

The Hermeneutics of Testimony: Ricoeur and an LDS Perspective

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Bearing testimony is a central aspect of LDS religious practice and experience. Testimony, or the profession of faith, plays a distinctive role in personal and shared religious experiences. One cannot observe LDS practices without being struck by the culture of certainty communicated through monthly testimony meetings, the emphasis of many programs and initiatives on gaining a personal testimony, or the solemn and even apostolic testimonies borne by our leaders. Why is testimony so important to us? Principally because faith in Christ is the first principle of the gospel and is necessary for salvation, not only as a belief but as a living force evidenced by our actions. Our testimonies become a central source of motivation in our lives and have a primary influence on our actions. For latter-day saints a testimony implies a number of elements including a strong emphasis on bearing testimony, a culture of certainty characterized by statements like “I know . . .,” and a specific content that includes bearing witness of not only God and Jesus Christ, but also of the Restoration, the Book of Mormon, and the current prophet. The testimony we seek is identified as a gift from the Spirit, a gift from God to the earnest seeker. Because of the importance that testimony has in LDS religious practices, it is appropriate to discuss it from a philosophical perspective in the hope that it will deepen our understanding and appreciation of what it means to testify.

This paper explores the question, “How should we think about testimony?” More specifically, it aims at making connections between the philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s work on testimony and LDS examples and

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practices, in the hope that such a comparison will help latter-day saints gain a greater understanding of what it means to bear testimony. The first section of the paper summarizes many of Ricoeur's contributions to the philosophy of testimony. Ricoeur seeks to determine whether a philosophy of testimony is even possible. He analyzes testimony bearing from a semantic perspective, providing language and terms to describe the philosophical aspects of testimony. Furthermore, his analysis illuminates the juridical structure that shapes the meaning of the word "testimony." He builds on this model through an analysis of prophetic discourse as it appears in the Bible—culminating in the trial of Jesus Christ. The second part of the paper applies Ricoeur's insights to the Book of Mormon. In particular, the trial of Abinadi closely resembles both prophetic discourse in the Old Testament and the trial of Jesus Christ, making it an ideal place to test Ricoeur's ideas. Finally, the third part of the paper focuses on the potential of Ricoeur's ideas to affect and enlarge the way we think about our own testimonies and the role we play in bearing them. Examining Ricoeur's work leads to new insights and a philosophic understanding that is useful in articulating the LDS practice of bearing testimony.

I. Ricoeur and a Semantic Analysis of Testimony and Prophetic Discourse

Ricoeur begins by stating that testimony is quasi-empirical: it designates the act of relating what one has seen or heard. It is not perception of the event itself, but the story or narration of an event. The witness is the author. He reports personal experiences and shifts the discourse from the level of things seen to the level of things said (123). Testimony also implies a dual relationship: the testifier (who has seen) and the hearer (who has not seen and must rely on what is heard to judge the facts in question). Thus, another aspect of testimony is that it is a tool for judgment. We rely on the statement or story to form an opinion of the meaning of what has happened. In other words, testimony seeks to prove, to justify, and to show something to us. Therefore, testimony is not just a statement about something witnessed but an account used in support of a judgment, giving rise to the judiciary sense of testimony (124).

Ricoeur observes that not every account is a testimony; the act of testifying has a relation to a place or institution. Specifically, testimony makes reference to a trial which calls for testimony to settle a dispute between two or more parties. We always testify *for* or *against* something. Both legal discourse and the notion of the trial model certain traits of testimony and give rise to the quasi-judicial aspect of testimony (125). In a legal judgment

we cannot have certainty, only probability, and the probable is pursued through a struggle of opinion. Another trait of legal judgment is that it is defeasible, meaning that any judgment can be contested or invalidated (126). Furthermore, in a quasi-judicial sense, testimony is a kind of proof, part of the rhetorical level of discourse aimed at getting a certain judgment. Drawing on Aristotle's work in the *Rhetoric*, Ricoeur demonstrates that testimony is a non-technical proof, meaning that it is external to the arguments the orator makes (127). The judge and judgment become dependent on something exterior, to things seen or heard. In this context, the credibility of the testimony and the quality of the witness take on the utmost importance.

