

# *Your Four Great Days*

STERLING W. SILL

**A**s your great President and my very good friend was saying some of those very nice things, I thought about a man who once said to his wife, “How many really great men do you think there are in the world?”

She said, “I don’t know. But I am sure of this: that there is one less than you think there is.”

George Bernard Shaw said that he never made speeches for the speeches. He made speeches for the introductions. Now, I’m not sure what kind of a speech you’re about to get, but I think the introduction was well worth my coming down here to receive.

As I have been sitting here looking out into your faces, I have thought of something that probably most of you would not believe, and that is that fifty years ago I was as young as some of you are. If I’d like to frighten you a little bit, and I would like to frighten you a little bit, I would suggest that if you live for the next fifty years some of you may be as old as I am. But what I’d like to say to you today involves what is going to happen in your lives in between those two important periods.

While I am speaking of my antiquity, I would like to have you remember that when I was born the Wright brothers had not yet made their famous sixty-second flight from Kill Devil

Hill in Kittyhawk, North Carolina. In those days, substantially, there were no automobiles or telephones or radios or atomic bombs or a great many other things that make up our present world. And then I’d like to point you in the other direction and see what kind of a world it is that you are going to have a part in just a few years from now and how you can best prepare to meet it.

Before I leave the subject of my old age, I would like to tell you a story I heard Brother Hugh B. Brown tell some time ago. His granddaughter had said to him, “Grandpa, were you in the ark?”

Brother Brown replied, “No, of course I wasn’t in the ark.”

And she said, “Well, then, why weren’t you drowned?”

I thought that this morning I would like to discuss with you some of the life experiences that you might expect that involve the four most important days in your life. Somebody said the four most important days in your life

*Sterling W. Sill was an Assistant to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 29 January 1974.*

are these: number one is the day you are born; number two is the day you are married; number three is the day you select your life's work; and number four is the day you die.

### **The Day You Are Born**

I'd like to involve myself a little bit personally in each of these as we go along. The most important accomplishment in my life is that I was successful in getting myself born. I am just awfully pleased about that, and my pleasure increases a little each year as I go along. One of the most important things about the moment of birth is that it is an unconscious moment. Nobody knows at the time he is being born that this important event is actually taking place. And sometimes we don't find it out until quite a long time afterwards. Sometimes we never do find out that we have been born. The other day I heard someone say of his friend that he didn't know that he was alive. Actually, in many cases that is pretty close to the truth.

There are a lot of important things in life that happen which we are not aware of when they're actually taking place. Sometime after I was born, I discovered that I had inherited two wonderful people called parents. They were pretty poor, and we sometimes had a pretty hard time in getting along. But I discovered that there are some advantages even in that situation. Somebody said that one of the greatest disadvantages anyone can have in life is to have too many advantages. And there are some advantages in having some disadvantages. Somebody put this idea in verse under the title of "Adversity." He said:

*The tree that never had to fight  
For sun and sky and air and light,  
But stood out in the open plain  
And always got its share of rain,  
Never became a forest king  
But lived and died a scrubby thing.*

*The man who never had to toil*

*To gain and farm his patch of soil,  
Who never had to win his share  
Of sun and sky and light and air,  
Never became a manly man  
But lived and died as he began.*

*Good timber does not grow with ease.  
The stronger wind, the stronger trees.  
The further sky, the greater length.  
The more the storm, the more the strength.  
By sun and cold, by rain and snow,  
In trees and men good timbers grow.*

*Where thickest lies the forest growth  
We find the patriarchs of both.  
And they hold counsel with the stars,  
Whose broken branches show the scars  
Of many winds and much of strife.  
This is the common law of life.  
[Author unknown]*

It was some time after I was born that I discovered that I had been born an American. How grateful I am that I was born in this wonderful country, where God raised up wise men to write our Constitution and where we had such men as our founding fathers to stand in the forefront of our civilization and give our nation its start toward its destiny, instead of having men who use Stalin blood purges, Hitler gas ovens, and Castro indignities as instruments of government.

