

# Great Expectations

THOMAS S. MONSON

**M**y dear young friends, the spirit which permeates this meeting here in the Marriott Center at Brigham Young University and in hundreds of other locations throughout the world is a reflection of your strength, your devotion, and your goodness. How grateful I am to be with you this evening. You bring to mind the words penned by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*How beautiful is youth! how bright it gleams  
With its illusions, aspirations, dreams!  
Book of Beginnings, Story without End,  
Each maid a heroine, and each man a friend!*<sup>1</sup>

In addition to being with all of you, I'm pleased to be with members of my family tonight.

Recently I reread an old favorite of mine by Charles Dickens entitled *Great Expectations*. You who have read this classic will recall that Dickens speaks of a young boy by the name of Philip Pirrip, more commonly known as Pip. Little Pip was an orphan who could not remember ever having seen his mother or his father. He had all the desires of a boy. He wished with all his heart that he were a scholar. He wished that he were a gentleman. He wished that he were less ignorant. Yet all of his

ambitions and all of his hopes seemed doomed to failure until one day a London lawyer by the name of Jaggers approached little Pip and told him that an unknown benefactor had bequeathed a fortune to him. Then that lawyer said that little Pip was “a young fellow of great expectations.”<sup>2</sup>

Today, as I contemplate who you are and what you are, who you may become and what you may become, I say to you, as that lawyer said about Pip, you have *great expectations*—not as the result of an unknown benefactor, but as the result of a known benefactor—even our Heavenly Father—and great things are expected of you.

## Prepare for the Race of Life

Many of you here tonight are close to completing your formal education. (We'll have a moment of cheer on that one.) Others of you have additional periods of academic preparation ahead. Each is in what could be called the race of life.

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes wrote, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to

---

*Thomas S. Monson was president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was delivered on 11 January 2009.*

the strong” (Ecclesiastes 9:11); it is to him who endures to the end. The race of life is so important, the prize so valued, that great emphasis must necessarily be placed on adequate and thorough preparation.

When we contemplate the eternal nature of our choices, preparation is a vital factor in our lives. The day will come when we will look upon our period of preparation and be grateful that we properly applied ourselves.

Many years ago, before I was called to the Quorum of the Twelve, I had the opportunity to address a business convention in Dallas, Texas—known as “the city of churches.” After the convention I took a sightseeing bus ride about the city’s suburbs. As we would pass the beautiful churches, our driver would comment, “On the left you see the Methodist church,” or “There on the right is the Catholic cathedral.” As we passed a beautiful red brick building situated upon a hill, the driver informed us, “That building is where the Mormons meet.”

A lady’s voice from the rear of the bus asked, “Driver, can you tell us something about the Mormons?” The driver pulled the bus over to the side of the road, turned around in his seat, and replied, “Lady, all I know about the Mormons is that they meet in that red brick building. Is there anyone on this bus who knows anything about the Mormons?”

I gazed at the expression on each person’s face for some sign of recognition, some desire to comment. I found nothing—not a sign. Then I realized the truth of the statement “When the time for decision arrives, the time for preparation is past.” For the next 15 minutes I had the privilege of giving, as Peter declared, “a reason [for] the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). At that time I developed a much greater appreciation concerning the matter of preparation.

Actually, my young friends, the period of your preparation did not begin the day you walked into your first college or university classes. It began long before you ever came to mortality, when we lived as spirit children of

our Heavenly Father. I am so grateful that in His wisdom He has given us a record, in the book of Abraham, which tells us something of that existence:

*Now the Lord had shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones;*

*And God saw these souls that they were good, and he stood in the midst of them, and he said: These I will make my rulers; for he stood among those [who] were spirits, and he saw that they were good; and he said unto me: Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born.*

*And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;*

*And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;*

*And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads forever and ever. [Abraham 3:22–26]*

Then, in the wisdom of our Heavenly Father, you and I were born into mortality and welcomed into loving families.

