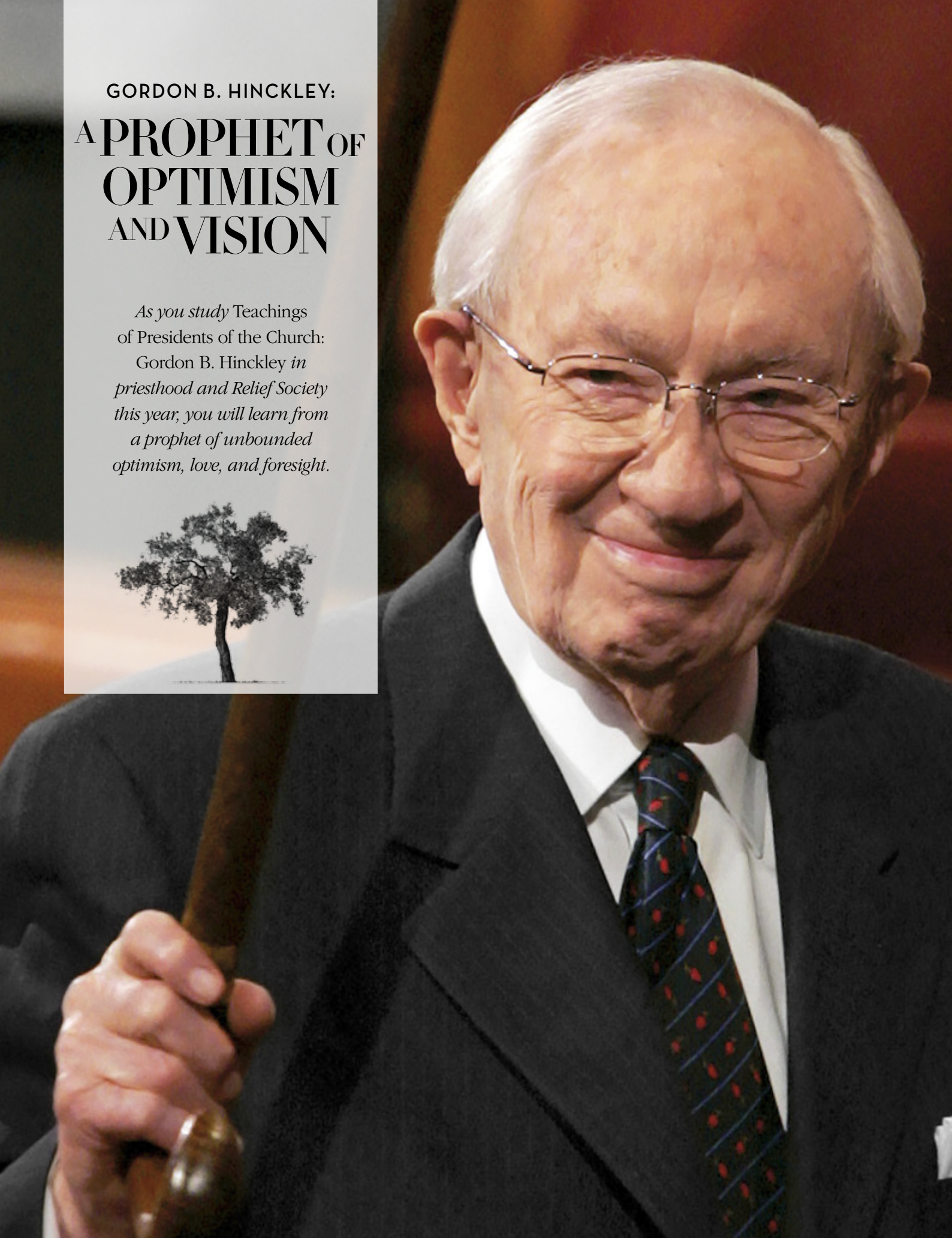


GORDON B. HINCKLEY:

A PROPHET OF OPTIMISM AND VISION

*As you study Teachings
of Presidents of the Church:
Gordon B. Hinckley in
priesthood and Relief Society
this year, you will learn from
a prophet of unbounded
optimism, love, and foresight.*



Gordon B. Hinckley was born on June 23, 1910, to Bryant Stringham Hinckley and Ada Bitner Hinckley. He married Marjorie Pay in the Salt Lake Temple on April 29, 1937, and they became the parents of five children. He served as the 15th President of the Church from March 12, 1995, to January 27, 2008.

