

A Prophet's Physician

Conversations with Ernest L. Wilkinson Jr., M.D.

Editor's Note: Ernest L. Wilkinson, Jr., was privileged to serve as President Spencer W. Kimball's personal physician for a number of years, which included traveling abroad with him during the extensive area conferences of the Church during the last half of the 1970s and early 1980s. The following is taken from a two-hour interview with Wilkinson shortly after President Kimball's death.

When did you first become associated with President Kimball?

I first became personally acquainted with President Kimball in 1970 when I was asked to be his personal physician. It was shortly after a recurrence of his laryngeal cancer for which he had refused further surgery. He had also slipped into congestive heart failure and was having great difficulty with shortness of breath, so he wanted the attention of a cardiologist. He was found to have calcific aortic stenosis and coronary artery disease and was subsequently successfully operated on by Dr. Russell M. Nelson at the age of 78.

And when he later became the President, you were asked to travel with him?

I had been his personal physician for about five years when President Harold B. Lee died in December 1974. After President Kimball was called as President of the Church, I continued as his personal physician. In the early summer of 1975 President Tanner and President Romney invited me to their office. They told me that they were embarking on a very aggressive program of area conferences which would be held throughout the world. President Kimball would be leaving the country, perhaps three or four times a year, for periods as long as two weeks for the area conferences, temple site and building dedications, and so forth. They were very concerned about his health and asked me at that time if I would be willing, together with Dr. Nelson, as a contribution to Church service, to accompany President Kimball as his personal physician whenever he left the country. Initially Dr. Nelson and I alternated this responsibility but since the problems were predominantly medical, not surgical, I soon found myself attending all the conferences.

In the later years as his health was failing, I went to conferences that he attended in this country as well.

People have asked me, "How did you get to become the Church physician?" There really is no such title as "Church physician." I was called to that

activity simply because I had been his personal physician prior to his becoming President of the Church. We had developed a very warm relationship, and he had confidence in my professional ability and recommendations. That is why his counselors asked if I would not perform this service to the Church.

How do you feel that knowing President Kimball during his most trying physical moments helped you gain a greater appreciation for and testimony of his prophetic calling?

I've always thought that President Kimball was like Job of old. He had been tried and tested in so many ways. Cancer on two occasions, serious heart disease with coronary artery bypass surgery, an aortic valve replacement, congestive heart failure, multiple cerebral vascular accidents and many, many other types of medical problems that certainly tried and tested him almost on a daily basis. My testimony grew as I watched this man—dedicated entirely to the Lord and to the people despite the persisting health problems—continue to expand his dedication and love for the Lord. That dedication has been exemplified so many times in little, intimate, personal experiences that we've had over the years.



He was a man of almost indefatigable character. He once came to me with the physical complaint that he was very tired. In trying to physically assess this complaint, I really could not find any specific new problem to explain this unusual fatigue. I then asked him if he would tell me about his schedule. He told me that it was his custom to arise each morning at 4:30. From 4:30 until 6:30 in the morning was his quiet hour. This was when he read the scriptures and petitioned the Lord in prayer. It was the time of day he had some privacy without interruption and could do some writing. Then, about 6:30 a.m., he would dress, have a very light breakfast, and arrive at his office by 7:00 a.m. While the composition of the days varied depend-

ing on which day of the week it was, each was filled with appointments, committee meetings, and other activities, so that he rarely left the office before 5:30 or 6:00 p.m. He would then return to his home, have a light supper with his wife, and go into his study where he would work for the next three hours, until about 10:00 in the evening, laboring on problems that he simply had not had the time to get to during the day. Well, if you count the hours from 4:30 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., you'll find he had a seventeen-and-a-half hour work routine. I advised the President that I certainly felt his schedule, which was enough to almost destroy a younger man, was contributing to his fatigue. His only response was that he would not modify his schedule in any way or

forsake the projects that he was involved in. My job, he told me, was to keep him going at the pace he would continue to go.

Another time, in response to this same type of problem, as his physician advisor, I tried to encourage him to modify his pace. He said, "You don't seem to understand. I don't want to be saved in this world. I want to be exalted in the world to come."