For Ricoeur, the problem of false witness is centered more in sincerity than accuracy. Thus, a false witness is not defined as an error in the account of things experienced, but as a lie in the heart of the witness. The evil intention in false witness is "fatal to the exercise of justice" (128). But what defines a true witness? The witness is not merely a reporter: he testifies "for" or "to" something, implying a public conviction to a cause or interpretation of events that can extend even to the sacrifice of life. Inherent in being a witness is the possibility of becoming a martyr, a relationship that is suggested in the fact that the root word for martyr means "to witness" (129). Yet one does not become a martyr unless one is on trial, and in a normal judicial setting the one on trial is the accused, not the witness. So when does the witness become the accused and risk becoming a martyr? Ricoeur states it is when society or the powerful hate certain causes, even the most just ones (129). The "persecuted just" are exemplified by such men as Socrates or Jesus, who faced death for their unwavering witnesses. It is within this context that Ricoeur focuses on the word "witness." He states, "The witness is the man who is identified with the just cause which the crowd and the great hate and who, for this just cause, risks his life" (129). As such, testimony is more than a narration of events; it is the engagement of a pure heart to the death. Even in a less dramatic or somber setting, Ricoeur points out that acts and movements of life become testimonies to the extent that they are a living proof of an internalized conviction and devotion to a cause. Testimony can be an action that points to or affirms a conviction or faith outside of itself. But this meaning of the word "testimony" and the judicial sense, described earlier as a statement for or against something, are not opposed; the range of meaning joins at a fixed point: the engagement of the witness in testimony. The nature of this engagement is the fundamental difference between true and false witness (130).

Ricoeur builds on his semantic analysis by addressing the religious aspect of testimony. Using a text from Isaiah, Ricoeur identifies four characteristics of the religious meaning in the word *testimony*. First, as is

evident in the case of prophets, a witness is *sent* in order to testify of something. Second, the witness testifies about the “global meaning of human experience,” God, and so forth. Third, “testimony is oriented toward proclamation”—it is meant for and relevant to all people. Fourth, testimony in a religious setting implies the “total engagement” of words and acts, even to the extreme of martyrdom (131). Perhaps the primary difference between the religious and the profane meaning is the sense that the testimony does not belong to or originate with the witness: God is both the source of testimony and the subject of its content (131). As scriptural examples highlight, proclaiming to others is always more important than dying for a cause; being a witness precedes being a martyr. Yet even in a religious context the juridical aspect of testimony is still relevant. People of faith are called on to testify that God is the only true and living God in a trial that God initiates with people and their idols (132). In fact, this theme of religious confession-profession in a trial is a characteristic of the prophetic idea of testimony. Yet this confession of faith is only possible if united with a certain narrative kernel, a historic element. Ricoeur states, “It is not possible to testify *for* a meaning without testifying *that* something has happened which signifies this meaning” (133). As such, any religious witness or testimony is necessarily a witness of historic signs or a narration of acts.

The characteristics of testimony shift slightly between the prophetic discourse of the Old Testament and the evangelical discourse characterized by the New Testament. In this setting the central aspect of testimony is confession, especially that Jesus is the Christ. Though all four gospel writers proclaim as much, Ricoeur focuses on the Gospel of John. While retaining a narrative framework, John focuses more on confessing that Jesus is the Christ than on a narration of events. The term “witness” is often applied to Christ himself (136). This difference in meaning affects the way we think about testimony. In John, “testimony” is used as a synonym for “revelation;” the Son testifies and thereby manifests the Father: the testimony of Christ is the exegesis of God. Testimony shifts “from confession-narration toward manifestation itself” (137). This shift in meaning is seen in John the Baptist, who is not an eye-witness to the resurrection or to many of Jesus’ other miracles. John the Baptist’s testimony is the “Christic confession.” He testifies that Jesus is the son of God, which witness comes from an interior sign or signs, an interior word that says this is the Christ (138). His testimony is a personal and internal witness. The extreme point of internalization is testimony through the Holy Ghost, a personal witness known only to the individual. In summary, evangelical discourse is characterized by the dual theme of Christ as the faithful witness and of personal testimony through a revelation of the Holy Ghost. However, such testimony does not lose all reference to eye-witness testimony. This is because testimony is always a

testimony of something. A testimony-confession of Christ is still linked to a narrative framework of who he was, what he did, what his works were, and so forth. Even at an extreme point of internalization, testimony-confession cannot be separated from testimony-narration (139).

