

Seeing Through the Generations

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I feel very humbled to be with you today, realizing that each person who is here has chosen to be here. You have come with the attitude of learning by faith, and I pray that the Holy Ghost will be in abundance with us, that your faith will be rewarded, and that you can learn something that can be helpful to you.

I want to introduce my subject this morning by telling you of a very simple event that happened to me 32 years ago during the spring semester of my junior year here at BYU.

I was taking a class in a large amphitheater classroom. Entering the classroom on one of those first days of the semester, I sat in the very back, far from the professor. As he began writing on the blackboard, and as those around me began taking notes, I realized that I could not see what they could see on the chalkboard. Up until that very moment I had not imagined that I needed glasses. I had not anticipated glasses in my future.

But that experience led me to the optometrist and to a pair of glasses. Suddenly my world improved immensely. I could see many things that I had not been seeing for some time. The world became much more alive for me. I remember asking myself, "Why didn't I realize before that I needed glasses? How could I have not known that I was not seeing?"

While seeing can be a function of our eyes, we also use the word *see* to mean "understand" or "comprehend." Have you ever asked, "Don't you see what I mean?" And haven't you responded at some time, "Oh, now I see."

My objective today is to enlarge your vision in some small way that allows you to see or to understand what you have not totally seen or understood before.

As you live righteously, you will find that during your lifetime your perspective will enlarge many, many times. Usually this shift in perspective is not a dramatic one that you can see from one day to the next, but over time the advances are significant.

The most important perspective we want to gain was described beautifully by the Savior: "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

I will start with two rather academic examples and then move to a more spiritual principle.

First, a perspective on time.

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The Perspective of Time

In the same year that I first put on a pair of glasses—1974—I attended a large fireside held in the Marriott Center, where the speaker was Elder Neal A. Maxwell, then a new member of the Quorum of the Seventy. I have never forgotten the talk he shared. It helped me to view my own mortality in a slightly different way. He read from the writing of Brother A. Lester Allen, a former dean and scientist of the Department of Biology and Agriculture on this campus. Let me read you this analogy and see if it expands, just a little, your view of time. Listen closely.

Suppose, for instance, that we imagine a “being” moving onto our earth whose entire life-span is only 1/100 of a second. Ten thousand “years” for him, generation after generation, would be only one second of our time. Suppose this imaginary being comes up to a quiet pond in the forest where you are seated. You have just tossed in a rock and are watching the ripples. A leaf is fluttering from the sky and a bird is swooping over the water. He would find everything absolutely motionless. Looking at you, he would say: “In all recorded history nothing has changed. My father and his father before him have seen that everything is absolutely still. This creature called man has never had a heartbeat and has never breathed. The water is standing in stationary waves as if someone had thrown a rock into it; it seems frozen. A leaf is suspended in air, and a bird has stopped right over the middle of the pond. There is no movement. Gravity is suspended.” The concept of time in this imaginary being, so different from ours, would give him an entirely different perspective of what we call reality.

On the other hand, picture another imaginary creature for whom one “second” of his time is 10,000 years of our time. What would the pond be like to him? By the time he sat down beside it, taking 15,000 of our years to do so, the pond would have vanished. Individual human beings would be invisible, since our entire life-span would be only 1/100 of his “seconds.” The surface of the earth

*would be undulating as mountains are built up and worn down. The forest would persist but a few minutes and then disappear. His concept of “reality” would be much different than our own. [A. Lester Allen, quoted in Neal A. Maxwell, “But for a Small Moment,” 1 September 1974, in *Speeches of the Year, 1974* (Provo: BYU, 1975), 454]*

When I first heard this analogy—with time moving so very quickly or moving so very slowly—I thought of the words of Alma: “All is as one day with God, and time only is measured unto men” (Alma 40:8). I also thought of Nephi’s words: “As well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round” (1 Nephi 10:19). Somehow I sensed that my “reality” as an individual walking through earthly time could be very limited without some perspective greater than my own.

Now I switch perspectives—to a perspective of space.

The Perspective of Space

To help illustrate this perspective, let’s examine a leaf on a plant that sits in the V part of the Y on Y Mountain. If we move far, far away from the plant—10 million light years away—can you see the leaf? To help you understand this distance, one light year is approximately 6 trillion miles. After traveling for 27 years, the Voyager I space probe had only covered a distance of 13 light hours. So 10 million light years is a very, very long way. If we look at the leaf 10 times closer—from 1 million light years away—we see the spiral of the Milky Way galaxy. Then 10 times closer than that is only 100,000 light years away. As we come again 1,000 times closer, we still see nothing but stars. At 1 trillion kilometers—1,000 times closer still—we can begin to identify our sun. Another 1,000 times closer—at 10 billion kilometers—we can see our solar system. This is 10 billion times closer to the leaf

than where we started at 10 million light years away. As we continue to move even closer—at 1 million kilometers—we see the earth and the orbit of the moon. At 100 times closer than that—at 10,000 kilometers—we see the Western Hemisphere of the earth. And, finally, from 10 kilometers we can see Y Mountain with Provo below. From 10 meters away we can easily see the Y and the plant in front of us, and, then, at 10 centimeters, we see the leaf we have been following from so far away.