It's difficult for someone like me to chastise the Prophet of the Church. Yet in a very friendly, kindly way we would often impose upon him to terminate his work, to rest. His travel schedules were unbelievable. For example, I remember one group of area conferences where we traveled from Salt Lake to New York, flew over the Atlantic Ocean to

London, spent a few hours in the London Temple, from there went directly back to the airport at Heathrow, flew to the Canary Islands, and then continued on all night to Johannesburg South Africa. We arrived there at 7:00 a.m., went directly to the hotel, shaved, showered, changed clothes, and went to the area conference that morning. Then after two days of almost continuous conference sessions in Johannesburg, we went by plane to Capetown, and, while awaiting a plane there, held a missionary conference. We then flew all night long over the South Atlantic to Buenos Aires. After landing at the airport at Buenos Aires, we took a short hop to Montevideo, Uruguay, and that morning held an area conference. It was not at all uncommon to travel all night long or on long transatlantic flights without ever taking your clothes off and then carry forth as if it was just business as usual. Sometimes it was very difficult to remain fully alert in the conferences. Often there would be three, four, or five meetings the next day, and President Kimball would kid his wife, Camilla, by saying something like, "Dear, did I see you nod your head during that service?" when literally they hadn't been to bed the night before.

This was the way we travelled. A lot of people say, "Gee, what a wonderful opportunity you had to travel and see the world with President Kimball." I say, "Yes, it was a wonderful opportunity, but as far as seeing the world, for the most part all I've seen are the airports and the insides of stake houses and hotels. He was there on Church business, and believe me that's what he did."

From your experiences with the prophet do you find you have developed a unique perspective on the relationship of mind, body, and spirit?

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With all of the medical difficulties that President Kimball suffered, I don't feel he possibly could have had the enthusiasm and the vigor to pursue all that he was engaged in except that the hand of the Lord was giving him support.

cept that the hand of the Lord was giving him support. He went through some major medical crises that, measured by any yardstick, I would have expected him to not survive. Yet he not only survived, but he came back stronger and with more dedication than before, if that was possible, to carry out the work that he was there to do. He set a very high standard for himself. He was quite depressed during his last two or three years by his inability to perform up to the standard that he had set for himself and that he felt the Lord expected of him. I've heard him say many times that he did not want to meet Father Lehi on the other side and tell him that the work was not yet finished—in other words, that he had failed and had not done his job in completing the work. He felt it very, very necessary to do everything in his human power to do these things and certainly made every effort to do it. So it was a great spiritual experience to witness the hand of the Lord in sustaining him and giving him strength, vigor, and vitality to carry on.

How was his sense of humor?

He had a great sense of humor. I recall one day after the area conference had ended in Mexico City. He was going to visit many of the countries of

Central America and South America before returning back to Salt Lake City. Somehow at dinner that evening with President Romney and President and Sister Kimball, Arthur Haycock and his wife, and my wife and myself, we started discussing President Kimball's uncle, the famous Golden Kimball, and he started telling Golden Kimball stories. I knew a few of them, but President Kimball, being a nephew and having been very close to his Uncle Golden, knew literally dozens of them, as did President Romney, and they had a wonderful evening recalling all of these Golden Kimball stories and mimicking his high, squeaky voice.

President Kimball was one of the kindest, most considerate individuals that I ever knew, really a lot of fun. He played the piano and he loved to sing. On occasion, after going to the hotel from an area conference, the hotel would extend him the courtesy of the presidential suite. Frequently there was a piano there. He'd play the piano, and we'd all sing and have a little repast after the conferences.

He had a great sense of humor, and yet he was serious most of the time during the period that I knew him because there were many problems and heavy responsibilities—but he always enjoyed a good laugh.

Did President Kimball ever ask you for advice on subjects other than medical?

To a degree he would. When we traveled together, we would commonly shift seats in the airplane so we would have an opportunity to sit with different people and become better acquainted. Occasionally he would come and sit with me or would ask me to come and sit with him. He would test out ideas and simply ask me for an opinion regarding this or that but would hardly ever comment on the opinion.

