

The Glass Is Half Full: The Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ

RICHARD NEITZEL HOLZAPFEL

It is a pleasure to be here today among friends, colleagues, and students. As I was seated upon the stand and thinking about what I might say to introduce my topic, it dawned on me how things have really come full circle. It doesn't seem like it was very long ago when I was in your seats here as a student myself at the university. And, interestingly enough for me personally, I notice seated upon the stand two professors who had a profound impact upon my own education and on what I would eventually do for a living. You have heard from one, Brother Donald Q. Cannon, who gave the opening prayer. He was a very important teacher in my life who directed my attention to the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He encouraged my pursuit of a degree in that field and has been a kind friend, colleague, and important mentor ever since. Also upon the stand is associate academic vice president Noel Reynolds. Professor Reynolds was one of my political science professors. And since that time he has been a good friend and mentor.

Today I would like to talk about the Second Coming, but I would like to talk specifically about two aspects that I call related but separate issues. The first aspect is the timing of the Second Coming and the second is the emphasis we sometimes place on the prophecies that tend

to highlight the terrible days and tribulation that lie ahead for the generation who will witness this long-prophesied event.

I often come into class the first day wearing sunglasses, so I am going to put on a pair of sunglasses right now to illustrate an important point. This is where we'll begin today. All of us, whether we know it or not, wear a pair of glasses. The color, the tint of the lens, is determined by our social and academic background, our experience, our ethnicity, our gender, and also our religious convictions. Sometimes we go a long time without having our eyes checked, and therefore we wear glasses from an old prescription. So not only do we have a tint of color in our glasses, but sometimes the glasses are out of focus. I remember one difficult year during graduate school. You can imagine starting a family while in a PhD program and living on a shoestring budget. I broke a pair of glasses and decided that I couldn't afford a new pair. So I went for about six months before I finally went to the optometrist and got a new prescription and a new pair of glasses. When I came out of

Richard Neitzel Holzapfel was a BYU associate professor of Church history and -doctrine when this -devotional address was given on 10 July 2001.

his office, I literally stood on the sidewalk disoriented as I attempted to focus. And I said to myself, “Boy, I forgot that blades of grass can actually be discerned.” In six months my eyes had changed tremendously.

When we worship together on Sunday; go to the temple; attend classes here at BYU in the sciences, humanities, mathematics, arts, religion, and all other fields; attend general conference; and receive blessings and counsel from our friends, part of the purpose in these endeavors is to get a better prescription—that is, to try to get a better pair of glasses and eliminate the artificial color and blurring of our vision. Changing our glasses can affect the way we see the world. And so today I would ask all of us to take off our glasses—the way we generally look at the Second Coming—and try to look through a new pair of lenses, which, I pray, will give us a better understanding.

Paul the Apostle put it another way: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Although the modern reader of the King James Version may not quite get the proper reading of the text from the language of 1611, we generally understand what he is saying. Let me restate the quote in modern phrasing: “During mortality,” Paul would say, “we look into an bronze mirror and see ourselves as a reversed and distorted image. Someday, however, we will see a perfect view of ourselves and the world, not reversed like a mirror and not distorted like an ancient bronze mirror.”

The Timing of the Second Coming

It has not been unusual for nearly every generation who has lived on the earth since the mortal ministry of Jesus Christ to believe they might witness the terrible events immediately preceding the Second Coming and be present at His coming. Apparently even some first-century Saints thought they lived in the “last days”; they believed His coming was imminent. You will recall Paul’s famous

admonition to the members of the Church in Thessalonica:

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him,

That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. [2 Thessalonians 2:1–2]

For this group, anxious about the event, Paul provided a list of some of the key events that must occur *before* the Lord’s second advent. In other words, he exhorted them to be patient and not to be troubled about the timing of the Second Coming.

Later generations were also anxious. In particular, some Christians greeted the turn of the first millennium after Christ with the belief that the end of the world was at hand. There were even some who sold all their possessions, dressed in white clothing, and waited in a prayerful attitude in fields outside their cities as the church bells tolled the dawn of a new millennium.

