

## *"These Are the Times"*

H. DAVID BURTON

Good morning, my young friends. I hope you have enjoyed your short Thanksgiving break. Sister Burton and I are delighted to be on this beautiful campus with you today. It is always good to be with your marvelous president, President Samuelson; his lovely wife; and members of his administrative team.

It is an interesting time to be on campus. The fall semester is soon coming to an end—too soon for those who have procrastinated writing that required term paper or who are substantially behind in reading assignments, but perhaps not soon enough for those looking forward to Christmas travel or even the conclusion of their university experience. For some it is the time to start cramming for final exams. Remember the counsel “If ye are prepared ye shall not fear” (D&C 38:30). All of this is going on in the aftermath of an emotional football game with an in-state rival. Thank you for the invitation to spend a few minutes with you today. You are an awesome—and intimidating—audience.

I asked our BYU-attending grandchildren for their suggestions on what would be an appropriate subject for me to address this morning. Unanimously they replied, “Anything but marriage and dating. We have heard a lot about those subjects.” However, just

for the record, it is important to understand that because of the eternal nature of marriage, you can never hear too much about it.

Because I have such deep respect and admiration for the opinions of the best Cougar grandchildren on campus, I will refrain from speaking about marriage and dating this morning, except for this last fleeting reference: Sister Burton and I are in our 50th year of marriage. Convincing her to marry me was by far my most notable achievement and certainly my greatest blessing. She is wonderful! Over these 50 years we have learned it is exciting and really fun to spoil and associate with grandchildren while we are in our fifties and sixties. I sometimes wish we would have had those grandchildren first. For those who are prone to defer and procrastinate getting married, remember your destiny may be raising challenging teenagers while in the senior years of life. Think about that scenario for a moment. It may be worth thinking about getting married now rather than avoiding that challenge later.

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*H. David Burton was the Presiding Bishop of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 1 December 2009.*

I spoke in the last general conference of the Church. It is always an intimidating experience, as you can well imagine. There are several audiences you think about as you prepare for general conference. First, there is the audience present in the Conference Center; second, the unseen audience—those listening or viewing via an electronic connection; and third, those who will read the proceedings of the conference in the *Ensign* or *Liahona* magazines. Over the past year I have become aware of another large and rapidly growing audience on Twitter. Tweeters send “tweets,” or electronic messages, to friends expressing their feelings regarding the contents of your message, usually while you are speaking. It is possible to monitor the tweet traffic that occurs in the Conference Center during a given time period. Let me show you the 25 pages containing the tweet traffic during my conference talk on virtues ending in *-ity*.

I’ll share just a couple of the more positive tweets. One said, “That darn 13th Article of Faith.” Another said, “Who in the heck is H. David Burton?” And another said, “My wife is all about the affordable needs. She’s forced me to learn a lot.” Still one more said, “This isn’t a typical Burton talk at all. But I like it.” And lastly, “You just know the *-ity* thing is going to be the new ‘Six B’s.’ Mormons like that kind of thing.” I won’t bother you with the tweets that were something less than positive. However, please remember honesty, civility, integrity, dignity, and, most of all, charity as you tweet each other today. Take pity on a fragile ego already intimidated by this occasion.

As Christmas approaches and the weather turns cold and snow covers the ground, I often reflect on a large picture that graced the foyer of the grade school I attended. The picture depicted General George Washington leading a freezing, exhausted, ragtag group of men as they attempted to cross the Delaware River on Christmas Day in 1776. The purpose of the crossing was to help preserve the inde-

pendence of our nation, which had just been chronicled six months before. This event was described in a series of pamphlets written by Founding Father Thomas Paine, entitled simply *The Crisis*. Thomas was a journalist who traveled with the Continental Army. He was not a good soldier, but his treatise helped inspire the army during this difficult time. It turned out to be a very popular pamphlet series. The percentage of the population who read it was larger than the percentage who watch the Super Bowl today. One quote from that publication has survived the 233 years since it was first penned. It simply is “These are the times that try men’s souls” (*The American Crisis*, also called *The Crisis*, no. 1 [23 December 1776]).