Ricoeur also maintains that the profane sense of the word “testimony”—an element of proof in a trial—is relevant to testimony in a religious setting. This is represented in Christ’s ministry in general and his trial in particular, both of which present a contest between God and the world with the advent of the Lord’s kingdom in the balance (140). Christ’s trial typifies Ricoeur’s theology of testimony; Christ is both the faithful witness and the emissary sent to testify to the world. Christ is the defendant in the earthly trial but the judge in the eschatological trial (141): “The world cannot hate you; but me it hateth, because I testify of it, that the works thereof are evil” (John 7:7). It is in this judicial setting that confession-profession takes on all the characteristics of testimony, namely confession and attestation. “Internal testimony of the Holy Ghost derives . . . its meaning in the struggle” between the world and Christ as evidenced by the trial (Ricoeur 141). At the human level testimony is dual, an internal testimony or conviction from the Holy Ghost and the external testimony of works and suffering. The trial is significant because it is at the juridical moment that testimony as a confession of faith is tied to testimony as a narration of facts.

II. Ricoeur, Testimony, and LDS Scripture

Ricoeur finds support within the Bible for understanding testimony as being related to the idea of a trial. However, the same principles are evident in the Book of Mormon as well. In particular, Abinadi’s prophesying to the people of King Noah, culminating with his trial, highlights many of the same themes and tensions that Ricoeur found in the trial of Christ and serves to support Ricoeur’s ideas about understanding testimony in both a semantic and religious context.

In his semantic exploration of the word “testimony,” Ricoeur states that a testimony is primarily a story or narration of things one has both heard and seen (123). The witness or bearer of the testimony is the author of this narration. Furthermore, “testimony” implies a dual relationship between the witness and those who hear and then judge whether or not to accept the testimony. The heart of this judiciary sense of testimony is that any testimony lends itself to the support of some statement or opinion; it is a tool of judgment in a trial. These ideas lend themselves well

to the story of Abinadi. He comes among the people of King Noah¹ and prophesies to them of their wickedness and of the impending judgments of God. In a strict sense, Abinadi and his testimony do not fit perfectly with Ricoeur's semantic outline, primarily because of the differences between testimony in profane and religious discourse. For example, while Ricoeur states that the witness is the author of the testimony, Abinadi makes it clear that his testimony or witness comes from the Lord: "Behold, thus saith the Lord, and thus hath he commanded me, saying, Go forth, and say unto this people . . . except they repent I will visit them in mine anger" (Mosiah 11:20). Nevertheless, vestiges of Ricoeur's semantic analysis are evident. While primarily acting as an emissary of God, Abinadi nevertheless includes his own observations as a member of King Noah's kingdom. "And now I read unto you the remainder of the commandments of God, for I perceive that they are not written in your hearts; I perceive that ye have studied and taught iniquity the most part of your lives" (Mosiah 13:11). His witness is based both on a narration or history of what God has revealed to him and what he has seen for himself. The second point Ricoeur makes about testimony is illustrated by the dual relationship between Abinadi, who testifies, and the people to whom he testifies. They assume the role of the judge and must decide what to make of Abinadi's testimony, even before they decide what to do with his life. Abinadi's testimony is decidedly in support of a specific opinion or statement, namely God's witness against Noah and his people. Its judicial nature is highlighted by its stark contrast to the testimony of the people, who in angry rebuttal cry, "O king, behold, we are guiltless . . . therefore, this man has lied concerning you, and he has prophesied in vain" (Mosiah 12:14).

While strong judicial themes are evident in the case of Abinadi, the differences between Abinadi's trial and Ricoeur's ideas are mediated by Ricoeur's evolving semantic treatment of "testimony." The struggle of two parties in a judicial setting and the pitting of one's testimony against the other points to the importance of the reliability of the witness. The issue of whether the witness is a false witness, defined as having a lie in one's heart, or a true witness, fully devoted to their cause or testimony, becomes paramount. But in Ricoeur's words, the possibility that a true witness, fully devoted to his or her cause even to the point of martyrdom, "may also be accused calls for a different analysis" (129). The idea of the faithful witness, identified with a just cause and pitted against the rest of society, more closely resembles Abinadi's trial. Abinadi does not argue his case against King Noah and his people before an impartial judge. Rather, Abinadi is

¹ King Noah is not to be confused with the biblical Noah. King Noah's life is described in Mosiah 11-19.

both the witness and the accused. By becoming a martyr, Abinadi's trial closely resembles the trials of both Socrates and Jesus, and fits within the archetype that Ricoeur identifies.

