

The Dawn of a New Millennium

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The dawn of a new millennium and the dusk of an old provide an opportunity to review key events and accomplishments of the recent past and ask what the future may hold. I realize that some believe the transition from one century and millennium to the next will occur at the end of the year 2000. For others who like to celebrate good things twice, the trial run has just been completed. And for those who base their counting on a multiplicity of zeroes, the new millennium has arrived. Regardless of how one counts, we “stand on the summit of the ages.” In the October 1999 general conference, President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke of standing “on the summit of the ages, awed by a great and solemn sense of history” (“At the Summit of the Ages,” *Ensign*, November 1999, 74). With eloquence he said:

What an exciting and wonderful thing it is to step across the threshold of the centuries. . . . Even more exciting is our opportunity to bridge the millennium that is drawing to a close and greet a new thousand years. [Hinckley, “Summit,” 72]

He continued:

For some reason unknown to us, but in the wisdom of God, we have been privileged to come to earth in

this glorious age. There has been a great flowering of science. There has been a veritable explosion of learning. This is the greatest of all ages of human endeavor and human accomplishment. And more importantly, it is the season when God has spoken, when His Beloved Son has appeared, when the divine priesthood has been restored, when we hold in our hand another testament of the Son of God. What a glorious and wonderful day this is. [Hinckley, “Summit,” 74]

There is an adage that says, “One does not see the future by looking in a rearview mirror.” In contrast, there is another that declares: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (George Santayana, “Flux and Constancy in Human Nature,” in *Reason in Common Sense*, vol. 1 of *The Life of Reason* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905–1906], 284). For a moment I wish to remind us of some of the spiritual and temporal high points since Joseph Smith’s day and then look forward to the new century in anticipation of what lies ahead. We are fortunate to have prophets and apostles who are seers—servants who have

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provided us with a road map for the future. It is instructive to see what the Lord has said through them regarding the years ahead.

Some Highlights from the Last Two Centuries

Since the dawn of time, prophets have spoken of two special periods in the history of the earth. The first is the meridian of time, a time when the Son of God was born, ministered to His people, suffered death, and was resurrected. Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and numerous other prophets of the Old Testament foretold of this special season when the Son of God made the earth His footstool. It has now been 2,000 years since the Savior walked the earth, taught the gospel, healed the sick, raised the dead, and voluntarily gave His life that all of His Father's children could have the opportunity to overcome physical and spiritual death.

The second special period referred to by the prophets is called the dispensation of the fulness of times. According to the Apostle Paul, it is an age when the Lord will "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth" (Ephesians 1:10; see also D&C 27:13). It is a period often referred to as the last days; a time just preceding the Lord's second coming; a time when He will restore the gospel to the earth, including all of the keys, powers, and authority previously bestowed in earlier days (see Bruce R. McConkie, *MD*, 200, s.v. "dispensation of the fulness of times").

Isaiah referred to the last days on numerous occasions. He foretold the establishment of the Lord's house "in the top of the mountains" and said that all nations would "flow unto it" (Isaiah 2:2). Isaiah also told of a people whose voice would speak from "the dust," whose words would be in the form of "a book that is sealed"—the words of which could not be read by learned men. And in that day, the Lord would proceed to do "a marvellous work and a wonder" (Isaiah 29:4, 11–12, 14).

Daniel foresaw a day when the Lord would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed nor given to another people (see Daniel 2:44). The kingdom was represented by a "stone . . . cut out of the mountain without hands" that would roll across the earth, breaking in pieces earthly kingdoms (Daniel 2:45).

Malachi spoke of a day just before the Lord's second coming when Elijah the prophet would be sent to "turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers," lest the earth be smitten with a curse (Malachi 4:5–6).

Peter spoke of the last days when he told the Jews to repent before "the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" and explained to them that Christ's second coming would not occur until "the times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:19, 21). Finally, John the Revelator foretold of an event shortly before the Lord's second coming when an angel would return the everlasting gospel to the earth so that it could be preached "to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Revelation 14:6).

The dispensation of the fulness of times represents a winding-up period preceding the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a time when the gospel will be preached to every nation, giving the Father's children an opportunity to prepare for the Son's second coming. It will be a day of judgment and the end of the world as we know it. The beginning of this dispensation was initiated by one of the greatest events in the course of human history—the appearance of the Father and Son to the boy Joseph Smith. To illustrate the majesty of the event in the Sacred Grove, can you think of another time when both the Father and the Son appeared on this earth? The scriptures tell of occasions when the Father's voice was heard from the heavens declaring His Only Begotten Son: e.g., at the Savior's baptism (Matthew 3:17), on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5), and to the Nephites in the land

Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:3–7). But the Garden of Eden may be the only other place where both openly manifested Themselves on this earth.

