

Choosing God's Best Blessings: Family

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Welcome, everybody, to spring semester! I am really glad to have you here. Provo is so beautiful in the spring and the summer. It seems terrible that as soon as the weather becomes good, everybody leaves. But just as there are some people who leave Provo in the winter because of the snow, there are some who come here deliberately during the spring and the summer because it is so beautiful. I am glad you are going to get to experience it—and I hope that it is not just because you couldn't get out of a twelve-month housing contract off campus! It seems to me that there is a different feeling in the spring and the summer. Somehow it is a little bit more relaxed and a little bit more fun—although that is hard to explain because the classes actually go twice as fast. But welcome! We are so glad you are here.

Posterity, Priesthood, and a Promised Land

I want to start by talking about the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant is very important even today, as it is used in modern temple

ordinances to symbolize all of God's greatest blessings. We read in Genesis that

when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. . . .

. . . Thou shalt be a father of many nations. . . .

And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. [Genesis 17:1–2, 4, 8]

I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore. [Genesis 22:17]

And in Abraham we read:

Thy seed . . . shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations. . . .

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. . . And in thee (that is, in thy Priesthood) . . . , for I give unto thee a promise that this right shall continue in thee, and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal. [Abraham 2:9, 11]

From these verses and others, I gather that the blessings the Lord promised Abraham were (1) posterity like the sands of the sea, (2) priesthood, and (3) a promised land. You could call them the three Ps. From the Lord’s perspective, these are the great blessings. And this is my first key point: when God wanted to bless Abraham, it was with posterity, priesthood, and a promised land.

I had this on my mind one day when I was reading Doctrine and Covenants 121, and I noticed an amazing pattern. This section was given after the Saints had been scattered and when they were suffering from bitter persecution. Joseph was wrongfully imprisoned in dreadful conditions in Liberty Jail, and he cried out to the Lord:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants? [Doctrine and Covenants 121:1–2]

In response, the Lord reassured Joseph, saying:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God shall exalt thee on high. [Doctrine and Covenants 121:7–8]

Then God explained what would happen to the people who had thrown Joseph in jail and who were persecuting the Saints:

And not many years hence, . . . they and their posterity shall be swept from under heaven, saith God, that not one of them is left. . . .

Wo unto them; . . . they shall be severed from the ordinances of mine house. . . .

They shall not have right to the priesthood, nor their posterity after them from generation to generation.

[Doctrine and Covenants 121:15, 19, 21]

What I noticed is that this cursing seems to be the exact opposite of the Abrahamic covenant: instead of posterity, priesthood, and a promised land, their posterity would “be swept from under heaven,” they specifically would “not have right to the priesthood,” they would occupy no promised land, and they would “be severed from the ordinances of” the temple.

As far as the scriptures report, neither Joseph nor Abraham brought up any of these blessings on their own—they came directly from the mind of the Lord. I believe this reveals what the Lord thinks are key blessings: having posterity that blesses others with the priesthood, as happens in the temple.

Interestingly, a part of these blessings is echoed in Doctrine and Covenants 132, the great revelation on the new and everlasting covenant. God explained that

if a man marry a wife . . . by the new and everlasting covenant, . . . they shall pass by the angels, and the gods, . . . to their exaltation and glory in all things, . . . which glory shall be a fulness and a continuation of the seeds forever and ever. [Doctrine and Covenants 132:19]

Their glory will be “a continuation of the seeds”—or posterity—just as the Lord’s work and glory is His children (see Moses 1:39). The scriptures teach that our posterity will be our ultimate glory as well. I have learned a lot from the scriptures.

My Great Life Experiment: Family

Another way to learn is to experiment. I am a scientist, and I like to think of life as a great experiment on faith. In the experimental sciences, we run what is called a control experiment. This is an experiment in which you leave out or perturb one key variable to confirm its relevance to the end result. Unfortunately, in the great experiment of life it is very difficult to run a control experiment. For instance, it is impossible in one lifetime

to test whether it is better to live in complete fidelity to your spouse or not; you simply cannot test both paths in one life. Instead we must learn from other people's lives as well as from our own. It is in that spirit that I want to share with you a little bit about my own life and tell you what my greatest blessings have been.

I met my wife, Angie, in a BYU family home evening group in our freshman ward in the dorms. I was lucky to find her so quickly. Following my mission, we were married. We had our first child, Ashley, and then moved to Stanford, California, so that I could go to graduate school there. We lived in a tiny married-students-with-children housing unit, which actually turned out to be one of the most fun places we have ever lived. When Ashley was about one and a half, she had a very regular bedtime routine: Angie would change her into her pajamas, brush her teeth, pray with her, rock her while reading a story, and then sing to her before putting her in her crib. I cannot explain in words the wonderful feeling that existed in her room on those nights during that bedtime routine.