Ricoeur concludes his semantic analysis by emphasizing that the essence of a true witness is devotion to a cause, and that actions and lifestyles can be testimonies to the extent that they point to a certain conviction (130). The fact that the witness is engaged in bearing testimony unites the familiar judicial meanings of testimony that Ricoeur first highlights with the internalization of testimony in the true witness. It is here where the case of Abinadi shines. To say that Abinadi is a true witness seems almost to understate his complete and total commitment to his testimony and mission. Abinadi is completely faithful in discharging the direction he receives from the Lord. He boldly testifies to King Noah and his people of their wickedness and the judgments of God, testifies to them of the Savior, and does so with complete disregard for his own safety and life (Mosiah 13:9). This total engagement of acts and beliefs renders his testimony potent and sincere.

A comparison between Ricoeur's analysis of the religious sense of the word "testimony" and the trial of Abinadi reveals even closer parallels. Ricoeur first identifies four characteristics of religious meaning in the word "testimony," each of which fits in the case of Abinadi. First of all, the witness is *sent* to testify of something. As noted earlier, this marks a departure from Ricoeur's analysis of testimony in a profane sense, in which the witness is the author of his or her testimony. It also fits more closely with Abinadi's role as a prophet who is *sent* from God to testify (Mosiah 11:20). The second and third characteristics of testimony in a religious discourse refer to its cosmic scope as well as its universal relevance. Abinadi's message to the people of King Noah focuses on their eternal salvation, which can only come through repentance and accepting the witness of Christ: "I would that ye should understand that God himself shall come down among the children of men, and shall redeem his people" (Mosiah 15:1). The fourth characteristic that Ricoeur highlights is a total engagement of words and acts, even to the point of martyrdom. In this sense, the witness in a religious setting is similar to the *true witness* that Ricoeur elaborates in his semantic analysis. As a prophet of God, Abinadi shows complete engagement to his witness when he states, "I will suffer even until death, and I will not recall my words, and they shall stand as a testimony against you. And if ye slay me ye will shed innocent blood, and this shall also stand as a testimony against you at the last day" (Mosiah 17:10). Ricoeur is careful to point out that being a witness comes before being a martyr. One is a martyr because of one's witness, not the other way around. This points to the fact that the message from God is more important than the life or

death of the messenger. The trial of Abinadi dramatizes this idea by the fact that Abinadi is given divine protection to finish his message before he can become a martyr (Mosiah 13:2-4). His subsequent martyrdom seals his testimony without drawing attention away from it.

Ricoeur also points out that, just as with the profane use of the term, religious testimony is connected to a narration or history of events. There is a “narrative kernel” to all religious testimony (133). Even at the extreme point of internalization, as in the case of a personal witness from the Holy Ghost, the testimony-confession of Christ is linked with a testimony-narration. In other words, even a simple and personal witness that Jesus is the Christ is necessarily connected with certain facts about who Christ was, what he did, and why he is significant, as well as the historicity of that divine revelation. Abinadi’s testimony is primarily a declaration of Christ’s divinity, which is the height of testimony according to Ricoeur (134). Abinadi’s sermon to King Noah and his court is significant for at least two reasons. First of all, Abinadi’s declaration of Christ’s divinity is done within a narrative framework that includes references to biblical laws, prophecies, and the Plan of Salvation. Abinadi testifies of Christ’s divinity through a lengthy narration beginning with Christ’s pre-mortal identity, extending through his earthly ministry, atonement, and resurrection, and including a description of what men and women must do to merit salvation (Mosiah 15-16). The nature of Abinadi’s testimony of Christ clearly demonstrates the relationship that Ricoeur identifies between testimony-confession and testimony-narration.