As Joshua was about to cross over the River Jordan to establish his people in their promised land, which was already in a full state of cultivation, the Lord said to the people: "And thou shalt inhabit cities which thou didst not build. And thou shalt eat from the vines which thou hast not planted. And thou shalt drink from wells which thou didst not dig" (see Deuteronomy 6:10-11). There isn't anyone in this audience who isn't in that same situation. All of you inhabit cities which you did not build. Every Latter-day Saint eats from vines which he did not plant. Every American drinks

from wells which he did not dig. And every one of us shares in a million different blessings that he had no part in producing. The Lord said something else to the children of Israel that we ought to think about. He said, "When thou shalt have eaten and be full; then beware lest thou forget the Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:11–12). There are always great benefits in remembering the source of our blessings.

When I was nearly eight years old, someone taught me this great truth proclaimed by Jesus that everyone should be born again. And so, on August 27, 1911, I was born of the water and of the spirit in exactly the meaning of the term as indicated by Jesus. I was also confirmed a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

### **Intellectual Rebirth**

If we had two or three hours to talk about it, we might enumerate some of the tremendous advantages that we have in being members of the Church and in doing those things that the Lord has indicated would be for our benefit. We have a lot of other opportunities as well. I have discovered as I have gone along in life that you can be born again as many times as you would like to be born. Someone asked Phillips Brooks one time, "When were you born?"

He said, "I'll tell you about it. It was one Sunday afternoon about three-thirty when I was twenty-five years old, just after I had finished reading a great book." You are here at this great University for several purposes, but one of them is to involve yourselves in a love for and a knowledge of great books. And you ought to be born again a great many times as a consequence. You are involved with a large number of great teachers and important philosophies which will also help you to be born again.

I'd like to tell you about one of the most pleasant and most productive experiences of my life. In 1943, as the Japanese war was coming to an end, I heard Dr. Adam S. Bennion

give a lecture on the value of great literature. You can sell the idea of the value of great ideas to anyone; that is, everyone believes that we should be acquainted with great human thought. But almost everyone gets away from its benefit by saying that he doesn't have time to read. To get away from this objection of not having time, Dr. Bennion said, "Suppose that you were going to be a prisoner in a Japanese concentration camp for the next four years and you could take with you the works of any ten authors. Which would you take and what would you expect to get out of them?" That is, what are the values of great ideas, of great literature? His idea was that you take the ten authors you would most like to resemble and then exhaust each one in turn. You would read every thought and consider every idea that each author had ever thought; you would rethink his every idea. The psychologists say that when you run an idea through your brain it makes a little groove or engram. If you run through your mind the kind of ideas that went through the mind of Shakespeare or Emerson or the apostle Paul or Moses or Jesus of Nazareth, then your brain would tend to respond as their brains did.

From someplace I got the courage to make the start. I guess Shakespeare comes fairly close to the top of most people's lists of great authors. So I got out Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays, his sonnets, and his poems and went to work. Reading them was pretty difficult at first. I read very slowly and perhaps not very comprehendingly. Shakespeare wrote a long time ago, and there were many things that I did not understand. I had to reread some things several times, look up their meanings, and ask people about them. But finally the clouds began to part, a little bit of the sunlight began to come through, and I had a tremendous experience with Shakespeare. Shakespeare looked with clearer insight into human life than do most men. He said his purpose in writing was to hold the mirror up to

life, to show virtue her own image and scorn her own likeness. He said, "I your looking-glass will be and will modestly discover to yourself qualities which you yourself know not of." I had a great uplift as I read his great speeches and his great arguments for success. And as he pictured life in miniature with his great characters acting and reacting upon each other, I was born again—a great many times. Each time we discover some inspiring thought, we can be born again and we can be born better.

I always read with my pen, marking every idea, every phrase, every quote, and every other thing that I think will help me. And then I put these thoughts into my notebooks. One of my most valuable possessions in the world is my collection of twenty-five notebooks. They are just regular 8 ½-by-11-inch page size, three-ring binders with about three hundred pages in each one, so I have seventy-five hundred pages of notes. I think of my reading as a combine harvester sweeping across a field of wheat. It cuts everything before it but throws out the weeds and the chaff and the straw and puts the wheat in the sack. If I were now going to read something that would be particularly exciting to me, it wouldn't be Shakespeare, it wouldn't be Emerson, it wouldn't even be the scriptures. It would be my notes, because I have selected for my notes those things that particularly inspire me.