By Andrew D. Olsen

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“I have to plant some trees each spring,” President Gordon B. Hinckley recorded in his journal at age 82. “I think I have done so for at least the last 50 years. . . . There is something wonderful about a tree. It starts ever so small and grows through the seasons. It affords shade from the hot summer sun. It bears delicious fruit. It carries on the remarkable process of photosynthesis. . . . A tree is one of the remarkable creations of the Almighty.”¹

President Hinckley continued planting trees into his 90s. In many ways, his love for planting was reflected in his ministry as an Apostle and as President of the Church. When he planted, it was an expression of optimism, a characteristic that also infused his teachings and his interactions with others. He nurtured each tree, just as he did each person. And he looked far into the future,

seeing what the trees would become—just as he saw the eternal potential of each person and the grand future of God’s work.

“We Have Every Reason to Be Optimistic”

“I am an optimist!” President Hinckley often declared. “My plea is that we stop seeking out the storms and enjoy more fully the

sunlight.”² His optimism went much deeper than having a positive outlook, although he cultivated that. The ultimate source of his optimism—the source that made it a power—was his faith in God and his testimony of God’s plan for the happiness and salvation of His children.

One manifestation of President Hinckley’s optimism was his firm belief that “things will

work out.”³ That phrase, said Elder Jeffrey R. Holland of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “may well be President Hinckley’s most repeated assurance to family, friends, and associates. ‘Keep trying,’ he will say. ‘Be believing. Be happy. Don’t get discouraged. Things will work out.’”⁴

This message wasn’t only for others, however. “I say that to myself every morning,” President Hinckley told a congregation. “If you do your best, it will all work out. Put your trust



in God, and move forward with faith and confidence in the future. The Lord will not forsake us.”⁵

President Hinckley’s optimism sustained him through trials, feelings of inadequacy, and overwhelming pressures. And he stood by his conviction that “things will work out” even when he experienced setbacks and disappointments, heartache and loneliness.

In his optimism, President Hinckley did not minimize problems. He explained: “I have seen a good deal of this earth. . . . I have been in areas where war rages and hate smolders in the hearts of people. I have seen the appalling poverty that hovers over many lands. . . . I have watched with alarm the crumbling morals of our society.

“And yet I am an optimist. I have a simple and solemn faith that right will triumph and that truth will prevail.”⁶

During an interview with a *New York Times* reporter in Nauvoo, Illinois, USA, President Hinckley acknowledged the prevalence of tragedies and problems, and then he drew on his love of Church history to teach about optimism:

“We have every reason to be optimistic. . . . Look at Nauvoo. Look at what they built here in seven years and then left. But what did they do? Did they lie down and die? No! They went to work! They moved halfway across this continent and turned the soil of a desert and made it blossom as the rose. On that foundation this church has grown into a great worldwide organization affecting for good the lives of people in more than 140 nations. You can’t, you don’t, build out of pessimism or cynicism. You look with optimism, work with faith, and things happen.”⁷

President Hinckley’s optimism also influenced his sense of humor—an upbeat, congenial wit that built affinity with others. One time he stayed with a stake president whose family lived in an old schoolhouse that they had converted

into a home. That night, a classroom served as President Hinckley’s bedroom. During stake conference the next day, he quipped, “I [have] slept on a great many occasions in classrooms before—but never in a bed.”⁸



“Our Concern Must Always Be with the Individual”

In his first general conference address as President of the Church, Gordon B. Hinckley spoke extensively about the Church’s growth. “We are becoming a great global society,” he said. He then shifted to emphasize this essential principle: “Our interest and concern must always be with the individual. . . .

