

A Divine Nature and Destiny

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As I was thinking about what I would like to share with you today, I thought that perhaps we could learn from the scriptures and from the prophets and leaders of the Lord's church about the family. This topic came to mind because I realized that I would be speaking to people who are starting, or soon will be starting, that great journey of initiating their own families. Sometimes young people who are beginning this great adventure remind me of the anxious traveler who runs to catch a bus and only when inside and seated thinks to ask, "Where is this bus going?"

Perhaps if we can learn a little better the marvelous origin and great destination of the family, we can also learn the manner in which we should come back to our Father in Heaven as a family. As individuals we all travel the same path to the Father, but the roles we assume in our family have different ways of conveying us down that path. And most of the time we have more than one role to fulfill: husband, father, son, wife, mother, or daughter. Each role has different duties—if you will, a different "method of transportation" in our journey. We shall speak of these in due time.

Now let us speak of the origin of the individual and of the family. We believe that the individual bears a special relationship to deity.

Each individual born into this world has been the actual spiritual son or daughter of God the Father in the premortal world of spirits.

The first major step upward made by the uncreated entities was entrance into what we call the first estate. Here the intelligences were tabernacled in bodies of spirit matter by birth through heavenly parents. In November 1909 the First Presidency declared in "The Origin of Man": "All men and women are in the similitude of the universal Father and Mother, and are literally the sons and daughters of Deity" (in James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–75], 4:203).

God is the actual father of the spiritual bodies possessed at that time. This is not a case of creation but of procreation. Brother B. H. Roberts explained:

I call attention to this distinction that when in our literature we say "God created the spirits of men," it is understood that they were "begotten."

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We mean “generation,” not “creation.” Intelligences, which are eternal, uncreated, self-existent beings, are begotten spirits and these afterwards begotten men. When intelligences are “begotten” spirits they are of the nature of him who begets them—sons of God, and con-substantial with their Father. [The Mormon Doctrine of Deity (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1975), p. 260; emphasis in original]

So when we make reference to members of mankind as sons and daughters of God, it is not a symbolic term. Our Heavenly Father is the actual father of the spiritual bodies of mankind.

In this spiritual body can be found latent powers inherited from the divine parents. These powers await maturation, education, training, and experience of many kinds. In 1872, Elder Lorenzo Snow—then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve—said about these powers:

We were born in the image of God our Father; he begot us like unto himself. There is the nature of deity in the composition of our spiritual organization; in our spiritual birth our Father transmitted to us the capabilities, powers and faculties which he himself possessed, as much so as the child on its mother’s bosom possesses, although in an undeveloped state, the faculties, powers and susceptibilities of its parent. [JD 14:302]

Elder John A. Widtsoe reaffirmed this concept with these words:

Man is one of the eternal, imperishable realities of the universe. His story begins in the infinite past, before the earth was made. His eternity reaches into the yesterdays as into the tomorrows. He belongs to the endless ages.

In the beginning, man was with God, a child of God, begotten by Him. He has a divine pedigree. In the pre-existent, spiritual domain, as a son or daughter of the divine Father, he increased in

knowledge and power and grew in spiritual stature. At length he was prepared for the earth career and willing to accept its conditions. Man is not an accidental or transient invader of earth. Instead, he is a creature of plan and progress.

As a child of God, man partakes of the divine nature of his Father. Within him lie germs of infinite development. Potentially he is a Godlike being. Therefore he may rise eternally toward the likeness of his Father in heaven. Upward, divine, unending, is man’s high destiny. [CR, October 1936, p. 97]

What a beautiful and amazing inheritance! The nature of deity in the composition of our spiritual organization opens the door to the vision of eternal life and divine destiny.

In “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” the following is declared:

All human beings—male and female—are created in the image of God. Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny. [Ensign, November 1995, p. 102]

So we ourselves and all living creatures that have life on this earth were once spiritual beings, “called and prepared from the foundation of the world according to the foreknowledge of God” (Alma 13:3). We enter this, the second estate, or our earthly life, to receive a body so we may be in a position to perform the purpose outlined in Abraham 3:24–28:

And there stood one among them that was like unto God, and he said unto those who were with him: We will go down, for there is space there, and we will take of these materials, and we will make an earth whereon these may dwell;

And we will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them;

And they who keep their first estate shall be added upon; and they who keep not their first estate shall not have glory in the same kingdom with those

who keep their first estate; and they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever.

