

The Eternal Family

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Almost three years ago in a Saturday evening session of a stake conference in New York, I listened intently to a young Hispanic sister bear her testimony. As a recent convert she bore witness of the promptings and feelings that occurred during her conversion. She stated:

When the missionaries knocked on my door, I saw the smiles on their faces and felt the firm grip of their handshakes. They said they had a message that would bring happiness into my life. At the conclusion of the first lesson they turned to Moroni's promise in the Book of Mormon. I was surprised. They did not ask me to believe their words. Instead, the missionaries challenged me to find out for myself the truthfulness of the gospel through prayer and the Holy Ghost. Later, as I listened to the missionaries explain the plan of salvation, I suddenly felt a confirming witness that I was more than a speck in the universe. My life was important not only to me but to a loving Heavenly Father and his Son. They knew me! There was purpose to life, and God had a plan for me to achieve that purpose. I could never feel worthless again!

The truth of the young sister's testimony burned within me that evening. I knew then and know now, as do you, that there is purpose

to life, that God has a plan of happiness designed for all of his children. The plan includes a premortal existence in which men and women were begotten spirits, "born of heavenly parents, and reared to maturity in the eternal mansions of the Father, prior to coming upon the earth in a temporal body to undergo an experience in mortality" ("The Origin of Man," November 1909, in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 6 vols. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75], 4:205). Individuals were blessed with the gift of agency in pre-earth life just as they are here. Those spirits who were obedient to law gained knowledge and intelligence and were rewarded with a second estate. One's progress depended on the choices made (see Abraham 3:22–26, Moses 4:1–4, Revelations 12:3–9). Agency always has been an integral part of the plan (see D&C 93:30–31, 38).

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Mortality and the Formation of Eternal Families

The plan includes an earthly or temporal sojourn as well. During this state we receive a physical body with procreative powers and the opportunity to form eternal families of our own. The power to create new life is given to men and women for a season, and they are tested as to how they will use this sacred power. By the time death occurs, the power is removed. For those who are obedient to eternal law, the procreative power is restored in the Resurrection. For those who are disobedient to righteous principles and are unrepentant, the power is never returned (see D&C 131:1–4; 132:22, 25).

A key purpose of God’s plan is the formation of eternal families. It is within the family that exaltation is achieved. My remarks today center on the importance of the family and its eternal nature. I am aware that some individuals do not have the opportunity to marry in mortality. For those who remain single on earth, there is still much that can be done to develop one’s talents, to help others, and to prepare for the blessings that will come. For the promise is that no blessing will be withheld eternally if a person is worthy (see Clyde J. Williams, ed., *The Teachings of Harold B. Lee* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996], p. 256).

The creation of the earth, the fall of Adam, and the atonement of Christ are essential elements or pillars in the Father’s plan for the progress and development of his children. This is true not only for the salvation of the individual but for the exaltation of the family. The earth’s creation provided a new state of existence apart from our spiritual home, and mortality’s probationary test is qualitatively different from the premortal one. It differs in that we are expected to live by faith. A veil has been drawn over our minds, and we remember little or nothing of life with our Heavenly Parents. In the words of Ecclesiastes, “There is no remembrance of former things”

(Ecclesiastes 1:11). In Paul’s words, “For now we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Through faith, assurances come (see JST Hebrews 11:1). But diligence and obedience are required to hear and feel the still small voice.

The test in mortality also differs because the physical body is subject to a new set of desires and temptations. Mortals by nature have an “inherent . . . inclination to succumb to the lusts . . . of the flesh [and] the allurements of worldly things” (Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2nd ed. [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966], p. 781, s.v. “temptation”; see also Alma 42:10). The earthly test is whether we will yield to the seductions of nature or to the “enticings of the Holy Spirit,” which changes our nature “through the atonement of Christ” (Mosiah 3:19). Alma’s counsel to Shiblon was to “bridle all your passions, that ye may be filled with love” (Alma 38:12). As children and parents, a new family setting allows us to love, trust, care, and serve in a different environment.

The fall of Adam made it possible for children to be born and, therefore, families to be created (see 2 Nephi 2:23, 25). The atonement of Christ opens the door of salvation for the individual and for exaltation for the family (see D&C 131:1–4, 132:22). The three doctrinal pillars of the plan of salvation are intimately involved in the creation of new eternal families and their extension into the eternities.

