

“I was asleep at my Post,”

testimony of

Orson F. Whitney

“Lest We Forget” by Albert L. Zobell, Jr.

Improvement Era, September, 1969, p 68-79.

Originally: “The Divinity of Jesus Christ” by Elder Orson F. Whitney, of the Council of the Twelve,” *Improvement Era*, January 1926, No. 3

“Lest We Forget” by Albert L. Zobell, Jr.

Improvement Era, September, 1969, p 68-79.

Elder Orson F. Whitney (1855-1931), one of the poet, historian princes of the Latter-day Saints, became an apostle April 9, 1906, at the same time as George F. Richards and David O. McKay.

Elder Whitney, always a popular and much-sought-for speaker, spoke at the MIA June Conference in 1925, recalling how, as a young man of 21, he had served a mission in Pennsylvania and had found some success in expressing his thoughts in newspaper articles and poems.

His companion chided: “You ought to be studying the books of the Church; you were sent out to preach the gospel, not to write for the newspapers.”

Young Whitney knew his missionary-brother was right, but he still kept on, fascinated by the discovery that he could wield a pen. In his words, as he spoke at a Sabbath evening MIA session June 7, 1925:

“One night I dreamed—if dream it may be called—that I was in the Garden of Gethsemane, a witness of the Savior’s agony. I saw Him as plainly as I see this congregation. I stood behind a tree in the foreground, where I could see without being seen. Jesus, with Peter, James and John, came through a little wicket gate at my right. Leaving the three Apostles there, after telling them to kneel and pray, he passed over to the other side, where he also knelt and prayed. It was the same prayer with which we are all familiar: ‘O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass

from me; nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.' (Matt. 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:42.)

"As he prayed the tears streamed down his face, which was toward me, I was so moved at the sight that I wept also, out of pure sympathy with his great sorrow. My whole heart went out to him, I loved him with all my soul, and longed to be with him as I longed for nothing else.

"Presently he arose and walked to where the Apostles were kneeling-fast asleep! He shook them gently, awoke them, and in a tone of tender reproach, untinctured by the least suggestion of anger or scolding asked them if they could not watch with him one hour. There he was, with the weight of the world's sin upon his shoulders, with the pangs of every man, woman and child shooting through his sensitive soul -- and they could not watch with him one poor hour!

"Returning to his place, he prayed again, and then went back and found them again sleeping. Again he awoke them, admonished them, and returned and prayed as before. Three times this happened, until I was perfectly familiar with his appearance -- face, form and movements. He was of noble stature and of majestic mien-not at all the weak, effeminate being that some painters have portrayed -- a very God among men, yet as meek and lowly as a little child.

"All at once the circumstances seemed to change, the scene remaining just the same. Instead of before, it was after the crucifixion, and the Savior, with those three Apostles, now stood together in a group at my left. They were about to depart and ascend into Heaven. I could endure it no longer. I ran out from behind the tree, fell at his feet, clasped him around the knees, and begged him to take me with him.

"I shall never forget the kind and gentle manner in which He stooped and raised me up and embraced me. It was so vivid, so real, that I felt the very warmth of his bosom against which I rested. Then He said: 'No, my son; these have finished their work, and they may go with me, but you must stay and finish yours.' Still I clung to him. Gazing up into his face -- for he was taller than I -- I besought him most earnestly: 'Well, promise me that I will come to you at the last.' He smiled sweetly and tenderly and replied: 'That will depend entirely upon yourself.' I awoke with a sob in my throat, and it was morning."

"That's from God," Elder Musser said, when he heard the story.

"I don't need to be told that," Elder Whitney replied, and then he told the vast MIA congregation:

"I saw the moral clearly. I had never thought that I would be an Apostle, or hold any other office in the Church; and it did not occur to me even then. Yet I knew that those sleeping apostles meant me. I was asleep at my post -- as any man is, or any woman, who, having been divinely appointed to do one thing, does another.

