

DISCOURSE

BY

ELDER ORSON PRATT,

DELIVERED IN THE

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REPORTED BY DAVID W. EVANS.

It is written somewhere in this book—the Bible—that “in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established.” These words were recorded in the law of Moses, and referred to by our Savior, but in what part of the evangelists they are recorded I do not remember. They occurred to my mind just as I rose to my feet. It seems to have been the method in which God has dealt with the children of men ever since they have had an existence on the earth to reveal certain principles, and to confirm them by as many witnesses as seemed proper to him.

Our Father, the Creator of this earth, has power, if he saw proper to do so, to give a vast amount of evidence to the children of men, concerning the divinity of a message which he might at any time offer to them. It would be a very easy matter, if he saw proper to do so, to inscribe, in the very heavens, in letters of light, testimony and evidence which would be so conspicuous, and powerful, and plain, and easy to be understood, that all the nations, languages, kindreds and tongues upon our globe would know the truth at once, and have no misgivings about the matter. But the Lord has not seen proper thus to deal with the human family. He seems to require, in the first place, faith on good, sound, substantial evidence, instead of imparting knowledge at once.

There is a great difference between faith and knowledge. I am told that there is such a country as China on the eastern borders of Asia. But I never have been there. I never have seen that country. I can not say, most positively, that such a country exists, only on the testimony of others I am informed that such is the case. I believe that testimony; but it is not a perfect knowledge to my own mind, obtained by my own experience. And so in regard to ten thousand other facts or events. We are in many, indeed in almost all, instances required to believe without a knowledge. The judge who sits in a court of justice to decide upon the liberties and lives of his fellow-beings, does not decide from a knowledge; but from the testimony and evidence presented before him he pronounces sentence of imprisonment or death, because the evidence is sufficient to bear him out in passing such a sentence.

A person can not be a witness to that which he merely believes. God requires mankind, or certain individuals among mankind, to be witnesses for him—witnesses of his existence—so that they can bear testimony to others. It is important and necessary that they should have a knowledge of the things whereof this testimony is given; hence, in some few cases among the inhabitants of our globe, there have been men raised up to whom there has been a knowledge imparted almost immediately, and they knew most perfectly, concerning the things which they were to communicate to their fellowbeings. They were true witnesses, and on their evidence and testimony the world have been condemned, and will be judged in the great judgment day. For instance, the Lord our God has revealed a system or plan of salvation to the human family, requiring all men to repent of their sins, turn away from everything that is evil, reform their lives, and to believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world, who died to atone for the sins of mankind; to believe in his Father as the great Supreme Being, the Creator of all things; to believe in that which God has ordained, pertaining to the gospel, that is intended for the salvation of mankind, such as the ordinances of baptism, and confirmation by the laying on of hands, and the administration of the Lord's Supper. All these are principles and ordinances which God has revealed to the children of men, making known to certain individuals that these are divine, and commanding them to go and bear testimony thereof unto others. Now, when a man stands up before an audience and says, with all boldness and with all humility, that God exists, the question