When I read that Lehi said the fruit of the tree of life was "most sweet" and "desirable above all" else (1 Nephi 8:11–12), I wonder if I have already tasted it in the love of God that existed in that room on those nights. I was often studying or in the lab, so I rarely got to be there. But I remember that on one particular night, knowing of the sweetness and the power of the love that would be in that room, I snuck in before the bedtime routine and hid underneath the crib to enjoy it. Oh what a feeling to take in! It was so sacred.

Near the end, I poked my head out from underneath the crib, and Ashley detected me. She shook her head, pointed at me, and then pointed to the door. I was excused because I was not part of the normal bedtime routine. My sneaking into the room became something of a little game we would play.

Oh how I love Ashley! What a precious blessing she is! And how wonderful is the bond between a mother and a child! It is sacred.

Our next child is a boy. We named him Taylor. Taylor is very gifted socially, so he had many friends. By the time he was in high school, I was

a professor at Caltech in Pasadena, so we lived in Southern California. We had a cool backyard: We had a pool, a hot tub, a trampoline, some outdoor speakers, a treehouse, and a zip line. You could climb up on the ladder of the treehouse, hop on the zip line, fly across the yard, and drop into the pool. It was super fun!

Taylor decided to have his sixteenth birthday party at our house. He invited his friends, but then his friends invited their friends, and then those friends invited a whole bunch of people. Somehow it went viral, and pretty soon everybody around school knew that the party was at Taylor's house that night. It was great: the backyard was full of people and the front yard was full of people.

And then some people came over who didn't even know Taylor, and they were doing doughnuts with their cars in the street and smoking pot between the cars.

And then the police came! A police officer knocked on the door. I went and opened the door, and the young officer asked, "Are you the owner of this house?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Well, we've got some problems: we've got kids doing doughnuts in the street, they're smoking pot, it's too loud, and the neighbors are complaining."

I answered, "I know! What should we do?" My cooperation surprised him—I think he expected some opposition.

Then he said, "Okay, well, I'll just park my police car right here in the street in front of your house. You turn the stereo off, and let's see if we can make some progress."

I said, "That's a great idea—let's do it!"

It worked, and things calmed down.

Oh how I love Taylor! He is an incredible person. He is my son, and I will be his father forever and ever. He means the world to me.

Our third child is lovely Lydia, the peacemaker. We got her middle name right: Grace. She has brought peace and harmony, grace and beauty with her everywhere. Angie and I used to joke that if we knew the Lord would send us children like Lydia every time, we would try to have them as fast as possible for as long as possible. She

made and continues to make everything in our lives better, brighter, and more lovely. How I love Lydia—I cannot even begin to tell you.

As it turned out, we only had time for three more children. Our fourth child is Natalie. Since birth, her nickname has been Sunshine, and for good reason. She was born with strong mothering instincts. Natalie became like a second mom to our youngest two children just by her nature—it couldn't be stopped. Because of that, the younger three came to be known as the “junior patrol,” in contrast to the older three, who I guess were the “senior patrol,” though they never used the term themselves. Natalie led Mandy and Benjamin in everything—club meetings, adventures, shows, chores—and they loved it. Talk about belonging! They felt it.

One night Angie and I were tired and sitting at the dinner table talking, and Natalie was doing the dishes because it was her turn. Exhausted, Angie turned to Natalie and, without thinking, asked, “Natalie, after you finish the dishes, will you put your kids to bed?”

Natalie was stunned, and then we all three started laughing together—well at least Angie and I were laughing. I am not sure Natalie was laughing, because of course they were not Natalie's kids; they were ours. Oh how we love Natalie—the sunshine of our lives!

Our fifth child is Mandy. Her nickname is Six-pack because she was a gymnast and the only member of the family to ever actually have a real six-pack. This picture was taken at a daddy-daughter event planned by our local stake Primary presidency. [A photo was shown.] It was made into a button I could wear on my shirt.

When President Jeffrey R. Holland came to campus a few years ago, he challenged the BYU faculty and staff to be more vocal in support of the proclamation on the family (see Holland, “The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University,” BYU university conference address, 23 August 2021; see also “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” 23 September 1995). I wondered what a biophysicist like me could do to help—I take pictures of cells and viruses. I decided to start wearing this button so that when students asked me about it, I could explain how

much I love Mandy, how she means the world to me, and what a blessed life I have because I am her dad. And then, once they understood how I felt about her, I could explain she is actually our fifth kid!

The last child we have is named Benjamin. When he was young, we had a family tradition on the day after Thanksgiving. We would load all of our bikes in the back of the truck, get everyone into the minivan, and then drive up to a mountain trail near the San Gabriel River in Southern California. We would go on a bike ride there and then have a picnic at a park at the end. We did this every year.

When Benjamin was three or four, we piled out of our van, got our bikes out of the truck, put our helmets on, got on our bikes, and just started riding—everybody knew the drill. Benjamin was the second to last to get on his bike, and I was the last. When Benjamin got on his bike, he immediately swerved terribly to the left, overcorrected all the way to the right, and then fell on the ground.