Creation of Man and Woman

The scriptures state that men and women are created in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26–27, Abraham 4:27–28). Both women and men have within them the attributes of divinity, and both are blessed as they fulfill their divine callings. The apostle Peter and King Benjamin indicate that we partake of the divine nature through Christ’s atonement aided by the Holy Ghost (see 2 Peter 1:3–8, Mosiah 3:19). It is interesting to observe the similarity of the fruits of the Spirit to the divine seeds inherited from Heavenly Parents (see Galatians 5:21–22,

2 Peter 1:3–8). Since “light cleaveth unto light” and Spirit to spirit, the Holy Ghost is able to quicken us by a portion of light that causes the divine seeds within to bud and to flower (D&C 88:29, 40). The degree of light and the extent to which the attributes flourish is a function of how well women and men bridle their passions and are obedient to divine principles.

When a man understands how glorious a woman is, he treats her differently. When a woman understands that a man has the seeds of divinity within him, she honors him not only for who he is but for what he may become. An understanding of the divine nature allows each person to have respect for the other. The eternal view engenders a desire in men and women to learn from and share with each other.

Men and women are created as complements. They complete one another. Paul told the Corinthians: “Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:11). Men and women complement each other not only physically, but also emotionally and spiritually. The apostle Paul taught that “the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband” and through them both the children are made holy (1 Corinthians 7:14). Men and women have different strengths and weaknesses, and marriage is a synergistic relationship in which spiritual growth is enhanced because of the differences.

The Family Proclamation

In September 1995 the First Presidency and the Council of the Twelve Apostles issued “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (*Ensign*, November 1995, p. 102). The statement is an extraordinary document outlining Church doctrine with respect to the family and the relationships between husband and wife, parents and children. On a number of occasions during the past two years, President Hinckley has

been asked why the proclamation was issued. Typical of his answers is the following:

Much of the world is in serious trouble over the disintegration of the family. The family is the basic unit of society. No nation is stronger than the homes of its people. . . .

*Lawrence Stone, the noted Princeton University family historian, says: “The scale of marital breakdowns in the West since 1960 has no historical precedent that I know of, and seems unique. . . . There has been nothing like it for the last 2,000 years and probably longer.” (Quoted by David Popenoe, “A World without Father,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 1996, p. 13.) You are familiar with the fruits of broken homes. I think the home is the answer to most of our basic social problems, and if we take care of things there, other things will take care of themselves.*

*We are trying to preserve the traditional family—father, mother, and children—working together in love toward a common goal. In large measure we are succeeding against great odds. [Washington, D.C., media luncheon, 2 December 1996, quoted in *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1997), pp. 209–10]*

Following the issuance of the proclamation, all members of the Church have been challenged to become familiar with its doctrines and teachings and to apply them. It is particularly revealing to compare the teachings of the proclamation with contrasting philosophies and practices of the world. A review of the world’s practices regarding marriage and the family illustrate the challenges that beset a society when it loses its eternal compass. May I share with you the basic principles taught by the proclamation and contrast them with the beliefs and practices that are becoming more and more prevalent in society. In doing so, I am aware that there are many people outside the Church who value the traditional family and whose views are similar to ours relative to this

important institution. Nevertheless, the data suggests that the family is under siege in America and the Western world.

Marriage Between a Man and Woman Is Ordained of God

The first principle taught by the proclamation is that “marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God.” We believe that the first marriage was performed by God and that marriage had no end (see Genesis 2:22–24, Moses 3:21–24). Marriage is a sacred relationship. When performed in the right place by the right authority, an everlasting covenant is established between the man, the woman, and the Lord (see D&C 132:15–19). The covenant has the potential of creating an eternal unit.

We believe that society has a stake in marriage in that the physical, emotional, spiritual, and economic health of its citizens is determined by the quality and duration of marital relationships. We believe that procreation powers are sacred and are to be used only between a man and a woman legally and lawfully married. When they are used outside of marriage they may destroy relationships rather than build them.

In contrast, many people in the world treat marriage as merely an association by consenting adults (see Bruce C. Hafen, “Covenant Marriage,” *Ensign*, November 1996, pp. 26–28). The association may or may not be based on a contract. Sexual relationships outside the association are widely seen as acceptable. Open marriages without a contract are more and more prevalent as young people live together on a trial basis. Some people are now asking that an association between partners of the same sex be recognized as marriage. It is clear that marriage is not considered a sacred relationship in many quarters. In fact, some argue that the state or society has no interest or stake in marriage.