might arise—“How do you know that he exists?” In reply, he says to his audience, “He exists because the Bible speaks of it, the works of Nature declare that there must be a Supreme Being, the wisdom that is manifested in the works of creation, show forth his attributes—his goodness, his wisdom, and the adaptation of the various principles in nature to other principles show that there must have been an all-wise Designer.” “But,” inquires an individual, of the speaker, “do you know anything about this being of whom you say the works of nature declare his attributes, and can you tell us whether he is a personal being or a widely diffused spirit that exists throughout all nature?” If he can not bear any other testimony than this, merely referring to the Bible or the works of Nature, his hearers can say, “We have the same evidence ourselves, and your testimony is no better than ours.” But if he stands forth as a servant of the Most High God, and declares that he knows God exists, because he has received a revelation to that effect, God has spoken to him, and his eyes have been opened to behold his person and his glory, and that he has heard his voice, then that man's testimony is greater than the testimony of those who depend merely upon what God has said in past ages, written in the Bible; and greater than that which arises from beholding the beauty, glory, simplicity and wisdom that characterize the works of Nature. Such a testimony, as I have named, where a person can bear testimony to what his eyes have seen, and to what his ears have heard, concerning the Almighty, to what God has revealed to him, will condemn the world. Persons may pretend to be God's witnesses, and preach fifty, sixty, or four score years in the ears of the people, but if they have never received this testimony their evidence will be of no effect in the day of judgment. I have heard, in the course of my life, a great many Christian ministers of different denominations, many of them no doubt sincere, say to their congregations, “I will be a swift witness against you in the day of judgment.” Ask these Christian ministers, “Have you ever received a revelation from God yourself?” “Oh no.” Has God ever spoken to you?” “Oh no.” “Have you ever had a heavenly vision?” “Oh no.” “Has the Holy Ghost given you a new revelation?” “Not at all.” “When did God last speak to the human family?” Says the Christian minister, “He has said nothing for about eighteen hundred years; the last he said or spoke to the human family is recorded in the New Testament.” Such a minister might preach all the days of his life, and so far as his evidence or testimony is concerned it would not condemn a solitary individual. Such men are not witnesses for God. He never sent them, he never spoke to or revealed anything through them; they have never seen his face or heard his voice, consequently they know no more about him than the people in the congregation to whom they are speaking. When, therefore, we speak, in the language of our text, that “in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established;” when these witnesses are divine witnesses, sent forth to bear testimony of divine things, they must have a knowledge of those things; not merely a faith, not a speculative idea or opinion, but they must know, just as well as they know concerning their own existence, of the things about which they speak and of which they bear testimony to the people. Then in the great judgment day God will say to that people, “Did I not declare my words unto you by my messengers whom I sent unto you, to whom I revealed myself, and who had a knowledge of the things they bore testimony of?” And that will condemn the people.

In order to apply this to one particular subject, which now occurs to my mind, I will take the Book of Mormon, for instance. This book professes to be a divine revelation; it professes to be the writings of a succession of ancient prophets, the same as the Bible contains the revelations and writings, given in different ages to inspired men; and while the Bible contains the writings of inspired men who lived on the eastern hemisphere, the Book of Mormon professes to be the writings of inspired men who lived in ancient times on the western hemisphere. One is called, if we may so speak, the Bible of the East; the other may be termed, with great propriety, the Bible of the West,

both of them being of the highest antiquity.

Now, if these books are divine, what evidence is necessary to convince us of that fact? If the Book of Mormon is really a divine revelation, containing the writings of ancient prophets who dwelt on this American continent before and after Christ, it is important that every man and woman in the four quarters of the earth should understand this; for if it be the word of the Lord we shall be judged out of the Book of Mormon as much as out of the eastern Bible. If it be not a divine record and not the word of the Lord, it is absolutely necessary that we should know it, in order that we may reject it, and reject it understandingly. Take it either way, then, whether it is or is not a revelation from God, it is equally important that we should know it.

Now what evidence have we that the Book of Mormon is a divine revelation? I will bring forth some evidence upon this subject. Before this book was permitted to be presented to the inhabitants of the earth the Lord raised up witnesses. Before it was printed, in the year 1829, three witnesses were raised up to bear testimony to it. Now, how could these witnesses get a knowledge of that this book was divine? Were they merely told that it was so by the Prophet Joseph Smith, who translated the book from the metallic plates that were taken out of a certain hill in the State of New York? Was this all the information they had before they commenced bearing testimony to the world of the divinity of the book? If this was all, then all who knew Joseph Smith might be witnesses. But we are told in the forepart of the book the nature of their evidence and testimony. We are told that David Whitmer, Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery, in the year 1829, before this book was published, saw an angel of God come down from heaven, and take the plates from which it was translated, and he exhibited them before the eyes of these three men, turning them over leaf after leaf. They saw the angel descend; they saw his glorious personage; they beheld the light and glory of his countenance; they saw the plates in his hands, and they saw the engravings upon the pages of these plates. While the angel was doing this before them they heard a voice in the heavens, declaring unto them that the plates had been translated correctly, and commanding them to bear testimony of it to all nations, kindreds, tongues and people to whom this work should be sent. They accordingly have prefixed their testimony to this book, which those who obtain the book can read at their leisure; we have not time on this occasion to read it.

