

The Time for New Year's Resolutions

STERLING W. SILL

I hope that that very generous introduction of your great President didn't lay a foundation for a disappointment later on. As he was saying some of those very nice things, I thought of what President Kimball said the other night about a minister who was driving down the highway a little faster than he should have gone, and he was stopped by a traffic officer. The minister didn't want to be arrested, so he said, "Please officer, don't arrest me. I'm a poor preacher." The officer said, "Yes, I know. I've heard you."

The most important thing I think I'd like to say to you today is that I am very grateful to be here with you, and I'd like to congratulate all of you on being here. Somebody has said that a thing is sometimes not as important for itself alone as for what it stands for. The fact that you are all here at this great University associating with and under the direction of these great teachers and being inspired and directed by each other is a sign of some very important things that will come about in your life later on, in the great society in which you live, in the great country that you will serve, and in the Church to which you have pledged and will pledge your allegiance.

The custom of celebrating holidays

We have a very interesting custom among us of setting aside special days on which we think about special things. We set aside the second Sunday in May as Mother's Day, and on this day we let our minds reach up and try to understand the purposes for which this day was set apart. We set apart the third Sunday in June as Father's Day for the same reason.

Someone has said that the human mind has some of the qualities of the tendrils of a climbing vine; that is, it tends to attach itself and draw itself upward by what it is put in contact with. Then we have some other great days on which we think about other wonderful ideas. We have Memorial Day, Easter, Pioneer Day, and the Fourth of July. We set aside the fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving. On this day we try to build gratitude and appreciation into our lives. Cicero, the great Roman statesman, said that gratitude is the mother

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of virtues; that is, our virtues and our abilities and our attitudes have parents just the same as other things we do. As we recount our blessings, we increase them.

Then we set aside another whole period of the year, beginning at Thanksgiving and ending at the New Year, in which we commemorate and think about and learn from the greatest event that ever took place upon this earth—when the Son of God came here to establish his church and to tell us about the standards that ought to distinguish our lives. During this period we decorate our homes, set up Christmas trees, and listen to Christmas carols. We hear Christmas sermons, and we retell ourselves the great traditions of Christmas. We give gifts to each other, and we build up an attitude of gratefulness and appreciation and reverence and worship into our lives. I'm not going to talk to you about that. That's already past. But I'd like to talk to you about the important day that this Christmas season leads into. It seems to me very proper and natural that Christmas should follow Thanksgiving and that we lay a proper basis for Christmas during the Thanksgiving period. Then our Christmas is enhanced as a consequence.

Importance of the New Year

What I would like to talk to you about is the important period that we call the New Year. This is a time when we make New Year's resolutions. This is the time when we could make some determinations about the things that we have been thinking about during Christmas. Sometimes after some great event is over, we close our minds on it and forget about what we have done. That is, after Christmas, we repack our boxes of ornaments and tinsel. The Christmas themes are taken off the radio, and we go back to doing the things that we did before. Of course, when we do that, we miss one of the greatest values of Christmas. When we lay down the ideas that we have associated with during this high point of the year, we

frequently have a corresponding recession in our lives. Someone has expressed the opposite of this idea in verse when he said:

*When the song of the angels is heard no more
And the Bethlehem star is gone out of the sky
When the kings and the Wisemen have returned to
their homes
And the shepherds are back in the fields with their
flocks,
Then is the time when the real work of Christmas
should be eagerly begun:
To spread the Christian message, to lift up the
broken hearted;
To convert the unbelieving, to purify the national
purpose,
To break the bonds of sin, and to exalt the purpose of
all mankind.
The New Year is the time when we should establish
in our heart
Those great ideals that were given us by the Son of
God for the Christmas season.*

The Christmas season loses much of its constructive purpose when we repack our tinsel and forget about it. This practice reminds us of one of the great experiences in world history. Some time ago, my wife and I read the story of Queen Victoria, who was just a teenager in 1837 when the crown of England was placed upon her head. For the next sixty-four years, until her death in 1901, she ruled this greatest nation that there had ever been in the history of the world.

