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The Heart of a Prophet

We can rejoice that the Lord's prophet is in place and that the Lord's work is being done in the way that He has divinely prescribed.

I have fervently prayed that the Holy Ghost will be with each of us today on this heavenly occasion. What we have collectively witnessed has been most impressive as the 17th prophet of this dispensation has been sustained in solemn assembly.

As I sought guidance to know the topic the Lord would have me address today, my mind was directed to a recent conversation with the newly called First Presidency. In this discussion, one of the counselors shared

words to this effect: "I deeply hope that the membership of the Church can comprehend the magnitude of what has taken place with the calling of our new prophet, President Russell M. Nelson, and the significance and sacredness of the solemn assembly that will take place at general conference." He further observed, "It has been 10 years, and many, especially the youth of the Church, do not remember or have not experienced this before."



This caused me to reflect on experiences I have had. The first prophet I remember is President David O. McKay. I was 14 years old when he passed away. I remember a sense of loss that accompanied his passing, the tears in my mother's eyes, and the sorrow felt by our whole family. I remember how the words "Please bless President David O. McKay" fell out of my lips so naturally in my prayers that if I wasn't mindful, even following his passing, I would find myself using those same words. I wondered if my heart and mind would transition to the same feeling and conviction for the prophets succeeding him. But almost like parents who love each of their children, I found a love for, connection with, and testimony of President Joseph Fielding Smith, who followed President McKay, and for each prophet thereafter: Harold B. Lee, Spencer W. Kimball, Ezra Taft Benson, Howard W. Hunter, Gordon B. Hinckley, Thomas S. Monson, and today President Russell M. Nelson. I fully sustained each prophet with uplifted hand—and uplifted heart.

As each of our beloved prophets has passed on, it is only natural to feel a sense of sorrow and loss. But our sadness is tempered by the joy and hope that come as we experience one of the great blessings of the Restoration: the calling and sustaining of a living prophet on the earth.

To that end, I will speak to this divine process as observed over the past 90 days. I will describe it in four segments: first, the passing of our prophet and the dissolution of the First Presidency; second, the period of time awaiting the reorganization of the new First Presidency; third, the calling of the new prophet; and fourth, the sustaining of the new prophet and First Presidency in solemn assembly.



The Passing of a Prophet

On January 2, 2018, our dear prophet Thomas S. Monson passed to the other side of the veil. He will forever have a place in our hearts. President Henry B. Eyring offered sentiments at President Monson’s passing which succinctly describe our feelings: “The hallmark of his life, like the Savior’s, will be his individual concern in reaching out to the poor, the sick—even all individuals—worldwide.”¹

President Spencer W. Kimball explained:

“As one star sinks behind the horizon, another comes into the picture, and death spawns life.

“The work of the Lord is endless. Even when a powerful leader dies, not for a single instant is the Church without leadership, thanks to the kind Providence who gave his kingdom continuity and perpetuity. As it already has happened . . . before in this dispensation, a people reverently close a grave, dry their tears, and turn their faces to the future.”²

The Apostolic Interregnum

The period of time between the death of a prophet and the reorganization of the First Presidency is referred to as an “apostolic interregnum.” During this period, the Quorum of the

Twelve, under the leadership of the quorum president, jointly holds the keys to administer the leadership of the Church. President Joseph F. Smith taught, “There is always a head in the Church, and if the Presidency of the Church are removed by death or other cause, then the next head of the Church is the Twelve Apostles, until a presidency is again organized.”³

The most recent interregnum period began when President Monson passed away on January 2 and ended 12 days later on Sunday, January 14. On that Sabbath morning, the Quorum of the Twelve met in the upper room of the Salt Lake Temple in a spirit of fasting and prayer, under the presiding direction of President Russell M. Nelson, the senior Apostle and President of the Quorum of the Twelve.

Calling of a New Prophet

In this sacred and memorable meeting, following a well-established precedent in unity and unanimity, the Brethren were seated by seniority in a semicircle of 13 chairs and raised their hands first to sustain the organization of a First Presidency and then to sustain President Russell Marion Nelson as President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This sustaining was followed by the Quorum of the Twelve

gathering in a circle and placing hands upon the head of President Nelson to ordain and set him apart, with the next most-senior Apostle acting as voice.

President Nelson then named his counselors, President Dallin Harris Oaks, President Henry Bennion Eyring, with President Oaks as the President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and President Melvin Russell Ballard as the Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Following similar sustaining votes, each of these Brethren was set apart to his respective office by President Nelson. This was a deeply sacred experience, with an outpouring of the Spirit. I offer to you my absolute witness that the will of the Lord, for which we fervently prayed, was powerfully manifest in the activities and events of that day.

With the ordination of President Nelson and the reorganization of the First Presidency, the apostolic interregnum ended, and the newly constituted First Presidency began to operate without, remarkably, even one second of interruption in governing the Lord’s kingdom on the earth.

Solemn Assembly

This morning, this divine process is culminated in accordance with scriptural mandate outlined in the Doctrine

and Covenants: “For all things must be done in order, and by common consent in the church, by the prayer of faith,”⁴ and “three Presiding High Priests, . . . upheld by the confidence, faith, and prayer of the church, form a quorum of the Presidency of the Church.”⁵

Elder David B. Haight described a previous occurrence of what we participated in today:

“We are witnesses to and participants in a most sacred occasion—a solemn assembly to act upon heavenly things. As in olden times, there has been much fasting and prayer offered by the Saints throughout the world that they may receive an outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord, which is so much in evidence . . . on this occasion this morning.