He would also use those times to broaden our spiritual perspective. I recall one time that he said to me, "Isn't this a wonderful airplane on which we're flying?" We were on a 747 flying from Tokyo to Honolulu. I said, "Yes,

President, it's a magnificent plane." There was a pause. He said, "Have you ever thought about why the Lord permits us to have such planes?" I said, "Well, I have to admit, President, I've never really thought about it in those terms. I really don't know. It's certainly comfortable and permits us to get to where we're going much faster and in greater safety." He said, "Yes, yes. All that's true. But what's the real reason?" There was a pause and then he answered the question himself, "It's to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you remember that we used to have missionaries that would take two months by boat to reach their destination? Now they do it in twelve hours." And then he said, "It's to help facilitate spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's to make available every corner of the earth for the gospel. That's why we have airplanes. That's why we have better transportation, communication, and all of these things."

You and I think much more in temporal terms, but he often thought in spiritual terms.

We've often heard of President Kimball's work with the missionaries.

The tales of President Kimball and the missionaries are legion. I suppose there is no group of people in the entire Church that the President had more love and admiration and respect for than his own colleagues, the general authorities. But the next group was the missionaries of the Church.

Once we had been in East Germany. We were returning to West Germany through the Berlin wall at Checkpoint Charlie. We had some difficulty getting through, just the usual administrative nonsense, and we were a little late in arriving at the church in West Berlin where the Hamburg Mission had assembled for a missionary conference. They were in the chapel singing while awaiting the President's arrival. There were two missionaries standing in the door going into the chapel, and they had their backs turned as we came in the front door. We overheard one mis-



sionary say to the other one, "Today I converted two members of the Church, and they're going to be baptized this next week." Even though we were late, the President couldn't resist the opportunity to take advantage of a great teaching lesson, and he went up and put his hand on the shoulder of this missionary and turned him around. To the missionary's surprise, here was the President of the Church. Of course, he was quite taken back. President Kimball said, "Young man, I couldn't help overhearing you say you had converted two members to the Church today. I want you to know that you've never converted anybody in your life. And what's more, you never will. Conversion is an act of the Spirit and you're only an instrument in the hands of the Lord to

bring this person into acceptance of the gospel."

You can imagine how this missionary was taken back. But after President Kimball had been critical and reproved the missionary he showed forth an increased amount of love just as the scriptures tell us to do. The President put his arms around him, gave him a little squeeze, kissed him on the cheek, and then told him how much he loved him and appreciated the good work that he was doing.

There was another occasion in Manila. We were exiting from this huge area conference where there had been 20,000 people in a sports arena. I was on one side of the President and Arthur Haycock was on the other. (We also served as part of the security team and

had certain security responsibilities.)

As we were leaving the building, an elder came running up to him and said, "Oh, President, I've got a terrible problem. Won't you please help me?" The crowd was beginning to swarm. We were anxious to get the President out and away to avoid any physical problems. The President insisted on stopping and listening. "President, my companion is standing over there against the wall. He's been out in the mission field for only two months. He says he's going home tomorrow. Won't you please help him. We've done everything that we can. I talked to him. His district supervisor and other elders and the mission president have all talked to him. We can't persuade him to not go home. Can't you do something?"

So the president veered off his course and walked over, took this missionary by the hand, put his arm around him, and said, "Elder, come walk with me." We continued to trail right behind him, and we heard him say, "You know elder, the Lord loves you and every single moment you're out here in the mission field, he loves you that much more. If you go home tomorrow the Lord will understand, and he will continue to love you despite all of your shortcomings. If you go home tomorrow, it's quite possible that your family will continue to love you, though they'll be disappointed." And then he said, "If you go home tomorrow it won't be but a few weeks before the most serious problem will occur—you will be disappointed with yourself, and you may never fully recover from that."

About that time we reached the car. The president got into the back seat of his limousine and said, "Elder, come in and sit with me for a minute." He got into the back seat, and they talked together for five minutes. When the elder got out of the car, his companion, who had been waiting, ran up to him and asked, "Well, are you going home tomorrow?" He said, "No, not until it's my turn to go."

