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## Characters and Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Lesson 2—The Witnesses to The Book of Mormon

Author(s): Leland H. Monson

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## *Theology*—Characters and Teachings of The Book of Mormon

### Lesson 2—The Witnesses to The Book of Mormon

Elder Leland H. Monson

(Text: The Book of Mormon: “The Testimony of Three Witnesses”; “And Also The Testimony of Eight Witnesses.”)

For Tuesday, November 6, 1951

Objective: To establish the authenticity of The Book of Mormon according to the principle of witnesses.

AS the Prophet Joseph neared the completion of his translation of The Book of Mormon, he translated the following verses:

And behold, ye may be privileged that ye may show the plates unto those who shall assist to bring forth this work; and unto three shall they be shown by the power of God; wherefore they shall know of a surety that these things are true (Ether 5:2-3).

#### *The Three Witnesses*

Cognizant of this message, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris were anxious to become the three special witnesses to whom the plates should be shown by the power of God. Accordingly, they requested that Joseph inquire of the Lord to see if they might not be given that privilege. Subsequently, Joseph did inquire. He received the following revelation, directed to these three men:

Behold, I say unto you, that you must rely upon my word, which if you do with

full purpose of heart, you shall have a view of the plates, and also of the breast-plate, the sword of Laban, the Urim and Thummim, which were given to the brother of Jared upon the mount, when he talked with the Lord face to face, and the miraculous directors which were given to Lehi while in the wilderness, on the borders of the Red Sea.

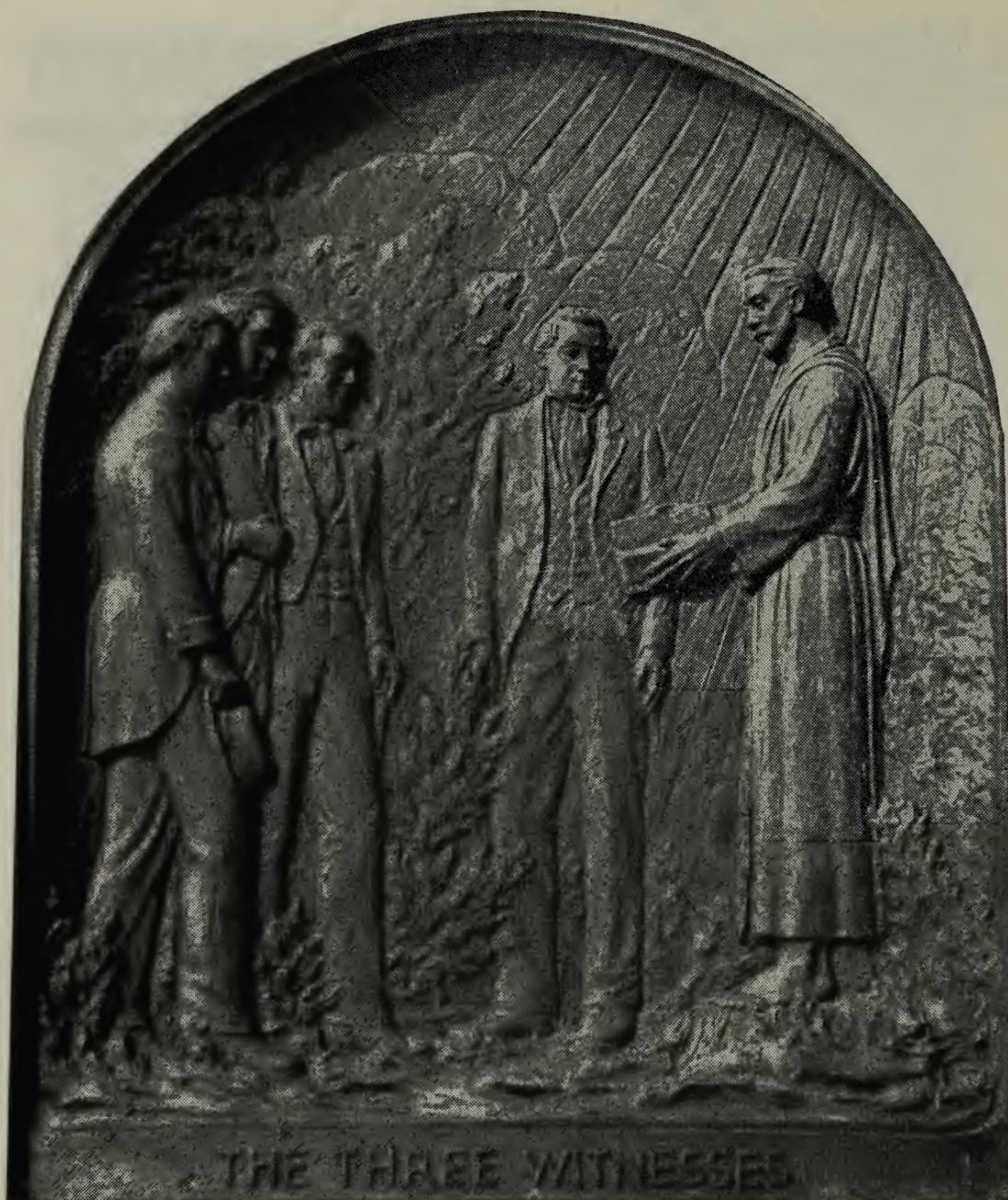
And it is by your faith that you shall obtain a view of them, even by that faith which was had by the prophets of old.