And the Lord said: Whom shall I send? And one answered like unto the Son of Man: Here am I, send me. And another answered and said: Here am I, send me. And the Lord said: I will send the first.

And the second was angry, and kept not his first estate; and, at that day, many followed after him.

Did you notice the important concepts that are mentioned in these verses? For example, “There stood one among them that was like unto God.” We are talking of Jesus Christ, the Firstborn and—under the direction of the Father and by his power—the Creator.

“And we will prove them herewith”: The word *prove* is a key word, fundamental to understanding the events, circumstances, and philosophy of life on this earth. Proving is an eternal principle. We have been proven before. Remember, “They who keep their first estate shall be added upon.” We go through the same process now on this earth, always placed in situations when and where the test will be more effective to strengthen and advance our eternal nature.

And if we pass the test, if we observe the commandments, if we live “by every word that proceedeth forth from the mouth of God” (D&C 84:44), then the great promise we find in Abraham that “they who keep their second estate shall have glory added upon their heads for ever and ever” (Abraham 3:26) or what we read about in Moses 5:11, “the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient,” will be our blessing, our eternal reward.

Now eternal life, or God’s life, consists of two things:

One is to receive the fulness of the glory of the Father (see D&C 93:19–20).

Another is to have a continuation of the seed forever and ever (see D&C 132:19). Or, in other words, to live in an eternal family unit.

There is no way that our minds can conceive anything as great and as glorious as eternal life because that is God’s life, and what is greater than God? So eternal life is what we seek, and, in the words of President Joseph Fielding Smith, “To know the way to eternal life is far more important than all the learning that the world can give” (CR, April 1955, p. 51).

The plan of salvation has been established to enable us to obtain that eternal destiny. In “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” we find the following statement:

The divine plan of happiness enables family relationships to be perpetuated beyond the grave. Sacred ordinances and covenants available in holy temples make it possible for individuals to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally. [“The Family: A Proclamation,” p. 102]

Let me repeat that phrase: “to return to the presence of God and for families to be united eternally.” That is the promise; that is the destination.

At this time I would like to ask for the help of two of the prophets of this dispensation to give comfort and answer some questions that can arise in the hearts of faithful, young people of the Church.

First, President Lorenzo Snow said:

There is no Latter-day Saint who dies after having lived a faithful life who will lose anything because of having failed to do certain things when opportunities were not furnished him or her. In other words, if a young man or a young woman has no opportunity of getting married, and they live faithful lives up to the time of their death, they will have all the blessings, exaltation and glory that any man or woman will have who had this opportunity and improved it. That is sure and positive. [Millennial Star, vol. 61, 31 August 1899, p. 547]

And President Ezra Taft Benson also made these comments:

Not all women in the Church will have an opportunity for marriage and motherhood in mortality. But if you in this situation are worthy and endure faithfully, you can be assured of all blessings from a kind and loving Heavenly Father—and I emphasize all blessings. [TETB, p. 550; emphasis in original]

Maybe we can now review some basic principles that can help us in our eternal familial relationships and that can help us prepare ourselves to meet God.

Let me talk to you who are now or will be husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, to you children of God of divine origin and eternal destination.

Chief among the organizational arrangements and foreordinations in the premortal existence was the organization of lineage and family. Offices and positions in the Church or in the earthly kingdom would be important, but these would be only for a time and season, whereas relationships associated with the family are to endure throughout the endless eternities.

Elder David O. McKay said the following about the family as an eternal unit:

Latter-day Saints, the responsibility of saving this sacred institution devolves largely upon you, for you know that the family ties are eternal. They should be eternal. There is nothing temporary in the home of the Latter-day Saint. There is no element of transitoriness in the family relationship of the Latter-day Saint home. That all such ties are eternal should be maintained. To the Latter-day Saint the home is truly the cell-unit of society; and parenthood is next to Godhood. [CR, June 1919, p. 77]

President Gordon B. Hinckley said:

Our Father in heaven, who loves his children, desires for them that which will bring them happiness now and in the eternities to come, and there is no greater happiness than is found in the most

meaningful of all human relationships—the companionships of husband and wife and parents and children. [CR, April 1974, p. 31; or “The Marriage That Endures,” Ensign, May 1974, p. 23]

What a brilliant objective: an eternal family! Eternal families are not created simply through the birth of children. Strong family ties do not happen by chance. To assume that eternal families will be developed through osmosis by the mere fact that we are members of the Church and that our children have been born in the covenant is only wishful thinking. It is only an expression of desire. Family unity is forged by time, patience, service, teaching, and sacrifice. Eternal life is family life.