In 1897, the Great Jubilee was conducted for this famous Christian queen. The officers of their far-spread country, the crowned heads of all of the courts of Europe, and the great ambassadors and the island princes from their faraway locations were invited to come to London for the great celebration of this Diamond Jubilee.

In preparation for this celebration, the *London Times* asked Rudyard Kipling to write a Jubilee poem; you remember that the result

was his famous "Recessional." A recessional is something that has to do with a recession. It is letting down or a worsening that sometimes takes place after the main event has passed. Sometimes the orchestra plays a recessional in the theater as the audience is leaving, or sometimes a recessional is played in the church as the choir and clergy are leaving the chancel and going to the robing room. Sometimes we have a recessional in our lives or our businesses. And in his great poem, Mr. Kipling prays that England could avoid a recessional in its high standards of life and power. In his poem he said:

*God of our fathers, known of old —
 Lord of our far-flung battle-line —
 Beneath whose awful hand we hold
 Dominion over palm and pine —
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet
 Lest we forget — lest we forget!*

*The tumult and the shouting dies —
 The captains and the kings depart —
 Still stands Thine ancient Sacrifice,
 An humble and a contrite heart.
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget — lest we forget!*

*Far-called our navies melt away —
 On dune and headland sinks the fire —
 Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
 Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
 Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
 Lest we forget — lest we forget!*

*If drunk with sight of power, we loose
 Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe —
 Such boasting as the Gentiles use
 Or lesser breeds without the Law —
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget — lest we forget!*

*For heathen heart that puts her trust
 In reeking tube and iron shard —*

*All valiant dust that builds on dust,
 And guarding calls not Thee to guard —
 For frantic boast and foolish word,
 Thy mercy on Thy People, Lord!*

In trying to warn the people against a recession, Mr. Kipling went back and relived this period of recession among some of the ancient nations. He knew what happened when people forgot about God and brought on a moral recession of national scope.

During Queen Victoria's long reign and the period when England became the great nation that ruled over one-quarter of all the earth's surface, Britain's navies controlled the seven seas and her great commerce dominated the trade in the entire world. The sun never set upon the British Empire. When Victoria was asked what the secret of British greatness was, she would always put her hand on the Bible and say, "England is the land of the Book. England lives by the principles of the gospel that have come down to us in this great biblical record." This reverence of the things of God is what, in my opinion, more than anything else, controls the success of our lives.

Looking backward and forward in time

We come now to this very important period of January, this time of a new beginning. We remember the interesting fact that January was named after Janus, the old Roman god of doors and beginnings. Janus had one interesting peculiarity; he had two faces. With one face he looked back into the past year to discover his own mistakes and his own successes. Then through the other face he looked up into the future to make plans for a new year and to put these great ideals into operation that had been formed during the past year.

I suppose this is also what Charles Dickens had in mind in his story "A Christmas Carol." This story is probably the most famous non-scriptural Christmas story that we have. Each year we see it a half a dozen times. In the story,

the Spirit of Christmas takes Scrooge back into his past and lets him relive his early experiences before he had gained those problems that eventually caused him trouble. After he had sufficiently learned the lessons of the past, the Spirit of Christmas took him up into the future, where Christmases were yet to be and where things were still subject to change, and let him see some of the things that may take place if he did not do the right thing. Then Scrooge begged the Spirit of Christmas to let him change some of the conditions of his life, and after these changes had been made and he was brought back into the present, he said, "I am not the man I was."

This is also the philosophy, I suppose, that H.G. Wells considered when he wrote his famous story *The Time Machine*. You remember there was a machine that Mr. Wells could get into and push the lever, and he would go back into his own past or back into the past history of the world as far back as he would like to go. And because he was an historian, he liked to go back and verify, by his own personal presence, the Battle of Hastings and other events which he was interested in. When he had finished his explorations into the past, he would push the lever the other way and go up into the future and prelive what was to come. He could go where time had not yet taken place and arrange for those things that he would like to occur in his own life.

Now, God has a time-traveling ability, some of which he has given to the prophets as well as to us. We remember that Abraham was permitted to go back and relive the preexistence. He said, "Now the Lord has shown unto me, Abraham, the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and that among all these there were many of the noble and great ones" (Abraham 3:22). The Lord also put John the Revelator into a time machine and sent him up into the future to prelive the final judgement.