Interestingly, *The Crisis* not only describes the foundations of the American Revolution, it also depicts the life of Thomas Paine himself. Paine had the great gift of exciting passion with his writings, but his writings also brought him an abundance of criticism. He was equally adept at communicating ideas and concepts to common men and women as he was communicating with intellectuals and the well educated. He certainly had what we would describe today as an agenda. He was staunchly antislavery. He was one of the first to advocate a world peace organization. He even suggested a social security program for the elderly and poor. His biggest challenge centered on his radical views on religion, which ultimately brought him disdain. By the end of his life only a handful of people thought enough of him to even attend his funeral. His lasting legacy lay in his stirring writings in support of the Revolution and the thought-provoking quote “These are the times that try men’s souls.”

Indeed, today may be a time that tries some men’s and women’s souls. The challenges for many are great. Secularism abounds in the land. Satan’s minions are unabated and seem to have dominion in many aspects of our lives. Economic uncertainties breed fear for the

future. Trusted institutions have betrayed our trust and have opted for greed. Widespread discontent exists between nations and world religions. Death and despair plague portions of our planet. Some children of our Father in Heaven are suffering because they lack basic human needs. Perhaps there are some in this very audience whose souls are stressed, wondering what the future holds for them.

As I contemplate our time, I also think of a quote from Charles Dickens' great novel *A Tale of Two Cities*. I'm sure you will recall it as well:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. [1859, 1]*

We all have to determine for ourselves if we—in mixed turbulent times like we are currently in—perceive the glass of water to be half full or half empty. I'm a half-full sort of guy. I propose that we are, indeed, living in the best of times. In spite of all of its warts, 2009 is a great time to be alive. We are living in a time of great opportunity. In his book *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw suggests that it was the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s that served as the catalyst that built the character of the generation whose selfless sacrifice led to victory in World War II. This generation also served as the backbone for the economic and technological explosion that graced the last half of the 20th century. During the Great Depression there were, to be sure, those who took advantage of the disadvantaged, but there were many who rose above themselves and the times to give opportunity to those who were suffering. People reached out to feed neighboring children even when they had great difficulty feeding their own. Comfort was extended to others in spite of personal pain. We have that same opportunity today. The challenges

of 2009 can be the platform that sensitizes, prepares, and launches us to the tomorrows of our lives.

The noted author Stuart Wilde wrote that "in a time of crisis we all have the potential to morph up to a new level and do things we never thought possible" ("The Cat & the Lion," Stuart Wilde "A" List, posted 19 February 2007 on stuartwilde.com). Why do I see the glass half full when difficulties abound? Why do I feel 2009 is an exciting time to be alive? Why is it the best of times even though men's souls are being severely tested? For me, and I hope for you, it comes down to this simple fact: It is an awesome and exciting time to be alive because the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ has again been restored to the earth in our day. Only a relative few of our Father in Heaven's children have had that great blessing and opportunity. Why are we so blessed? I do not know all the whys and wherefores. I merely express deep appreciation. It is exciting to see divine prophecy unfold before our very eyes as the gospel spreads rapidly around the world.

Let me give you a little perspective. Do you know what important event will transpire at Church headquarters this Friday promptly at 9:00 a.m.? This is a little piece of Church operational trivia that will likely not be on any of your final exams, but perhaps it should, because you may be affected by what is decided. One of the constitutional councils of the Church will convene under the direction of President Monson. The council is described in section 120 of the Doctrine and Covenants. It is called the Council on the Disposition of the Tithes. It is made up of the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve, and the Presiding Bishopric. It is the council's responsibility to determine how the resources of the Church will be used in 2010 for the purpose of blessing lives of individuals and families, of increasing testimony and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and of building the kingdom of God around the world.

