, including the design of smaller temples, the building of the Conference Center, the announcement of 79 new temples, and the dedication or rededication of 95 of the 124 temples then in operation. President Hinckley's vision knew no bounds.

President Hinckley was fearless in proclaiming the future. Consider his prophetic words: "This cause [of Christ] will roll on in majesty and power to fill the earth. Doors now closed to the preaching of the gospel will be opened. The Almighty, if necessary, may have to shake the nations to humble them and cause them to listen to the servants of the living God. Whatever is needed will come to pass."⁴ President Hinckley inspired us to "try a little harder to be a little better."⁵

Thomas S. Monson

President Thomas S. Monson was called to be a bishop at age twenty-two in a ward that included some eighty widows. He was then called to be an Apostle at the age of thirty-six. He lived his life according to the motto, which he repeated to me more than once:

“If the Lord needs something done, I want Him to know that He can count on Tom Monson to do it.”

President Monson showed us how to reach out and rescue the one. He taught us by example that taking care of people is more important than meetings or schedules. Throughout his life, President Monson took random routes home at the end of a long day's work—sometimes stopping at a hospital to comfort someone in distress and other times feeling led to a specific home to visit. Often his unexpected knock on a door was met with a tearful person saying, “How did you know it was the anniversary of our daughter's death?” or “How did you know today was my birthday?”

President Monson's life consistently exemplified both the first and second great commandments—to love God with our whole souls and to love God's children as ourselves.

We can learn a lot from studying how prophets choose to live their lives.

Joseph Smith's Unparalleled Example

There is no latter-day prophet from whom we can learn more than the Prophet of this dispensation—the Prophet Joseph Smith. I marvel at all he accomplished in his relatively short life. His remarkable achievements were facilitated by the matchless power of Heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and a host of heavenly beings.

In particular, Joseph Smith's experiences are evidence of the Lord's willingness to reveal Himself and His will to His prophets.

As we know, the Restoration began with the First Vision. In response to Joseph's prayer in 1820, Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, appeared to the boy Joseph. They told him to join

none of the current churches and “[promised] that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known unto [him].”⁶

In addition to the First Vision, we know of at least *nine* other occasions when Joseph saw the Father *or* the Son. Four of these visions included both the Father *and* the Son, while the Savior appeared to the Prophet another five times by Himself.⁷

Two of these sublime manifestations of the Father and the Son are canonized in sections 76 and 137 of the Doctrine and Covenants.⁸ Four years later in the nearly completed Kirtland Temple, Joseph “beheld the celestial kingdom of God” and the “blazing throne of God, whereon was seated the Father and the Son.”⁹ The other appearances of the Father and the Son occurred at a conference in Kirtland in 1831 and at the School of the Prophets.¹⁰

As stated earlier, Joseph Smith saw the Lord Jesus Christ on at least five additional occasions. One of those was in 1831 during a meeting at Isaac Morley’s farm, and another in 1833, while Joseph was setting apart his father as Patriarch to the Church. The other three appearances occurred in the Kirtland Temple in the days surrounding its dedication, including the remarkable vision recorded in Doctrine and Covenants section 110.

On that occasion, Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery “saw the Lord standing upon the breastwork of the pulpit.” They heard the Lord declare His personal identity, saying, “I am the first and the last; I am he who liveth, I am he who was slain; I am your advocate with the Father.”¹¹

In addition to these transcendent experiences with the Father and the Son, Joseph was visited by, or saw in vision, dozens of ancient prophets and angels.¹² Joseph personally interacted with “divers angels, from . . . Adam down to the present time, all declaring their dispensation, their rights, their keys, their honors, their majesty and glory, and the power of their priesthood.”¹³

Through these remarkable experiences, the Prophet came to understand that heavenly knowledge transcends worldly knowledge. On one occasion, he declared, "Could you gaze into heaven five minutes, you would know more than you would by reading all that ever was written on the subject."¹⁴

President George Q. Cannon, a counselor to four Church Presidents,¹⁵ said: "[Joseph] had vision after vision in order that his mind might be fully saturated with a knowledge of the things of God, and that he might comprehend the great and holy calling that God had bestowed upon him. In this respect he stands unique. There is no man in this dispensation [who] can occupy the station that he, Joseph did, God having reserved him and ordained him for that position, and bestowed upon him the necessary power."¹⁶

The Angel Moroni figured prominently in Joseph's early tutoring, making at least twenty visits to him in the 1820s.¹⁷ At the time of Moroni's first visit, Joseph was only seventeen years old. In 1823, Moroni's first three visits occurred in rapid succession through the night in the upper story of the Smith's log home. "[Moroni] said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and . . . the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it,"¹⁸ Joseph recorded.

