

The great commandment of life is, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength" (Mark 12:30).

May God bless us to put the first commandment first and, as a result, reap peace in this life and eternal life with a fulness of joy in the life to come, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

The chorus sang "The Morning Breaks" without announcement.

President Monson

It has been our privilege to listen to the opening address of our beloved prophet, President Ezra Taft Benson.

Following his remarks, the Mormon Youth Chorus sang for us the beautiful hymn of the Restoration, "The Morning Breaks."

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Council of the Twelve Apostles will now speak to us.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell

Thank you, President Benson, for that sermon on the first commandment, and even more, for the way in which you implement it by your expressions of your love for all of us.

Keep prophecies in perspective

Brothers and sisters, over the sweep of Christian history, some believers have, by focusing on a few prophecies while neglecting others, prematurely expected the Second Coming. Today, while we are obviously closer to that great moment, we are in the same danger.

On the other hand, smugness is also a real danger. Of Jesus' first advent, the smug said, "It is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come" (Helaman 16:18). Declared Jesus of His second coming, "Take heed . . . lest . . . that day come upon you unawares" (Luke 21:34; see also Matthew 24:37-38, Luke 21:35, Revelation 3:3, D&C 45:26).

Peter wrote of the smug skeptics who would say, "Where is the promise of his coming," for do not "all things continue as they were from the beginning" (2 Peter 3:4)?

Some prophecies, such as the return of Jewish people to Israel, were decades in their fulfillment (see Ezekiel 39:27). Other prophecies can be fulfilled in a compressed period of time. Taking the

restored gospel "for a witness" to all the nations of the world involves generations (Matthew 24:14), but a "desolating scourge" can cover the land quickly (D&C 5:19). Sadly, more than one qualifying possibility already exists for such scourges (see Mark 13:10, D&C 5:19). The blossoming of the desert "as the rose" involved substantial time, yet significant moral decay can happen within a single generation—whether in a nation or in a family (see Isaiah 35:1; Helaman 6:32, 11:36, 12:4).

The Middle East has been at the intersection of human history so many times! Yet in our time the words of Zechariah are especially descriptive, saying that Jerusalem is to be "a cup of trembling" for "all the people round about" and "a burdensome stone for all people" (Zechariah 12:2-3).

Hence the need to keep our eyes on more than a few leaves of the fig tree in order to know when "summer is nigh" (Matthew 24:32). By analogy, it is one thing to notice strong ocean breakers crashing against the shore, heralding another oncoming storm, and quite another to discern the powerful movements on the ocean's quake-jarred floor foretelling a terrible tidal wave.

In the context of such cautions, I have no hesitancy in saying that there are some signs—but certainly not all—suggesting that "summer is nigh"

(Matthew 24:32). We would do well to notice and to ponder but without either becoming preoccupied or ignoring any sprouting leaves because of being “overcharged” with the “cares of this life” (Luke 21:34).

Wickedness in the last days

We are told, by way of example, that some conditions preceding the second coming of the Savior will be as in the days of Noah (see Matthew 24:37–39) and “also as it was in the days of Lot” (Luke 17:28). Noah’s time was one of disobedience and wickedness. People were uncomprehending and “knew not until the flood came” (Matthew 24:39; see also Genesis 6:5, 1 Peter 3:20). The choking cares and pleasures of this life led to the general rejection of Noah’s prophetic message. Two especially interesting words are used in the Bible to describe Noah’s time: *violence* and *corruption* (see Genesis 6:11). Violence and corruption, seldom strangers to the human scene, appear to be increasing today.

Some of the coarseness and cruelty present at the time of Noah will be replicated, for “the love of many shall wax cold” (Matthew 24:12). Also, peace will have been “taken from the earth” (D&C 1:35).

Peter wrote of how “the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah” until, as other scriptures advise, the wickedness exceeded that among all God’s creations (1 Peter 3:20; see also Moses 7:36). A very cruel society existed, one “without affection” in which people hated “their own blood” (Moses 7:33). Given the abuses by humans of other humans, in His longsuffering, God waited as long as even He could.