In order to accomplish that great objective, we must live worthy lives. Our Heavenly Father wants obedience from his children. He wants “a man [to] marry a wife by [his] word, which is [his] law, and by the new and everlasting covenant, and it is sealed unto them by the Holy Spirit of promise” (D&C 132:19). He wants a home where spouses remember their marriage vows and honor them. He wants a home where the father is devoted to the family with which he has been blessed—a home where union, love, and understanding between father and mother and also between parents and children prevail. He wants a home where there is, in the words of President Spencer W. Kimball, “a father who procreates, provides, and loves and directs, and a mother who conceives and bears and nurtures and feeds and trains” (TSWK, p. 324).

For example, see what President Harold B. Lee had to say about the role of the father:

Fatherhood is leadership, the most important kind of leadership. It has always been so; it always will be so. Father, with the assistance and counsel and encouragement of your eternal companion, you preside in the home. It is not a matter of whether you are most worthy or best qualified, but it is a

matter of law and appointment. You preside at the meal table, at family prayer. You preside at family home evening; and as guided by the Spirit of the Lord, you see that your children are taught correct principles. It is your place to give direction relating to all of family life.

You give father's blessings. You take an active part in establishing family rules and discipline. As a leader in your home you plan and sacrifice to achieve the blessing of a unified and happy family. To do all of this requires that you live a family-centered life. [Father, Consider Your Ways (pamphlet, 1973), pp. 4–5]

President Harold B. Lee also said, “The most important of the Lord’s work that you will ever do will be the work you do within the walls of your own home” (*Strengthening the Home* [pamphlet, 1973], p. 7).

What is the most important priesthood calling that a man in the Church can have? Can he have any greater influence in the kingdom of God than the influence he has in the lives of his family members? Is he as concerned about magnifying his calling as a husband and father as he is about his other callings in the Church?

President Kimball said:

To begin to strengthen the priesthood, brethren, we must return the fathers to their divinely appointed place at the head of the family. As fathers ourselves we must ensure that we do not neglect our own families. We should be teaching our people over and over again that the most important position in time and eternity is that of the Father. [Spencer W. Kimball, address delivered to priesthood leaders, August 1974]

And in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” this concept is amply ratified: “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” (p. 102).

In Moses 1:39 we read: “This is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man.” Likewise, we could say that this is the glory of men and women—to bring to pass the mortality of the sons and daughters of God, to give the opportunity of earth experience to the children of our Father who are waiting to come, to participate in the great experience of this, the second estate.

So the greatest mission of women, through an honorable marriage, is to give life—we must say earth life—to those spirits, to our Heavenly Father’s children who desire to come to this mortal state to advance in knowledge, experience, and challenges in order to accomplish what is outlined in the plan of salvation. What a great honor and glory. What an ever-enduring happiness to become the mother of the sons and daughters of God—not only for giving them earthly life but also for bringing them, by a careful and devoted motherhood, to transit on the path that leads to eternal life.

Providing opportunity for the spirit children of our Father in Heaven to come to earth and work out their own salvation with the consequent great price that mothers pay to make this possible is not, for sure, the whole responsibility of motherhood. In “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” we read, “Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children” (p. 102).

I would recommend to you to go and study the meaning of the word *nurture* and its implications. I am sure you will have a better and more profound understanding of what the First Presidency said in 1942:

This divine service of motherhood can be rendered only by mothers. It may not be passed to others. Nurses cannot do it; public nurseries cannot do it; hired help cannot do it—only mother, aided as much as may be by the loving hands of father, brothers, and sisters, can give the full needed measure of watchful care.

The mother who entrusts her child to the care of others, that she may do non-motherly work, whether for gold, for fame, or for civic service, should remember that “a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.” (Prov. 29:15.) In our day the Lord has said that unless parents teach their children the doctrines of the Church “the sin be upon the heads of the parents.” (D&C 68:25.)