If you could sit in on the council meeting, I think you would see and feel why it is exciting to be alive and be a participant in helping the gospel of Jesus Christ spread around the world. Inasmuch as you won't be in attendance, let me share a few facts about what occurred last year on that eventful first Friday in December. The council set aside enough resources to begin more than 300 new meetinghouse projects this year. Because meetinghouse projects are several years in duration, there are currently about 1,000 meetinghouses under construction somewhere around the world. Enough resources were set aside to build 13 new temples if the First Presidency so chooses. Today there are 21 temple construction projects, spread out from Kiev in the Ukraine to Cebu in the Philippines. Today there are 130 operating temples. It is exciting to think that many in this room will likely be alive when temples number 230 or 330 are completed. Here is another piece of useless trivia: The Church will likely build more building square footage this year than will Wal-Mart. Think about that. And we'll have just about as much problem getting zoning and permits as they do.

The Lord has entrusted His nearly 27,000 bishops and branch presidents to see that each in their flock has the means to sustain life and the opportunity to be self-reliant. Sufficient resources were set aside to accomplish this task.

Education is extremely important. Enough resources were set aside last December for over 50,000 of you to have a quality university experience in a marvelous environment at a very reasonable cost. How fortunate you are and how excited you should be because of your presence at this institution. Sufficient resources were also allocated to bless the lives of over half a million young people by providing religious education in seminaries and institutes around the world.

We are a missionary Church. We have always been a missionary Church, and I sus-

pect we will always be a missionary Church. Last December enough resources were provided to vigorously pursue that sacred mandate, with about 52,000 full-time missionaries organized in 350 missions. The result of this endeavor in 2009 will likely be the equivalent of creating 400 new wards and 50 new stakes.

One of the very exciting aspects of temple worship is the use of technology in identifying ancestors, linking families, and performing sacred ordinances. Funds were provided to continue a multiyear, first-of-its-kind project of developing and perfecting a Web-based process to efficiently accomplish this task.

Indeed, 2009 is a special and exciting time. In terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it certainly is the best of times. As each of you contemplates what is occurring quietly around the world, I hope you will feel excitement and optimism laced with an abundance of gratitude.

The Old Testament prophet Amos reminded us that "surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). My testimony is that it is exciting as well as humbling to live at a time when living prophets serve as the mouthpiece of our Father in Heaven. I have had the great opportunity to closely observe and serve at the direction of three marvelous prophets, seers, and revelators. Each has been a unique personality, but each has been dedicated to moving the kingdom of God forward under the power and inspiration of heaven. President Hunter's typical response to a troubling temporal issue simply was "Pray and go do as inspired." As difficult issues were discussed, President Hinckley would often say, "David, we are on the Lord's errand. Go do your best. All will be well." And then he would add, with his marvelous smile, "And even your best may not be good enough." President Monson's inspired advice is nearly always "Make sure you measure twice and cut once."

Time after time I have witnessed inspired prophetic direction move the kingdom of God forward in miraculous ways. It is exciting for all of us to be living at a time when we can each be literally tutored, in person or via technology, at the feet of living prophets. I can only say, "Wow!"

Think of the technological advancements that have happened in the lifetime of your parents, and then think of what is likely to happen during the course of your lives. The Internet and all of its many aspects affecting commerce, communication, social interface, and knowledge—to list but a few—continues to bloom and blossom in directions never contemplated just months and years ago. To be sure, some of the blooms and blossoms have unintended consequences that Satan has captured to "try men's souls." But that is a subject for another day. It is wonderful to see how technology is helping all of the Father's children enjoy the fruits of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Enjoy and participate in the thrill of the best of times!

Certainly too many of our brothers and sisters around the world need more of this world's goods and services in order to recover from devastation or sustain living standards commensurate with gospel participation. For me it is exciting to see how Latter-day Saints around the world respond when the need is great and help or resources are required. We express gratitude for the substantial and generous contributions from those who have been blessed with much, but it is the small contributions given week after week by many that make it possible for the Church to reach out to those of any race, creed, or religion who have need.