Those in Lot’s day ate, drank, bought, sold, planted, and builded amid gross wickedness (see Luke 17:28), vexing Lot with their “filthy conversation,” or, as it says in the Greek, they “oppressed [him] by [their] outrageous behavior” (2 Peter 2:7^b). In their grossness, there was also gross neglect of the poor (see Ezekiel 16:49).

Our time already reflects yet another prophecy: “Distress of nations, with perplexity” (Luke 21:25). Before modern times, global perplexity simply was not possible. Now there is a quick transmission of some crises and problems from one nation to others—the consequences of debt-ridden economies, the spreading of diseases, the abuse of narcotics, and, perhaps most of all, a shared sense of near-helplessness in the face of such perplexities. Today, the assembled agonies of the world pass in reminding review on the nightly news.

The Church’s growth and a great division

In the last days, happily, the Church will grow extensively, with its membership being “scattered upon all the face of the earth” (1 Nephi 14:14). Nevertheless, its dominions will still be comparatively “small” because of “wickedness,” which will close the ears of many to the gospel message (1 Nephi 14:12).

There will also be “a great division among the people” (2 Nephi 30:10; see also D&C 63:54). This stressful polarization will, ironically, help in the final shaking of that strange confederacy, the “kingdom of the devil,” in order that the honest in heart, even therein, may receive the truth (2 Nephi 28:19).

This “great division” is what President Brigham Young also saw, saying, “It was revealed to me in the commencement of this Church, that the Church would spread, prosper, grow and extend, and that in proportion to the spread of the Gospel among the nations of the earth, so would the power of Satan rise” (in *Journal of Discourses*, 13:280).

Prophecies should help us prepare, not weigh us down

Happily, even though the world worsens around us, there will be many, many fine and wonderful men and women of all races and creeds—and of no religious creeds at all—who will continue to lead decent and useful lives. Besides, as

Mormon said, scriptural commentary on declining conditions is not communicated "to weigh thee down," but, instead, to help us live so that Christ may "lift thee up" (Moroni 9:25).

Thus, what I have said is not said in alarm at all, but, rather, so that we might be noticing and preparing. Prophecies are given, in part, that we "might know and remember" that these things "had been made known . . . beforehand, to the intent that [we] might believe" (Helaman 16:5). Today's inattentive people will be like an earlier, desensitized people who "began to forget those signs and wonders which they had heard, and began to be less and less astonished, . . . and began to disbelieve all which they had heard and seen" (3 Nephi 2:1; see also 1 Peter 3:17). If faithful, brothers and sisters, we lose nothing, even if, happily, like the ancient Ninevites, today's mortals were to repent.

Honor covenants

So let us look at ourselves. For the Church, the scriptures suggest both an accelerated sifting and accelerated spiritual and numerical growth—with all this preceding the time when the people of God will be "armed with righteousness"—not weapons—and when the Lord's glory will be poured out upon them (1 Nephi 14:14; see also 1 Peter 4:17, D&C 112:25). The Lord is determined to have a tried, pure, and proven people (see D&C 100:16, 101:4, 136:31), and "there is nothing that the Lord thy God shall take in his heart to do but what he will do it" (Abraham 3:17).

How can we, as individual members of the Church, survive spiritually if we do not honor our covenants? How can we survive spiritually if we break outright the covenants made at the time of baptism or in the holy temples? How can we be on the Lord's side during the "great division" if we mirror the world's materialism and selfishness (2 Nephi 30:10)?

The righteous need not fear

Members of the Church need not and should not be alarmists. They need not be deflected from quietly and righteously pursuing their daily lives, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (2 Timothy 1:7).

In 1836, the Prophet Joseph pled with the Lord "to confound, and astonish, and to bring to shame and confusion, all those who have spread lying reports abroad, over the world" (D&C 109:29). As a people, we were so blessed recently, and we will be again.