I have always felt a little bit cheated in my life that no one has ever tried to talk me out of my faith. I have heard many people say that they got into the wrong crowd or listened to the wrong professor or were influenced by the wrong philosophy. But everywhere I have gone, people have encouraged me to live my religion more instead of less. Once I thought that maybe I believed as I do just because I didn't know any better, so I got the complete works of Robert G. Ingersoll. In my opinion, Robert G. Ingersoll was the "greatest" atheist, if you could use that term, that ever lived in

the world. I don't know how convincing other people's atheism is, but Robert G. Ingersoll was a great salesman. He was a great orator. He was a great architect of speech. He knew how to put ideas together. If anybody could persuade me about something, I think maybe it would have been Robert G. Ingersoll. His complete works are made up of 19,900 pages. There are 214 pages in my New Testament, so I read 90 new testaments of atheism. I didn't read his works to try to outargue him or to find fault with them. I read them actually to try to help him persuade me that there was something better than those things that I believed. I read him very carefully. I don't skip read; I don't jump over things or just read things that I think would be interesting. If something is important enough for him to write down, it is important enough for me to study and to try to find out the right answer to the subject discussed. And in all of my experiences in reading his work, he hasn't shaken my faith in the smallest degree. Since that time, I have read 987 of the great books, and I have had some tremendous experiences in a lot of different directions with what I have read. These great new philosophies have enabled me to be born again.

### **The Day You Are Married**

Then we come to the second important event, which takes place on the day you are married. We have the opportunity in our lives to enter into the covenant of marriage. Many years ago, I was very fortunate in finding a wonderful person who agreed to go to the temple of the Lord with me. We established a family relationship; we acquired some children and some grandchildren. We had a little dinner party last night, as we frequently do, where we had a wonderful time together. In all of the time of our marriage, I have never discovered one occasion when my wife ever tried to deceive me or to be unfair or to do any other thing that would be dishonorable. I am very grateful for her and for the fact that we have a

relationship which hopefully will continue throughout all of eternity. You study a lot at this great University and elsewhere about the importance of marriage and how to make the most of it, so I will not take the time to discuss it further here except to say that you must not do or say anything that would cast any kind of limiting shadow over that all-important event.

### **The Day You Select Your Life's Work**

Now we come to the third important day of your life—the day you choose your occupation. That is another of the reasons you live. That is another of the reasons you come here to school. The Church is a divine institution, but the government is also a divine institution. The scripture says, “governments were instituted of God for the benefit of man; and . . . he [the Lord] holds men accountable for their acts in relation to them” (D&C 134:1).

But your occupation is also a divine institution. When God was creating this earth, he covered it over with sixteen inches of a miraculous substance called topsoil, in which he put all of the elements necessary to provide our food, our clothing, our medicines, and all of the things necessary to provide for our needs. When the Lord did this, he was laying the foundation for our great agricultural industry. He himself planted the garden eastward in Eden, and he became the first horticulturist. The Lord also established the livestock industry. When he taught Adam and Eve how to make coats out of skins, he was founding the tailoring industry. When he loaded our earth with minerals and metals and oils, he was establishing our mining and manufacturing and transportation industries. There are many other sciences and services necessary for our welfare.

On one occasion, Elbert Hubbard said that business is the process of ministering to human needs. Therefore, said he, business is essentially a divine calling. When the farmer grew the tomatoes that helped to provide you with

your breakfast this morning, he was ministering to a human need. Therefore, he's entitled to say that he is engaged in a divine occupation. I went to the hospital some few years ago and received nine blood transfusions. The hospital was ministering to a human need; therefore, it is entitled to say that it is engaged in a divine calling. As you prepare at this great University to take hold of your share of the work of the world, I would like to have you think of your studies in that way and do them in that spirit.

### **The Day You Die**

Then we come to the final one of these great experiences, which takes place on the day you die. Someone said that the most important event in life is death. We live to die, and then we die to live. Death is our graduation day. It is the gateway to eternal life. We don't like to think about death because we think of it as unpleasant, and we don't like to think about unpleasant things. And so we close our minds and turn away our faces. But death does not cease to exist just because it is ignored. The ancient Egyptians had a much more logical way of handling this situation when on their great festive occasions they kept constantly on display before the revelers the skeleton of a dead man; that is, they wanted everybody to continually remember that someday he was going to die. I don't want to frighten any member of this student body unnecessarily, but I'd just like to point out to you as kindly and as gently as I can that someday every one of you is going to die. Somebody said, “Judging from the past, there are going to be very few of us who will get out of this world alive.” One man, in preparing an inscription for his tombstone, said, “I knew it would happen!”

