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*Wars, Rumors of Wars,
and Wise and Faithful Servants*

R. KIRK BELNAP

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Wars, Rumors of Wars, and Wise and Faithful Servants

R. KIRK BELNAP

My dear brothers and sisters, I pray that the Spirit of the Lord will be here with us and that you and I will be edified and instructed from above. I have prayerfully sought the Lord's guidance as I have prepared to speak to you. I am convinced that the unity of the themes that have been addressed to large audiences on this campus in the past 10 days is not a matter of coincidence. As the featured speaker of the Freedom Festival patriotic service, Sheri Dew reminded us that where much is given much is expected. Elaine Bond, last week's devotional speaker, also spoke of our duty and our opportunity to serve our brothers and sisters. I, too, have been guided toward a similar focus.

Let me begin by taking us back to the last week of the Lord's mortal ministry. The Savior had just delivered a stinging rebuke to hypocritical scribes and Pharisees who, instead of serving God and feeding the flock, had given themselves over to seeking the honors of men. Jesus and His disciples had retired across the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, from where they could look down on the temple and surrounding buildings. From this vantage point—the place from which the Lord would soon ascend into heaven and the place to which He will return as King of Kings and Lord of

Lords—the Good Shepherd warned His under-shepherds of trouble ahead and taught them key principles that will help His followers prepare for His much-anticipated return.

He spoke of tribulation and persecution. He said that there would be “wars, and rumors of wars. . . . For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes. . . . And . . . because iniquity shall abound, the love of men shall wax cold.” But “the end . . . , or the destruction of the wicked,” will not come until the “Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world” (JS—Matthew 1:28–31). He cautioned us to not despair and charged us to remain vigilant. He then asked, “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?” (Matthew 24:45). In other words, the faithful and wise servant feeds the sheep. The Lord concluded His counsel with three important parables: the parable of the ten virgins; the parable of the talents; and the parable of the sheep and the

R. Kirk Belnap was a BYU associate professor of Arabic and director of the National Middle East Language Resource Center when this devotional address was given on 8 July 2003.

goats—this last driving home the importance of serving, of feeding the flock.

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. [Matthew 25:31–36]

I am grateful that the Lord has given us such specific guidance to help us find peace in troubled times and to help us know what we need to do—and do we must if we wish to be among those who hear the Lord say: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant . . . : enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21).

As we hear of wars and rumors of war, as natural disasters increase, as old and new diseases spread, as iniquity abounds, even Saints are prone to give into the inclinations of the natural man and hunker down and avoid the battle against evil that we came to this earth to fight. As long as one’s relatives, friends, and neighbors are safe and sound, it’s tempting to write off “the world” and sit back and hope that the Lord comes soon. Brothers and sisters, if our bowels are not filled with charity for the whole world, we have not understood the parable of the good Samaritan. If we shun the fight, our lamps are likely to run out of oil, and before we know it, we may find the door shut before us and hear

the Lord say to our request to enter, “I know you not” (Matthew 25:12).

No one can be faulted for hoping that the coming of the Lord is nigh. What we must guard against is the tendency to assume that it is too late for us to make a difference. We must pray for love to replace fear, for “there is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear” (1 John 4:18). As the Prophet Joseph Smith observed, “A man filled with the love of God, is not content with blessing his family alone, but ranges through the whole world, anxious to bless the whole human race” (HC 4:227).

As disciples of Christ we cannot give up. We have been commanded to seek peace. We have been told, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you,” and we must follow these teachings if we would be worthy to be called the children of Him who “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:44–45). Indeed, “blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

I want to tell you about some peacemakers. It has been my great privilege over the years to associate with hundreds of students committed to working for peace. With surprising regularity students and others knock on my door or call and say, “You may find this strange, but I feel that I am supposed to study Arabic.” These people, young and old, all have one thing in common: a strong desire to serve the Lord and work toward a better world. Some are only with us for a semester whereas others spend years and achieve impressive levels of fluency. All are peacemakers, bridge builders. Few things soften a person’s heart toward a people like learning their language.