I pause to let you know how much your families pray for you. They worry about you. They wonder how you’re getting along. They love you so much. Don’t disappoint them.

The Lord tells us in the Doctrine and Covenants that during the first eight years of our lives, power is not given unto Satan to tempt us as little children (see D&C 29:46–47). We had an eight-year head start on Lucifer.

This information was given by the Lord to the Prophet Joseph Smith back in 1830. In our own time Dr. Glenn Doman, a renowned

scholar and scientist who has almost definitely never heard of the revelation quoted, has, through his research, come to the conclusion that

*a newborn child is almost an exact duplicate of [a] computer, although superior to one in almost every way.*

*What is placed in the child's brain during the first eight years of life is probably there to stay. If you put misinformation into his brain during this period, it is extremely difficult to erase it.*

He believed that the most receptive age in human life is that of two or three years old.<sup>3</sup>

You might ask, "Why is President Monson emphasizing this? Our first eight-year period of learning is long past." But you, my brothers and sisters, are going to be parents one day, and you will want to emphasize the importance to your children and to your future generations of descendants of that first eight-year period.

When I consider some of the things you and I no doubt did as children, as teenagers, and as young adults, I think it is a wonder at times that our parents survived, let alone retained their sanity. One woman who had been experiencing a very challenging morning trying to keep her children under control felt that she was about to lose her sanity.

Her small son, Matthew, came to her and said brightly, "Mom, you remember that vase that your grandmother gave to your mother, and she gave to you, and you are always worried that I am going to break it?"

"Yes," she said.

"Well," Matthew replied, "you can quit worrying!"

### **Prepare Academically**

You, my brothers and sisters, have now entered into another great preparation period in order that you might qualify for the race of life. I speak of academic preparation. This is

important because it is here that we learn the lessons which will help us meet the challenges of this changing world in which we live.

Just a few generations ago, if someone were applying for a position of responsibility in the business world, a personnel director would probably ask: "Are you willing to work hard? Are you healthy?" And if the answers to those questions were "Yes," chances are he'd be hired.

This, of course, is not so today. Assuming one's application—usually submitted online—is chosen for a personal interview, the modern human resource director will ask such questions as What sort of degree do you have? What contributions can you make to our firm? Which computer programs can you use skillfully?

### **Put Forth the Effort**

Many years ago I had the opportunity to teach at the university level, and I remember that some students seemed to know where they were going. They applied themselves, they had objectives, they had goals, and they worked toward the achievement of these objectives and goals. But other students could not have cared less. They seemed to be drifting on a sea of chance, with waves of failure threatening to engulf them. First they became lazy, then discouraged, and then indifferent, and then they became dropouts.

One such student who dropped out of school went home to his mother and said, "Mom, I've quit school. I'm going out to make my own way in the world." He packed his suitcase and went out to meet life head-on. After three weeks of meeting life, he called his mother. "Mom," he said, "remember telling me when I left home that if I quit school I wouldn't be able to get a job? Well, you were wrong. I've only been out on the road for three weeks, and I've already had six jobs!"

In your pursuit of excellence, real effort is required. Remember, "he which soweth

sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6).

Life is a sea upon which the proud are humbled, the shirker is exposed, and the leader is revealed. To sail it safely and reach your desired port, you need to keep your charts at hand and up-to-date. You need to learn by the experience of others, to stand firm for principles, to broaden your interests, to be understanding of the rights of others to sail the same sea, and to be reliable in the discharge of your duty.

Your efforts in school will have a notable effect on your opportunities after you leave school. As you struggle for that grade point average, don’t overlook the importance of really learning to think. Henry Ford, the great industrialist, said:

*An educated man is not one whose memory is trained to carry a few dates in history—he is one who can accomplish things. A man who cannot think is not an educated man however many college degrees he may have acquired. Thinking is the hardest work any one can do—which is probably the reason why we have so few thinkers.*<sup>4</sup>

### Prepare Spiritually

Greater than our period of academic preparation is the matter of spiritual preparation. We must acquire for ourselves a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which testimony will be an anchor to our soul.