If we can understand far enough in advance that we will die, there are quite a lot of things that we can do to make the experience more favorable. The death hour is the key hour. It judges all of the other hours; that is, you could never have written the life story of Jesus of



Nazareth or Judas Iscariot without knowing about his last hour. It is important that this graduation day should be a great day.

Some time ago, I reread the old Grecian tragedy written about the fall of Athens. You may remember that a Roman general had captured an Athenian philosopher and the Roman told the Athenian that he meant to put him to death. But the Athenian didn't seem very disturbed, so the Roman thought that probably he had not understood. The Roman said to the Athenian that maybe he did not know what it meant to die. But the Athenian said that he thought he understood it better than the Roman did. Then he said to the Roman, "Thou dost not know what it means to die, for thou dost not know what it means to live. To die is to begin to live. It is to end all stale and weary work, to begin a nobler and a better. It is to leave deceitful knaves for the society of gods and goodness."

Death is the time when we begin to live. One of the reasons that you are at this great University is to learn how to live—to learn how to live eternally. I do not know what it would be like if sometime we discovered that we had become teledstial beings. I do know that it would be as far below the celestial as the twinkle of a tiny star is below the blaze of the noonday sun.

I thought I discovered up in western Canada the other day what it would be like to ride in a teledstial automobile. A missionary took me to one of my appointments in an automobile that he had purchased two years previously for sixty dollars. Having driven it for two years, he was using it to take me to my appointment. We hadn't gone very far before I noticed that there was smoke coming out of both the front and the rear of this machine. I heard some noises that I had never identified before as those coming from an automobile, and when we were safely at our destination, I was very pleased that the experience had been completed satisfactorily. Then it occurred to me

that it would probably not be too inconvenient if, every time throughout the rest of my life that I had need of an automobile, a teledstial variety would be provided. But I would not like to have a teledstial body, or a teledstial mind, or teledstial friends, or live on a teledstial earth.

We know quite a bit about the celestial kingdom. Every principle and ordinance of the gospel has to do with the celestial kingdom. If we are interested only in becoming teledstial or terrestrial beings, it is not necessary to be baptized. It is not necessary to be married in the temple. We can mess up our lives with a lot of dishonesties and disloyalties and immoralities and break the hearts of other people, and we can still qualify for some of the lower kingdoms. But if we want to qualify for the celestial kingdom, then we need to live the principles of the gospel.

#### **Celestial Afterlife**

We know quite a bit about the celestial kingdom. We have had quite a few celestial people appear to us upon this earth. And each time they have come, those who have received them have said they are impossible to describe. We remember, when the Prophet Joseph Smith had his vision of the Father and the Son, he said their "brightness and glory defy all description" (Joseph Smith 2:17). You do not have any background of understanding or any words to describe a celestial accomplishment. There are some things that we can't describe even in this life. For example, if you were going to try to describe to me the look on your little sister's face on Christmas morning when she's radiant and expectant, with something shining out through her face that you may be able to identify, you might have difficulty explaining how she looks to somebody who had never had that experience. You might try by saying, "She has a light in her eye," or "Her face beams," or "Her countenance glows." None of these things is true actually. Her eyes are the same color, the same shape, the

same size as they were before and yet there is something shining out of her face that is indescribable.

The other day, I married a young couple. After the marriage ceremony was over they just stood there looking at each other. Something was going back and forth between them that almost frightened me. Inasmuch as they were not paying any attention to what I was doing and inasmuch as I generally don't like to miss anything, I decided that I would just stand there and watch. I wanted to see what was going to happen. Somebody tried to describe this situation by saying, "She looked at him as if he were a piece of fried chicken." And that is just about as good a description as I could make.

If we're delighted by seeing this radiance and light and righteousness and love shining out through the face of our friends here, what do you think it would be like sometime when—with quickened senses, amplified powers of perception, and vastly increased capacity for love, happiness, and understanding—we become resurrected, celestialized, glorified beings, made beautiful beyond all comprehension?