Let me tell you one student’s story. In 1997 Alicia’s family moved to Jerusalem as a result of her father’s assignment to teach at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies.

While there she had the opportunity to travel to Jordan and attend church meetings with the members of the Amman Branch. She was frustrated that she could not speak with them and vowed that she would learn Arabic. True to her word, she enrolled in Arabic 101 the first semester of her freshman year here.

Like many students Alicia found Arabic challenging, but she pushed on, looking forward to returning to Jerusalem in January of 2001 to participate in our winter/spring intensive Arabic program. Less than three months before our scheduled departure, violence broke out in Jerusalem and quickly spun out of control. No students have been sent to Jerusalem since. As a result of remarkable prior events, however, our students ended up spending winter semester in Syria, a land where few Americans go.

Once in Damascus, the students applied themselves to learning Arabic. With the help of excellent teachers and good friends they gradually acquired facility in the language. Syrians are particularly proud of their language and were deeply impressed to see Americans striving to learn it. Thousands, if not millions, came to know about our students, who were regularly featured on radio and TV and in newspapers. Everywhere the students went, people recognized them.

All of the students spent time serving in the community. Of one such experience Alicia wrote in her journal:

This morning before classes we did service at the handicapped school again. As we entered the gates, as with all other mornings, about 20 or so little Down syndrome kids raced toward us with huge smiles and outstretched arms. We began the routine of the morning with exercises and the national anthem of Syria and then went off to class. As we filed away to classes I was pulled away by a messenger who had been sent to tell me that the director of the school wanted to see me. I followed her to a room where the director and other adminis-

trators were anxiously waiting. . . . The principal informed me that their school was to participate in a Mother's Day program where numerous government officials would be in attendance. He asked if I knew any children's songs about mothers that the children could perform. . . . All that I had to draw from were the Primary songs of the Church that I had learned and sung to my mother as a child.

"Yes, I know some Mother's Day songs," I replied.

"Good. Will you sing one for us?" he asked.

I was startled. They all sat quietly and waited for the impromptu performance. I motioned to my colleague across the hall to come join me. Then she and I stood and sang. With no practice or prior notice we sang our hearts out. And as we did so, I felt certain that our voices were amplified by the power of heaven. We sang with the voices of angels resonating through the stone-arched walkways of this little school. A spirit of peace descended upon all present. At the close of our performance the director complimented us and asked if we would teach our songs to the children to perform on Mother's Day. We accepted and went to work. For months we practiced, and finally the day of performance arrived.

As we waited for our turn to perform, we watched the performance of other schools. Instead of the sweet love-filled holiday I had expected, this had played out instead to be a political rally. Mothers and children, infuriated by their separation from one another by the Israeli occupation of the Golan, chanted out calls of war and pledges to reclaim what had been taken from them.

The children walked on stage with guns, flags, and signs of protest. The listening crowd cheered. I began to panic, realizing that it was almost our turn to perform. What we had to offer was such a contrast to what had been presented thus far. Yet there was nothing to do but to simply go on and pray that all would go well. . . . We stood on stage and . . . thanked God in heaven for sending us to our dear mothers. We sang of goodness, light, and peace. . . . A silence fell on the crowd, and for a brief moment the anguish and hate were lifted.

All in attendance felt of the peace that emanated from our simple Primary songs. Though it was just a Mother's Day program, for me it was a grand experience. During this performance I came to understand a portion of the pain that these Syrians had experienced, and through our songs we offered to them the healing balm of the Spirit and peace. A bridge of understanding had been built between us, and our message to each other was burned into each others' hearts.

In April our group spent a few days visiting Lebanon. We met with the Beirut Branch for church meetings. The room that serves as the chapel was filled to overflowing. The students were thrilled to hear (and understand!) talks given in Arabic and to participate in Sunday School. In a combined priesthood/Relief Society meeting, Nabil Assouad, the branch president, spoke for a few minutes and then turned the time over to the students to share their testimonies. One after another they rose and bore testimony. The Spirit was powerfully present. Alicia spoke of how she had prayed in her first visit to the Amman branch that she would be able to learn Arabic and participate in the meetings. She wept as she thanked God.