*Motherhood is near to divinity. It is the highest, holiest service to be assumed by mankind. It places her who honors its holy calling and service next to the angels. [In James R. Clark, comp., *Messages of the First Presidency*, 6:178; also in *CR*, October 1942, pp. 12–13]*

I would like to make clear, at this point, that we understand that there is not a superiority factor in the husband-wife relationship or in the roles that they play as they walk as a family in all righteousness to the mansions of exaltation ahead. The roles of father and mother are equally important, but not identical.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie said the following:

In the true Patriarchal Order man holds the priesthood and is the head of the household of faith, but he cannot attain a fulness of joy here or of eternal reward hereafter alone. Woman stands at his side a joint-inheritor with him in the fulness of all things. Exaltation and eternal increase is her lot as well as his. . . . Godhood is not for men only; it is for men and women together. [MD, p. 844]

And Elder John A. Widtsoe emphasized the concept in these words:

By divine fiat, the Priesthood is conferred on the men. This means that organization must prevail in the family, the ultimate unit of the Church. The husband, the Priesthood bearer, presides over the family; the Priesthood conferred upon him is intended for the blessing of the whole family. Every member shares in the gift bestowed, but under a proper organization. No man who understands the gospel believes that he is greater than his wife, or

*more beloved of the Lord, because he holds the Priesthood, but rather that he is under the responsibility of speaking and acting for the family in official matters. It is a protection to the woman who, because of her motherhood, is under a large physical and spiritual obligation. Motherhood is an eternal part of Priesthood. [John A. Widtsoe, *Evidences and Reconciliations*, arr. G. Homer Durham (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987), pp. 307–8]*

We can take, for example, the responsibility of presiding righteously in the home. If we understand that the priesthood is power and authority delegated by God to man on earth to act in His behalf in the name of Jesus Christ, we will come to the conclusion that to possess the priesthood is to have the privilege of calling down the powers of heaven to assist in fulfilling sacred responsibilities and opportunities. Priesthood power is delegated to mankind in order to assist Heavenly Father and the Savior in their glorious work—“to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39).

In D&C 121:34–36 we read:

Behold, there are many called, but few are chosen. And why are they not chosen?

Because their hearts are set so much upon the things of this world, and aspire to the honors of men, that they do not learn this one lesson—

That the rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and that the powers of heaven cannot be controlled nor handled only upon the principles of righteousness.

The priesthood, then, has been given to mankind so that families might have righteous leadership—in other words, a representative of God to lead them.

This blessing of providing righteous leadership in the family should also be shared with wives. President Faust has said:

*It is an unrighteous exercise of priesthood authority for a man, as a conduit through his priesthood office, to withhold or limit blessings which should flow through the priesthood to his wife and family. The priesthood blessings are not just male- or husband-limited, but reach their potential flowering in the eternal relationship of the husband and wife sharing and administering these great blessings to the family. Our wives have priesthood blessings, though not priesthood offices. These blessings are the keys to eternal life, salvation, and exaltation through obedience. [James E. Faust, "Brethren, Love Your Wives," *Ensign*, July 1981, p. 35]*

Fidelity in marriage is a very important ingredient in having a happy family life here on earth and in giving us the assurance of looking forward to a resumption of that family life beyond the veil.

In the preface of section 42 of the Doctrine and Covenants we are told that the Prophet Joseph Smith specified this revelation as "embracing the law of the Church." It provides significant, divine information relative to marriage and fidelity. The Lord declared in this revelation that men are to love their wives with all their hearts and are to "cleave unto her and none else" (v. 22). President Kimball explained the meaning of this commandment:

And, when the Lord says all thy heart, it allows for no sharing nor dividing nor depriving. And, to the woman it is paraphrased: "Thou shalt love thy husband with all thy heart and shalt cleave unto him and none else."

The words none else eliminate everyone and everything. The spouse then becomes preeminent in the life of the husband or wife, and neither social life nor occupational life nor political life nor any other interest nor person nor thing shall ever take precedence over the companion spouse. We sometimes find women who absorb and hover over the children at the expense of the husband, sometimes even estranging them from him.

*The Lord says to them: "Thou shalt cleave unto him and none else." [Spencer W. Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1972), pp. 142–43; emphasis in original]*

"And he that looketh upon a woman to lust after her shall deny the faith, and shall not have the Spirit; and if he repents not he shall be cast out" (D&C 42:23).

This reinforces the teachings of the Master: As a man thinketh, so is he (see Proverbs 23:7). One usually first becomes unfaithful in the mind and later in deeds.

