

Your Time on Earth: When Would You Have Chosen to Come?

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As a basis for my remarks this morning, I want you to assume—contrary to what we know—that in your premortal life you were permitted to see the end from the beginning. Assume also that you were told you would be privileged to come to the earth as a member of the restored Church and that you could choose one particular period of Church history in which you would lead your active adult life. Given that opportunity, what choice do you suppose you would have made?

Surely the temptation would have been great to pick the very early years, what we might call the New York/Pennsylvania period, when the Book of Mormon was being translated and published, the Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthoods were being restored, and the Church officially organized. Just think how exciting it would have been to be there when men such as Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, the Whitmer family, and Parley and Orson Pratt first came to know that Joseph Smith was a prophet and the Book of Mormon was modern-day scripture, even the companion volume to the Bible, the stick of Joseph foreseen by the prophet Ezekiel.

What a thrill it would have been to hear the Prophet Joseph or Oliver Cowdery recount

their personal impressions as John the Baptist returned to earth and on the banks of the Susquehanna River laid his hands upon their heads and said, “Upon you my fellow servants, in the name of Messiah I confer the Priesthood of Aaron” (D&C 13:1).

Based on our present-day impressions, it is not likely that many of us would have picked what we might refer to as the Ohio period, from about 1831 through 1838, but if we look more carefully, some very exciting and important events occurred during that time. It was, for example, a period in which no fewer than seventy-seven sections—60 percent of the total pages—of the Doctrine and Covenants were revealed.

The Ohio years also constituted the single period that probably would have presented the greatest opportunities in all Church history to demonstrate your loyalty to the Prophet and to sustain him in times that he was in great need of sustenance. For this was a period of great rebellion from within the Church, including such Church leaders as Martin Harris,

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Frederick Williams, John Boynton, and William McLellin. It was also the time when faithful leaders were called upon to participate in Zion's Camp, a venture that, from all outward indications, was a failure, but, when viewed through the long lens of history, proved to be the laboratory that would identify and develop the Church's top leadership for decades to come.

Surely it would have taken great courage, knowing in advance the events that were to occur there, to have selected the comparatively brief but brutal and even tragic Missouri period, highlighted by the tarring and feathering of Bishop Edward Partridge, the driving of the Saints from Jackson County in the cold of November, and the subsequent battles of DeWitt and Crooked River. These events ultimately culminated in Governor Boggs' extermination order—and within a matter of days the tragedy of Haun's Mill, the capture of Far West, and the incarceration of the Prophet and his companions in Liberty Jail. To those of us whose understanding of civil rights and common decency is rooted in the soil of the last half of the twentieth century, it is literally unthinkable that the governor of any of the United States of America would issue an official order that an entire group of people be either expelled from the state or actually exterminated.

The extermination order carries an irony that accompanies its offensive outrage: though the threat of its actual use existed for only a brief period, it was not formally revoked until 1976. Little did I know when I traveled to St. Louis or Kansas City prior to 1976 that I was under official order of the state of Missouri to be dealt with in the same manner that the Orkin Company deals with termites.

How great the temptation would have been to have picked the Nauvoo period. Nauvoo the Beautiful—it was beautiful in many ways. Certainly beauty abounded in its physical surroundings, as anyone can attest who has

visited it in its restored condition. Even more beautiful were some of the events that occurred there. It was in Nauvoo that the Prophet introduced for the first time baptism for the dead, the endowment in the form we know today, and the sealing of husbands and wives in the new and everlasting covenant of marriage.

Nauvoo was also beautiful because of the faithful Saints and the lessons they taught us. They knew, for example, that their remaining days in Nauvoo were limited; indeed, they had publicly committed to that effect. Yet they worked feverishly, literally around the clock, twenty-four hours a day, pouring enormous portions of their resources and their energy into the completion of a temple that they knew they would have to abandon. They toiled and they built and they spent their scarce funds because that was the place where their endowments could be performed—and nearly 6,000 were in fact performed before they began the long trek westward.