We have been given that same ability in our dreams and imaginations. In President

McKay's great book *Gospel Ideals*, he had a paragraph in which he said, "Last night I dreamed about my mother." Then he said, "I would like to dream about my mother more often." That is, in his dream he went back and relived those important events that took place at his mother's knee when he learned the lessons of life that brought him to his ultimate high place. President McKay didn't learn how to be the President of the Church when he was ninety or seventy or sixty. He learned those lessons when he was five and ten and fifteen. And then in his dream he went back and relived that important experience so that he could reabsorb the original good. When he had awakened the next morning, even though now his mother had been gone for many years, it was as though he had actually had that experience with his mother during the nighttime.

Preliving the important events of our lives

But no one needs to be asleep in order to dream, and with equal benefit we can go back and relive our marriage vows. We can relive and revitalize the covenants which we made at the waters of baptism when we promised God that we would be faithful. We can go back and relive all of those sources in the past from which we may regain strength and ambition, and we can remake our decisions about them. Or we may push the lever in the other direction and prelive the future.

I have a relative who, when she reads a novel, always reads the last chapter first. She wants to know before she begins where she's going to be when she gets through. That is a pretty good idea for life.

We can also prelive our marriage vows and determine in advance the kind of people we would like to be when that great occasion arrives. This is much better than being faced with the pressures of the moment when the occasion arises so that we clean ourselves up temporarily to get married. That is, in order to attain the goal for which we are not prepared,

we get on buddy-buddy terms with the bishop, and we get a recommend. However, after the goal has been accomplished, we sometimes drop back into our past mediocrity because we are not prepared to carry through. Sometimes we even go to college or we go on missions or we do some other great thing, but because we lack the necessary buildup to give us the follow-through and determination, it doesn't do us the good that was intended.

The other day I heard a story that I think ought to be in the Bible. A young mother was called upon to talk about some of the things that had happened in her life to prepare her for the responsibilities of her future home. She brought with her to the stand her husband and six children. She then told about a time before she was married when she attended the commencement exercises at her graduation, and the speaker talked to the students about the fact that they were now through with their schoolwork and were facing the great opportunities of the future. He pointed out some of the questions that would need to be decided. Some of the students would seek employment, and hopefully all of them would be married. He talked about this idea of looking up into the future and making some definite commitments to those values that would soon become a part of their lives.

Because this prospective mother was impressed with the speaker, and because she had thought of these things on her own power, she realized that someplace there was a man who would eventually become her husband. In her mind she wondered what he was like and she was curious about the kind of husband he would prove to be. Because she understood the antemortal life, she knew that her children were also in actual being in the spirit world. Her mother had had six children, and she had grown up with the idea that that would be an acceptable size for her family. She knew that they now walked by sight and that they would

be conscious of the fact that she was preparing to be their mother.

She knew that her children would be very concerned about her and they would want to come into this life through her instrumentality under the best circumstances and not the worst. So after thinking about it, she decided to sit down and write them a letter. They would not be born for a number of years, but she was looking ahead to what would ultimately take place and she wrote them to make a kind of progress report of their future mother.

She told them about this commencement service that she had attended and that she had finished her schoolwork and that she had graduated with high honors and was pleased about that. In her letter she said to them, "I have never done anything in my life up to this point that I think would make you ashamed to recognize me as your mother, and I will promise you right now, as I go out to look for your father, that I will never accept anyone for that office who would not be the kind of man who could make us a good living and maintain a high standard of life and take us through the temple on his own power and have the kind of family unit that the Lord would like us to have."

Later on, when she met her husband and he asked her to marry him, she explained to him that she had made some commitments to some other people. She talked about these family members whose mother she was to be. This man was delighted that she had such extraordinary vision and would look out for the welfare of those children who were also going to be his.

They were married in the temple under the finest circumstances, and they were happy. As she finished her talk, she read extracts from some of these letters that she had written to her antemortal children many years before. Then she asked her husband and her children to stand up and she introduced them to the audience. And her program would make a good New Year's resolution for many fine people.