In this inquiring, uncertain period of your lives, some of you may ask, as did Pilate, the Roman procurator in Judea at the time of Christ, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). And again we turn to the revelations for guidance:

*And that which doth not edify is not of God, and is darkness.*

*That which is of God is light.* [D&C 50:23–24]

Thousands of honest, searching souls continue to be confronted by that penetrat-

ing question which coursed through the mind of Joseph Smith as he surveyed the declarations made by the churches of his community concerning who is right and who is wrong. Joseph said:

*In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it? . . .*

*At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God.* [Joseph Smith—History 1:10, 13]

He prayed. The results of that prayer are best described in Joseph’s own words. You know them:

*I saw two Personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of them spake unto me, calling me by name and said, pointing to the other—This is My Beloved Son. Hear Him! [Joseph Smith—History 1:17; emphasis in original]*

Joseph listened; Joseph learned. His question had been answered.

To those who humbly seek, there is no need to stumble or falter along the pathway leading to truth. It is well marked by our Heavenly Father. We must first have a desire to know for ourselves. We must study. We must pray. We must do the will of the Father. And then we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. Divine favor will attend those who humbly seek it. That is a promise which I leave with you. Think of it.

Remember that doubt and faith cannot exist in the mind at the same time, for one will dispel the other. Whereas doubt destroys, faith fulfills. An attitude of faith brings one closer to God and to His purposes.

President David O. McKay often mentioned:

*Man's earthly existence is but a test as to whether he will concentrate his efforts, his mind, his soul, upon things which contribute to the comfort and gratification of his physical nature, or whether he will make as his life's pursuit the acquisition of spiritual qualities.*<sup>5</sup>

Faith implies a certain trust, even a reliance, upon the word of our Creator.

If you should have doubting thoughts, remember the counsel given by President Stephen L Richards, a former counselor in the First Presidency, who declared:

*Just say to those skeptical, disturbing, rebellious thoughts, "I propose to stay with my faith, with the faith of my people. I know that happiness and contentment are there and I forbid you, agnostic, doubting thoughts, to destroy the house of my faith. I acknowledge that I do not understand the processes of creation, but I accept the fact of it. I grant that I cannot explain the miracles of the Bible and I do not attempt to do so, but I accept God's word. I wasn't with Joseph, but I believe him. My faith did not come to me through science and I will not permit science to destroy it."*<sup>6</sup>

As your preparatory period at school comes to a close and you embark on the great race of life, may I suggest some helpful hints which will assist you to achieve your great expectations.

### **Avoid Life's Pitfalls**

*First, avoid the pitfalls in the track.* Avoid the detours which will deprive you of your celestial reward. You can recognize them if you will. They may be labeled "Oh, just this once won't matter" or "My parents are so old-fashioned."

Bad habits also can be such pitfalls. At first we could break them if we *would*. Later, we would break them if we *could*. John Dryden, an influential English poet and playwright of the 17th century, wrote:

*Ill habits gather by unseen degrees,  
As brooks make rivers, rivers run to seas.*<sup>7</sup>

Good habits, on the other hand, are the soul's muscles. The more you use them, the stronger they grow.

Our Heavenly Father has counseled us to seek after "anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy" (Articles of Faith 1:13). Permissiveness, immorality, and the power of peer pressure cause many to be tossed about on a sea of sin and crushed on the jagged reefs of lost opportunities, forfeited blessings, and shattered dreams.

Whatever you read, listen to, or watch makes an impression on you.

Avoid any semblance of pornography. It is dangerous and addictive. If you continue to view pornography, your spirit will become desensitized and your conscience will erode.

Don't be afraid to walk out of a movie, turn off a television set, or change the radio station if what's being presented does not meet your Heavenly Father's standards. In short, if you have any question about whether a particular movie, book, or other form of entertainment is appropriate, don't see it, don't read it, don't participate.