Through more than 25 years of personal study—beginning during my undergraduate training here at BYU and continuing on through graduate school and the present—I have come to realize that even during our glorious dispensation of the fulness of times, many Latter-day Saints believe they might witness the Second Coming. For example, some Saints living in the 1860s believed that the great American Civil War was the beginning of the end. Another group of Saints thought that 1890 would be a decisive year, and still another generation of members of the Church were sure that the Great War that we now call World War I was the foretold destruction that would immediately precede the coming of Christ. Some of my parents’ generation, the so-called “Greatest Generation,” believed that World War II was nothing more nor less than the beginning of the destruction

that would be poured out upon all nations before the Second Coming and of almost every major conflict or development in the Middle East. From my personal observation today, nothing has really changed since the days of Paul: for generation after generation some people have become anxious about the timing of the Second Coming and have misread many of the prophecies found in sacred scriptures.

The proliferation of popular books, tapes, and firesides among the Latter-day Saints during the last 25 years of my adult experience demonstrates how fruitful our imaginations have been when we have attempted to interpret current affairs in light of ancient and modern prophecy without proper historical context and the prophetic and ordained authority to do so.

The Internet brought a whole new way to stir the waters. Rumors abound about a friend whose uncle knew a woman who worked in the temple who had met a young missionary who was told by his patriarch that the elder would not finish his mission before the Second Coming! Certainly the Internet has blessed our lives, but what a curse it has been as far as rumormongering is concerned—even among Latter-day Saints.

My generation was not immune either from the effects of what I call Second-Coming fever. As young missionaries, some of us serving in the Italy Milan Mission speculated that 1974 would be a critical year—and possibly the very year of the Second Coming. We were highly imaginative as we wove together a tapestry of various bits of data, including the facts that the April annual general conference that year was to be the 144th annual conference of the Church and President Spencer W. Kimball, the twelfth president of the Church, would be sustained as prophet, seer, and revelator in a special solemn assembly to be held on April 6. What better day than this, a day filled with historical tradition and scripturally significant numbers such as 12 and 144, for the Lord to return to earth to begin His millennial reign?

You may laugh, but we took our wild speculation very seriously. Of course that historic and spiritually uplifting conference has come and gone, and we are still here. (See *CR*, April 1974, or *Ensign*, May 1974.)

Even today I encounter scores of people who believe they will witness the Second Coming in their lifetime. For my part, I am now somewhat reserved and wiser. I teach my students these guiding principles: prepare a will, buy life insurance, put funds away in a retirement program, and, if they really want to be nice to their family, purchase a pre-need funeral program that includes a cemetery plot! For many of my students, this last bit of advice is a little morbid, but it makes my point. Live today as if you will meet Jesus this evening, but plan your life as though you will live to be 100 years old.

A bright friend of mine always dreamed of becoming a medical doctor. However, during our undergraduate training here at BYU he fell prey to Second-Coming fever and made a decision in his life not to continue his education and apply to medical school. He reasoned that if the Second Coming was close, then he probably wouldn't even have time to finish paying off his college loans, and in the Millennium he wouldn't even have a job! Needless to say, my dear friend made a terrible mistake on two accounts. First, he was wrong to believe that the day Paul had talked about was upon us:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:

Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Wherefore comfort one another with these words.
[1 Thessalonians 4:16–18]

Second—and this may be a more important point for you and me today—my friend did not

realize that the Lord expects us to live for the future no matter what lies on the horizon. One of the best examples of this principle is the story of the Saints' efforts to build the beautiful Nauvoo Temple on the banks of the Mississippi River in Illinois more than 100 years ago. They knew that they were leaving for a great journey to a new land far away in the west, yet they built the temple anyway. They not only built it so they could receive sacred ordinances, but they built it as though it would stand for decades to come. We need to plan for tomorrow, no matter what comes today.

This is continually reinforced to me as students who seem to be overly concerned about the timing of the Second Coming sincerely ask, "Why should we plan for the future?" "Why should we finish our college education?" "Why should we have children when events so awful are about to descend upon us that just the thought of them can make even the most callous of us have an upset stomach?" There never seems to be a week following a news broadcast about the events in or connected to the Middle East that someone does not ask me, "Well, Brother Holzapfel, is this it?"

Let me read a quote that sums it up well:

I recall a reported statement, attributed, as I remember it, to President Wilford Woodruff. Some of the brethren of his time are said to have approached him (they had their troubles also) and to have inquired of him as to when he felt the end would be—when would be the coming of the Master? These, I think, are not his exact words, but they convey the spirit of his reported reply: "I would live as if it were to be tomorrow—but I am still planting cherry trees!" I think we may well take this as a page for our own book and live as if the end might be tomorrow—and still plant cherry trees! [Richard L. Evans, CR, April 1950, 105–6]

Although I certainly do not know the day nor the hour of the coming of our Lord—as Jesus said Himself, no one knows that but the

Father (see Matthew 24:36)—I have learned to be careful in speculating about events associated with the Lord's glorious return. We should not be so myopic and consider ourselves the focus of history. Additionally, I try to take into account all the prophecies of the last days instead of focusing on a few isolated passages and ignoring a host of others that provide a broader context of the last days. Certainly there is a lot of work yet to do, so I am not overly anxious about the timing of the coming of the Lord.