And after that you have obtained faith, and have seen them with your eyes, you shall testify of them, by the power of God (Doctrine and Covenants 17:1-3).

After thus designating the conditions under which these three men were to have a view of the plates, the Lord explained in the same revelation his reason for providing witnesses:

And this you shall do that my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., may not be destroyed, that I may bring about my righteous purposes unto the children of men in this work (Doctrine and Covenants 17:4).





Photograph by Otto Done

PLAQUE ON THE ANGEL MORONI MONUMENT  
THE HILL CUMORAH, NEW YORK

Torlief Knaphus, Sculptor

Soon after this revelation was received, Joseph, Oliver, David, and Martin retired to the woods near the Whitmer home in Fayette, New York, and asked the Lord in humble prayer to give them a view of the

plates. Joseph prayed first. He was followed by each one of the others. This first series of petitions did not bring the blessing they requested. Again they prayed in rotation, trying to exercise the necessary faith



to open the channels of communication between God and man. Still, they did not receive an answer.

Martin Harris, feeling that his presence was the cause for their lack of success, withdrew from the others and retired to another part of the wood.

Joseph, Oliver, and David then knelt in prayer. Joseph wrote of this glorious experience as follows:

Presently we beheld a light above us in the air, of exceeding brightness; and behold, an angel stood before us. In his hands he held the plates which we had been praying for these to have a view of. He turned over the leaves one by one, so that we could see them, and discern the engravings thereon distinctly. He then addressed himself to David Whitmer, and said, "David, blessed is the Lord, and he that keeps His commandments"; when, immediately afterwards, we heard a voice from out of the bright light above us, saying, "These plates have been revealed by the power of God, and they have been translated by the power of God. The translation of them which you have seen is correct, and I command you to bear record of what you now see and hear" (D.H.C. I, pp. 54, 55; see also "Interview with David Whitmer," *The Elder's Journal*, IV, pp. 383-387).

After this glorious manifestation, Joseph went in search of Martin Harris, whom he found at a considerable distance fervently engaged in prayer. Martin requested Joseph to join him in prayer, and they ultimately obtained their desires. Regarding this vision, Joseph wrote:

The same vision was opened to our view, at least it was again opened to me, and I once more beheld and heard the same things; whilst at the same moment, Martin Harris cried out, apparently in an ecstasy of joy, "'Tis enough; 'tis enough; mine eyes have beheld; mine eyes have beheld;" and jumping up, he shouted, "Hosanna"; blessing God, and otherwise rejoiced exceedingly (D.H.C. I, page 55).

By exercising faith in God, these witnesses had gained their request. Now they were under obligation by divine decree to testify to the world concerning that which they had seen and heard. Obedient to divine command, they prepared and signed the following testimony:

Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken. And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engravings which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man. And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon, and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true. And it is marvelous in our eyes. Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God.

In giving this testimony, these three men bear witness of an event which is definitely within the realm of probability. Angelic visitations

form an important part of the ecclesiastical history given in the Holy Bible. Sincere Christians, the world over, do not question the validity of such ministrations.

Though we recognize that as men they had their weaknesses, these witnesses, whether friendly to the Church, or disaffected, always remained true to their testimony as quoted above. Oliver and David were excommunicated from the Church after a trial before the high council in Far West, Missouri; Joseph, himself, testifying against Oliver in the trial. Martin Harris, alienated in feeling against the main body of the Church, remained behind when the saints came westward, rejoining them later in the declining years of his life.