And what about that long trek westward? Is that the period you would have chosen? The years from 1846 through 1869—and particularly through the end of the 1850s—were a time when it was not easy to be a believing and practicing adherent of the restored gospel. You would have suffered deprivation of a quality and duration known by few other people in the history of the world. Almost inevitably some of your loved ones, and perhaps even you, would have been buried along the trail in shallow, unmarked graves, and one might conclude that even greater suffering was endured by some of those who did not die. The experiences of the Willie and Martin Handcart Companies, for example, must never be erased from our memory but must always remain a proud part of our tradition, however painful it may be to reflect back on their tragic experiences.

Because of a series of unfortunate delays, those companies found themselves buried by the deep snows of a disastrous Wyoming winter. Their food stores ran out, and they did not have

sufficient bedding to withstand the freezing temperatures. An estimated 217 of them perished in the cold. Samuel and Margaret Pusell and their little family from Preston, England, were with the Martin Company. Samuel grew so weary from lack of food and the constant pulling of the cart that he became ill and died. His wife followed five days later. Ten-year-old Nellie's feet were frozen so badly that they had to be amputated with a butcher knife and a carpenter's saw, without anesthetic. A biographer records that "in pain she waddled through the rest of her life on her knees." Nevertheless, in "poverty and pain she reared a family of six children but never asked for favors of pity or charity because of her tragic handicap" (William R. Palmer, "She Stood Tall on Her Knees," *Instructor* 91 [July 1956]: 196–97).

Those days, my brothers and sisters, are gone forever. Never again will faithful Saints be required to endure that exact set of circumstances. What we must never forget is that the members of those companies were willing to suffer as they did because of their unshakable belief that no sacrifice—whether starvation, loss of frozen limbs, or death itself—was too great a price to pay for their convictions.

Once Zion's center point was established, there followed periods of significant colonization not only in Utah but also in the surrounding states and Canada and Mexico. In the Brigham Young era alone, there were from 350 to 400 colonizing settlements. This period would have also presented important opportunities to contribute to the building of the restored kingdom. My own ancestors were called to settle on the Little Colorado River in northeastern Arizona. It was a bleak existence, but, once again, they went in response to a prophet's request. The Little Colorado, at least the part of it that flows by my little town, hardly deserves its label as a river. It was described by my grandfather as "Too thin to plow and too thick to drink."

My grandfather was also the source of several stories about living conditions and other circumstances that existed during that late nineteenth-century colonization period. Let me share one of them with you.

In the 1890s, as the Salt Lake Temple was nearing completion, a request went out from the First Presidency under Wilford Woodruff that members of the Church contribute whatever money they could toward the completion of the temple. My great grandfather called a family council, and all agreed that they should donate their entire savings, consisting of about \$5, which they kept in a jar on the top shelf in the kitchen. It was the family's mite—everything they had—and they gave it for a cause in which they believed and in response to a prophet's request. It was the same spirit, undergirded by the same conviction, that had sustained their own forebears in Missouri, in Illinois, and on the trek across the plains—a conviction that Joseph Smith really saw the Father and the Son, that once again there are prophets on the earth. The account of this \$5 contribution has come down from generation to generation as a valuable part of our family heritage.

I am now prepared to give you my own answer to the hypothetical question I posed at the outset. Had I been privileged to know the beginning from the end, and had I been given the choice, I would have elected to come during the time that you and I share in common, the close of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first.

My conclusion is based on my conviction, grounded on several years of contemplation of this very issue, that a well-educated and totally devoted Latter-day Saint whose education prepared him or her to deal with the world on its own terms and who is also anchored on foundation stones of great faith can make as great or perhaps even greater contribution to building and strengthening the restored kingdom today than at any other time in our history.

Daniel saw our day. He spoke of the little stone cut out of the mountain without hands that would roll forth and consume all other kingdoms (Daniel 2:45). Peter also saw our time when, in the third chapter of Acts, he prophesied concerning the “restitution of all things” (Acts 3:20–21). I bear testimony that this restitution of all things has come to pass, and you and I are participants. That rock cut from the mountain without hands has greater momentum today than at any time in our history (see D&C 65:2), and there are very concrete things that you and I can do that will add to that momentum.