But now that we are here, there is still much more to see. Moving into the leaf we get quite another view. At 1 millimeter we see the leaf magnified 100 times. Looking 1,000 times closer, at 1 micrometer, the nucleus of the leaf cell is visible. At 100 nanometers—10 times closer than that—the chromatin of the leaf cell nucleus is visible. From 10 nanometers we can see or we can imagine the individual DNA strands. Still 100 times closer, at 100 picometers, the outer electron cloud of a carbon atom is visible. This is 1 billion times closer than when we were seeing the leaf from 10 centimeters. Going 100 times closer still, we see the empty space between the inner shell and the nucleus of the atom. As we magnify 100 times more at 10 femtometers, we can see the nucleus of the carbon atom. Finally, magnified 100 times more at 100 attometers, we are looking at quarks within the single proton. (The idea of this demonstration was taken from a Florida State University Web site at micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/java/scienceopticsu/powersof10.)

This is quite a journey to view a simple leaf on Y Mountain. When I see the immensity of space and the intricacies and complexity of objects on earth, I think of the words of Moses:

And were it possible that man could number the particles of the earth, yea, millions of earths like this, it would not be a beginning to the number of thy creations. [Moses 7:30]

Remember also the words of the Psalmist:

When I consider thy heavens, and the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

What is man, that thou art mindful of him?
[Psalm 8:3–4]

And in that glorious hymn we sing, “There is no end to matter; There is no end to space” (“If You Could Hie to Kolob,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 284).

In the powerful words of the prophet Alma to the deceiver Korihor, we read:

All things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator. [Alma 30:44]

I bear witness that He lives, that this Supreme Creator is He who we call our Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ. A developed perspective of space helps us to see the greatness of our Heavenly Father and also that we would be wise to learn of Him and to conform our lives to His eternal plan.

Let us now look more closely at His plan for us—a plan He has called “the great plan of happiness” (Alma 42:8). For this we must speak of His words to both ancient and modern prophets.

You have been who you are for a very, very long time. We are sons and daughters of heavenly parents who love us and who have sent us on a course to become more like Them. We lived in the premortal existence prior to our coming to earth. We were taught of our Heavenly Father’s plan. We would receive a physical body; we would learn to choose good over evil. The Only Begotten Son of the Father offered Himself as the Savior of the world, allowing us a way to return to our heavenly home. We rejoiced in the plan, and we “fought for it. Many of us also made covenants with the Father concerning what we would do in

mortality. In ways that have not been revealed, our actions in the spirit world influence us in mortality” (Dallin H. Oaks, “The Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign*, November 1993, 72).

We do not have all the answers, but it is very clear that our life is not a coincidence—and that it is not by chance that we find ourselves here at this time in human history.

The Restoration scriptures explain a beautiful linking of the generations that, once understood, opens our view, and we see our lives in a more complete way.

Three thousand years ago the Lord covenanted with a righteous man named Abraham, promising him that “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:18). There was a covenant made, a people established, and a promise that through this people many great things would come to pass in the latter days.

When the Savior visited the Nephites following His Resurrection, He said to them:

Ye are the children of the prophets; and ye are of the house of Israel; and ye are of the covenant which the Father made with your fathers, saying unto Abraham: And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

. . . Ye are the children of the covenant. [3 Nephi 20:25–26]

You and I are “children of the covenant.” The Savior has declared it, and I confirm it to you. As we come to understand what it means, we see more clearly. Mortality comes more into focus. Just like putting on glasses and seeing the blackboard of our mortality, our understanding grows.

The Apostle Peter described members of the Church as “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9).

I repeat: It is not by chance that we find ourselves within this holy lineage, the blood of Israel, with a promise and a destiny that

through our lives and the lives of our posterity all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (see 1 Nephi 15:18; 3 Nephi 16:5–7; D&C 39:11).

When we see ourselves in the perspective of this holy family, those who came before us and those who come after us become very important to us. I have heard President Gordon B. Hinckley say on more than one occasion, “I have been thinking a lot about my grandfather and grandmother. I have been thinking a lot about my father and my mother. I have been thinking just a little about myself and my dear wife. And I have been thinking a lot about my children, about my grandchildren, and about my great-grandchildren.” And then he has concluded with this phrase: “And I have been thinking a lot about this wonderful link that binds us all together” (President Hinckley speaking at Vernal, Utah, and Campinas, Brazil, temple dedications).

Now you might say, “But my parents and grandparents were not like President Hinckley’s; they were not members of the Church.” Or, “They were not faithful in the Church.” Or, as a man in Argentina who I called to be a stake president said to me: “I don’t even know who my father is.” He had been given the family name of his mother. He had not heard the name of the Church until he was 18 years old. How could he be part of this royal family?