What greater testimony concerning the ministering of angels has any person ever given to the human family, than the one I have named? We read about angels ministering in ancient times on various occasions, and for certain purposes. Sometimes appearing in great glory, and sometimes withholding their glory. Hence it is written by one of the apostles—“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for some, in so doing, have entertained angels unaware,” showing that angels have sometimes withheld their glory, and appeared like common men, and that they have been entertained as such. In other instances their glory was exhibited before those to whom they revealed themselves, and they bore testimony to the things they heard from the mouths of their divine visitants.

A question arises here, Is there any testimony in the Old or New Testament any more worthy of being received than that of these three modern witnesses? Do angels live at the present day as they did in ancient times? Every one will say that they still live. Are they the messengers of the Most High now as they were in ancient times? Yes. Says one, “We suppose they are subject to the command of God now as they were in ancient times.” Is there any thing in the Bible that indicates that a period or day would come when the ministration of angels would no longer be necessary? No, not one syllable in all the Bible that indicates any such thing. To the contrary, we find that the Apostle Paul, in speaking of angels says—“Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who shall be heirs of salvation? Now, if there be any heirs of salvation on the earth in the 19th century, why not those ministering spirits be sent forth to minister for them? And if sent forth, why

should they withhold their glory and their personal presence from those to whom they administer? Why not reveal themselves as they did in ancient times, personally and bodily, so that the eye of the individual to whom they administer may behold them? We can see nothing whatsoever that indicates, in the least degree, that these privileges are to be withheld from the children of men. Many, at the present period, believe the testimony recorded in the Scriptures concerning the ancient ministrations of beings called angels. They know not why they believe this, only because it is popular, and it is recorded in the Bible that they did appear. Ask these persons if they believe in the ministration of angels at the present time and they will tell you “no.” They can't give you any reason why they disbelieve in their ministration now, only it is unpopular. It is popular to believe in the ministration of angels anciently, but unpopular to believe in such a thing in modern times, consequently people go along with the popular mind and believe in former-day ministrations of those heavenly messengers, but latter-day ministrations of the same nature they reject.

If persons raised up in ancient times had a knowledge, by the ministration of angels, concerning the message which they communicated to the human family, and their testimony condemned the generation to whom they were sent, I ask, will not the same knowledge, communicated in the same manner, in our day, condemn this generation, inasmuch as the message is not received? Judge this for yourselves.

When the Book of Mormon was printed, early in the year 1830, with these witnesses' names attached to it and presented to the human family, they had the testimony, not only of these three witnesses, but also the testimony of Joseph Smith, the translator, to the ministration of angels, and concerning the existence of these plates. Here then was the mouth of four witnesses, at least, that God gave to this generation. Besides these four we have it recorded here that eight other men, men with whom I am, or was, well acquainted, some of them are now dead. Eight other persons besides these four knew of the existence of the metallic plates, from which the Book of Mormon was translated. Their testimony is also prefixed to this work, their names given. They testify that they saw these plates, that they handled them with their own hands, that they saw the engravings upon the plates; that they took them in their hands, and that they knew of a surety of the existence of those plates. They did not bear testimony that they had seen an angel, but they bore testimony to that which they did know, namely, the existence of the plates, that Joseph Smith, the translator, was the person who exhibited the plates to them, and that the characters or letters contained upon the plates had the appearance of ancient work and of curious workmanship, and they bear their testimony in the most positive manner to this thing, declaring in the closing sentence that they bear testimony of these things, and “we lie not, God bearing witness of it.” Here then is the testimony of twelve witnesses, four of whom saw an angel of God. Is not this sufficient to justify the children of men in having faith in the Book of Mormon? Faith is not a knowledge, but faith is the evidence of things not seen. Now, I may not have seen the plates, you may not have seen the plates, but we have the evidence or testimony of things not seen, by a great number of witnesses who did see them.