### **Persevere Toward Goals**

*Second, beware of the flashy start and the fade-out finish.* I love the simple wisdom found in this poem by an unknown author. I don't think it's a literary masterpiece, but you can understand it.

*Stick to your task till it sticks to you;  
Beginners are many, but enders are few.  
Honor, power, place, and praise  
Will come, in time, to the one who stays.*

*Stick to your task till it sticks to you;  
Bend at it, sweat at it, smile at it too;  
For out of the bend and the sweat and the smile  
Will come life's victories, after awhile.*<sup>8</sup>

Formula “W” is interesting: “Work will win when wishy-washy wishing won’t.” An attitude of work results in the capacity to make continuous effort toward the accomplishment of a given goal.

I’ve always been an ardent sports fan. Long will I remember one sportscaster as he praised the marvelous performance of Y. A. Tittle, one of the all-time great professional football quarterbacks. He said:

*This will be the key play of the game. Tittle has the snap from center; he fades to throw, but his line cannot hold. It appears the game is over.*

*Wait! Wait! Tittle has eluded his tacklers; he’s fallen deep behind the line. He cocks his arm to throw, and the pass is away and caught in the end zone for a touchdown.*

*That was a great second effort by Y. A. Tittle!*

In the game of life, a second effort is often required. The happy life is not ushered in at any age to the sound of drums and trumpets. It grows upon us year by year, little by little, until at last we realize that we have it. It is achieved by a body of work done so well that we can lift our heads with assurance and look the world in the eye.

Follow the example of Christopher Columbus. Take a leaf out of the log of his journal on his first voyage. Day after day, as they hoped to find land and never found it, he wrote simply, “This day we sailed on.”<sup>9</sup> Perseverance will pay rich rewards.

### Help Others

*Third, help others in their race of life.*

Remember that when you help another up a mountain, you are a little nearer the top yourself. Try to look at your brother or your sister in the right perspective. One man said, “I looked at my brother through the microscope of criticism, and I said, ‘How coarse my brother is.’ I looked at my brother through the telescope of scorn, and I said, ‘How small my brother is.’”

Then I looked into the mirror of truth, and I said, ‘How like me my brother is.’”

An attitude of love characterized the mission of the Master. He gave sight to the blind, legs to the lame, and life to the dead. Perhaps when we make face-to-face contact with our Maker, we will not be asked, “How many positions did you hold?” but rather, “How many people did you help?” In reality, you can never love the Lord until you serve Him by serving His people.

### Seek the Lord’s Help

*Fourth, and finally, seek the help of the Lord.*

Souls are precious—your soul and my soul. Our Heavenly Father Himself has said so.

Remember that we do not run alone in this great race of life; we are entitled to the help of the Lord. To the Hebrews the Apostle Paul urged:

*Lay aside . . . sin . . . , and let us run with patience the race that is set before us,*

*Looking [for an example] unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith. [Hebrews 12:1–2]*

Before we can take Him as our companion, before we can follow Him as our guide, we must find Him. In order to find Him, I would like to suggest, first of all, that we must make room for Him in our lives. He said, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

The physician Luke described the nativity scene: “And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7).

The invitation of the Lord is directed to each of us. Think of it as the words of the Lord to you individually: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him [and, I might add, to her]” (Revelation 3:20).

Oh, my young brothers and sisters, make room for the Lord in your homes and in your hearts, and He will be your companion. He will be by your side. He will teach you the way of truth. With His help, and with the preparation about which we have spoken, you can go forward in this race of life and achieve your own great expectations. Then, at the conclusion of it all, you'll be able to say, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

By so doing, the blessings of heaven will attend. He who notes the sparrow's fall will, in His own way, acknowledge our service.

Let me share with you an experience that illustrates this assurance.