The Family Is Central to the Father’s Plan for the Eternal Destiny of His Children

The second principle taught by the proclamation is that the family is central to the Father’s plan for the destiny of his children. As noted earlier, the plan calls for mortal probation and the testing of God’s spiritual offspring (see Abraham 3:22–26). In the testing process the family is essential for the proper training of children in the faith (see D&C 68:25, 28). The commandment that God gave to Adam and Eve to “multiply, and replenish the earth” remains in force (Genesis 1:28, Moses 2:28). Father and mother are important role models in nurturing and developing children. We believe that children’s self-respect and identity are partially determined by the love their father and mother have for each other.

President McKay often repeated the saying, “A father can do no greater thing for his children than to let them feel that he loves their mother” (see *Teachings of Gordon B. Hinckley*, p. 201). My experience suggests that a child’s identity and feelings of security are threatened when parents argue and condemn one another. The home is the best place for children to experience the bonds of love and learn virtue, honesty, and good citizenship. The home is the primary place where children learn to treat others with respect.

What are the world’s views with regard to the family? There are many who assume that there is no plan because there is no God. Life is an accident. Marriage and the family are temporal associations. The association between consenting adults has as its purpose pleasure and individual satisfaction. If the association no longer serves that purpose, it should end regardless of the impact on one’s partner or children. Is it any wonder that marriages do not last given these views? More than half of all civil marriages in the United States end in divorce. Based on these philosophies, it is not difficult to propagate an argument recently heard in a Hawaiian court that children can be

nurtured as well by two adults of the same sex as by the natural father and mother. (See Brief for Amici Curiae Bronfenbrenner et al., *Baehr v. Miike*, No. 91-1394-05 [Haw., May 23, 1997].)

Also, if marriage is a temporary association that may end at any time, it is then simple to extrapolate that governments should assume primary responsibility for children's training and education.

In a recent general conference address, Elder Bruce Hafen pointed to the Savior's comments on the "contractual attitudes" of the "hireling" versus the covenant relationship of the shepherd.

When the hireling "seeth the wolf coming," he "leaveth the sheep, and fleeth . . . because he . . . careth not for the sheep." By contrast, the Savior said, "I am the good shepherd, . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep." ["Covenant Marriage," p. 26; see John 10:12–15]

When the view is myopic, the distortions are large. When one's marital objectives are selfish and transitory, relationships are ephemeral.

One can assume that the longer the view a woman and man have regarding the marital relationship, the greater the probability of success. The divorce rate for temple marriages is well below that of civil marriages, and civil divorce rates are exceeded by separation rates for open marriages. (See Tim B. Heaton and Kristen L. Goodman, "Religion and Family Formation," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 4 [June 1985]: 343–59; John O. G. Billy, Nancy S. Landale, and Steven D. McLaughlin, "The Effect of Marital Status at First Birth on Marital Dissolution Among Adolescent Mothers," *Demography* 23, no. 3 [August 1986]: 329–49; Larry L. Bumpass and James A. Sweet, "National Estimates of Cohabitation," *Demography* 26, no. 4 [November 1989]: 615–25.) A view of marriage and the family based on eternal principles increases the probability of success. When one takes the long view,

one tries harder to be patient, long-suffering, kind, gentle, and meek. These characteristics, in turn, strengthen the marriage.

Principles and Practices That Build Successful Families

The proclamation teaches that "successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities." In other words, the Lord measures the success of a family by the quality of its relationships. In a home where faith, love, and forgiveness are dominant, members find joy and satisfaction in being together. Ideally the father presides in love and righteousness, provides the necessities of life, and protects the family while the mother is primarily responsible for the nurturing of the children. In contrast, the world often measures family success by the accumulation of worldly things and the size of the estate that is passed on to the children.

Many programs and practices in the Church are designed to strengthen the family. These include family home evening, family councils, family history work, family prayer, father's blessings, family scripture study, and others. It is important for families to build special traditions that tie children to parents and grandchildren to grandparents. In closing may I share one of the family practices that has produced joy and memories in our family. It is a tradition that has tied us together as a nuclear and an extended family.

When our oldest children were ready to begin formal schooling, Sister Bateman and I decided that a father's blessing would be given each to child and to the mother at the beginning of the school year. The family home evening preceding the start of school would be the occasion. We began the practice when Michael, our oldest son, turned five and was about to enter kindergarten. The practice continues to this day, although there is only one

son at home. He is a student at BYU. When all the children were home, eight blessings were given on that special Monday evening.

The year Michael was about to enter the third grade holds special memories for us. During the summer he had participated in Little League baseball. He was a backup catcher and an outfielder on his team. For his age he had some athletic ability and was a good player. At the time he loved baseball. When we gathered together for family home evening just before the start of school, Michael announced to the family that he was too old for a father's blessing. After all, he had completed his first season in Little League, he had played well, and blessings were for younger children.