Judge C. M. Nielsen relates an interesting narrative that came to him concerning an experience had by Oliver Cowdery during the period of time he was embittered towards the Church. The original author of this narrative gave the following account of Oliver as prosecuting attorney before a crowded court:

Finally Oliver Cowdery arose, calm as a summer morning. I was within three feet of him. There was no hesitation, no fear, no anger in his voice, as he said: "May it please the court, and gentlemen of the jury, my brother attorney on the other side has charged me with connection with Joseph Smith and the golden Bible. The responsibility has been placed upon me, and I cannot escape reply. Before God and man I dare not deny what I have said, and what my testimony contains as written and printed on the front page of The Book of Mormon. May it please your honor and gentlemen of the jury, this I say, I saw the angel and heard his voice—how can I deny it? It happened in the daytime when the sun

was shining bright in the firmament; not in the night when I was asleep. That glorious messenger from heaven, dressed in white, standing above the ground, in a glory I have never seen anything to compare with—the sun insignificant in comparison—and this personage told us if we denied that testimony there is no forgiveness in this life nor in the world to come. Now how can I deny it—I dare not; I will not" (*Liahona*, August 30, 1910, reprinted in NIBLEY, PRESTON: *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*, page 45).

Subsequently, Oliver Cowdery came back into the Church. He died reaffirming the truth of the divine authenticity of The Book of Mormon. David Whitmer wrote of the death of Oliver Cowdery as follows:

I was present at the deathbed of Oliver Cowdery, and his last words were, "Brother David, be true to your testimony of the Book of Mormon." He died here in Richmond, Missouri, on the third of March, 1850. Many witnesses yet live in Richmond, who will testify to the truth of these facts, as well as to the good character of Oliver Cowdery (ROBERTS, BRIGHAM H.: *New Witnesses for God*, II, page 257).

David Whitmer, throughout a long, honorable, and a busy life spent outside our Church, for he never came back into the organization after his excommunication, frequently bore his testimony concerning the divine origin of The Book of Mormon (*Ibid.*, p. 258-265).

David Whitmer's final testimony, given just before his death on January 12, 1888, was as follows:

I want to say to you all that the Bible and the record of the Nephites (Book of Mormon) are true, so you can say that you have heard me bear my testimony on my deathbed (*Ibid.*, page 256).



In July 1950, while in Richmond, Missouri, the writer of these lessons met Charles Whitmer, a man eighty-two years of age. He informed him that David Whitmer was his great uncle, and that as a boy fifteen years of age, he heard David Whitmer bear his testimony concerning his view of the golden plates.

Martin Harris was equally as steadfast in his testimony as were Oliver and David. He did not come westward until 1870, but the records show that he always bore a fervent testimony concerning the divine authenticity of The Book of Mormon. He died in Clarkston, Utah, in 1875, reaffirming his lifelong testimony.

His son, Martin Harris, Junior, said concerning his father's last words:

He has continued to talk about and testify to the truth of the Book of Mormon, and was in his happiest mood when he could get somebody to listen to his testimony; if he felt dull and weary at times, and some one would come in and open up a conversation and give him an opportunity of talking, he would immediately revive and feel like a young man, for a little while. We begin to think he has borne his last testimony. The last audible words he has spoken were something about the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, but we could not understand what it was (*Ibid.*, page 268).

When we consider the fact that the visions given to these three witnesses were in two different parts of the wood; the first vision to Joseph, Oliver, and David; and the second one to Joseph and Martin, and also remember that the visions were in the broad light of day, we certainly must conclude that these witnesses could not have been mistaken. They were not deluded.

If we eliminate the possibility of mistake, we have only two other alternatives left, either they were deliberate prevaricators planning to deceive mankind through collusion with Joseph Smith, or they bore a testimony of that which they actually saw and heard. The occurrences detailed in this lesson, and there are many more of equal validity, lead us to conclude that every circumstance helps to rule out the possibility of collusion. The steadfastness with which these witnesses adhered to their testimony even after they had become alienated against Joseph Smith and the Church, is strong evidence against any idea of collusion to perpetuate a monumental fraud upon mankind.