But for all of us, this month of January is a month when we look up into the new year and also plan for more effective lives. We can prelive our marriages. We can prelive our deaths. Suppose we think occasionally of the kind of people we would like to be on that very special future occasion of our marriage, when we stand up in the house of the Lord that has been dedicated for his sacred purposes and take some very special person by the right hand and promise her or him that throughout our lifetimes we will be faithful. We will be true to those great trusts of life that have been given us as we have come into mortality.

Living according to the Bible

There are many places where we do not want to have any recessional. It is very important that the Lord should be with us yet, lest we forget the promises we have made to him. Since the days of Queen Victoria, the great British nation, ruling much of the area from the palms in the south to the pines in the north, has lost much of its territory. And many of the people have lost much of their traditional faith where they lived by the Book. But only as long as England lived by the Book did she continue to be the world's greatest nation. It is interesting to us that even yet England and her offshoot nations are the only nations that have made this great idea of democracy and free enterprise work on a large scale over a long period of time. But the center of religious gravity has now passed to the United States, and America now has become the land of the Book.

If you read in the Book of Mormon the vision that was given to the prophet Nephi, you will see that he was permitted to see us and our time and what we did here as this great nation was being established upon the Western Hemisphere. The angel pointed out to Nephi that these people carried with them a book as they went forth in this great accomplishment. The angel said, "Knowest thou the meaning of the book?" Nephi said, "I know

not." Then the angel explained to him that this book was the great Bible record that was carried by these people as they came to our shores (see Nephi 13:21–23).

As the "land of the Book," we sell more Bibles in the United States than in all the rest of the world put together. We do more toward trying to help other people. This is the place where the gospel of Jesus Christ has been restored. This is the center of education. This is the center of invention. This is the place that the Lord looks to for the gospel to go out all over the earth. This is the reason for which you are at this great University: to prepare yourselves to serve the Church, and to serve your family, and to serve this great nation, and to serve God and to serve your own interests. Every one of us was permitted to come to this earth with the hope that we might qualify for the celestial kingdom. If we are only interested in the terrestrial or the telestial kingdoms, it is not necessary to be baptized. It isn't necessary to come to Brigham Young University if you are only interested in the telestial kingdom. You can get into the telestial kingdom without any education. If you are only interested in the telestial kingdom, it is not necessary to be married in the temple, because if you qualify only for the telestial kingdom you won't have your families anyway.

One of the greatest ideas there is in the world for us is that we should be the "land of the Book." Our lives should be lives patterned after and following the great commandments and directions that are given us in the Holy Bible and in the other volumes of scripture that have been given to assist us. This ability to prelive the future includes the opportunity to prelive our eternal lives. I don't know just what it would be like if we sometime discovered that we had become telestial people. I do know that it would be something less fine, less glorious, less satisfactory, and we would be less happy. It would be as far below the celestial as the

twinkle of a tiny star is below the blaze of the noonday sun.

Planning for our last hours

Somebody said that the most important event in life is death. That is the graduation day. Death is our only possible entrance into immortality. The last hour of life is the key hour. That is the hour that judges all of the other hours. Nobody can judge anybody's life until his last hour. That is, you couldn't write the life story of Jesus of Nazareth or of Judas Iscariot without knowing about what each did in his last hour. But suppose you go forward today and prelive your last hour and find out what kind of a person you would like to be at that time.

I would like to tell you the story of two men who lived with a recession in their last hour. The first of these is the old legendary story of Faust. You may remember that Dr. John Faust died in Wittenberg, Germany, in the year 1540. Twenty-four years before his death, Faust had made a deal wherein he sold his soul to Satan. He said to Satan, "If you will assist me for twenty-four years, punishing my enemies and aiding my friends, at the end of that time, I will forever deliver up my soul." Now that was a great idea because twenty-four years was a long time. It seemed to Faust that it would never exhaust itself. Twenty-four years was longer than Faust had lived in his entire lifetime up to that point. But what difference did it make anyway what happened after twenty-four years? There is an optical illusion in our perspective that sometimes gets us into difficulties because it makes everything close by seem large and impressive and everything in the distance seem small and of little importance.