True, the enemies and the critics of the Lord's work will not relent; they only regroup. Even among the flock, here and there and from time to time, are a few wolves, wearing various styles of sheep's clothing—ironically, just before the shearing season! A few defectors and "highminded" traitors (2 Timothy 3:4) even go directly to the "great and spacious building" to hire on (1 Nephi 8:26). There recruits are celebrated and feted until—like their predecessors—they have faded into the dark swamps of history. As President Heber C. Kimball said, divine justice will eventually require that they "pay all the debt of [all] the trouble that they have brought upon the innocent" (in *Journal of Discourses*, 5:94).

Thus, there is no need to be surprised, nor to fear, when certain conditions come upon mankind. Furthermore, the Lord has given to us some remarkable assurances about the Restoration's lead Prophet and the restored Church:

"Behold, that seer will the Lord bless; and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded" (2 Nephi 3:14) "in mine own due time" (D&C 71:10).

"And the righteous need not fear, for they are those who shall not be confounded. But it is the kingdom of the devil . . . who need fear, and tremble, and quake" (1 Nephi 22:22, 23).

Rewards for the faithful

If we are faithful and obedient while in this good and beautiful world, we will

later inherit “a far better land of promise” (Alma 37:45), “a city . . . whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:10), a city within which are “many mansions” (John 14:2; see also John 14:3).

Paul wrote, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man [meaning we cannot even imagine], the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

The spiritually submissive will make it through. The word of God will lead the man and the woman of Christ “in a strait and narrow course across that everlasting gulf of misery” (Helaman 3:29) and land their souls at the right hand of God in the kingdom of heaven, “to sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the holy prophets who have been ever since the world began” (Alma 7:25; see also Ether 12:4).

Those who have overcome the world will themselves then be overcome by the generosity of the Father, as the Father shares “all that [the] Father hath” (D&C 84:38). The faithful will hear those special words, “Enter into the joy of [your] Lord” (D&C 51:19), for “they who have endured the crosses of the world, and despised the shame of it, they shall inherit the kingdom of God, . . . and their joy shall be full forever” (2 Nephi 9:18).

The light that Lamoni received “infused such joy into his soul” (Alma 19:6). Yet, incomparable incandescence lies ahead, for “the day cometh . . . [when] all things shall be revealed . . . which ever have been . . . and which ever will be” (2 Nephi 27:11).

Here in mortality we already know moments when, “because of the great goodness of God,” there is a “gushing out of many tears” (3 Nephi 4:33). Our joy is brim (see Alma 26:11). Yet this is but a foretaste of the ultimate homecoming, when our cups will not only be brim, but will run over without ceasing!

The gospel’s sure samplings tell us even now, in Jacob’s words, of “things as they really will be” (Jacob 4:13), like beautiful, beckoning postcards from that “far better land”! (Alma 37:45).

The Lord leads us

Meanwhile, perhaps “summer is nigh” (Matthew 24:32; D&C 35:16, 45:37). We are here in mortality, and the only way to go is through; there isn’t any around! Yet our Deliverer assures us: “be of good cheer, for I will lead you along. The kingdom is yours and the blessings thereof are yours, and the riches of eternity are yours” (D&C 78:18).

Brothers and sisters, it is my testimony to the Church that the Lord will lead us along, just as promised. He balances giving to the Church and its people the needed, specific directions, with providing the relevant learning experiences, including having our faith and patience tried in order to be strengthened. Thus He leads us along, but He desires that during that process we take His yoke upon us in order to learn of Him by our personal experiences. We surely feel the weight of that yoke at times, but the path is clear.

Jesus, our Shepherd, has “marked the path and led the way, And ev’ry point defines” (“How Great the Wisdom and the Love,” *Hymns* [1985], no. 195). His clearly defined footprints are easy to see. They are pressed distinctly and deeply into the soil of the second estate, deeply and distinctly because of the enormous weight which pressed down upon Him, including the awful burden of all of our individual sins.

Only He could have carried it all.

I thank the Savior personally for bearing all which I added to His hemorrhaging at every pore for all of humanity in Gethsemane. I thank Him for bearing what I added to the decibels of His piercing soul-cry atop Calvary, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

President Monson

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Council of the Twelve Apostles has just spoken to us.

The chorus and congregation will now join in singing “Put Your Shoulder to the Wheel,” following which Elder