Hope in Our Day and in the Future

Another aspect related to the Second Coming is the pessimism often associated with the events immediately preceding the coming of the Lord.

According to one dictionary, *pessimism* is "an inclination to take the least favorable view (as of events) or to expect the worst" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, paperback ed., s.v. "pessimism," 1997, 549). In popular speech, one who is pessimistic is one who sees the proverbial glass as being half empty. During my life I have encountered students, friends, and associates who have often shown various degrees of pessimism when discussing the Second Coming.

In fact, an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* noted this:

In Jewish and Christian thought there are two basic ways of viewing the coming of the Messiah. Some consider promises of a Messiah and a millennial era symbolic of a time when men [and women] will finally learn to live in peace and harmony and the world will enter a new age of enlightenment and progress; no one individual nor any one specific event will usher in this age. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints opposes this view and agrees with the many other Jewish and Christian groups who affirm that there is an actual Messiah, that he will come at some future time to the earth, and that only through his coming and the events associated therewith will a millennial age of peace,

harmony, and joy begin. [Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism: The History, Scripture, Doctrine, and Procedure of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (New York: Macmillan, 1992), s.v. "Jesus Christ: Second Coming," 2:737–38]

The author continues:

The scriptures, both biblical and modern, abundantly testify that the era just preceding the second advent of the Savior will be "perilous" (2 Tim. 3:1) and filled with "tribulation" (Matt. 24:29). At that time "the devil shall have power over his own dominion" (D&C 1:35). The resulting judgments upon the wicked are part of the preparations for the Millennium. [Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 738]

Although this description in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* is certainly accurate in placing our doctrine of the Second Coming in context with what other Jews and Christians think about the coming of the Messiah, such a view without the proper context often provides fertile ground for a growing pessimism regarding the time in which we live and the future.

I am no Pollyanna. I know something has gone terribly wrong with our planet, and I believe that the only ultimate hope for humankind is Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, I believe we need to be optimistic about the present and what lies beyond the horizon. A bright future still awaits all of us as we approach the Second Coming. Remember our earlier quote from Paul found in 1 Thessalonians? "Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The Lord certainly expects that the proper teaching about events surrounding the Second Coming should provide comfort to us.

I have fallen prey to this pessimism from time to time and have wondered whether the future holds any real promises in light of prophetic scriptures about "the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Malachi 4:5).

I am almost certain we could fill one of the largest lecture halls here on campus if we chose

a speaker willing to focus on the blood, fire, carcasses, flies, immorality, wickedness, natural and political upheavals of the time, and, finally, the death and destruction usually associated with Second Coming discussions. I am also certain that if we had someone address the basic doctrines of Christ—such as faith, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Holy Ghost—we most likely would have a rather small showing in the lecture hall. The Second Coming is an exciting topic, with sex, violence, and intrigue all part of the main story line.

My generation and the one that has followed—your generation—I call "the Fast-Food Generations." We need stimulation about every two minutes or we lose interest. (I believe that is about the pace of *Sesame Street*.) So the exciting and highly violent nature of certain prophecies regarding the Second Coming tends to capture our imagination, whereas other topics seem boring. Speakers and teachers who desperately want to keep the attention of their students often resort to Second Coming themes as a way to hold their audience. In this I believe we do ourselves a great disservice.

In the past I have focused on the "blood-and-gore" prophecies and provided my own students a glass that is half empty. I am sorry for those failings and apologize to my students for providing an environment of anxiety, fear, and stress.

The scriptures, however, offer another view of the events of the last days. Let me provide you with an example of how just one text can be read through different lenses—how one can view the glass as being half empty or how one can view the glass as being half full.

I am not sure how many times I have read Nephi's words describing his vision concerning the last days, but they are legion. Nephi stated: "And it came to pass that I beheld the church of the Lamb of God, and its numbers were few, because of the wickedness and abominations of the whore who sat upon many waters" (1 Nephi 14:12).