This type of incident happened so many times and in so many different

On hearing his third request everybody realized that this was it. We immediately began to organize some rational way we could do this without a stampede. That night he stood there and shook several thousand hands.

ways. He just literally loved the missionaries and there was nothing he wouldn't do for them.

I think the most unusual missionary conference I've ever seen (and I've been to one in Japan where all nine missions in Japan were represented with 1,800 missionaries present) occurred in Capetown, South Africa. An area conference had been held in Johannesburg, but the missionaries in Capetown were not permitted to come because of the distance. It was like traveling from Chicago to New York. When we arrived in Capetown and found that the plane was going to be delayed six hours, President Kimball immediately asked the missionary leader there who had met us to contact all missionaries in the area and have them meet at a certain chapel to hold a conference. This was accomplished in a couple of hours. The entire audience consisted of ten missionaries sitting in the first row of the chapel, and on the stand were President and Sister Kimball, President and Sister Tanner, four other General Authorities of the Church and their wives, the president of the Relief Society, Ambassador David M. Kennedy and Sister Kennedy, and then the supporting cast, Arthur Haycock, myself, the news contingency, the television people, and so forth.

President Kimball said "Gordon, (Gordon Hinckley) I'd like you to conduct." So Gordon B. Hinckley stood up and said, "Brethren, we'll start this missionary activity by singing verses one and four from 'The Spirit of God Like a Fire Is Burning.' We'll ask Sister so and so to lead the singing," and then he called on one of the people on the stand to offer the opening prayer. Under instructions of President Kimball he said "Now, you're a fine looking group. Which one of you elders has been here the longest?" A hand shot up. He said, "Fine, elder. You'll be the first speaker." And then he said, "Which one of you have been here the least amount of time?" A little missionary in the corner could hardly get his hand up, and President Hinckley said, "Good elder, you'll be the second speaker." The missionaries were instructed to come up to the stand one at a time and take two or three minutes each to bear their testimonies. After all ten missionaries had the opportunity to do this, President Kimball spoke extemporaneously for about half an hour to the missionaries, giving them instruction and counsel both on their mission and how they were to conduct themselves as members of the Church when they left the mission field. It was really unusual to see all of this authority of the Church sitting on the stand before ten missionaries. I'm sure they'll never forget it. I know I never will.

Is it true he felt a special responsibility to the Lamanites?

Yes. When he was a youth he had a patriarchal blessing that indicated he would render the Lamanites a great service.

Before his apostolic calling, he had always wondered about this part of his patriarchal blessing. I heard him say that there were few, if any, Lamanites in St. Louis, Missouri, where he served his mission. So shortly after he was called to be an apostle, he was told that for some time the First Presidency had considered a new program in the Church to more effectively bring the

gospel to the Lamanite people. His first assignment as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve was to direct this program.

So he became active in the program, and he never forsook it. It had always been of great interest to him. He had a great love for the Lamanite people that included not only the American Indian but those in Central and South America and the islands as well.

Once we were in Bolivia. We had been on the road for two weeks and were very tired. We were scheduled to fly later that night to Lima, Peru.

During the interval between the last two sessions of the conference we were back in a little room behind the stage when the President suddenly said, "Before we leave tonight I would like to have the opportunity to shake hands with and express my appreciation and love to all the Lamanite people here at the conference." There were several thousand of them—almost all of them Lamanites, descendants of the Inca civilization.

President Romney looked at President Tanner. "President, I don't think that is very wise. When we announce this we will have a real problem with security. We will have a problem with discipline. People will be stumbling over each other in order to shake your hand. You are already tired and have been on the road all this time. You need your rest." Not two minutes later, without saying anything more, President Kimball repeated his request. Once again his counselors said they didn't think it was very wise, but realizing that he was more serious now, both of his counselors looked at me. "Doctor, how do you feel about this? Do you think he is up to it?" I rendered a professional opinion, similar to his counselors', that I felt it was unwise under the circumstances of fatigue, the long day, the days of travel behind us, and the security problem.