If you want to experience real excitement, look into the appreciative faces of recipients and caregivers when a long-hoped-for wheelchair allows them some mobility. It is both exciting and heartwarming to hear the expressions of appreciation, particularly from

women, when they have a clean and convenient source of water in their village.

To see a widow's or senior couple's tears when thousands of "helping hands" enter a community devastated by flood and storm to begin the overwhelming task of cleanup is exciting as well as heart-wrenching.

Yes, these are the times that may try men's souls, and perhaps for some the challenges of the day may seem overwhelming, but for all who continue to have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who regardless of circumstances continue to be positive and obedient, who continue to see the glass half full, 2009 and the times that follow will be the best of times. Keep in mind the old Chinese proverb "The gem cannot be polished without friction, nor man perfected without trials."

What do you call the story of a person who breezes through college, lands the perfect job, climbs the corporate ladder with ease, and quickly makes a fortune? The answer is it's a fairy tale—it just never happens. Real life is littered with struggle, problems, mistakes, and lessons that all combine in the process of polishing our gem. Each should be treasured because over time they will constitute the best of times. Henry David Thoreau is attributed as saying, "Success usually comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it." To be sure, success is a process as well as a journey. It is not a destination.

The word *remember* is found in the scriptures over 550 times. It is an important verb in our lexicon. It simply means to bring to mind or think of again. Book of Mormon prophets like King Benjamin, Alma, and Helaman used the phrase "O remember, remember" particularly as they emphatically counseled their sons on various issues (see Mosiah 1:6–7; Alma 37:13; Helaman 5:12).

Today we would do well to "remember, remember" the testimony of father Lehi as he counseled his sons. He said:

*But behold, all things have been done in the wisdom of him who knoweth all things.*

*Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy.*

*And the Messiah cometh in the fulness of time, that he may redeem the children of men from the fall. And because that they are redeemed from the fall they have become free forever, knowing good from evil; to act for themselves and not to be acted upon, save it be by the punishment of the law at the great and last day, according to the commandments which God hath given.* [2 Nephi 2:24–26]

We need to “remember, remember” during times that test our souls to enjoy and keep focused on Father in Heaven’s plan of eternal happiness while at the same time carefully navigating through the best of times.

Perhaps for us in 2009 it would be wise for us to remember to be fully immersed and invested in the gospel of Jesus Christ. An old Christmas story best describes what is meant by invested and immersed. The story is told in first person by a tired shopper who after a long, cold day of Christmas shopping finds herself exhausted on a crowded bus with her arms full of carefully selected gifts. The last available seat on the bus is near the back next to a very handsome gentleman who politely helps her situate her packages.

“*My goodness,*” he said, “*did you leave any merchandise still in the stores for the rest of us?*” . . .

*The woman in the seat behind us joined in . . . , “The worst thing is that the day after Christmas we will be carrying this same armload back to the store to exchange it.”*

Her comment brought a general chuckle from all those within earshot, including my seat mate. As the laughter subsided, he began in a quiet, melodious voice, deepened with experience, to teach me a lesson that I have never forgotten.

“*Hear now the parable of the shopper,*” he said, speaking gently and indicating my packages. “*A woman went forth to shop, and as she shopped, she*

*carefully planned. . . . The many purchases were made with the pure joy and delight that is known only to the giver. Then the gifts were wrapped and placed lovingly under the tree.*

“*In eager anticipation she [watched] each face as the gifts were opened.*

“*What a lovely sweater,’ said the eldest daughter, ‘but I think I would prefer blue. I suppose I can exchange it?’*”

[The man went on to tell how each recipient made similar remarks about his or her gift.]

“*How sad it is,*” continued his soft, beautiful voice, “*when gifts are not received in the same spirit they are given. To reject a thoughtful gift is to reject the loving sentiment of the giver himself. And yet, are we not all sometimes guilty of rejecting?*”

[By now the bus had stopped, and the passengers were all gathered around. The gentleman] took a present from my stack.