After the meetings and after some delicious food provided by the members, students and members got to know each other better. Both the Lebanese Saints and the students were hungry for each other's company, the Beirut Branch being small and the students having had little or no contact with other members of the Church. The students had also missed having access to a piano, so one student soon began playing hymns and Primary songs. A number of students began to sing along. Other students and local members pulled up chairs to listen. Later that day I wrote in my journal, "I was very touched at the sight. Here we were, in Beirut, symbol [for the West] of all that's gone wrong in the region, but we were united in love and peace, praising God."

We returned to Damascus to participate in a symposium on Islamic philosophy jointly sponsored by Damascus University and BYU. Syrian professors, students, dignitaries, and media representatives packed the large room and stood in the hall as President Bateman emphasized the common values and the deep faith in God that the Syrian people and the Latter-day Saints share. Dr. Mouaffak Daaboul, academic vice president of the University of Damascus, opened the conference by expressing his admiration for BYU and for the Church and its members, recounting personal details of his visit to Utah to attend the Conference on the Family. He reflected on memories of a family home evening here that left him deeply touched. He concluded his talk by expressing his love for the BYU students and then reading from letters that they had written in Arabic to the president of Syria about their experiences.

One student had written, "What surprised me was the friendliness of the Syrians—in my view the Syrians are the gentlest nation I have ever met. Syrians always have the time to sit and talk with us. People are the most important thing in their lives." Dr. Daaboul concluded his remarks by holding the students up as an ideal for all to emulate in order to build bridges of understanding between the peoples of the world.

A few days later the students bid farewell to Syria, some to return to the U.S. and others to continue on for additional study in Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Spain. In each of the three branches of the Church in Jordan the students presented special programs. Returning to Amman meant that Alicia had come full circle and was finally able to communicate with the Saints there. Members and their friends thrilled to mingle with young American members who spoke their language and valued their culture. One of the senior missionaries serving there told me that the students accomplished more in a few days than he would in 18 months. We went on to similar experiences with the Saints

in Cairo. Many of the students commented that these opportunities to strengthen Arab members of the Church were the high point of their Study Abroad experience.

Starting our trip in Istanbul and then covering much of the Mediterranean gave the students a rare feel for Muslim, Jewish, and Christian history and culture. Spain was a particularly fitting conclusion to the trip, it being the site of the culmination of the Umayyad Empire, which was originally based in Damascus. As a result, Spain is home to some of the greatest achievements of Islamic civilization—but more on this in a moment.

Our students returned home just two months before the tragic events of September 11. I am convinced that they were sent to Damascus and other places by a loving Father in Heaven who knows all things. They softened many hearts, and their hearts were filled with love and understanding. Individuals can make a critical difference in the course of history. I believe that the world is a better place and that it will be a better place because of what these students and others have done, what they are doing, and what they will yet do. Many of them are or will be in positions of responsibility that will allow them to be a force for good, for peace, for understanding. They will likely make an even greater contribution through their children.

Weeks after her return to the U.S., Alicia left to serve in the Singapore Mission, from which she returned in January. She recently wrote me:

For the first year of my mission I served among the Muslim people in countries ruled by Islamic governments. Although we were not generally permitted to teach Muslims, there were numerous occasions where I had opportunities to build bridges. . . . I attended several Islamic conferences and was able to speak with the conference participants (often in Arabic) and tell them of my experiences in Jerusalem, Syria, and other places. . . . They were interested in our Study Abroad program. They were interested in my love for the Muslim

people and expressed a desire for future programs to their countries so that students will likewise come to understand and love them as I do the people of Syria. I was daunted by the fact that I would be the sole representative there. However, I was comforted by remembering that the Lord had prepared me through experiences such as the Islamic Translation Series Conference in Damascus, where I, with the other students, was able to represent our student program and answer questions that I would later be asked again as I stood on my own in Malaysia. I have no doubt that those experiences were in the plan of the Lord and that He prepared me for them.