Marilyn and I were stunned at first. We encouraged him by suggesting that a blessing would help him with his schoolwork. It would provide him with protection. It would help him in his relationships with his brothers, sisters, parents, and friends. But our encouragement, along with considerable coaxing and cajoling, failed. He was too old. Since Marilyn and I believe in agency and were not about to force a blessing on an eight-year-old, all of the children except Michael received a blessing that year.

The school year proceeded normally. Michael and the other children did well and the family enjoyed their associations together. As the following May arrived, it was time for Little League baseball to begin. Following the last day of school, Michael's coach called a team practice. Michael's anticipation could not have been greater. His dream was about to be realized. He was to be the starting catcher. The baseball diamond was located in the river bottoms not far from the mouth of Provo Canyon and a few blocks from our home. The boys and the coach walked to the field. Following the practice the boys and coach started for home. Michael and a friend decided to run on ahead of the coach and the other boys. In the process they had to cross University Avenue not far

from the mouth of the canyon. As they approached the highway, Michael's friend looked each way and noticed a car coming from the north. Michael failed to look and darted onto the highway just as a 16-year-old boy, out for his first drive in his brother's car, came speeding out of the canyon.

I can't imagine the fear that must have struck the young driver's heart as he saw the small boy in front of him. The driver slammed on the brakes and swerved in an attempt to miss the boy. The side of the front fender and grill hit Michael and threw him down the highway, where he landed in a heap of broken bones.

Sister Bateman and I were visiting parents in American Fork when the police reached us by telephone with the news. We were told that Michael was in an ambulance on his way to the hospital and that he was in critical condition. Before leaving American Fork, I called a friend and asked him to meet us at the hospital to assist in giving Michael a blessing. The drive from American Fork to Provo was the longest 20 minutes of our lives. During the drive Marilyn and I prayed fervently, asking the Lord to preserve the life of our son and bless me with an understanding of the Lord's will for him. In those 20 minutes we learned what it means to pray with "real intent" (Moroni 10:4).

As we parked the car by the door of the emergency room, we saw the police and a young man leaving the hospital. He was crying. The police recognized us and introduced us to the young man as the driver of the car. We put our arms around him and told him that we knew it was not his fault. We then entered the hospital to find Michael. We found him in a room with doctors and nurses feverishly attending to his needs. He had received a concussion and was irrational and crying for his mother. His scalp was laid back on his head, and the broken bones were obvious. My friend had arrived, and we asked if we could have two or three minutes with him alone before

they took him to the operating room. They agreed. Again I prayed with all the fervency of my being that his life would be preserved and that the blessing would reflect the Lord's will. My friend anointed and I sealed. As I laid my hands upon his head, a feeling of comfort and peace came over me. Words flowed and promises were made.

For the next four weeks Michael lay in a hospital bed with his head bandaged, his arm in a cast, and his leg in traction. Each Wednesday evening following the Little League game, his teammates would file into the hospital room and give Michael a run-down. Each week tears would well up in Michael's eyes and run down his cheeks as he saw his teammates enter the room and heard the boys relive the game. He would have given anything to be able to participate. After four weeks Michael was put in a body cast that went from his chest to his toes. On two or three occasions we took him to a game to watch his friends play. Another four weeks passed, and the body cast was replaced with a cast from his hip to his toes. Two days before school was to begin the cast was removed, and Michael began the long process of exercising his leg to obtain full use again.

As the family gathered the next night for school blessings, is there any wonder as to who

wanted the first blessing? A nine-year-old boy, a little older and a lot wiser, was first in line. Michael is not the only member of our family to learn from the experience. All of the other children have talked about the protection that may come through a father's blessing. Over the years they have come to understand that accidents are not always prevented by priesthood blessings, but they have also learned that more than one type of protection is available through the priesthood. Today our grandchildren are recipients of priesthood blessings. The tradition is in its second generation. We hope that this practice, like the family, will prevail through the eternities.

Brothers and sisters, the family is meant to be eternal. Each one of us may be part of an eternal family if we are obedient to gospel principles. A fullness of joy is found only within the framework of an exalted family. Some people may scoff at the seventh commandment, which requires chastity before marriage and fidelity afterward, but "political correctness" is not a substitute for the plan of happiness. Marriage is a sacred relationship between a man and a woman. May each of us live so that we may partake of the greatest blessing the Lord has in store for us, that of eternal life. I ask these blessings on all of us in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.