My good friend and colleague Stephen E. Robinson recently provided a thoughtful insight to this passage as it relates to the identity of the “great and abominable church” mentioned by Nephi (see Stephen E. Robinson, “Nephi’s ‘Great and Abominable Church,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7, no. 1 [1998]: 32–39, 70). I, however, want to pay close attention to this comment from the scriptures: “and its numbers were few.” In seeing the glass as half empty, I have tended to emphasize the negative aspects of our times: The Church is small because there are so many ungodly people doing ungodly things—and things will only get worse.

It may be difficult for some students here today to visualize a church of only two million members, yet I vividly recall that day not too far in our past. The Church membership has certainly grown beyond my wildest imaginations, and I have had to readjust my thinking on this topic. What does it mean to be small? To get a sense of my own experience, one needs to look no further than a wonderful article written by BYU professor Bruce A. Van Orden in the October 1999 issue of the *Ensign*, “Preparing for a Worldwide Ministry” (pages 32–46). Bruce, who is just a few years older than myself, tells the dramatic story of the Church’s growth during the period between 1951 and 1995 from his own perspective as a witness who has lived during these times.

Even today maybe some of you think a church of 15 to 20 million could fulfill Nephi’s vision of “the church of the Lamb of God” as being composed of a few members in comparison with the total world population.

Now let us reread the text. Instead of seeing the glass as half empty, let us see it as half full: “And it came to pass that I beheld the church of the Lamb of God, and its numbers were few, because of the wickedness and abominations of the whore who sat upon many waters; nevertheless, I beheld that the church of the Lamb, who were the saints of God, were also upon all the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 14:12; emphasis added).

Notice the wording: “nevertheless, I beheld that the church of the Lamb, who were the saints of God, were also upon all the face of the earth.”

Now that provides a whole new way of looking at things. Relatively speaking, the membership of the Church could be considered small with 100, 250, or even 600 million members when compared with the world population. The key to interpreting this verse may well be exploring it with the idea that the Church’s membership will be “upon *all* the face of the earth” (emphasis added).

Not long after the Church was organized, the Lord told the Saints: “Hearken, and lo, a voice as of one sent down from on high, who is mighty and powerful, whose going forth is unto the ends of the earth, yea, whose voice is unto men—Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” (D&C 65:1). This revelation was received sometime in October 1831 on the Johnson family farm in rural Ohio. Although we do not know the exact number of members in the Church at the time, it was certainly not more than six thousand—and it was probably closer to two to three thousand. Yet the Lord told this small group of Saints that His “going forth is unto the ends of the earth.” He was trying to prepare them for the mission ahead of them. A few weeks later, in a revelation now found in the preface to the Doctrine and Covenants, He was more exact:

For verily the voice of the Lord is unto all men [and women], and there is none to escape; and there is no eye that shall not see, neither ear that shall not hear, neither heart that shall not be penetrated. . . .

And the voice of warning shall be unto all people, by the mouths of my disciples, whom I have chosen in these last days.

And they shall go forth and none shall stay them. [D&C 1:2, 4–5]

It seems reasonable to suppose that the Lord has a much larger plan than we sometimes see.

Because we tend to be myopic when it comes to God's continued and deep abiding love for others, we subconsciously assume that He has saved us and that is all that really matters. Let us return for a moment to the October 1831 revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 65. Following a brief but powerful introduction, the Lord says something quite marvelous:

The keys of the kingdom of God are committed unto man on the earth, and from thence shall the gospel roll forth unto the ends of the earth, as the stone which is cut out of the mountain without hands shall roll forth, until it has filled the whole earth. [D&C 65:2]

Of course the imagery here is based on the ancient prophecy found in the Old Testament. Nebuchadnezzar's dream of a colossal image was revealed to Daniel:

Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible.

This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass,

His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay.

Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces.

Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. [Daniel 2:31–35]

Not only did Lord reveal to Daniel the dream of the king, but He also provided through Daniel the interpretation thereof (see Daniel 2:36–45). In the last two verses of this interpretation, Daniel said:

And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.

Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure. [Daniel 2:44–45]

Since 1831, when section 65 of the Doctrine and Covenants was received, some members of the Church have continually struggled to capture the large vision of the kingdom's destiny. An example of this is found in a story Wilford Woodruff related about the earliest days of the Church:

On Sunday night the Prophet called on all who held the Priesthood to gather into the little log school house they had there. It was a small house, perhaps 14 feet square. But it held the whole of the Priesthood of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who were then in the town of Kirtland. . . . When we got together the Prophet called upon the Elders of Israel with him to bear testimony of this work. . . . When they got through [bearing testimonies] the Prophet said, "Brethren I have been very much edified and instructed in your testimonies here tonight, but I want to say to you before the Lord, that you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother's lap. You don't comprehend it." I was rather surprised. He said, "It is only a little handfull of Priesthood you see here tonight, but this Church will fill North and South America—it will fill the world." [Wilford Woodruff, CR, April 1898, 57]

It may be that some of us are still like these early Saints—we know no more concerning the destiny of the Lord's church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother's lap. We don't comprehend

it. I certainly do not, but I am beginning to get the picture. I started to expand my vision when I was a young missionary serving in Italian-speaking Switzerland and in northern Italy. The food in Italy was wonderful, but the work was difficult, and rejection was common. Certainly larger numbers of people were joining the Church in Italy at the time in comparison to some other European countries, but it was not uncommon for missionaries to labor months upon months without witnessing the marvelous miracle of conversion. I was very pessimistic about the Church's future in Italy. I knew, of course, of the phenomenal success of the Church in Mexico and in Central and South America, but I was deeply concerned about Europe. At the time the Eastern Bloc—the former Soviet Union and other eastern European countries—was closed to active missionary efforts.

In my lifetime I never imagined that China, Africa, and Greece would ever have congregations of Saints worshiping the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, ironically, we still believed that the Second Coming was imminent. We simply did not comprehend the Lord's timetable in this matter or the scope of His intended work during the time preceding the Second Coming.

Sometimes, in rather dramatic fashion, things change. The revelation on priesthood in 1978 and the demise of the Soviet Union dramatically changed the boundaries of our missionary fields of labor. Who has not been grateful for the expansion of the work among our brothers and sisters across Africa, eastern Europe, and elsewhere? Thrilling stories of a new generation of Mormon pioneers living in such places as Mongolia and India and in nations unfamiliar to myself such as the island chain of Kiribati are just as spiritually exciting and stimulating as almost any story from the first 100 years of the Restoration.

In 1997 I began a year of service at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies. During the following year we met with members of the Church from various nations of the earth

and from various ethnicities living, working, and worshiping in the Holy Land. A real surprise to me was a branch composed of native members of the Church in Jordan and Israel—some returned missionaries and endowed in the temple. Since then, along with other professors—David Seely, Jim Toronto, and Paul Hoskisson—I have spoken to members of the Church who gather together weekly to worship the Lord in Lebanon and Cyprus.

It was in Cyprus that my story comes full circle. One of my assignments during my mission was in Lugano, a beautiful city by a lake in the mountains of southern Switzerland. It was a paradise: Swiss yogurt, Swiss chocolate, and heated buses in the winter! While there I became friends with Trafford and Fernanda Cole, members who lived in Italy. My companion, Elder Chris Meacham, and I spent long hours with them when they visited Lugano. Nearly a year later I was transferred to Padova, Italy, near Venice. There my companion Elder Steve Smoot and I worked closely with the Coles. Young and enthusiastic about the gospel, they both played important roles in the small branch of the Church. If they were ever pessimistic about the Church's future in Italy, they never showed it.

Recently, some 25 years later, I rushed to a small, rented hall in Cyprus where Professor Seely and I were to speak at a missionary fireside. The missionaries had placed an ad in the local paper announcing the meeting: "Two American University Professors Will Speak on Paul's Life and Labors." Paul had visited the island nearly 2,000 years ago, and now we were there to talk to members and nonmembers of the Church about his life and ministry.

As we made our way into the building, we were introduced to some of the local members, visitors, guests, and missionaries serving on the island. I was impressed with the group of young elders and sisters. They were assigned to the Athens Greece Mission and were serving at this time on the island of Cyprus. They came

from many lands, including Canada, England, Sweden, Germany, and France. But as the group opened up, there he was: Elder Cole. Yes, it was the son of Trafford and Fernanda Cole—the young couple I had known previously in Italy. Elder Cole was a second-generation Italian speaking modern Greek as a Latter-day Saint missionary in Cyprus!

Of course my story can be duplicated dozens of times by many of you here today. My students are returned missionaries from California, Montana, Chile, France, Russia, Mongolia, India, Korea, etcetera. My colleagues serve as mission presidents throughout the world—in places that seemed closed forever but that have now been opened by the hand of the Lord. The gospel is spreading across the nations of the earth. Although we are relatively few in number, nevertheless the destiny of this Church is such that before the Lord's coming there shall be Saints upon *all* the face of the earth.