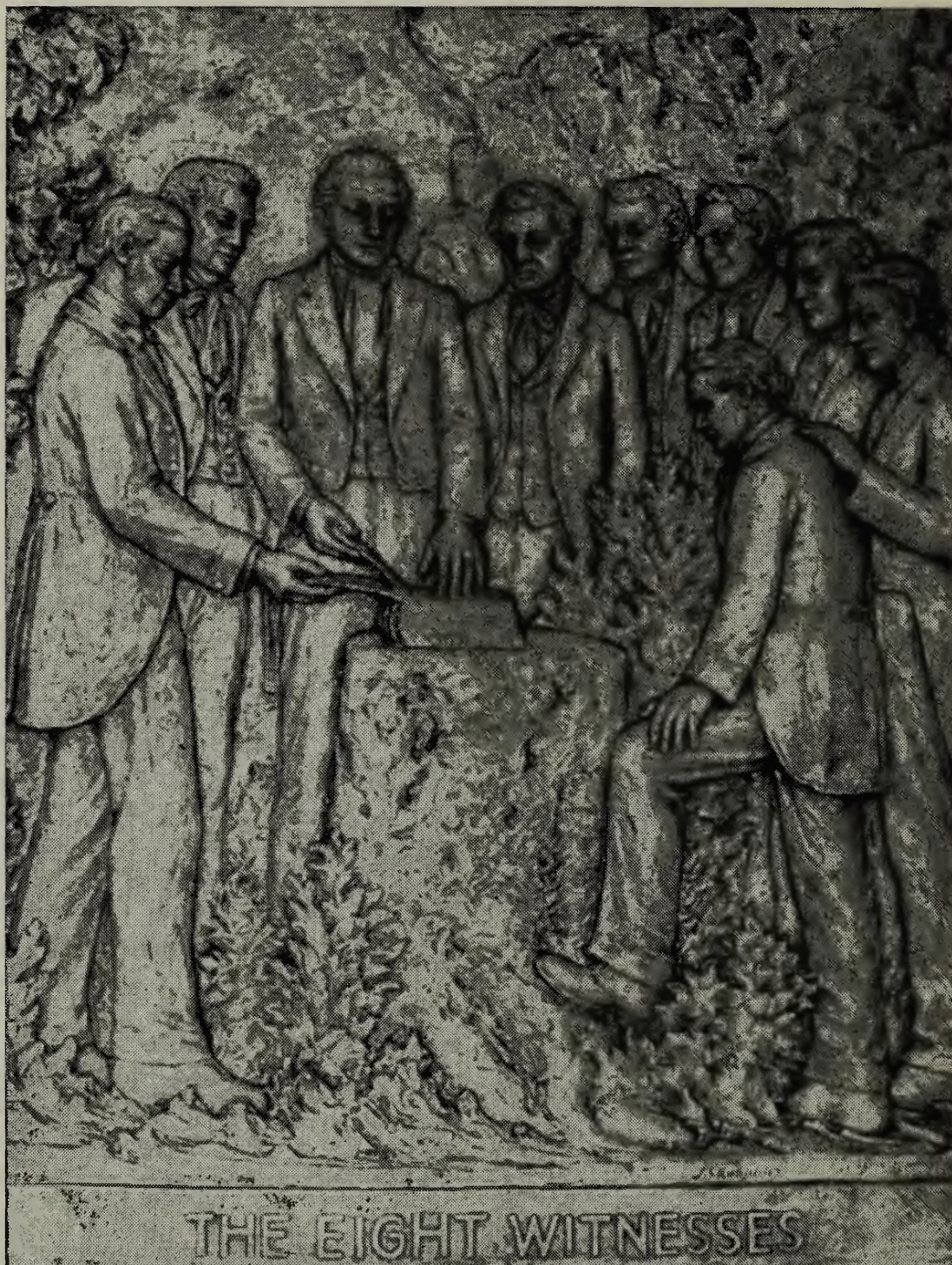
Moreover, the fact that two of these three witnesses, Oliver after eleven years, and Martin Harris after thirty-three years, came back into the Church is more convincing proof that there was no collusion. Hungry for that which they knew to be true, they came back into the Church, not as leaders, but as humble followers.

The testimony of the three witnesses is valid. It is sufficient to convince God-fearing men that The Book of Mormon was translated from golden plates and that the translation is correct.