This is the problem that got Esau into trouble. You remember Esau came home one night and said, "Jacob, if you will give me your mess of pottage, I will assign over to you my birthright." Now, to one who had just had a good dinner, that would not seem like a very

intelligent trade. But Esau was hungry. I suppose he thought, "What difference does it make what happens in ten years? What good is my birthright when I am hungry right now?" I don't even know what a "mess" of pottage is. It doesn't sound very appetizing to me, but Esau traded off everything he had to get it (see Genesis 25:29–34). We make that same mistake every day. Every day each one of us in some way trades off some future birthright for some present pottage.

Faust also made this great mistake. But Satan, with more perfect perception, said, "I will wait on Faustus while he lives, and he shall buy my service with his soul." Then the twenty-four years began and Faust had every experience of good and bad. But almost before he was aware, it was said to Faust, as it must be said to every one of us, "Thine hour is come." He had never made any attempt to prelive the future or make any New Year's resolutions about it, and now that it had actually arrived, he realized for the first time how badly he had cheated himself. And then he wished that the bargain could be set aside. But that wasn't possible. Then he prayed and he said, "Oh, God, if thou canst have no mercy on my soul, at least grant some end to my incessant pain. Let Faustus live in hell a thousand years or even a hundred thousand, but as last be saved." But he knew that, according to his own bargain, even this could never be. Then he sat and watched the clock tick off the seconds. Finally, just before the hour struck, the last words of Faust before he died were "Faustus is gone to hell."

If Faust had lived his last hour first and tried to understand what kind of a person he would like to be then and what kind of record he would like to have, then he would never have made those serious mistakes that brought him to that unpleasant place.

The other story is Shakespeare's story of the great Cardinal Wolsey in the play *Henry VIII*. You may remember that the Cardinal was a very wealthy man. He had great power. He

had made and unmade kings and kingdoms, but along the way, thinking as most of us do that the end would never find him out, he had done evil, and in his last hour he found himself discovered, discredited, and discarded. His property had been confiscated by the state, his robes had been withdrawn by the church, and in the humble place where he went to die, he said substantially this:

The last hour of my long and weary life has come upon me. I have done not well and may God have mercy on my soul. Farewell, a long farewell to all my greatness. This is the state of man. Today he puts forth the tender leaves of hope, tomorrow blossoms and bears his blushing honors thick upon him. The third day comes the frost, the killing frost, and then he falls as I do, never to hope again. I have ventured many summers in a sea of glory far beyond my depth. I have sounded all the depths and shoals of honor. But I have missed the way. My high blown pride at last broke under me and left me weary and old in service to the mercy of the rude stream.

Then he said to his servant, the only one who had not forsaken him:

Oh, Cromwell, Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition. By that sin the angels fell. Corruption wins not more than honesty. Be just and fear not, let all the ends thou aimest at be thy country's, thy God's and truth's. Then if thou diest, thou diest a blessed martyr.

Then he said:

Oh, Cromwell, Cromwell, had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my king, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies.

If the great cardinal had pre-lived his life, if he had done some thinking and some determining about the kind of person that he would

like to be, not just on a temporary basis, but throughout his life, then he would never have come to this disastrous place which was his end.

So on this occasion, I'd like to remind you again of this period of the New Year, when we must not forget the lessons that we have learned in the previous year. We should not forget the month of January with the authority Janus had of doors and beginnings. This is the one time each year when we look back into the past and then start over with new beginnings on a clean sheet. This past year we may have been plunged into several kinds of recessions which have made it a little more impressive that we should let no recessions get a hold in our lives.

We pray to God that no recession will ever take place in the significance of Easter or Memorial Day or Mother's Day or Father's Day or that first day or each week which is our Heavenly Father's day. And as we commemorate Thanksgiving and that tremendously important period of Christmas, we ought not to cause a recession by packing up our tinsel and our ornaments and forgetting the significance for which these periods were set apart. Father, we ought to pass into the New Year as one of the greatest of all great days where we form convictions and make decisions that will govern all of our future lives.

May the Lord bless you, my young brothers and sisters, as you continue this thrilling experience that you are having at this great University. I don't know of anyplace in the world that is a better place for you to be than here where you can partake of the Spirit of the Lord and the spirit of this great faculty led by this wonderful University President.

May God help each one of us to be successful, I humbly pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.