In addition I have come to appreciate the fact that people of goodwill from various nations and various religious traditions can and do make a difference in the world today. We must see these people as allies and friends, working together to fulfill God's plan of a just and safe world for men and women, young and old, rich and poor, black and white, and educated and noneducated. Surely there are many good people to be found on the earth—not just among the Latter-day Saints. We are not alone, and the numbers of good, honest people will increase upon the earth.

Conclusion

There is another important scripture that I believe will help us see the glass of the future as half full instead of half empty. It is found in the book of Revelation, chapter 7. John saw those who will be saved in heaven and observed, "And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel" (Revelation 7:4).

But that is not all who are saved, as verse 9 continues: "After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands" (Revelation 7:9).

How does my understanding of the gospel help me to appreciate this scripture? Well, I know that men and women become kings and priests, queens and priestesses through the ordinances of the house of the Lord. If we take this passage literally—and I certainly do—then the restored gospel of Jesus Christ must spread to all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, and those people who accept the gospel must be baptized, receive the gift of the Holy Ghost, and enter into the temples of the Lord to receive all the ordinances therein that allow them to receive the fulness of the priesthood. Have you and I not witnessed the expansion of temple building in our own time to match the internationalization of the Church?

There is a sense that we are just beginning this aspect of the work, especially when listening to President Gordon B. Hinckley in the April 2001 general conference. He said:

The great work of temple building goes on throughout the world. . . . It is wonderful, but we are not satisfied. We will keep on working to bring the temples to the people. . . .

*I have said before that the blessings of the temple represent that fulness of the priesthood of which the Lord spoke when He revealed His will unto the Prophet Joseph Smith. [Gordon B. Hinckley, "The Work Goes On," *Ensign*, May 2001, 5]*

For those who have been careful to examine ancient and modern prophecy together, instead of isolating certain passages of the scriptures, it does not surprise them that although we are most certainly in the "last days"—noting the official name of the Church—we still have much work to do. President Brigham Young,

the founder of this institution, indicated long before any temples were built in Utah that “to accomplish this work [salvation for the living and the dead] there will have to be not only one temple but thousands of them” (Brigham Young, 22 June 1856, *JD* 3:372).

We are witnessing the beginning of the fulfillment of Joseph Smith’s vision:

*Our missionaries are going forth to different nations, and . . . the Standard of Truth has been erected; no unhallowed hand can stop the work from progressing; persecutions may rage, mobs may combine, armies may assemble, calumny may defame, but the truth of God will go forth boldly, nobly, and independent, till it has penetrated every continent, visited every clime, swept every country, and sounded in every ear, till the purposes of God shall be accomplished, and the Great Jehovah shall say the work is done. [Joseph Smith, *HC* 4:540]*

In our own time President Gordon B. Hinckley declared this is just the beginning:

There was never a brighter day than today in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There was never a season when the work of the Lord prospered as it now prospers.

There was never a time for greater rejoicing and gratitude on the part of Latter-day Saints everywhere. . . .

*. . . I marvel at what is happening in the growth and expansion of this work. And yet I know that what we see today is but the scratching of the surface of far greater things yet to come. [Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Lengthened Shadow of the Hand of God,” *Ensign*, May 1987, 52, 59]*

So that I will not be misunderstood, let me say that I am aware of the challenges we face as individuals, as a society, as a nation, and as a Church. Remember Jesus’ own words on the

night He was betrayed: “In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). I have witnessed such things in my own family, among my friends, and among the Saints as I have served in various Church callings. In the triumphal vision of John, we are reminded of the difficulties that plague us in mortality. When asked to identify the kings and priests and queens and priestesses from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people that he saw in his vision, John indicated he did not know. Then the angel of the Lord told him: “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

Certainly we are mortal. We do face challenges. We need to be realistic about the effects of a fallen world; nevertheless, we need to see the glass as being half full. Recalling the words of Elder Neal A. Maxwell might help us put future events in context:

*Yes, there will be wrenching polarization on this planet, but also the remarkable reunion with our colleagues in Christ from the city of Enoch. Yes, nation after nation will become a house divided, but more and more unifying Houses of the Lord will grace this planet. Yes, Armageddon lies ahead—but so does Adam-ondi-Ahman! [Neal A. Maxwell, *Even As I Am* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 121]*

Elder Maxwell added, “His work proceeds forward almost as if in the comparative calmness of the eye of a storm. First, He reigns in the midst of His saints; soon, in all the world” (*Even As I Am*, 121). Truly in Christ Jesus we find hope and pray for His return, when “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes” (Revelation 7:17). I say this in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.