

# FUNERAL SERVICE FOR HUGH W. NIBLEY

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Dallin H. Oaks<sup>1</sup>

Dear Sister Phyllis and members of the family, friends, brothers, and sisters, I feel very privileged to be invited to speak on this occasion.<sup>2</sup> I've enjoyed the wonderful tributes by sons and daughters and a brother and an associate. I've been pleased to be seated on the stand with the servants of the Lord from Hugh W. Nibley's ward and stake and with the current president and two other former presidents of Brigham Young University. I rejoiced in the tender words in the letter of the First Presidency read by Elder Holland.

I have known Hugh Nibley for over fifty years. He was my teacher at BYU in the winter of 1954. I can't remember why I took Hugh Nibley's "Rise of the Western Church to 600 A.D.," but its impact on my intellectual horizons was enormous. Professor Nibley was the first eccentric I ever met, and his example gave me a life-long appreciation for the wonderfully diverse way our Creator distributed talents and spiritual gifts. As I experienced his incredible brilliance and knowledge, I also observed his humble indifference to appearance and other worldly things. He sometimes came to class with trousers and a coat that did not match, and he often wore the two-buckle combat boots that were standard issue to the foot soldiers of World War II, then recently concluded. As I came to know him better in later years, I realized that he was the epitome of the Book of Mormon teaching, "Do not spend money for that which is of no worth, nor . . . labor for that which cannot satisfy" (2 Nephi 9:51).

When he was studying at the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago in the 1960s, we had him to our home for dinner. He

later spoke at our stake priesthood leadership meeting. During my nine years at BYU, 1971–80, we attended the same ward as the Nibleys. Our families were friends. We loved Phyllis. There I was again Brother Nibley’s student in our Gospel Doctrine class. I also enjoyed his personal teachings on a unique occasion when he spoke to a group of General Authorities in the Salt Lake Temple. All of these were thrilling and unique learning experiences.

During all of the more than fifty years I have known Hugh Nibley, I have been edified, inspired, and motivated by his many writings. I count myself among his foremost admirers and devoted friends. Thousands of others are similarly situated and would love to have had this opportunity to speak at this, his graduation exercise from mortality.

A funeral is a time to speak of the mighty realities of eternity. As pertaining to mortality, these realities include birth and death, ordinances and covenants. All of these great realities of eternity come to mind at a funeral. All are made possible by the mission of Jesus Christ, whose resurrection ensures our ultimate power over physical death and whose atoning sacrifice provides the opportunity for eternal life.

Funerals appropriately focus on the past in their tributes to a departed friend. But they should also focus on the future. We see the future through the lens of faith and with the light cast by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The work of the man we honor here makes it easy for us to focus on the future. Though we would expect a historian to focus on the past, the nature of his historical inquiries caused Hugh Nibley and his students to think of the big questions, those mighty matters that have greatest meaning for the future. That is what we do in temple worship, a major preoccupation of Nibley’s scholarship. Big ideas are the center of our forward-looking faith, as expressed in Alma’s great declaration: “Believe in the Son of God, that he will come to redeem his people, and that he shall suffer and die to atone for their sins; and that he shall rise again from the dead, which shall bring to pass the resurrection, that all men shall stand before him, to be judged at the last and judgment day, according to their works” (Alma 33:22). That teaching embodies the most important

and ultimate idea for the future, and Hugh Nibley believed it with all his heart.

I think our brother, Hugh, would like all of us who have assembled to honor his life to use this occasion to ponder these answers to the biggest questions of all. The Book of Mormon records these great truths taught by the prophet Jacob. I read from 2 Nephi chapter 9:

For as death hath passed upon all men, to fulfil the merciful plan of the great Creator, there must needs be a power of resurrection, and the resurrection must needs come unto man by reason of the fall; and the fall came by reason of transgression; and because man became fallen they were cut off from the presence of the Lord.

Wherefore, it must needs be an infinite atonement—save it should be an infinite atonement this corruption could not put on incorruption. . . .