“ . . . We speak in terms of numbers, but all of our efforts must be dedicated to the development of the individual.”⁹

While a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, President Hinckley traveled to some of the most remote areas of the world, including war zones, to minister to individuals.

No group was too far away or too small for his attention. He continued this same way as President of the Church, traveling more than a million miles to more than 60 nations, sometimes meeting with large groups, sometimes with just a handful.

In 1996, President and Sister Hinckley made an 18-day journey to eight nations in Asia and the Pacific. Beginning in Japan and moving at a vigorous pace, they met with thousands of people who packed every venue. “These are emotional experiences for me,” President Hinckley recorded while in Korea. “I see things that I scarcely dared dream of when I came here first in 1960.”¹⁰ On this trip he also dedicated the Hong Kong China Temple.

The final scheduled stops were in the Philippines. After speaking to 35,000 people in Manila, President Hinckley recorded, “I stood and waved to them with great emotion

in my heart. We left with tears in our eyes.” Earlier that day he had returned to the place where, in 1961, he had offered a dedicatory prayer to begin missionary work in the Philippines. “We were able to find only one native Filipino member,” he recalled. “From that one member the Church has grown to more than 300,000 members.”¹¹

When the Hinckleys began the trip home, they learned that the plane would refuel on the island of Saipan. President Hinckley asked if there were any missionaries on Saipan and was told that there was a small number. Although he was at the end of an exhausting trip, he wanted to meet with those few missionaries: “I asked if we might somehow get word to them that we would land in Saipan about 7:00 p.m. and would try to come out at the airport to greet them.”

Hours later in Saipan, 10 missionaries and about 60 Church members were there to greet the Hinckleys. “They threw their arms around us,” President Hinckley recorded. “They were so grateful to see us, and we were grateful to see them. We could spend only a very short time with them since only a brief time was needed to refuel the plane. We left our blessing with them and went back to the plane.”¹²

Another typical example of President Hinckley’s caring for an individual occurred during the 2002 Winter Olympics, which were held in Salt Lake City, Utah. Nearly every day he met with presidents, ambassadors, and other dignitaries. One day, shortly before meeting with the president of Germany, he met with a 13-year-old young woman on her birthday. “[She] suffers from aplastic anemia, a very serious illness,” he recorded. “We had a delightful visit. . . . I told her that we would remember her in our prayers.”¹³

President Hinckley had a special love for the children and youth of the Church, and they felt the same for him. After hearing him speak in Brazil, one young woman expressed: “I felt the Spirit of God intensely. When President Hinckley was ending his talk, he said to us, ‘You can leave here, go home, and forget everything that I said here today, but never forget that I love you.’ I will never forget those words.”¹⁴

President Hinckley’s wife, Marjorie, was both a partner

and influencer in his concern for individuals. He recorded: “Everyone she knows seems to love her because she has a genuine interest in people. She is concerned with their problems and their needs. How fortunate I am to have such a companion.”¹⁵



Clockwise from top: President Hinckley meeting with members; with his wife, Marjorie, in Hong Kong, China; contemplating at general conference.

After their five children were grown, the Hinckleys usually traveled together, and Sister Hinckley reached out with love around the world. When she met missionaries, she would often give their parents a surprise phone call when she returned home. She was also gifted at connecting with large audiences. “[Marge] knows how to say the things that please and help the people,” President Hinckley recorded after a regional conference. “The rest of us preach while she simply talks with them.”¹⁶

At the funeral for President Hinckley, one of his counselors, President Henry B. Eyring, summarized some of his accomplishments. He then observed that all of these accomplishments had one thing in common:

“Always they were to bless individuals with opportunity. And always he thought of those with the least opportunity,

the ordinary person struggling to cope with the difficulties of everyday life and the challenge of living the gospel of Jesus Christ. More than once he tapped his finger on my chest when I made a suggestion and said, ‘Hal, have you remembered the person who is struggling?’”¹⁷



Clockwise from top: President Hinckley at the Boston Massachusetts Temple; interacting with the news media; with members in Ghana.