As I prepared to speak to you, I was struck by the parallels between the sons of Mosiah and students like Alicia. Our world desperately needs more sons and daughters of Mosiah—people who will patiently and lovingly serve in the courts of modern-day Lamoni's. We cannot nor should we all book passage for exotic lands tomorrow, but we can prepare our hearts and prepare our children's hearts. We can pray, we can yearn, we can learn, and we can refuse to give up on any of our Father's children.

Let us look at another example from the Book of Mormon—that of Mormon himself, soldier and peace seeker. He never gave up—even when it was apparent that he could do no more for those of his generation. Shortly before he was killed by the Lamanites, he addressed their descendants. His last words of loving counsel are written to future generations of Lamanites, and the last words of his son are likewise addressed to the children of those who killed his father. This wonderful final chapter of the Book of Mormon speaks of testimony; of gifts of the Spirit; of faith, hope, and charity; of covenants and sanctification. Moroni opens this final outpouring of love and counsel by saying, "Now I, Moroni, write somewhat as seemeth me good; and I write unto my brethren, the Lamanites" (Moroni 10:1). "My brethren!" We, too, must press on in our discipleship, praying for that

gift of charity that will enable us to see every man as a brother and every woman as a sister.

Let us return to our group's final days in Spain. After months of visiting some of the great monuments of Islamic architecture, the students stood in front of the Madrid Temple. They readily recognized Islamic elements in that beautiful edifice.

Islamic influence on LDS temple architecture may come as something of a surprise to some of you. Let me explain. For nearly 800 years much of what is now Spain was part of the Islamic world. As a result, the pervasive influence of Arab culture is very much a part of Spain. For example, my tie is a gift that my students bought for me in Toledo. Its distinctive repeating geometric design could have come straight from the walls of a mosque or palace in various parts of the Muslim world.

Now let's consider influences involved in a beautiful window in the Madrid Temple. The central star configurations reflect the prolific use of star motifs in Islamic art and architecture. Muslims inherited a love of geometric cosmic symbolism from the Byzantine and Greco-Roman world—which can, in turn, be traced back to ancient Egyptian influences. For example, star patterns appear in the marble inlay of important Umayyad monuments such as the Dome of the Rock and especially in the domes of the Great Mosque in Cordoba.

Also, the nave of the Cappella Palatina, a 12th-century church in Palermo, Italy, copies Fatimid Egyptian style. All of these are exercises in cosmic geometry that pull the human soul back to its origins and God.¹

One could dismiss such Islamic influences in the design of the Madrid Temple as being merely a case of localization. Temples typically reflect aspects of the region in which they are built. I find the Islamic influence on the architecture of the Madrid Temple deeply symbolic of the role that the prophet Muhammad and Islamic civilization played in laying the groundwork for the Restoration, which is

eventually to “gather together . . . all things in Christ” (Ephesians 1:10).

The Lord works in mysterious ways. Latter-day Saints universally acknowledge the important preparatory role played by the Reformation. If not for the work of reformers like Martin Luther, who paved the way for religious freedom, Joseph Smith would have been burned at the stake long before Peter, James, and John could confer priesthood keys on him.

The Reformation did not take place in a vacuum. Critical events in history prepared the way. I believe that the advent of Islam is one important factor that contributed considerably to making a better world, including preparing the way for the Reformation and the Restoration. In 1978 the First Presidency acknowledged the important role of the prophet Muhammad and others when they issued this statement:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals. . . . We believe that God has given and will give to all peoples sufficient knowledge to help them on their way to eternal salvation. [“Statement of the First Presidency Regarding God's Love for All Mankind,” 15 February 1978]

Many Latter-day Saints are of the opinion that little or nothing of note took place between the time of the Apostasy and the Renaissance. They rarely stop to consider the factors that transformed western Europe from a backward collection of quarreling tribes into an economic, scientific, and cultural powerhouse.