There was a moment of silence and the President repeated his request again. On hearing the third request everybody realized that this was it. We

He then went on to prophesy of the great events that would happen in the Church in the East, in China, in India, in Pakistan, the islands of the Pacific, places that were not yet even opened up.

immediately began to organize some rational way we could do this without a stampede. That night he stood and shook several thousand hands. In South America it's not only just a brief handshake. Many use the South American *abrazo*, where you put your arms around each other, pat on the back, kiss on the cheek, and then present your baby to be kissed, and so forth.

Elder Bruce McConkie, realizing the problem, stationed himself just on the far end of the President, because many of the people, seizing upon the opportunity not only wanted to shake his hand and give him an *abrazo*, they wanted to tell him their problems, and there just wasn't time to do that. We had to meet the airplane. So just as soon as initial contact was made and the handshake finished, Elder McConkie would reach over, grab their hand, pull them further down the line, and say, "How are you brother?" We stood there for several hours. It was an evidence of the great love he had for the Lamanite people. We got to the plane around midnight, flew on to Lima, Peru, arrived around 2:30 a.m., and went to the hotel to get a few hours of sleep and to freshen up before the next conference started at 8 a.m.

If you wanted the readers to know and

understand one thing you have learned or experienced through your association with President Kimball, what would that be?

I think that it would be the idea that "If ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." President Kimball was a fine example of a person who loved people. He left no stone unturned to be kind, understanding, considerate, and compassionate to all people, both in and out of the Church. When we would be on trips for these area conferences, we would have a group of as many as thirty or forty people traveling together—half-a-dozen general authorities and their wives, Arthur Haycock, his personal secretary, and his wife, my wife and myself, Brother David Kennedy, the ambassador at large for the Church, and his wife, people representing the Deseret News and KSL, the Church Historian, perhaps the President of the Relief Society or the Young Women's organization, and so forth. In spite of the demands on his time, every day he would circulate among this group and would find out what their personal needs would be. He'd come up to you at the most unsuspecting time and say, "How are you getting along? Are you comfortable? Is your room satisfactory? Are you getting enough to eat? Are you happy? Is there anything that I can do to make your stay more comfortable?"

He really cared. Arthur Haycock and I, as the two who were closest to him on these trips—his secretary and his doctor—would inevitably end up carrying all the loose luggage, overcoats, and briefcases. President Kimball would say, "Ernest, please, please, let me carry something. Let me carry something." Of course, we'd insist, "No, you just go ahead. We'll take care of these things." The next thing you'd know he'd be circulating among the group asking all the women if he couldn't carry their bags or suitcases. There was nothing that he would not, or could not, do to make sure that everyone in the group was doing well.

I remember one occasion at a con-



ference in Central America. The President was sitting in his usual seat in the area conference and one shoe was kind of propped up while he had his legs crossed. Apparently the sole of that shoe was almost completely worn out. There was a woman sitting in the first row of that conference who happened to see it. At the end of the conference she handed an envelope to Arthur Haycock, asking him if he would personally give this to the President. Arthur opened the envelope. The note sort of castigated those of us who were close to the President for allowing him to have a pair of shoes that had a hole in the sole, and there was a fifty dollar bill to get a new pair of shoes.

Arthur told the President, and the President laughed and said, "Arthur, put it in the missionary fund."

Will you tell us of times when the manifestation that President Kimball

was a prophet was particularly evident?

There were many instances when I witnessed that he was a truly a prophet of the Lord. While in Capetown, on the edge of the sea at the southern tip of South Africa, we went up on a tram to a huge rock about 2,000 feet high called Table Rock. As you look out from Table Rock you can see the confluence of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. You can see the warm water and the cold water coming together, quite a thrilling experience. As we stood there President Kimball looked to the west and then looked to the east across the Indian Ocean and then repeated the scripture "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son..." and so on. He then went on to prophesy of the great events that would happen in the Church in the East, in China, in India, in Pakistan, the islands of the Pacific,

places that were not yet even opened up.

I recall a very significant statement of President Hinckley. As a conference was ending and the masses of people were surging forth to see and personally greet the Prophet, President Hinckley said, "There's the Prophet. He is the only one they have come to see and hear. The rest of us are just window dressing."