Second, the narrative structure of Abinadi’s discourse supports Ricoeur’s idea that testimony of Christ is the height of testimony. Abinadi begins his discourse to King Noah after claiming the right to finish his message. He starts by questioning them on their observance of the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Abinadi then connects the Law of Moses to Moses’ prophecies concerning the Messiah, followed by Isaiah’s more recent Messianic prophecies. He then declares his own witness that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and teaches them what they must do to gain salvation. Abinadi begins with ideas that King Noah and his priests are most familiar with and gradually builds up his message until he makes his point, focusing on and ending with Christ as the Messiah. The organization of his sermon points to Jesus Christ and his redeeming power as the most important part of his message.

The final and perhaps the most important part of Ricoeur’s religious analysis focuses on the judicial aspect of testimony as part of a cosmic trial between God and the world. This idea finds its most forceful expression in the trial of Christ. When he is brought before Pontius Pilate, Christ stands on trial in the earthly sense. But at the same time, he is the judge of the

world in the eschatological sense, declaring that his kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36). In this setting, the accused is both witness and judge. The same tension between the world and the kingdom of God evident in Christ’s trial also exists in Abinadi’s trial. Of course, Abinadi does not usurp Christ’s role as judge of the world, but as one of his emissaries he speaks with the authority of one of his plenipotentiaries. His witness and authority is divine, and he has come to testify and deliver the judgment of the Lord. King Noah and his people represent the children of God who have turned away from the covenant and embraced idol worship, perverting the law God gave to Moses. Thus there are two trials occurring simultaneously. In the earthly sense, Abinadi is the accused, on trial for testifying of the wickedness of the world. He is at the mercy of the world and faces martyrdom if he does not deny his divine witness. But in the eschatological sense, Abinadi represents the Lord’s judgment being passed on the people of King Noah: “Thus saith the Lord, it shall come to pass that this generation, because of their iniquities, shall be brought into bondage . . .” (Mosiah 12:2). Paralleling Christ’s trial, Abinadi is put to death for his witness against the world. But in the eschatological sense, Abinadi’s prophesies all come to pass and the people of King Noah find their lives dramatically disrupted by the judgments of God. The trial of Abinadi represents testimony in all its many facets, both secular and religious. It also demonstrates how the ideas that Ricoeur develops are broadly applicable to other instances of testimony and can deepen our understanding of the act of testifying.

III. The Importance of Ricoeur’s Ideas and their Implications for LDS Practice

When bearing testimony, we do not tend to think of ourselves as witnesses in a trial, nor do we pay close attention to the semantics underlying our speech. Nevertheless, several of Ricoeur’s insights can lead to a greater appreciation and understanding of what goes on when one bears testimony. The remainder of this paper explores several implications and personal applications of Ricoeur’s work.

During a recent session of General Conference, a biannual meeting of the LDS church, Elder Oaks stated, “A testimony of the gospel is . . . not a sermon. President [Spencer W.] Kimball taught that the moment we begin preaching to others, our testimony is ended.” (26) It is clear that as we bear testimonies to others, our role is to humbly witness of Christ’s divinity and not to cry repentance. Yet as we look to the scriptures, it seems as though all prophetic testimonies involve an either implicit or explicit call

to repentance. Certainly Abinadi captures this element of testimony when he blends his witness of Christ with a powerful rebuke to King Noah's priests, telling them that they ought to tremble, repent of their sins, and begin teaching the people that redemption comes through Christ (Mosiah 16:13). In what sense then is testimony a call? How can we mediate the apparent tension between Elder Oaks' statement and the presentation of testimony in the scriptures? Ricoeur provides a crucial insight when he equates the "Christic confession" with the manifestation of the Father (137). Testifying of the divinity of Jesus Christ is an act that runs deeper than a declaration of faith: it can lead to an experience with the divine. Lacking divine authority, most people who bear testimony are not in the position to lecture on repentance. Yet the call to repentance that seems closely related to bearing witness does not originate with the person bearing testimony, it is inherent in an individual's experience of the divine. The witness never issues the call to repentance, but this call is always present to the extent that our testimonies are windows to Christ's invitation to repent and "come unto him."