President Faust has said:

*Our loyalty to our eternal companion should not be merely physical, but mental and spiritual as well. Since there are no harmless flirtations and no place for jealousy after marriage, it is best to avoid the very appearance of evil by shunning any questionable contact with another to whom we are not married. [James E. Faust, *CR*, October 1977, p. 14; or "The Enriching of Marriage," *Ensign*, November 1977, p. 10]*

The influence we have with other people is measured by the trust they have in us. If people do not trust us, they will pay little attention to us. But if their confidence in us is deep, they will withhold little or nothing from us.

It is that way with our relationship to our Heavenly Father. We are blessed only in proportion to our faith in him, and isn't that faith easily interpreted in terms of trust? We believe God will help us because we trust him. If we had not trust in the Almighty, we would neither pray to him nor keep his commandments.

Do you remember the words of Nephi?

Let us be faithful in keeping the commandments of the Lord; for behold he is mightier than all the earth. [1 Nephi 4:1]

How is it that ye have forgotten that the Lord is able to do all things according to his will, for the children of men, if it so be that they exercise faith in him? Wherefore, let us be faithful to him. [1 Nephi 7:12]

And thus we see that the commandments of God must be fulfilled. And if it so be that the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them. [1 Nephi 17:3]

These are only a few of the many examples in the life of Nephi.

We follow President Gordon B. Hinckley because his life has established trust and love in our hearts. Because we trust him, we follow him, and thus is the Church enlarged.

That same kind of trust must abide in our families. Husbands and wives must trust each other and live in a way that will merit such confidence. There is no substitute for fidelity. And in the same way, parents must earn the trust of their children. How can that be accomplished? By providing unfailing companionship, by setting the proper examples to follow, and by teaching the divine precepts that can be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Listen to what the Psalmist told us about our children:

Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth.

Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate. [Psalm 127:3–5]

Good family life on this earth is vital to our enjoyment of family life in the realms of our Heavenly Father.

For that testimony which dwells in our hearts, we go to the temple and marry therein. For that reason we have children and rear them according to the principles of the gospel so they may continue in our family circle in the eternities to come.

Why would God make us spend so many years of our life on the earth raising offspring, rearing our children, rearing his children? One answer might be that man's growth includes learning to be part of a family—particularly learning to be a parent. God is not raising children; he is raising parents—parents who can someday fulfill the eternal role of parents as God fulfills his.

In a general conference address President J. Reuben Clark expressed the following:

I would like you to reflect upon the fact that our children came to us with spirits that did not ask us to bring them, but with spirits, through some operation of which I am not aware, that are assigned to us; and they come to us as our guests. We are responsible for the mortal tabernacling of that spirit; and I should like each and every Latter-day Saint to get that fact into his heart, that the child which is his, or hers, comes at the invitation, virtually, of them who beget it, and then I would like you to reflect upon the responsibility which that brings home to each and every man and woman who is a parent. Yours is the responsibility to see that this tabernacled spirit loses no opportunity, through you, to prove his worthiness and righteousness in living through his second estate.

Now the point that I wish particularly to emphasize is this—you parents cannot shift that responsibility to anyone else. It is yours; you cannot divest yourselves of it. [CR, October 1951, p. 57]

Maybe we can repeat now the fundamental concepts that we have been mentioning: We have been begotten and born of heavenly parents; God is our Eternal Father, the Father of us all. In consequence, we are his children, and therefore we belong to his family. Since we are

to become like him, “perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:48), family life is vital for Latter-day Saints. Or, in the words of Elder Dallin H. Oaks:

*Our theology begins with heavenly parents. Our highest aspiration is to be like them. Under the merciful plan of the Father, all of this is possible through the atonement of the Only Begotten of the Father, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As earthly parents we participate in the gospel plan by providing mortal bodies for the spirit children of God. The fulness of eternal salvation is a family matter. [“Apostasy and Restoration,” *Ensign*, May 1995, p. 87]*

With these concepts in mind, at the same time we can ask ourselves this question: “Will a father desire that his children have every good

thing that he has?” The answer surely would be that that is what a good father will desire. So isn’t it logical to think that in the beginning, when God and our Heavenly Mother begot us and brought us forth in the spirit world, their great desire for us was that we become like them?

In order to make that desire a reality as we strive to be good children, we make every effort to be good parents. The eternal reward—the desire and objective to reach—is exaltation or eternal life. It is the kind of life that God lives. It is the continuation of the family in eternity. It is eternal increase. It is the inheriting of all things. It is to receive all that our Father has.

May we be blessed as we journey in this segment of eternity, living the gospel and following the great Exemplar, even Jesus Christ, in his name. Amen.