Brother Edwin Q. Cannon Jr., we call him Ted, was a missionary to Germany in 1938. He loved the people and served faithfully. At the conclusion of his mission, he returned home to Salt Lake City. He married and commenced his own business.

Forty years passed by. One day Brother Cannon came to my office and said he had been pruning his missionary photographs. (That's a good word. You go through all of them, throw two away, and keep all rest.) Among those photographs he had kept since his mission were several which he could not specifically identify. Every time he had planned to discard them, he had been impressed to keep them, although he was at a loss as to why. They were photographs taken by Brother Cannon during his mission when he served in Stettin, Germany, and were of a family—a mother, a father, a small girl, and a small boy. He knew their surname was Berndt but could remember nothing more about them. He indicated that he understood there was a Berndt who was a Church leader in Germany, and he thought, although the possibility was remote, that this Berndt might have some connection with the Berndts who had lived in Stettin and who were depicted in the photographs. Before

disposing of the photos, he thought he would check with me.

I told Brother Cannon I was leaving shortly for Berlin, where I anticipated that I would see Dieter Berndt, the Church leader, and that I would show the photographs to him to see if there was any relationship and if he wanted them. There was a possibility I would also see Brother Berndt's sister, who was married to Dietmar Matern, a stake president in Hamburg.

The Lord didn't even let me get to Berlin before His purposes were accomplished. I was in Zurich, Switzerland, boarding the flight to Berlin, when who should also board the plane but Dieter Berndt. He sat next to me, and I told him I had some old photos of people named Berndt from Stettin. I handed them to him and asked if he could identify those shown in the photographs. As he looked at them carefully, he began to weep. He said, "Our family lived in Stettin during the war. My father was killed when an Allied bomb struck the plant where he worked. Not long afterward, the Russians invaded Poland and the area of Stettin. My mother took my sister and me and fled from the approaching enemy. Everything had to be left behind, including any photographs we had. Brother Monson, I am the little boy pictured in these photographs, and my sister is the little girl. The man and woman are our dear parents. Until today, I had no photographs of our childhood in Stettin or of my father."

Wiping away my own tears, I told Brother Berndt the photographs were his. He placed them carefully and lovingly in his briefcase.

At the next general conference, when Dieter Berndt visited Salt Lake City, he paid a visit to Brother and Sister Edwin Cannon Jr. so that he might express in person his gratitude for the inspiration that came to Brother Cannon to retain these precious photographs and for the fact that he followed that inspiration in keeping them for 40 years.

William Cowper penned the lines:

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea,  
And rides upon the storm.*

...

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*<sup>10</sup>

This testimony I bear to you, this witness I give unto you, that God lives, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, that He is our Elder Brother, He is our Redeemer, He is our Savior, and He is the author of your great expectations.

I leave with you my blessing; I express to you my love. You are a choice generation with great expectations. May our Heavenly Father ever guide and bless you; may you strive always to achieve those great expectations, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior, amen.

#### Notes

1. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Morituri Salutamus* (1875), in *The Complete Poetical Works*

of Longfellow (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1922), 311.

2. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 130; chapter 18.

3. Glenn Doman, quoted in “Too Young to Read?” *Life*, 27 November 1964, 111; see also 107.

4. Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1922), 247.

5. David O. McKay, *CR*, October 1963, 89; or “The Value of Self-Control,” *Improvement Era*, December 1963, 1096.

6. Stephen L Richards, in *CR*, October 1937, 39.

7. John Dryden, “Of the Pythagorean Philosophy” (1700), from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book XV, in *The Poetical Works of Dryden* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 881.

8. “Stick to Your Task,” in Jack M. Lyon and others, eds., *Best-Loved Poems of the LDS People* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 255–56.

9. See Lillian Eichler Watson, ed., *Light from Many Lamps* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), 138.

10. William Cowper, “Light Shining out of Darkness,” *Olney Hymns* (1779), no. 35, in *Masterpieces of Religious Verse*, ed. James Dalton Morrison (New York: Harper, 1948), 10–11.