Ricoeur's theme of a trial leads to further insights into what it means to bear testimony. In Adam Miller's essay "Atonement and Testimony," he states that every testimony is necessarily centered in the atonement of Christ, or in other words, grounded in an experience of the redeeming power of the atonement (2). Therefore, a testimony of anything besides the atonement is only a testimony in a peripheral sense, much like a branch is merely an appendage to the tree. To say one has a testimony of Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, or a living prophet is really to say that one experiences the power of the atonement through those things. This idea is all the more significant when juxtaposed with the statement in Revelation 19:10 which says, "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophesy." It intimates a connection between having a testimony in the religious sense and having the spirit of prophesy. When we bear sincere testimony to others do we become like the prophets, participating in a sort of cosmic trial witnessing for Christ against the world? Ricoeur would seem to believe so when he states, "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit derives all its meaning in the struggle which is waged between the Christ and the world before the court of history" (141). In a common LDS setting such as a sacrament meeting, the bearing of testimony is usually done in a safe environment, hardly the scene of martyrdom that accompanies Abinadi's or Christ's testimonies. Nevertheless the same tension between Christ and the world appears when we bear testimony because to bear testimony of Christ is to participate in the great eschatological trial between Christ and the world. In a certain sense, to bear testimony separates us from the world and profane. We are comfortable thinking that having and bearing a testimony

strengthens our relationship with God and helps us find religious truth, but Ricoeur's analysis implies more than that. Bearing testimony is a positive response to the cosmic question, "Who's on the Lord's side? Who?" (Hymns 260) in which we not only draw closer to Christ and witness of his divinity, but through doing so distance ourselves from the world and become a more holy people.

Also, if we view bearing our own testimonies in the light of a juridical moment, we realize that the two elements Ricoeur describes, testimony-confession and testimony-narration, are present in our own testimonies. Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated, "A testimony of the gospel is a personal witness borne to our souls by the Holy Ghost that certain facts of eternal significance are true and that we know them to be true. Such facts include the nature of the Godhead and our relationship to its three members, the effectiveness of the Atonement, and the reality of the Restoration" (26). In Elder Oaks' definition, the two elements of a Christic confession and a narrative content are closely bound together. We engage in testimony-confession when we declare our witness, borne through the revealing power of the Holy Ghost, that Jesus is the Christ. Testimony-narration consists of the associated narrative of how we gained that testimony and what the significance of that testimony is. Stating that Jesus is the Christ will always be tied into a narrative of how that Atonement cleanses us from sin, brings about the resurrection and so forth; in Ricoeur's words, a narration of "the acts of deliverance" (134). Distinguishing between these two important elements helps us better understand the makeup of our own testimonies. It also gives us a place to start when we seek to strengthen our testimonies of Christ, either through seeking a stronger spiritual witness of Christ's divinity or through increasing our familiarity with his divine character, perfect love, or saving grace.

Finally, through bearing testimony we participate in the Ricoeurian phenomenon of a "dual-trial." Whether we testify to those without faith or to those with a similar belief, we act as witnesses for Christ in his earthly trial. Our testimonies become a form of evidence in the defense of Christ. But our testimonies are also significant because they become evidence *for us* when we become defendants, on trial in the eschatological sense where our "words will condemn us, yea, all our works will condemn us; we shall not be found spotless; and our thoughts will also condemn us; and in this awful state we shall not dare to look up to our God" (Alma 12:14). In the great trial of the Final Judgment, Jesus moves from the role of accused to the role of counselor and advocate. For those who were faithful in their testimony of Jesus, the Lord has promised to forgive their sins and purify them through the Atonement. Abinadi makes clear the powerful connection between bearing testimony and salvation when he states that "those

who shall declare his generation,” or in other words, bear testimony of Christ, become numbered among “his seed” (Mosiah 15:10). “These are they whose sins he has borne; these are they for whom he has died, to redeem them from their transgressions” (Mosiah 15:12). Ricoeur may have meant something like this when he stated that the cosmic trial of Christ against the world is what gives meaning and significance to our personal testimonies (140–41). In Miller’s words, “to bear a testimony is to be redeemed” (14). Clearly the importance of testimony consists not only in its significance as a statement of shared belief or as a motivator of religious behavior, but in the fact that the strength of our testimony and our willingness to bear it becomes a factor in our salvation and a criterion that Christ uses to judge our worthiness to enter into his glory.

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