“But,” says one, “suppose that these witnesses were interested persons and they wished to combine together to deceive the children of men.” The same supposition might be made concerning ancient witnesses, the Twelve Apostles for instance. They were chosen by the Lord to bear testimony of the gospel unto all nations, and, with the exception of Judas, there was not a disinterested person among them, not even the one appointed to fill the place of Judas; and these men bore testimony to the most important truths that were ever revealed to the human family. They did this with a perfect knowledge. The infidel world will say they were interested witnesses, just the same as the world say concerning the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. I would not give much for a witness who was not interested, I would not give

much for the testimony of an individual who would come and say, “I have seen an angel from God, but yet I am not interested in any thing that he said to me.” No, let that man who receives a communication from the Almighty, and who knows of a surety of the things that he brings forth and bears testimony of to the world, let him be interested in his testimony and show to the world by his works that he is an interested witness.

Says one, “We have some disinterested witnesses with regard to the truth of the Bible.” I deny it, you have not one. You have eight writers in the New Testament, but were they not all interested witnesses? Yes. “But,” says one, “were there not a great many not connected with the ancient church who saw the miracles of Jesus?” If they did, we have not their testimony, not one. We find it recorded in the Acts of the Apostles that when Peter and John healed the lame man who sat at the beautiful gate of the temple, there was a great multitude around about who saw this miracle, but have you the testimony and evidence of any one of that multitude? No, you have not, no such evidence or testimony has been handed down to our day. But we have the testimony of the writer of the Acts of the Apostles that such was the case. He says so, and we have to believe it on his testimony. So in regard to the five hundred who saw Jesus after his resurrection. Paul declares that he was seen of five hundred of the brethren at once. But has one of those five hundred brethren handed down his testimony to the 19th century? Not one; it all depends upon the testimony of one writer. That writer says that five hundred men saw Jesus after his resurrection. So in regard to all the miracles that are recorded, said to be wrought by our Lord and Savior; so in regard to all the miracles, wrought after his ascension into heaven, by his servants and those who believed in his name. We have only the testimony of eight witnesses for the truth of the New Testament, and they were all interested.

Again. We know that there have been persons who have combined together to deceive their fellowmen, and how are we to know whether these witnesses to the Book of Mormon were men of that class, or whether they were really witnesses of the things of God? We can not know it at first; it is impossible for you and me to know that fact, unless we obtain our knowledge from heaven. We can believe it, or their testimony, but we can not know it, or their testimony. Now the way I would do, if I were an outsider and really desired to know whether the Book of Mormon was a divine revelation or not, I should examine the nature of this evidence which I have referred to, and then I should examine the contents of the book. If I found the book contradictory in its history, prophecies or doctrines, I should set down these twelve witnesses, whose names are prefixed to the book, as impostors; but if, after a careful perusal of this book, I found no contradictions or inconsistencies in the prophecies interspersed through its different parts, if I found that the doctrine was plain and simple and easy to be understood, and not contradictory, then the next thing with me would be to compare these prophecies with those in the Bible, and the doctrines of the Book of Mormon with those of Jesus and his apostles. If I found no contradictions between the two records, but that the same gospel is taught in both, and that both contain the same great chain of prophecy in regard to the events of the latter days, only more fully exemplified, and illustrated, perhaps in different language, in the Book of Mormon from what it is in the Bible, I should have no evidence whatever to condemn the book, or the witnesses contained in it.

Furthermore, if I found certain promises in the Book of Mormon to the effect that all persons, in all the world, who would receive it, and the message that God has sent forth by the administration of his servants, and would repent of their sins, and be baptized by immersion for the remission of their sins, and have hands laid upon them in confirmation, should receive the Holy Ghost, inasmuch as I could find no testimony against the book, but all these things in favor of it, if I should repent of my sins, there would certainly be no harm in it. If I should reform my life from