

AS FOR YEARS



WHEN SUSAN AND I WERE IN GRADUATE SCHOOL, we came to appreciate the wisdom embedded in three simple words from the Doctrine and Covenants: “as for years” (D&C 51:17). Two recent events have caused me to think about this phrase again.

The phrase came to mind as I attended the College of Life Sciences convocation with my daughter and son-in-law, who will soon be leaving BYU for medical school in the East. As I looked out across the throng of graduates, I recognized that many of them were also about to leave Provo for work and school. I thought to myself, “I hope that you will not treat the next destination on your life journey as if you were merely passing through, but give yourself to it *as for years*.”

Susan and I embraced this phrase in graduate school as we observed others in our situation who never truly unpacked and settled in. There is a strong temptation for young adults to look on their years in school or their first jobs merely as way stations toward a permanent job and home, and hence to hold back. I noticed the same attitude when I presided over a mainly freshman student stake. Many students, especially from the Wasatch Front, never became fully involved in their student wards because they went home most weekends. It’s easy for any of us to regard ourselves as simply passing through life, without making the effort—or assuming the risk—of putting down roots.

Knowing this, I have found it salutary to recall the counsel the Lord gave in May 1831 to a group of Saints from Colesville, New York, newly arrived in Ohio. The Colesville Saints were eagerly anticipating a revelation on the location of Zion, where they intended to establish permanent homes. They knew that Thompson, Ohio, would be a temporary stopping point. Yet the Lord told them, “I consecrate unto them this land for a little season, until I, the Lord, shall provide for them otherwise, and command them to go hence; and the hour and the day is not given unto them, wherefore let them act upon this land *as for years*, and this shall turn unto them for their good” (D&C 51:16–17).

“As for years.” I take this to be a D&C *carpe diem*. It invites us to seize the day, but with an eye toward the future. We are not merely to mark time in this life but to improve every shining moment, knowing that eternity is comprised of such fleeting moments. To paraphrase Thoreau, you can’t kill time without injuring eternity.¹⁴

I am persuaded that the commandment to “act upon this land as for years” was given more for the benefit of Saints in every generation than for the Colesville Saints alone. It established a principle. Latter-day Saint pioneers would later act upon this principle as they built bridges, planted crops, and established settlements that they knew they must leave. Those in my parents’ generation likewise lived by the “as for years” principle as they participated in a post-WWII Mormon diaspora in which Latter-day Saints moved from the Great Basin back out across the country and put down roots in communities from LA to DC. Susan and I tried to do the same when we lived in Berkeley. The principle holds for every generation. When we act upon the land as for years, it turns unto us for good—whether our sojourn be long or brief.

I thought of the phrase “as for years” again when a colleague in the prime of life died suddenly and without warning. His death reminded me that we are all like the Colesville Saints, in that “the hour and the day” of our departure is not given to us. None of us knows when we

will be called home, or how long we will be in our current jobs, Church callings, neighborhoods, and so forth. As the Apostle James wrote, “Ye know not what shall be on the morrow” (James 4:14). Nonetheless, we are to live in the present “as for years.” We are to “lift where we stand,”¹⁵ rather than be ever waiting for some future time and place to establish Zion. This will redound to our good.

Finally, a historical footnote about the Colesville Saints. As it turned out, their “little season” in Thompson, Ohio, was brief indeed—a mere six weeks! The owner of the property in Thompson reneged on his offer to consecrate his land to the Church. So in June the Lord commanded the Colesville Saints to take their journey to Missouri (see D&C 54:8), and off they trudged. Five days after they arrived, the Lord revealed that this was to be the land of Zion (see D&C 57). No doubt, they thought that this time they would live in their new home not just for years but for generations. They did not know that Jackson County too would be a temporary home—as would Nauvoo and Winter Quarters and even, for many, the Salt Lake Valley.

The Lord seems to want his people to be prepared, with equal grace, to build and leave temples, to accept both callings and releases, to live in the moment and for eternity. In this life, the disciple must learn “to love that well, which thou must leave ere long.”¹⁶