“A solemn assembly, as the name implies, denotes a sacred, sober, and reverent occasion when the Saints assemble under the direction of the First Presidency.”⁶

Brothers and sisters, we can rejoice—even shout, “Hosanna!”—that the Lord’s mouthpiece, a prophet of God, is in place and that the Lord is pleased that His work is being done in the way that He has divinely prescribed.

President Russell M. Nelson

This divinely ordained process leads to another divinely called prophet. Just as President Monson was one of the grandest inhabitants to grace this earth, so is President Nelson. He has been profoundly prepared and specifically tutored by the Lord to lead us at this time. It is a great blessing to now have dear President Russell M. Nelson as our loving and devoted prophet—the 17th President of the Church in this final dispensation.

President Nelson is truly a remarkable man. I had the privilege of serving in the Quorum of the Twelve with him as my quorum president for just over two years. I have traveled with him and marvel at his energy, as one must move quickly to keep up with his pace! In total he has visited 133 countries in his lifetime.

His outreach is to all, young and old. He seems to know everyone and is particularly gifted at remembering names. All who know him feel that they are his favorite. And so it is with each of us—because of his genuine love and concern for everyone.

My primary association with President Nelson has been in ecclesiastical roles, yet I have also become familiar with the professional life that President Nelson led before he was called as a General Authority. As many of you know, President Nelson was a world-renowned heart surgeon and, early in

his medical career, a pioneer developer of the heart-lung machine. He was on the research team that supported the first open-heart operation on a human being, in 1951, using a heart-lung bypass. President Nelson performed a heart operation on President Spencer W. Kimball not long before President Kimball became the prophet.

Interestingly, as President Nelson’s call to the Twelve 34 years ago ended a *professional medical career* of strengthening and repairing hearts, it began a *ministry as an Apostle* devoted to strengthening and repairing hearts of countless tens of thousands around the world, each having been lifted and healed by his words and acts of wisdom, service, and love.

A Christlike Heart

When I envision a Christlike heart in daily practice, I see President Nelson. I have not met anyone who exemplifies



this trait at a higher level than he does. It has been a remarkable tutelage for me to be in the position to observe firsthand the manifestations of the Christlike heart of President Nelson.

Within weeks of my call to the Twelve in October 2015, I had the opportunity to get an up-close glimpse of the past professional life of President Nelson. I was invited to attend an event where he was honored as a pioneer of heart surgery. When I entered the venue, I was astonished to see the large number of professionals there to honor and recognize the work that President Nelson had done many years before as a medical doctor and surgeon.

That evening numerous professionals stood and expressed their respect and admiration for President Nelson's outstanding contribution to his medical specialty. As impressive as each of the presenters was in describing President Nelson's various accomplishments, I was even more spellbound by a conversation I struck up with a man seated next to me. He did not know who I was, but he knew President Nelson as Dr. Nelson, director of the thoracic surgery residency program at a medical school in 1955.

This man was President Nelson's former student. He shared many memories. Most interesting was his description of President Nelson's teaching style, which, he said, brought with it a large measure of notoriety. He explained that much of the teaching of heart surgery residents was conducted in the operating room. There, residents observed and performed surgery under faculty supervision, as a laboratory classroom. He shared that the operating room environment under certain faculty surgeons was chaotic, competitive, pressure filled, and even ego driven. This man described it as a



difficult environment, sometimes even demeaning. As a result, resident surgeons even felt their careers were often on the line.

He then explained the unique environment found in President Nelson's operating room. It was peaceful, calm, and dignified. Residents were treated with deep respect. However, following the demonstration of a procedure, Dr. Nelson expected the highest standard of performance from each of the residents. This man further described how the best patient outcomes and the best surgeons came out of Dr. Nelson's operating room.

This is no surprise to me at all. This is what I have observed firsthand and been truly blessed by in the Quorum of the Twelve. I feel like I have been, in a sense, one of his "residents in training."

President Nelson has an exceptional way of teaching others and offering correction in a positive, respectful, and uplifting manner. He is the embodiment of a Christlike heart and an example to us all. From him we learn that in any circumstance we find ourselves, our conduct and hearts can be in accordance with the

principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We now have the great blessing to sustain our prophet, President Russell M. Nelson. Throughout his life, he has magnified his numerous roles as student, father, professor, husband, doctor, priesthood leader, grandfather, and Apostle. He fulfilled these roles then—and continues to do so—with the heart of a prophet.

Brothers and sisters, what we have witnessed and participated in today, a solemn assembly, leads to my witness that President Russell M. Nelson is the Lord's living mouthpiece for all humankind. I also add my testimony of God the Father, of Jesus Christ, and of His role as our Savior and Redeemer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. Henry B. Eyring, in Marianne Holman Prescott, "Apostles Share Thoughts about President Thomas S. Monson on Social Media," Church News section of LDS.org, Jan. 12, 2018, news.lds.org.
2. Spencer W. Kimball, in Conference Report, Apr. 1970, 118.
3. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (1998), 223.
4. Doctrine and Covenants 28:13.
5. Doctrine and Covenants 107:22.
6. David B. Haight, "Solemn Assemblies," *Ensign*, Nov. 1994, 14.