Time permits noting only a few ways in which Islamic civilization has directly and indirectly blessed our lives. Islam provided a much-needed challenge to a Christianity that was becoming more and more corrupt. It played a crucial role in preserving and

significantly improving on the achievements of Persian, Indian, Greek, and other civilizations. In the words of my colleague Professor Daniel Peterson:

The civilization that grew out of the Arab conquests and the spread of Islam was, for several centuries, the undisputed leader of the world in virtually every field of intellectual activity. . . . Arabic was the language of science and mathematics, and of philosophy.²

Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars and scientists working together made revolutionary breakthroughs. Muslim centers of learning in Spain and Sicily provided western Europe with easy access to knowledge and methods that helped to fuel the Renaissance. Latin translations of Arabic medical and philosophical textbooks were required reading in European universities. Arab navigational tools and techniques facilitated early European exploration of the globe. Many educated Europeans learned Arabic to gain direct access to the intellectual treasures of Islamic civilization. One of these was Martin Luther, who made a careful study of the Qur'an.

I am sure that it is no matter of accident nor luck that Luther and his ideas survived to change the world. Charles V, the most powerful European monarch and the newly proclaimed recipient of the title Holy Roman Emperor, condemned Luther as a heretic. A key factor in preventing Charles V from succeeding in executing Luther and squelching the Protestant movement was the fact that Ottoman armies were threatening to overrun Austria. Indeed, "the Lord worketh in many ways to the salvation of his people" (Alma 24:27).

Let me add that Muslims and peoples of many other faiths continue to bless our lives. Our closest allies in the struggle to strengthen the family are our Muslim and Catholic brothers and sisters. My faith and the faith of my wife and children have been greatly strengthened through our association

with faithful Muslims and others. I consider my friend and colleague Professor Muhammad Eissa, who will give the benediction, to be something of a modern Colonel Kane. He has come to the rescue and blessed me, the university, and the Church time and time again. Someday, when all things are revealed, I am confident that we will marvel at the debt we owe to peoples all across the earth, peoples we never dreamed of stopping to thank.

Now back to our little group in Madrid. As we watched the last rays of the sun fade and the temple began to glow brighter and brighter, I observed that the Islamic elements before our eyes seemed a fitting way to honor the culture that passed on light that would culminate in the Restoration. How appropriate it is that the house of the Lord—which exists to turn the hearts of the children to the fathers—brings together contributions from all of Abraham's children.

Now let us turn to the oldest section of the Doctrine and Covenants: section 2. Of all that Moroni, the peace seeker, said to young Joseph during his visits to the Smith home, only this prophecy was privileged a section of its own:

And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers.

If it were not so, the whole earth would be utterly wasted at his coming. [D&C 2:2–3]

Ten years later the Lord instructed His beleaguered Saints: "Therefore, renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children" (D&C 98:16).

Let us remember that "all are alike unto God" (2 Nephi 26:33) and that the entire world is populated by sons and daughters of God—sons and daughters who chose Him and His plan. Even if we never serve in Lamoni's court, let us do

what we can where we are and remember that the fervent prayer of a righteous person “availeth much” (James 5:16). Let us look to Father Abraham and remember the promises made to him and to us. Let us do as he did and become a blessing to all nations that it may be written of us as it was of the sons of Mosiah:

And thus they were instruments in the hands of God in bringing many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, to the knowledge of their Redeemer.

And how blessed are they! For they did publish peace; they did publish good tidings of good; and they did declare unto the people that the Lord reigneth. [Mosiah 27:36–37]

That we may ever be found publishing peace is my prayer. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. This devotional address would not have been possible without the contributions of many teachers, colleagues, students, and others over the years. Special thanks, however, are due Professor Cynthia Finlayson for her assistance in helping me to better understand architectural elements of the Madrid Temple and other European edifices.

2. Daniel Peterson, *Abraham Divided: An LDS Perspective on the Middle East*, rev. expanded ed. (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1995), 244. This book is an excellent introduction. For the reader who would like to know more about the fascinating East–West interchange that significantly figured in transforming the West, I highly recommend Jerry Brotton’s very readable *The Renaissance Bazaar: From the Silk Road to Michelangelo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).