Vision for the Future

Connected with President Hinckley’s optimism and his focus on individuals was his prophetic vision for the future. Most profoundly, that vision concerned temples. The ordinances of the temple, President Hinckley emphasized, are “the crowning blessings the Church has to offer.”¹⁸

When he became President of the Church in 1995, there were 47 operating temples worldwide. Under his leadership, the Church more than doubled this number in a little over five years. His vision regarding temples was bold and expansive, but the entire purpose was to bless individuals one by one.

The inspiration for this new era of temple building came in 1997 when President Hinckley went to Colonia Juárez, Mexico, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of

a Church-owned school. Afterward, during a long, dusty drive, he was contemplative. “It got quiet,” recalled his secretary, Don H. Staheli. “And then, as I understand it, the revelation started coming. He had thought about smaller temples in the past, but not in the way that he thought about them this time.”¹⁹

President Hinckley later described the process: “I began to ask myself what could be done to make it possible for these people to have a temple. . . . As I meditated on this, the thought came into my mind that . . . we can build all of the essential elements of a temple into a relatively small building. . . . I sketched out a plan. . . . The whole picture came into my mind very clearly. I believe with all my heart that it was inspiration, that it was revelation from the Lord. I came home and talked with my counselors about it, and they approved of it. I then presented it to the Twelve, and they approved of it.”²⁰

Four months later in general conference, President Hinckley made the historic announcement that the Church would begin to build smaller temples in areas where there were not enough members to justify larger ones. “We are determined . . . to take the temples to the people and afford them every opportunity for the very precious blessings that come of temple worship,” he said.²¹

In the next general conference, President Hinckley made another historic announcement, saying that plans were going forward to have 100 temples in operation by the end of the year 2000. “We are moving on a scale the like of which we have never seen before,” he stated.²² When he reported on the progress of temple building in April 1999, he used a familiar phrase: “This is a tremendous undertaking, with many problems, but no matter the difficulty, things work out and I am confident we will reach our goal.”²³

In October 2000, President Hinckley traveled to Boston, Massachusetts, USA, to dedicate the Church’s 100th temple—one of 21 he dedicated that year on four continents. By the end of his life, 124 temples were completed and another 13 were announced or under construction.

President Hinckley’s vision for the future prompted him to seek inspiration about other ways to bless God’s

children. He was anguished by the suffering and poverty he saw, so he directed a substantial expansion of the Church's humanitarian work, primarily among those who are not members of the Church. He also instituted the Perpetual Education Fund to help Church members in poverty-stricken countries. From this fund, they could receive loans to pay for the education they needed to obtain better employment, which would help them break the chains of poverty and become self-reliant. As of 2016, more than 80,000 individuals had received the opportunity for education or training made possible by loans from this fund.

Many other examples of President Hinckley's prophetic vision, such as "The Family: A Proclamation to the World" and the building of the Conference Center, are included in *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Gordon B. Hinckley*.



That is my nature."²⁴ No matter his age, whether a young missionary or a 97-year-old prophet, it was likewise his nature to plant gospel seeds and saplings in the hearts of people around the world. He served for 20 years as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He then served for 14 years as a counselor in the First Presidency. When he became President of the Church at age 84, he led it through nearly 13 years of dynamic growth.

At the core of President Hinckley's lifetime of service was his testimony of Jesus Christ and of His gospel restored through the Prophet Joseph Smith. In a general conference address titled "My Testimony," he expressed the following witness, speaking parts of it through tears:

"Of all the things for which I feel grateful this morning, one stands out preeminently. That is a living testimony of Jesus Christ. . . .

"He is my Savior and my Redeemer. Through giving His life in pain and unspeakable suffering, He has reached down to lift me and each of us and all the sons and daughters of God from the abyss of eternal darkness following death. . . .

"He is my God and my King. From everlasting to everlasting, He will reign and rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. To His dominion there will be no end. To His glory there will be no night. . . .

"Gratefully, and with love undiminished, I bear witness of these things in His Holy name."²⁵ ■

"My Testimony"

A few days before his 91st birthday, President Hinckley recorded: "I do not need to plant anymore, but I will.

NOTES

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