



TESTING THE TRUTH

BY BART J. KOWALLIS

Whether in science or religion, truth will stand up to the test.

In the hills and narrow canyons around the place where I grew up, I discovered something magnificent—rocks.

My mother and father bought me books and kits on mineral and rock identification, took me to rock shops and to gem and mineral shows, and made stops of geologic interest a regular part of our family vacations. At age 14, I went to receive my patriarchal blessing, and the patriarch asked me, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” My answer was “I am going to be a geologist.”

And here I am today, having taught geology at Brigham Young University for over 25 years—still teaching, practicing, and believing in the principles I have learned in my study of geology, but also having a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ and a knowledge of its power and truthfulness.

Some would ask, “Aren’t most scientists atheists or at least agnostic?” In fact, most scientists believe in God and find no significant contradictions between their belief in God and their belief in science.

I accept both the things I have been taught and learned as a scientist and the things learned from the scriptures and prophets because both of them work. Let me share with you two examples of what I mean.

My First Test

One day during a deacons quorum meeting our adviser decided that we would have a testimony meeting. It wasn’t that I hadn’t shared my testimony before. In fact, I was one of those kids who thought that bearing testimony was what one was supposed to do at every testimony meeting. But it wasn’t the cool thing to do at age 12.

I suppose that we had about 8 or 10 deacons in our quorum, and slowly (although not slow enough, it seemed to me) one boy after another stood to share his testimony. I was almost panicky because I just didn’t know what I would say. I hoped that maybe the time would run out, and I wouldn’t feel obligated to stand, but it did not. A small group of 10 deacons sharing their testimonies doesn’t take long, so plenty of time still remained when all of the other boys had finished standing and sharing their testimonies. I stood awkwardly and recited the same basic things most of the others had said: “I love my mom and dad. I know the Church is true. I know Joseph Smith was a prophet. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.”

The thing was done, but for the first time in my life I realized that it was a lie. The only thing I had said that I knew to be true was that I loved my mom and dad. I really did not know if the Church was true or if Joseph Smith was a prophet, but I knew then that I had to find out. I had to know for myself.

I don’t remember exactly when I finally asked, but I do remember that one night I knelt by my bed and pleaded with my Father in Heaven to forgive me for my weaknesses and to let me know if this church I belonged to was truly His Church. I had never prayed with such intent before, and I am not sure I have ever prayed with more fervor since. I was only about 12 or 13 years old, and yet I can still feel to this day the power of the spiritual witness that came to me that night confirming that this was indeed the Church of Jesus Christ and that my Father in Heaven knew me and loved me. The test had worked, just as the scriptures promised.

A Field Test

In my graduate program, my major professor spent summers working in Antarctica, in Alaska, or in the islands of the Arctic. I signed on to work with him in Svalbard, a group of islands about 500 miles north of Norway. It was a spectacular and wonderful place. Four of us were deposited on the shore of an island called Spitsbergen.

During the first month we worked in teams of two as we examined the rocks and collected samples. The Norwegians who transported us to the island warned us to be on the lookout for polar bears (and for seals, the polar bears' main food). They explained that almost every year someone in Spitsbergen was killed and eaten by a bear.

Needless to say, we were always looking out to see if a bear was approaching. We were particularly cautious when seals came into the bay. We carried rifles and revolvers wherever we went and slept with them at our sides. There was no place to run or hide if a bear decided that we would be its next meal.

Polar bear attacks were common, so we were alert and prepared with our guns. But when I was alone one night, I was sure I heard something, so I prayed for protection.

About midway through the field season, three of us students were left to work for a month on our own. The problem was that we needed to work in different areas about 25 kilometers apart. The decision was made that the other two would pack out together to work for two weeks in the more distant area and leave me by myself.

I was doing pretty well and feeling that being alone wasn't all that bad when one evening the fog rolled in off the ocean. As I lay in bed, the sounds of the ocean, which were usually so pleasant and comforting, were now muffled by the fog and seemed different. My mind began to interpret them differently. I was sure I heard something moving along the beach. Fear slowly crept into my heart and soul. I was sure the sounds were the padding of a polar bear coming along the beach.

I sat up in a state of panic, with the rifle in one hand and the pistol in the other, waiting for the inevitable to happen. It was then that I remembered I was not alone. I bowed my head and prayed fervently to my Father in Heaven to calm me and protect me. And He did. His Spirit engulfed me, the fear was gone, and I lay down and fell into a peaceful slumber. Once again the test had worked. I opened the door, and He entered.

Further Testing Required

I have found that prayer works, that God never fails in His promise to us, that He will be there waiting, knocking, hoping that we will open the door. It is a test that each of us can make. The results gained by experimenting on the Lord's word will have consequences that reach far beyond this world into the eternities.

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