O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit.

And because of the way of deliverance of our God, the Holy One of Israel, this death, of which I have spoken, which is the temporal, shall deliver up its dead; which death is the grave.

And this death of which I have spoken, which is the spiritual death, shall deliver up its dead; which spiritual death is hell; wherefore, death and hell must deliver up their dead, and hell must deliver up its captive spirits, and the grave must deliver up its captive bodies, and the bodies and the spirits of men will be restored one to the other; and it is by the power of the resurrection of the Holy One of Israel.

O how great the plan of our God! . . .

And he cometh into the world that he may save all men if they will hearken unto his voice; for behold, he suffereth the pains of all men, yea, the pains of every living creature, both men, women, and children, who belong to the family of Adam.

And he suffereth this that the resurrection might pass upon all men, that all men stand before him at the great and judgment day.

And he commandeth all men that they must repent, and be baptized in his name, having perfect faith in the Holy One of Israel, or they cannot be saved in the kingdom of God. (2 Nephi 9:6–7, 10–13, 21–23)

Hugh Nibley knew these great truths. He embodied them in his life, and he used them to direct his formidable intellect and his incredible efforts in scholarship. In doing so he changed the way Latter-day Saints think about many things. For that proposition I need only cite a few of many examples, including his *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, which many of us studied in our priesthood classes in the 1950s, and such other classics as his *Improvement Era* series, “Lehi in the Desert,” and his inspiring advocacy of the Restoration in *The World and the Prophets*.

Hugh Nibley “is a prodigy, an enigma, and a symbol.” So said Truman G. Madsen in his perceptive foreword to a 1978 volume of classic Nibley essays. Describing Nibley’s classroom teaching, Madsen says—and my own observations confirm this—“He does not lecture; he explodes. He brings source materials in the original to class, translates them on the spot, and lapses into spasms of free association as he sees linguistic connections.”<sup>3</sup>

As I experienced it, the manner of his speaking was short bursts of unfinished fragments, as if he were always hurrying on to the next step, always in search of something more important than the present. He dealt with the present, but his principal concerns were always with what was timeless. Now he has broken the barrier of time and has hurried on ahead. Now he has experienced some of the things he always sought. For those of us who considered ourselves his students, he is still leading the way. Since we know that chosen messengers continue to preach and work after they get to the world of the spirits (see Doctrine and Covenants 138:30–31), it is exciting to contemplate what work will be given to our brother Hugh Nibley.

We have been blessed for all time by Hugh Nibley’s learning and insights. But we should not forget that he was blessed with other gifts that can also enrich our lives if we have the wisdom to see them and the strength to learn from them. For example, he had an extraordinary gift of humility.

Like other Latter-day Saints who have pursued scholarship, I have often been challenged by these words, also from 2 Nephi 9:

O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men!  
When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hear-  
ken not unto the counsel of God, for they set it aside, supposing

they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish.

But to be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of God. (2 Nephi 9:28–29)

Similarly, a few verses later we read the promise that “whoso knocketh, to him will he open,” and the contrasting warning that the Lord will not open unto “the wise, and the learned, and they that are rich, who are puffed up because of their learning, and their wisdom, and their riches . . . save they shall cast these things away, and consider themselves fools before God, and come down in the depths of humility” (2 Nephi 9:42).

Hugh Nibley is the premier example of the man who is truly learned and also wise enough to come down in the depths of humility to hearken to the counsels of God to be taught by his Spirit and to be guided by his servants. His humility was also evident in his disinterest in acquiring disciples. Admirers, helpers, and supporters he had in abundance, but they were always unsought and unbidden. Truman Madsen perceptively notes when it came to disciples, Nibley “sent them on to the only One who deserves disciples.”<sup>24</sup>

As we pay these remarkable and deserved tributes to Hugh Nibley, we should remember that while his combination of talents was unique and is unlikely to be duplicated in mortal life, they were not comprehensive. For example, it took his intellect and knowledge to inspire the creation of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), but it took the different talents of many others to harvest where Nibley had planted—to manage and finance the work of that organization and to disseminate its work. Many of those beloved associates are here today, and we honor them as well.