“*This one,*” he said, holding it up and pretending to open the card, “*could be to you.*”

*He pointed to a rough-looking, teenage boy in a worn denim jacket and pretended to read the gift card.*

“*To you I give My life, lived perfectly, as an example so that you might see the pattern and live worthy to return and live with Me again. . . .*”

. . . He set the present down and took another one from my pile.

“*This one,*” he said, holding up a pure, white present, “*is for you.*” He held out the gift to a worn-looking woman, who in earlier years must have been a real beauty and was still attractive. . . . She read the card out loud and allowed her tears to slip without shame down her painted face.

“*My gift to you is repentance. This Christmas I wish you to know for certain that though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow, and I the Lord will remember them no more. . . . Signed, your Advocate with the Father.’*” . . .

[Next the man] looked around the group and brought a ragged, unkempt, little child forward.

“*This big, red package would be for you if He were here. The card would say, ‘On this Christmas and always, My gift to you is love. My love is pure! It*

*is not dependent on what you do or what you look like. I love you as you have been, as you are now, and as you will be in the future. From your brother, Jesus.' . . .*

"And this silver package to you, madam," he said with a bow and handed the gift over to an aging grandmother two rows behind.

"... His precious gift to you would be the gift of salvation. The surety that you will rise from the grave and live again with a perfect, resurrected body. The card would [be signed], 'your Saviour.'

"One final gift," said [the man]. "The greatest of all the gifts of God. Eternal life! . . . Though this gift is to all men, it must be assembled. He has given us the instructions. They are here in the scriptures." He tore off the paper to reveal a worn, well-used book. . . .

[Finally the man] stood up. He was leaving, making his way slowly down the aisle. He paused just as he reached the front and said, "One last gift. Peace! Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

With those words, he was gone. [From Costley, "The Parable of the Shopper," *Ideals—Christmas* 55, no. 6 (November 1998): 50–51]

Oh, remember, remember, my dear friends, the best of times are clearly all about example, repentance, love, salvation, eternal life, service, scriptures, and peace of mind and soul.

To find joy in the "best of times," remember, remember to take sufficient time to love, listen, learn, laugh, lighten, lead, and lift. Love as Jesus loved, without reservation. Listen to the words of living prophets without selectivity. "In a time of drastic change," remember, remember that "it is the learners who inherit the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists" (Eric Hoffer, *Reflections on the Human Condition* [New York: Harper and Row, 1973], 22). Remember that "intelligence without ambition is a bird without wings" (C. Archie Danielson, quoted in *Emotion: Webster's*

*Quotations, Facts and Phrases* [San Diego: Icon Group International, 2008], 7).

Don't take yourselves too seriously. It is okay to laugh once in a while, particularly at your own foibles. Lighten the load of others. Most often you will find the need in your own home, family, or community. You won't have to look far for opportunities to lighten the load of someone else. Remember, "when ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17).

Lead out in righteousness within the walls of your own home. Leadership starts by giving continuous spiritual direction and your time to your family.

Follow the advice found in this thought-provoking couplet:

*If thee'll lift me while I lift thee,  
We shall go up together!*

[John Townsend Trowbridge, *A Story of the "Barefoot Boy"* (1877), written for John Greenleaf Whittier's 70th birthday]

In all we do to enjoy the best of times, remember, remember that "discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments" (Jim Rohn, quoted in David DeFord, *1000 Brilliant Achievement Quotes: Advice from the World's Wisest* [Omaha: Ordinary People Can Win, 2004], 55).

I testify we indeed live at a time when men's souls are being tested, perhaps more severely than ever before. I also know opportunity beckons us daily to receive a full measure of joy as we experience the excitement that is 2009—the best of times. I invoke the blessings of heaven upon each of you at this season of the year and particularly at this exciting season of your lives. I know that our Savior lives. I know that He is our Advocate with the Father. I know that we are blessed with living prophets, even Thomas S. Monson. Of these things I testify and bestow in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.