We remember when the resurrected Jesus appeared to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdrey in the Kirtland Temple on April 3, 1836, and the Prophet said it was impossible to describe him as he then appeared. But he tried, and here are some of the phrases that he used. He said, "His eyes were as a flame of fire" (D&C 110:3). It isn't a twinkle any more; it is now magnified a few million times. I suppose there wasn't any flame there at all, any more than there is a light in your sister's eyes, but the Prophet was trying to describe something which is indescribable. He said, "His countenance shone above the brightness of the sun" (D&C 110:3). That is pretty bright.

We might imagine that Jesus was a little different from us, but the Prophet also tried to describe his some fifteen or sixteen visits with

the angel Moroni. Moroni was a soldier who lived upon our continent. At the time of the destruction of his civilization and the death of his people, he was approximately forty-four years of age. He alone was spared to take custody of their records to see that they were transmitted safely into our hands.

Then for the next thirty-seven what must have been long and lonely years, Moroni lived on alone, hiding from his enemies, seeking his food where he could. He said, "My father hath been slain in battle, and all my kinsfolk, and I have not friends nor whither to go" (Mormon 8:5). "Wherefore," said he, "I wander whithersoever I can for the safety of mine own life" (Moroni 1:3). He didn't have a warm bathroom to go into each morning, or someone to provide him a clean shirt or a nutritious breakfast, and we might imagine that he had allowed his personality to run down a little bit. We might now picture this old man, eighty-one years of age, as we see him for the last time, standing there on the edge of his grave. From this position he wrote us his last paragraph, in which he said:

*And now I bid unto all, farewell. I soon go to rest in the paradise of God, until my spirit and body shall again reunite, and I am brought forth triumphant through the air, to meet you before the pleasing bar of the great Jehovah, the Eternal Judge of both quick and dead. [Moroni 10:34]*

Then there followed a long silence of fourteen centuries. For 1,403 years we heard nothing more until—on the night of September 21, 1823—this same old man, now resurrected and glorified, stood by the bedside of Joseph Smith. The Prophet tried to describe him as he now appeared. And while he said that was impossible, yet he tried. And again, here are some phrases that he used. He said, "His whole person was glorious beyond description, and his countenance truly like lightning" (Joseph Smith 2:32). Not only was his person glorious,

but even his clothing was brilliant: “Beyond anything earthly I had ever seen,” said the Prophet, “nor do I believe that any earthly thing could be made to appear so exceedingly white and brilliant” (Joseph Smith 2:31).

We all know the things that we do to make this body a pleasant habitation. We bathe it, keep it clean, dress it in the most appropriate clothing; sometimes we ornament it with jewelry, or—if we are very wealthy—we buy bracelets and necklaces to make our bodies sparkle and shine and to make them pleasant places to be. Sometimes we work on them with cosmetics and eyebrow tweezers. Usually we don’t help them very much but we keep working on them all the time. If you think it would be pleasant to be dressed in expensive clothing, what do you think it would be like sometime to be dressed in an expensive body—one that shines like the sun, one that is beautiful beyond all comprehension? And we ought to remember that God runs the most effective beauty parlor ever known in the world.

But a celestial being is not just one who has a celestial body. He also has a celestial mind. Edwin Dyer said something about this in his poem:

*My mind to me a kingdom is.  
Such pleasant joys therein I find  
That it excels all other bliss  
That earth affords or grows by kind.*

If we do the right things, each of us may sometime have a celestial personality, a celestial family, and live with God, who is a member of this highest order of the celestial kingdom.

Socrates was a very homely man. On one occasion he prayed and said to the Lord, “Make me beautiful within.” We have all seen plain people who have been made beautiful by the working of a radiant spirituality. A godly spirit will make the plainest body beautiful. Great mental and spiritual qualities form our bodies into their likenesses. As you come here to this great University and as you enjoy this tremendous opportunity, I am sure that most of you do not understand the importance of your experiences. You will discover their importance years later—maybe when it is too late—for this opportunity that you are presently experiencing may be in one way at least a partially unconscious experience. Most of the important events in our lives we do not appreciate at the time.

May the Lord bless you in this important activity that you are presently enjoying in this very pleasant relationship you have with these great instructors, with these great books, and in this great institution, where you have a chance for the direction and guidance of the Spirit of the Lord. May you be born again a great many times and may you be born better each time is my prayer, which I ask in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.