I called out to everybody to stop, and then I asked, “Didn't anyone teach Benjamin how to ride a bike?”

None of us had! I looked at Natalie; she looked at Taylor and then me—I guess it was my job. The funniest thing was that Benjamin didn't even know that he needed someone to teach him. He just saw everybody get on their bike and go, so he did too!

So I did what dads do: I held the back of the bike seat steady and ran alongside him. Then after about ten yards I launched him, knowing there would be enough angular momentum to keep him vertical. And shazam! He learned how to ride a bike. Sink or swim, I guess. That's what happens sometimes to the youngest.

Benjamin, I love you. The worth of your soul is so, so great in the sight of God, me, and your mother (see Doctrine and Covenants 18:10).

I love my wife, Angie. I have sometimes joked, using finance terms, that while her adjusted gross income may never be that big, her gross domestic product has filled my life and our children's lives to overflowing. You remember the scriptures in which the Lord promised that our cups will be overflowing and that we won't have

room enough to receive the blessings (see Psalm 23:5; Malachi 3:10). This is how I feel because of what Angie has done. Her influence has already grown to touch the world and will yet fill an eternity! Her children have taught the gospel on five continents—North America, South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. There is a special love forged between mother and child that is unlike any other because it is earned through sacrifice—real sacrifice. Being a mom is not easy! Angie literally gave life to these people, and for this we honor her and will honor her and love her forever.

We have thousands of pictures and stories like these to tell—the memories of family life. I am sure your family has thousands of pictures too, and I am sure your parents love you the same way I love my kids. And you will love your kids more than your words will be able to express. As I look back, the times of my life when I have felt the Spirit the strongest were on those evenings when Angie rocked Ashley and on the occasions when I have given father’s blessings—when my job was to feel and communicate Heavenly Father’s love for my kids. I wish these kinds of blessings for all of you.

Now remember that nobody is perfect; nobody’s family is perfect. Our family is not perfect, neither is yours, and neither will your future family be perfect. And that is okay—it is actually more than okay. It is God’s plan, since it is in imperfect situations that we learn and grow. Just look at the families in the scriptures!

The Pinnacle Blessings

I have often thought about Judgment Day. I am grateful for the gifts and the blessings that the Lord has given me, and I have wondered whether He intends to give additional gifts on that day. Is there anything that the Lord couldn’t give me at the snap of His fingers on Judgment Day? What if I wanted to be a great pianist? Well, that involves neural circuits honed by tens of thousands of hours of practice. The Lord could just snap His fingers and give me those neural circuits to make me a great pianist. What if I wanted to jump like the members of the BYU Dunk Team? Well, again, that involves muscles firing in just the right order with coordination through practiced neural circuits. The Lord could just give me those in the snap of a finger.

So is there anything He couldn’t give me in a moment? Well, I have thought of a few things. One is history: real history and real relationships develop over time. Love is earned through service, and that is why it is so strong within families.

Every day since the day I was invited to give this devotional until now I have pondered and prayed about what would be the most beneficial message I could share with you. In the end it is this: marriage and family are the pinnacle blessings both in time and eternity. This is why they are at the core of the Abrahamic covenant and the new and everlasting covenant. They are the key blessings in time and eternity.

God lets us choose our own blessings. Many paths in life are good—there are a lot of good and great things that you can do! But as BYU students in the springtime of your lives, you should set your sights on the best and highest blessings. If God brings you in contact with somebody who is equally yoked in all the important ways and you have the chance to marry, do it. If God further blesses you with health and means to have children, do it. Of course not everyone has these opportunities, but God promises His greatest blessings eventually to all who keep His commandments, though for some reasons some people may have to wait longer in this life or even until the next. I suppose nobody longed for children more than Abraham’s own spiritual superstar wife, Sarah! Remember that your life was designed just for you, so all your unique circumstances have value that will allow you to learn, grow, and bless others.

The proclamation on the family teaches that “marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan” and that

God’s commandment for His children to multiply and replenish the earth remains in force. . . .

. . . Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness, respect, love, compassion, work, and wholesome recreational activities. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers

and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. Disability, death, or other circumstances may necessitate individual adaptation. [“The Family: A Proclamation to the World”]

I love this quote by Rachel Jankovic, repeated by Elder Neil L. Andersen:

Motherhood [or we might say parenting] is not a hobby; it is a calling. You do not collect children because you find them cuter than stamps. It is not something to do if you can squeeze the time in. It is what God gave you time for. [Jankovic, “Motherhood Is a Calling

*(and Where Your Children Rank),” 14 July 2011, Desiring God, desiringgod.org/articles/motherhood-is-a-calling; quoted in Andersen, “Children,” *Ensign*, November 2011]*

So in the end, my devotional is simply this: a full-throated, unqualified, unreserved endorsement of marriage, family, and the proclamation on the family. I hope my words will encourage and strengthen you while you are making key decisions in the springtime of your lives. I love you all and wish you the best. Welcome to spring! In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.