Not only did the Father and the Son open the last dispensation, but John’s angel proved to be Moroni, who returned the everlasting gospel so that it could be taken to every nation. The sealed plates Moroni revealed to Joseph Smith fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy that a people would speak out of the ground. The marvelous work and a wonder is the restoration of the gospel and the Book of Mormon’s witness that Jesus is the Christ. Elijah returned the sealing keys to Joseph and Oliver Cowdery in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836 (see D&C 110:14–16). Almost immediately the Spirit of Elijah began stirring the hearts of men and women to gather family records and histories so that temple ordinances might be performed. Isaiah’s “mountain of the Lord’s house” (Isaiah 2:2) has been established in the tops of the mountains in the form of the Salt Lake Temple, and people from all nations have flowed to it both temporally and spiritually.

Peter’s “times of refreshing” refer to the fact that all knowledge that has ever been revealed plus knowledge reserved for the last days will come to light in this last dispensation. The Lord told Joseph Smith in Liberty Jail that no knowledge would be withheld, that “all thrones and dominions, principalities and powers” would be revealed, that the “bounds set to the heavens or to the seas, or to [the earth], or to the sun, moon, or stars—All the times of their revolutions . . . shall be revealed in the days of the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 121:26–32). If one looks at the spiritual refreshing that has taken place through the prophets of this dispensation, plus the rapid discovery of temporal truths, can one doubt that the Lord is refreshing the earth, that the opportunity for men and women to be blessed both spiritually and temporally is vastly different today than at the turn of the 19th century?

To illustrate the change that has occurred, consider the field of transportation. From the beginning of time to the 19th century, the fastest mode of travel was the horse. Since the restoration of the gospel, new methods have been developed. Now we can travel on trains, automobiles, airplanes, and spaceships. Commercial air travel is so new that the first person ever to fly among my progenitors was my mother in 1947. Missionaries did not use air travel until the late 1950s. I left for England in 1956. The trip from Salt Lake City to London took 10 days by train and ship. Two years later, when I returned home, travel by air was allowed. It took 23 hours to fly from Scotland to Salt Lake City with stopovers in Greenland, New York, and Chicago. The flight across the Atlantic was 12 hours, including the refueling stop in Greenland. Fifteen years later I flew from London to Washington, D.C., on the Concorde in just over three hours. Today a spaceship travels around the earth in little more than one hour.

Consider the innovations and discoveries of the last few years that influence everyday life: cellular telephones, computers, fax machines, the Internet, new medical devices, genetic engineering, robots, and the sequencing of the human genome. The list is almost endless.

Unfortunately, the acceptance of temporal knowledge and its benefits has far exceeded the acceptance of spiritual truths. Although the gospel of peace is being taken to almost every corner of the earth, only a tiny fraction of the earth’s population has accepted it. Nephi saw our day and said that the members of the Lord’s church would be small in number, but they would be “upon all the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 14:12). We are 11 million people today—less than 1 percent of the earth’s population. We are scattered across the earth in more than 150 countries. The world has been slow to accept spiritual truths. “For the [20th] century as a whole, warfare is thought to have taken the lives of three times as many people as were

killed in 19 previous centuries combined” (David Gergen, “Roaring into 2000,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 3–10 January 2000, 96).

The 21st Century

What of the future? What are some of the key developments that will occur in the 21st century? What is the destiny of the Church as the earth rolls forward toward the Lord’s second coming?

First, let us consider the missionary program. Today there are 11 million members and approximately 60,000 missionaries in more than 150 countries. By the year 2025, estimates suggest that Church population will total 25 to 30 million if China remains closed to missionary work and an even larger membership if China opens. Today slightly less than 50 percent of the Church membership resides in North America, with just under 40 percent in Central and South America. By the year 2025, Latin American membership will rise to 15 million, whereas Church population in North America will total 8 million. The missionary force in 2025 will be more than 125,000. By 2025 the missionary program likely will be in every country with missionaries teaching every kindred, tongue, and people. The key variable that will determine the presence or absence of missionaries will be a nation’s policies regarding religious freedom. Recent research indicates a strong movement toward freedom, especially in the last few years. A recent *Church News* article reported this progress as follows:

Researchers found almost 60 percent of the world’s population live in free societies, where basic rights and religious freedom flourish. . . . Freedom House—a pro-democracy group based in Washington, D.C.—remarked that whereas 100 years ago, no nation on earth had universal voting rights for its citizens, now 119 of 192 nations have elected representatives. The group could find only 18 nations in which civil liberties were suppressed last year by the military or their rulers.

*With newfound political freedom comes renewed hope that religious liberties are gaining ground, also. The apostle Paul in his epistle to the Corinthians wrote, “Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” (2 Cor. 3:17.) [Viewpoint, “Blessing of Liberty,” *Church News*, 8 January 2000, 16]*

David Gergen, editor at large of *U.S. News and World Report*, reported on this same research, indicating that “when the Berlin Wall fell a decade ago, 69 countries were democratic; last week the Freedom House reported the number has grown to 120” (“Roaring into 2000,” 96).

The trend toward freedom will continue during the 21st century. This will occur as the “stone . . . cut out of the mountain without hands” quietly, peacefully moves across the earth. It will occur so that the gospel message can be preached in all the world. Toward the end of Christ’s life, His disciples, sitting with Him on the Mount of Olives, asked the following question: “Tell us when shall these things be . . . ; and what is the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (JS—M 1:4).