### *The Eight Witnesses*

Convincing as the testimony of the three witnesses is, we are not asked to believe in the divinity of The Book of Mormon on the strength of their statements alone. We have the testimony of eight other men who were shown the plates by Joseph, himself. These





Photograph by Otto Done

PLAQUE ON THE ANGEL MORONI MONUMENT  
 THE HILL CUMORAH, NEW YORK  
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eight men, Christian Whitmer, Joseph Smith, Sen., Hyrum Smith,  
 Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, and Samuel H. Smith drew up and  
 Jun., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, signed the following testimony:



Be it known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That Joseph Smith, Jun., the translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship. And this we bear record with words of soberness, that the said Smith has shown unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen. And we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

Christian Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Joseph Smith, Sen., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel H. Smith were faithful and true to the Church and died in full fellowship. Never did any one of the five ever deny his testimony.

John Whitmer was excommunicated from the Church by the high council in Far West, Missouri.

Although he never joined the Church again, after his excommunication in 1838, he was always true to his testimony in regard to the Book of Mormon. Even in his darkest days, and at the time he first turned his back upon the Church and the Prophet Joseph, he declared in the presence of a number of Missourians—enemies to the work of God—that he knew the Book of Mormon was true. His nephew, John C. Whitmer, of Richmond, Missouri, who was with him a few days before his death, testifies that he bore testimony to the truth of the Book of Mormon until the last, which is corroborated by many others who visited him on various occasions previous to that time. NIBLEY, PRESTON: *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*, page 154).

Hiram Page and Jacob Whitmer severed their connections with the

Church, but they were faithful to their testimony. Elder Andrew Jenson testified that in September, 1888, John C. Whitmer, son of Jacob Whitmer, bore the following testimony to him:

My father was always faithful and true to his testimony in regard to the Book of Mormon, and confirmed it on his deathbed (*Ibid.*, page 148).

Philander Page testified to Elder Andrew Jenson in the same month and year as follows:

I knew my father to be true and faithful to his testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon until the very last (*Ibid.*, page 157).

In or out of the Church, these men always testified that Joseph Smith had shown them the plates from which The Book of Mormon was translated. Not one of the eight ever denied his testimony.

It would seem that no divine manifestation has ever been more carefully and fully witnessed and attested than the incidents connected with the establishment of the divine authenticity of The Book of Mormon. It is a book of divine origin, a new witness of the divine mission of Jesus Christ.

### Suggested Readings

NIBLEY, PRESTON: *The Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*, Stevens and Wallace, 1946.

ROBERTS, BRIGHAM H.: *New Witnesses for God*, II, pp. 237-346, Deseret News Press, 1920.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Why did the Lord provide witnesses to the fact that Joseph had plates and had translated them correctly?



2. What evidence do we have that there was no collusion between Joseph Smith and the witnesses?

3. What is the difference between the testimony of the three witnesses and that of the eight witnesses?

Note: The article "Book of Mormon Witnesses and Their Testimony Meet Legal Standards," by Elder David J. Wilson, page 512, in this issue of the *Magazine*, is presented as supplementary reading in connection with this lesson.

## *Visiting Teacher Messages*

### Book of Mormon Gems of Truth

Lesson 2—"Remember That My Spirit Will Not Always Strive With Man" (Ether 2:15).

Leone O. Jacobs

For Tuesday, November 6, 1951

Objective: To point out that only by living the Lord's commandments can we be sure of the presence of his spirit.

**"REMEMBER** that my Spirit will not always strive with man." This is the Lord's admonition to the brother of Jared, and it is also a warning to us in our day. How awful it would be if we were shut out from the presence of our Heavenly Father's spirit. No darkness is so dense as the darkness in which one gropes without his spirit. It is a darkness more confusing and hazardous, by far, than physical darkness, for spiritual darkness clouds the mind, the heart, and the soul—it obscures the light of truth.

What does it mean to have his spirit striving with us? Of what value is it to us? It means that his spirit encourages us in righteousness, that it urges us to do good. His spirit illumines our pathway, helps us to distinguish between the real and the counterfeit, the important and the unimportant, truth and error. His spirit helps us to

resist evil, gives us strength to overcome. What greater treasure could one ask for?

But, under certain conditions, we are warned, his spirit will cease to strive with us. What are those conditions? When are we in danger of losing this protection and assistance? We are in danger when we harden our hearts and turn deaf ears to the spirit's promptings. We are in danger when we persist in doing evil. When we defile our bodies we are in danger, for the spirit of God will not dwell in an unclean temple. Failure to render obedience to God's commandments places us in jeopardy; and neglect and indifference are the characteristics of spiritual weakness.

How, then, may we be assured that the Lord's spirit will always strive with us? Continued adherence to the commandments of our Father in heaven is the safeguard. Sincere intent to do good must be