"But from that hour all was changed -- I was a different man. I did not give up writing, for President Brigham Young, having noticed some of my contributions in the home papers, wrote advising me to cultivate what he called my 'gift for writing' so that I might use it in future years 'for the establishment of truth and righteousness upon the earth.' This was his last word of counsel to me. He died the same year, while I was still in the mission field, ... laboring then in the State of Ohio. I continued to write, but it was for the Church and Kingdom of God, I held that first and foremost; all else was secondary."

One night I dreamed—if dream it may be called—that I was in the Garden of

Gethsemane, a witness of the Savior's agony. I saw Him as plainly as I see this congregation. I stood behind a tree in the foreground, where I could see without being seen. Jesus, with Peter, James and John, came through a little wicket gate at my right. Leaving the three Apostles there, after telling them to kneel and pray, he passed over to the other side, where he also knelt and prayed. It was the same prayer with which we are all familiar: "O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-41; Luke 22:42).

As he prayed the tears streamed down his face, which was toward me. I was so moved at the sight that I wept also, out of pure sympathy with his great sorrow. My whole heart went out to him, I loved him with all my soul, and longed to be with him as I longed for nothing else.

Presently he arose and walked to where the Apostles were kneeling—fast asleep! He shook them gently, awoke them, and in a tone of tender reproach, untinctured by the least suggestion of anger or scolding asked them if they could not watch with him one hour. There he was, with the weight of the world's sin upon his shoulders, with the pangs of every man, woman and child shooting through his sensitive soul—and they could not watch with him one poor hour!

Returning to his place, he prayed again, and then went back and found them again sleeping. Again he awoke them, admonished them, and returned and prayed as before. Three times this happened, until I was perfectly familiar with his appearance—face, form and movements. He was of noble stature and of majestic mien—not at all the weak, effeminate being that some painters have portrayed—a very God among men, yet as meek and lowly as a little child.

All at once the circumstance seemed to change, the scene remaining just the same. Instead of before, it was after the crucifixion, and the Savior, with those three Apostles, now stood together in a group at my left. They were about to depart and ascend into Heaven. I could endure it no longer. I ran out from behind the tree, fell at his feet, clasped him around the knees, and begged him to take me with him.

I shall never forget the kind and gentle manner in which He stooped and raised me up and embraced me. It was so vivid, so real, that I felt the very warmth of his bosom against which I rested. Then He said: "No, my son; these have finished their work, and they may go with me, but you must stay and finish yours." Still I clung to him. Gazing up into his face—for he was taller than I—I besought him most earnestly: "Well, promise me that I will come to you at the last." He smiled sweetly and tenderly and replied: "That will depend entirely upon yourself." I awoke with a sob in my throat, and it was morning.

The Moral of the Tale

"That's from God," said my companion (Elder A. M. Musser), when I had related it to him. "I don't need to be told that," was my reply. I saw the moral clearly. I had never thought that I would be an Apostle, or hold any other office in the Church; and it did not occur to me even then. Yet I knew that those sleeping apostles meant me. I was asleep at my post—as any man is, or any woman, who, having been divinely appointed to do one thing, does another.

President Young's Counsel

But from that hour all was changed—I was a different man. I did not give up writing, for President Brigham Young, having noticed some of my contributions in the home papers, wrote advising me to cultivate what he called my “gift for writing” so that I might use it in future years “for the establishment of truth and righteousness upon the earth.” This was his last word of counsel to me. He died the same year, while I was still in the mission field, though laboring then in the State of Ohio. I continued to write, but it was for the Church and Kingdom of God. I held that first and foremost; all else was secondary.

The Speaker's Testimony

Then came the divine illumination, which is greater than all dreams, visions, and other manifestations combined. By the light of God's candle—the gift of the Holy Ghost—I saw what till then I had never seen, I learned what till then I had never known, I loved the Lord as I had never loved Him before. My soul was satisfied, my joy was full, for I had a testimony of the truth, and it has remained with me to this day.

I know that my Redeemer liveth. Not even Job knew it better. I have evidence that I can not doubt; and this is why I am found among those who tonight unfurl the slogan for which we stand, possessing and proclaiming an individual testimony of the divinity of Jesus Christ.