In response, Jesus told them He would come in a day when the elect would “be gathered from the four quarters of the earth”; a time “of wars, and rumors of wars”; a period in which there would “be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes”; a time when “the love of men shall wax cold”; and a time when “this Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come” (JS—M 1:27–31). Then Jesus reminded His disciples that no one knows the hour of His coming, not even the angels of heaven, but His Father only (JS—M 1:40).

Although we do not know the exact time of the Lord’s second coming, the signs of the times are gradually being fulfilled. We live in a day of wars and rumors of wars. Earthquakes are occurring with disturbing frequency. Famines dot the earth and invade parts of continents from one year to the next. An increasing

divorce rate, the breakup of families, and larger and larger numbers of latchkey children are indicators that “the love of men [is] wax[ing] cold.” The process of gathering the elect from the four corners of the earth has been underway for almost 170 years, and the number of countries enjoying the fruits of missionary work is approaching the full complement.

There are two other signs that clearly indicate the progress being made by the Church to take the gospel to the four corners of the earth. The first relates to family history and the influence of Elijah. The second relates to the increasing number of temples.

On May 24, 1999, the Church announced a new Web site for family history. The interest and activity on this site was phenomenal in the following seven months. Between May 24 and December 30, the site experienced 2 billion hits. The site also has a free, downloadable version of the Personal Ancestral File software. More than 300,000 people have downloaded the software during the last few months. Literally millions of people across the earth have accessed the site. Daily traffic is running at a rate of 7 million hits per day. More than 5 million names have been uploaded to the file. The file now contains 600 million names in all. (Data from Richard Turley, managing director of the Church’s Family History Department.)

Can you imagine the progress that will be made during the next 25 years as members and nonmembers from almost every nation use the Internet to build family files and add to the names available for temple work? Family history is one of the most popular activities on the Internet and one of the leading avocations in the world. The Spirit of Elijah is alive and well. The developments in family history represent a miracle. No wonder the pace of temple construction has accelerated.

Now let me share a few thoughts regarding temples and their spread across the earth. Until recently, a phrase in an Isaiah passage dealing with the last days had escaped me. I have used

Isaiah 54:2 many times to explain how the Church grows. In this passage Isaiah likened the Church to a tent, using the Mosaic tabernacle as a metaphor. He described how the tent will spread over the earth by lengthening its cords and strengthening its stakes. Stakes in the Church are special units whose officers are given distinctive priesthood keys and authority to authorize saving and exalting ordinances. The Church grows by establishing new stakes.

Recently I noticed another phrase that has suddenly taken on meaning. In this same passage, Isaiah’s instructions are to “enlarge the place of thy tent, . . . and stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations.” I suddenly realized that the phrase “the curtains of thine habitations” refers to temples, to houses of the Lord. In looking at the last days, Isaiah saw that a key feature of Church growth would be the building of temples. Temples will spread across the earth. In fact, President Brigham Young said:

To accomplish this work there will have to be not only one temple but thousands of them, and thousands and tens of thousands of men and women will go into those temples and officiate for people who have lived as far back as the Lord shall reveal. [JD 3:372]

For many years I thought President Young’s statement would be fulfilled in the Millennium. Maybe it will, but it is incredible that we are living in the day when it has become apparent that thousands of temples will dot the earth. It is quite possible that there will be a thousand or more temples by the year 2025, with thousands more before you students pass through the veil. At the end of this year there will be at least 100 dedicated temples. If 36 temples per year were built for the succeeding 25 years, there would be one thousand temples. That number is quite reasonable, considering there will be 35 or more temples dedicated this year.

I remember sitting in the upper room of the Salt Lake Temple in March 1996 during a meeting of the General Authorities. The Church was

preparing to dedicate its 50th operating temple after 166 years of this dispensation. At the end of the meeting, President Hinckley stated that he hoped there would be at least 100 temples operating before he completed his assignment on earth. I sat there stunned. The president was in his 86th year. It had taken 166 years for the first 50 temples to be built. I knew him as an optimistic man, but how could another 50 temples be built in the remaining years of his ministry?

About 18 months later, in another meeting in the Salt Lake Temple, President Hinckley announced the concept of the small temple. On a long summer trip, returning from the old Mormon colonies in Mexico, the manner in which these temples should be constructed was revealed to him. The temples would be of the same quality as the larger ones, they would be built of the finest materials, and they would be constructed to last for hundreds of years.

Moreover, many of them would be built next to existing stake centers. The St. Paul Minnesota Temple was dedicated this past weekend, bringing the number of operating temples to 69. The 100th temple, expected to be in Palmyra, New York, will be completed within a few months. Brothers and sisters, we are witnesses of a miracle.

Do you understand the importance of temples in the Lord's plan? Do you understand how important it is to be worthy of entering a temple? Do you realize that temple work will be a key activity in the Millennium? It is clear that the Lord is preparing the earth for His second coming. May we appreciate the day in which we live. Our pioneer ancestors sacrificed everything they had in order that we might see this day. May we live each day as if the Lord had already come is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.