I recall our journey through Israel. I was privileged to travel with Arthur Haycock, President and Sister Kimball, Dan Ludlow, as our Church guide, and an Israeli guide that had been selected by Dan Ludlow as "the best Israeli guide in all of Israel." We went up together on the Mount of Transfiguration where Dan Ludlow and the Israeli guide told us all of the historic details as is known in the scriptures about the Mount of Transfiguration. Then the President, as only a prophet could,

spent another twenty minutes telling us what really happened. He talked about what actually happened at that time to Peter, James, and John on the Mount of Transfiguration, specifically the endowments that they were given. They were told and advised what would be requisite in their lives after having witnessed this transfiguration of Christ. And really for the first time they gained a full appreciation and testimony of who Christ really was. Up until that point there had been questions; there had been doubts. But now they really knew. You won't find this in any of the scriptures. I heard things that I've never heard before and have never heard since. But I have an abiding faith that they are true.

These are some of the experiences that helped me know that he is a prophet of God. I learned to know him as a person who prays in spiritual terms, not only in temporal terms, as a person who really loves our Father in Heaven and his children. I sensed his prophetic dedication and love in other little ways, such as being in a session where the sacrament was blessed and, as the sacrament prayers were being said, hearing him whisper under his breath "I do love thee. Oh, how I love thee."

Yet, in many ways, though he was a prophet, he was really simple.

Yes, he was a very common man in many ways. He ate in a very simple manner. People would offer him everything, but he would rather have bread and milk.

I'll never forget the occasion when we were in Johannesburg. It was a priesthood conference and the ladies did not have to be present. So Sister Kimball and the other ladies went to the Lion Park. I had taken the President back to his room and had seen to his needs. He was comfortable and said he was going to lie down, so I went down to the dining room for dinner. I was sitting at a table with President Hinckley, Arthur Haycock, and Earl Jones, who at that time was chief of security. Right in the middle of dinner one of the security people came down

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and said, "Doctor, the President just came out of his room and asked if we could find you. He wants to see you." President Hinckley then quipped, "Ernest, don't worry about your dinner. We'll eat it for you." I went up to the President's room. His wife hadn't come back yet, and he was lonely. He said, "Ernest, I just wanted you to come up and have dinner with me." Some good local Saint had delivered him a freshly baked, warm loaf of bread and a bottle of milk. The hotel had provided glasses on the tray. He said, "Let me fix it for you." And he took the loaf of bread, pulled off a chunk of it, stuffed it in the glass, poured in some milk, and gave me a spoon. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I had a prime rib of beef on the table down in the dining room. So we sat there and had bread and milk until his wife came home.

What were his last few years like?

In his declining days I would often go over to the hotel and review his medical situation. He would hold my hand and wouldn't let me go, and he would say, "Why won't the Lord take me. If I can't do his work, if I cannot complete the mission I'm here for, why won't he take me?" He would repeat this time and again, and I finally said,

"President, are you making a comment or asking a question?" He said, "I'm asking a question. I want you to tell me."

He told me one time in absolute seriousness that he never feared death, that he was prepared to go, but what he feared most was disability, the inability to perform up to the standard the Lord expected. He wanted me to be very careful about his medical situation. He made it clear that if I ever found him in a situation where it was concurred by all the consultants present that there was no chance for recovery, I was not to do one single thing that would allow him to live a day further—and if I did he would come back to haunt me in the remaining days of my life. He was serious, dead serious. Unfortunately, he lived through a period of disability. The very thing that he feared the most came about. We felt badly about that, but going back over the medical decisions, there was nothing else we could do under those circumstances. But he was prepared to go, and I'm sure the hand of the Lord maintained him here on the earth for a good many years more than he might otherwise have had, independent of anything his physicians or surgeons accomplished for him.

The President said that because of his multiple infirmities and difficulties that he finally understood what it meant to endure to the end. With all of the difficulties and privations that President Kimball experienced, he felt he had a full understanding and realization of what Job had gone through.

What was the kindest compliment he ever gave to you?

He said many nice things to me over a long period of time as I traveled with him; we had a good professional relationship. But I think the nicest thing that he ever said to me was, "Ernest, I want you to know that I no longer consider you just as my doctor. I consider you to be one of my family." I don't personally feel there is a higher accolade he could have given me. ❧