Later, a vision was opened to Joseph's mind showing him "the place where the plates were deposited."¹⁹ After going to the hill and uncovering the stone cavity, Joseph beheld the plates but was forbidden to remove them. He was instructed to meet Moroni at the hill one year to the date later.

Annual interviews took place atop the hill. These were sacred opportunities for Moroni to impart "instruction and intelligence" to Joseph regarding how the Lord's "kingdom was to be conducted in the last days."²⁰ During this time Joseph incrementally began to

understand what Moroni meant when he told Joseph that "God had a work for [him] to do."²¹

Moroni remained in contact with Joseph throughout the duration of the translation of the Book of Mormon until he permanently reclaimed the plates. Moroni's visits prepared Joseph for future communications with heavenly beings.

Joseph Smith's Heavenly Tutoring

President John Taylor taught that Joseph Smith was acquainted with "such men . . . as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Noah, Adam, Seth, Enoch, and Jesus and the Father, and the apostles that lived on this continent as well as those who lived on the [Asian] continent."²²

Other sources²³ confirm that Joseph was tutored by Old Testament prophets; all the New Testament Apostles, including Paul; and Book of Mormon prophets, including Nephi, Alma, Mormon, and the twelve Nephite disciples. Likewise, Joseph and others saw numerous unnamed angels during the Kirtland Temple dedication and in the following week, as part of the promised endowment "with power from on high."²⁴

Many of these experiences are not captured in the scriptures, but various accounts²⁵ indicate that Joseph saw in vision or was visited by some sixty angels during his lifetime. John the Baptist and Peter, James, and John restored the keys of priesthood authority.²⁶ Others, such as Moses, Elias, and Elijah, also committed priesthood keys to Joseph.²⁷

These divine interactions with angels were so frequent that President John Taylor observed that Joseph "seemed to be as familiar with these people as we are with one another." He believed that Joseph's familiarity with the ancients was necessary "because [Joseph] had to introduce . . . the dispensation of the fulness of times, . . .

—the dispensation in which all other dispensations are merged or concentrated.”²⁸

Joseph’s unique calling required repeated tutoring so that he could establish the firm foundation of the Lord’s Church that his successors would need so that they could accomplish the Lord’s purposes in the future.

Joseph Smith and Latter-day Scripture

Now consider Joseph Smith’s role as the revelator of latter-day scripture. Through the Prophet Joseph Smith we have received more pages of scripture than we have from any other prophet from the beginning of time!

He translated the Book of Mormon from an unknown language into the English language “by the gift and power of God,”²⁹ and he did this in one single draft without the advantage of modern technology!

I have examined surviving pages from the original manuscript, inscribed by the hand of Oliver Cowdery. The original manuscript is largely free from strikeouts and changes. This fact is stunning to me, especially when I consider the multiple iterations I generate for each message I give.

The Book of Mormon is tangible, irrefutable evidence of Joseph Smith’s foreordained designation as the prophet of this dispensation.

Additionally, Joseph Smith received by revelation all but three of the 138 sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, often in the face of extreme adversity and persecution. These revelations were received in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, Massachusetts, and Illinois. The Doctrine and Covenants proclaims the doctrine; establishes the administrative structure of the Church; and explains

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the keys, authority, and power of the priesthood in more detail than any other book of scripture.

Shortly after the Church was formally recognized, Joseph was directed to begin working on what we refer to as the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. He regarded this translation, this revelation, as part of his calling as prophet, seer, and revelator. This work was an important part of the Prophet's charge to restore the "many plain and precious things taken away from the [Bible]." ³⁰

The Pearl of Great Price includes the books of Moses and Abraham. These books also came by revelation. Think of the sacred truths taught in these books written by these two prophets, who were also heads of dispensations.