For me there is a particularly delicious and nostalgic significance in the fact that stake number 2,000 was organized last month in Mexico. I served as a missionary in Mexico from the mid- to late 1950s. When I left the mission in 1958 there were in the entire Mexican Republic fewer than a dozen branches that either were functioning or could have functioned under local leadership independent of the missionaries. The membership of the Church in Mexico at that time totaled less than 13,000. Today, just thirty-six years later, it totals more than 700,000 members organized into 129 stakes, 1,366 wards and branches, and eighteen missions.

Well, you may ask, what’s the point of all this? And the answer is, it illustrates my central thesis about the importance, and the attraction, of being a believing, practicing, dedicated member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at this particular time in history. While the Mexican experience is hardly typical of what has happened in the whole world, the Church is growing like never before. We now have wards and branches organized in twenty-six countries where just four years ago we had no wards or branches at all. In 1982 we had twenty temples. Today there are forty-seven, with commitments already made for ten more. And the wonderful thing, from our standpoint, is that it is happening right now in our day, with our participation.

We were not there to march in Zion’s Camp, to build the temple in Nauvoo, or to pull a handcart along the north bank of the Platte River. Carthage Jail, Haun’s Mill, Johnston’s Army, Winter Quarters—those are experiences that we will never have. It is, however, our good fortune to be participants in events that are equally historic and equally significant.

But once again you question me: How can I possibly say that we are participants in today’s events just as our ancestors were in Zion’s Camp? None of us is now preaching the gospel in the Czech Republic or in Mongolia, or doing the masonry work on a temple in Hong Kong. However true those facts may be, they cannot and must not mask the central reality that by virtue of the very structure that the Lord has ordained for his Church, if we do our job right as ordinary, everyday, practicing members, we are necessarily and inevitably contributing directly to the magnitude and quality of today’s kingdom-building just as effectively and importantly as if we had colonized on the Little Colorado or mixed mortar for the Nauvoo Temple. Let me explain why.

I think that if any objective observer were to analyze the LDS Church, completely ignoring any considerations of divine origin or continuing divine involvement, two factors undergird our success. The first is volunteer, uncompensated service, including not only our missionaries, but also the vast corps of leaders ranging from Mia Maid advisors to bishop’s counselors to Primary teachers who run our wards and stakes and other local units. And the second is our observance of the ancient law of tithing, as well as other voluntary financial contributions. Those of us who are believing, practicing members would add to that objective analysis that those who are faithful enough to pay their tithing and fulfill to the best of their ability whatever callings come to them in the Church will necessarily follow other commandments and counsel.

Does it sound too simple? Can that really be all there is to it? Just pay our tithing, serve willingly in the callings we have received, and keep the commandments? How, you ask, can it be said that doing these things makes our generation the most exciting and the most productive time in history to be a participant in the Restoration, given the fact that activities and service of that kind are no different today from what they were 150 years ago or at any time in between then and now?

The answer is, we are in a position to make more effective contributions of both our time and our money toward strengthening and enlarging the Restoration because of advantages uniquely available to us—advantages largely attributable to superior education such as you are receiving here. There has never been a time when the investment of those time and money resources can yield such immense returns.

And that's our job. That's our counterpart to pulling a handcart or giving as did my grandfather's family their entire family savings to finish the Salt Lake Temple. We prepare ourselves to serve, and then we serve willingly and faithfully. We live the gospel: school

ourselves and our families in the importance of prayer, missionary, and other Church service; pay our tithing; and offer complete loyalty to the Lord's chosen leaders.

I testify to you that this work of which I have spoken today is not just another church, another religious organization, another way of life, but the literal kingdom of God, restored to the earth in these last days through a prophet and still directed today by prophets under the inspiration of our Heavenly Father. That's what drove our ancestors through the Missouri period, the Illinois period, across the plains, and out to the surrounding states and Canada and Mexico, enduring conditions far more adverse than any that you and I will be called upon to endure. I further testify that faithful adherence to the commandments of our Heavenly Father received by us through those ancient and modern prophets will bring us the greatest joys that this life has to offer. The best time of all is ours. Right now. Our time. Our generation. May we take full advantage of it, building further on what earlier generations have begun, is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.