The Apostle Paul taught that the body of the Church has many members with many different talents and functions. “If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? . . . But now are they many members, yet but one body” (1 Corinthians 12:17, 20). So all the members should have care for one another. “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you” (verse 21).

If the Apostle Paul had been granted a vision of the future when he wrote those words, he could have given two examples. One was the Prophet Joseph Smith. We all affirm his unique spiritual gifts, while sometimes forgetting that he lacked the practical know-how in worldly matters that was so abundantly gifted to his successor, Brigham Young. The Lord told Joseph that “in temporal labors thou shalt not have strength, for this is not thy calling” (Doctrine and Covenants 24:9). So it was with Hugh W. Nibley.

Brother Nibley’s life taught us another lesson—undesired by any but valuable to all. An ancient sage taught his students that there was no royal road to geometry. By the same token, there is no unobstructed path through mortality. Even those we honor as prophets have experienced crushing adversities in the form of physical impairments and other challenges, often during the closing scenes of their lives when their prominence and visibility would cause us to assume that they would have physical comfort and mental serenity.

So it was with Hugh Nibley. The challenges of mortality continue to the end of mortal life, but the promises of eternity continue forever. That is something known to our friend who pursued the big questions, and it is something for remembering and rejoicing on this occasion when we honor his life.

I close with these two expressions of the Prophet Joseph Smith:

The expectation of seeing my friends in the morning of the resurrection cheers my soul and makes me bear up against the evils of life. It is like their taking a long journey, and on their return we meet them with increased joy.<sup>5</sup>

I see no faults in the Church, and therefore let me be resurrected with the Saints, whether I ascend to heaven or descend to hell, or go to any other place. And if we go to hell, we will turn the devils out of doors and make a heaven of it. Where this people are, there is good society. What do we care where we are, if the society be good?<sup>6</sup>

I look forward to seeing our friend Hugh W. Nibley with increased joy on resurrection morning. And wherever he is, there will be good society.

My brothers and sisters, as one appointed to so testify, and with joy, I testify that the gospel of Jesus Christ gives purpose and direction to mortality and reality and assurance to eternity. I also testify of Jesus Christ, the Light and Life of the World, who makes it all possible. And as his servant, I invoke the blessings of God upon this family and upon the work of this good man, whose memory blesses us, whose example strengthens us, and whose future gives us an ideal to pursue, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

*Dallin H. Oaks is an Apostle, jurist, educator, and administrator who since 2018 has served as the First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Having grown up in Provo, Utah, not far from Hugh Nibley's home, he studied accounting at Brigham Young University and attended law school at the University of Chicago, rising to the office of editor-in-chief of the prestigious University of Chicago Law Review. He graduated in 1957 with a JD cum laude. After law school, he clerked for Chief Justice Earl Warren at the US Supreme Court and served three years as an associate at the law firm Kirkland & Ellis. Oaks then returned to the University of Chicago in 1961 as a professor of law. Specializing in the law of trusts, he taught there until 1971, when he was chosen to serve for a decade as the president of BYU. During that time, Oaks was greatly interested in Nibley's speaking, teaching, and publications. Oaks was appointed in 1980 to the Utah Supreme Court, on which he served until his appointment to the Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in 1984. His books include The Lord's Way and His Holy Name.*

### Notes

1. When this talk was given, Elder Dallin H. Oaks was a member of the Church's Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He is currently serving as the First Counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
2. These remarks were given at the Provo Tabernacle on Wednesday, March 2, 2005. © 2005 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. Used by permission.

3. T. G. Madsen, "Prodigy," 391 (this volume).
4. T. G. Madsen, "Prodigy," 397 (this volume).
5. Joseph Smith, in *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 5:361–62.
6. Smith, in *History of the Church*, 5:517.