Through Joseph Smith, the Lord brought forth scriptures that He knew were necessary for His disciples to understand. These latter-day scriptures teach of God's eternal plan of happiness and of His covenant path to eternal glory.

The Significance of Latter-day Prophets

In considering what I have learned during a century of living about prophets, I have chosen to focus on the Prophet Joseph Smith and some of the Presidents of the Church whom I have known personally. I have done so for two reasons: first, to bear my witness that Joseph Smith is the prophet of this last dispensation. A testimony of the Prophet Joseph's pivotal role in the Restoration is a foundational pillar in anyone's testimony of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, to testify that I have experienced for myself the privileges and blessings that come from heeding the words and counsel of latter-day prophets. Listening to prophets has literally changed the course of my life.

I have been blessed to serve in the Quorum of the Twelve under

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five Presidents of the Church. It has been my joy to watch each President seek, receive, and respond to direction from the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

Now, as I serve as President of the Church, I can speak from my own experience. I testify that our Savior always has instructed and inspired His prophets, and He always will. No one cares more about His Church than He does. Jesus Christ actively guides His prophets, seers, and revelators. Of this I bear personal witness.

NOTES

5. Job 38:7.
6. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (1976), 181.
7. Alma 5:14.

Chapter 12: Listen to Latter-day Prophets

1. See Spencer J. Condie, *Russell M. Nelson: Father, Surgeon, Apostle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 165.
2. Harold B. Lee, letter to Ezra Taft Benson, in Sheri L. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 224.
3. Dew, *Ezra Taft Benson*, viii.
4. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Look to the Future," *Ensign*, November 1997.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, "We Have a Work to Do," *Ensign*, May 1995.
6. Joseph Smith, "Church History," *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842, 707.
7. For an in-depth study of these visits, see "Seventy-six Accounts of Joseph Smith's Visionary Experiences," in John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Studies, 2017), 302–9.
8. See Doctrine and Covenants 76:20–21; 137:1–6.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 137:1, 3.
10. See School of the Prophets Salt Lake City meeting minutes, October 3, 1883, 59, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
11. Doctrine and Covenants 110:2–4.
12. See Joseph Smith "Journal, 1835–36," 24, josephsmithpapers.org.
13. Doctrine and Covenants 128:21.
14. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (2007), 419.
15. President George Q. Cannon was a counselor to Presidents Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow.
16. "Discourse by President George Q. Cannon," *Deseret Evening News*, February 10, 1883, 1.
17. See H. Donl Peterson, "Moroni—Joseph Smith's Tutor," *Ensign*, January 1992; Robert J. Woodford, "Book of Mormon Personalities Known by Joseph Smith," *Ensign*, August 1978.
18. Joseph Smith—History 1:34.

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19. Joseph Smith—History 1:42.
20. Joseph Smith—History 1:54.
21. Joseph Smith—History 1:33.
22. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:94.
23. See Doctrine and Covenants 110; 107:42–57; Joseph Smith discourse, January 5, 1841, in L. John Nuttall papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 17:374; George Q. Cannon, in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:47.
24. Doctrine and Covenants 38:32.
25. In addition to the sources listed in the previous notes, see, for example, Doctrine and Covenants 27:8–13; 128:20–21; John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 18:325–26; 21:65; 23:48–49.
26. See Doctrine and Covenants 27:12–13.
27. See Doctrine and Covenants 110.
28. John Taylor, in *Journal of Discourses*, 21:94.
29. Title Page of the Book of Mormon.
30. 1 Nephi 13:28.

Chapter 13: Immerse Yourself in the Word

1. See 2 Nephi 25:26.
2. Title Page of the Book of Mormon.
3. Isaiah 29:14.
4. In Isaiah's prophecy that the Lord's name one day should be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God," etc. (Isaiah 9:6), the word *wonderful* is similar in meaning to wonder in Isaiah 29:14. Both come from the Hebrew *pele*.
5. From April to June 1828, Joseph translated 116 pages that Martin Harris later lost. For a season, Joseph's ability to translate was suspended (see Doctrine and Covenants 10:1–2). The process of translation was resumed on Tuesday, April 7, 1829.
6. See Doctrine and Covenants 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 14; 15; 16; 17; 18.
7. See John W. Welch, "How long did it take Joseph Smith to translate the Book of Mormon?" *Ensign*, January 1988. It is estimated that the