Through miraculous circumstances—that we will one day appreciate more than we can now explain—each of us has been brought into this covenant family and we have become children of the covenant. It is not necessary that we be able to explain every detail. Here is where we reverse “seeing is believing” to “believing is the beginning of seeing.” I confirm to you that it is not by chance that we are here and that we are who we are.

Notice in President Hinckley’s words that he looked both *back* through his generations—his parents, grandparents, great-grandparents—and *forward* through his generations—his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

This is the major point I want to make to you today: As we see through our generations, both backward and forward, we see who we are, and we see more clearly what we must become. Let me give you an example.

Let me show you the engagement picture of our son, Derek Andersen, with his fiancée, Erica Wible. They met here at BYU and fell in love. Three weeks ago, in their caps and gowns, they graduated together. Three days ago, kneeling at the altar in the San Diego Temple, they were sealed by the holy priesthood for time and for all eternity. They look to the future with great hope and anticipation.

Their lives will be like all of our lives: filled with challenges, tests, happiness, and satisfactions—and moments where they must exhibit the character and strength that is in them. If they look back and look forward and see their role in the generations, it will strengthen and fortify them.

Now let me show you two people in their lives from the past. Daniel Henry Arline was born in 1841 in northern Florida. He is Derek's great-great-grandfather. One day in 1898 he heard the missionaries speak in the town square. He felt something inside. Although there was great persecution against the Church and against the missionaries as well, he took the missionaries to his home, fed them, and watched over them. He was then 57 years old, but he told his wife, "For the first time in my life I have heard the truth." He and all his family were baptized. Though it was not easy to be a pioneer and a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the turn of the century in the southern United States, Daniel Arline remained true to the gospel and to his covenants. Part of who Derek is comes because of the goodness and righteousness of this man whom Derek has never met.

Marva Olson Prior is the great-grandmother of Erica. Her life did not take every turn as she expected. She reared her four children righteously in the Church without her husband

being a member. She once said: "If we keep His commandments, we will be blessed and find peace of mind and true joy, but not without trials, for we learn so much from our challenges." Her husband joined the Church after they had been married 46 years. Part of who Erica Wible is comes because of the noble life of this great-grandmother. I have a picture of Erica with her great-grandmother when Erica was younger. Sister Prior passed away four years ago.

In the world in which we live there is a great focus on "me," "I," "my world," "my style," "my satisfactions," and "my things." In the popular recent book *Generation Me*, author Jean M. Twenge leads with these words on the cover: "Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before."

Here is a paragraph from the book describing some of those in your generation:

*Born after self-focus entered the cultural mainstream, this generation has never known a world that put duty before self. Linda's youngest child, Jessica, was born in 1985. When Jessica was a toddler, Whitney Houston's No. 1 hit song declared that "The Greatest Love of All" was loving yourself. Jessica's elementary school teachers believed that their most important job was helping Jessica feel good about herself. Jessica scribbled in a coloring book called We Are All Special, got a sticker on her work sheet just for filling it out, and did a sixth-grade project called "All About Me." When she wondered how to act on her first date, her mother told her, "Just be yourself." Eventually, Jessica got her lower lip pierced and obtained a large tattoo on her lower back because, she said, she wanted to express herself. She dreams of being a model or a singer. She does not expect to marry until she is in her late twenties, and neither she nor her older sisters have any children yet. "You have to love yourself before you can love someone else," she says. This is a generation unapologetically focused on the individual, a true Generation Me. [Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's**

Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before (New York: Free Press, 2006), 1–2]

Now this does not describe you, but it describes a part of your generation.

If we can look back through the generations, we see those who helped us to get where we are now—those who forged the way before us, whether they were members of the Church or not. And in the restored gospel we realize even more deeply our responsibility to link them to us through the ordinances of the temple.

In a letter from the Prophet Joseph Smith to the members of the Church, we read:

These are principles in relation to the dead and the living that cannot be lightly passed over. . . . For their salvation is necessary and essential to our salvation, . . . they without us cannot be made perfect—neither can we without our dead be made perfect. [D&C 128:15; see also verse 18]

Now let's see through our generations forward. Who will be your children and your grandchildren? Or, if by chance you do not marry, who will be those you influence in the generations ahead?

Looking ahead through the generations, what kind of care and example will Derek and Erica's great-grandchildren receive from their parents? Will Derek and Erica teach their children in such a way that their grandchildren will believe that they are "children of the covenant"? When we look at our own lives, we must be prepared to look forward into the generations that will follow us, for our footprints will be seen in homes and on paths where we will never walk.

As we are righteous, there is a power in the priesthood that passes through us into our posterity, shaping their eternity as it shapes ours.

Let me share with you the words of a blessing pronounced by the Prophet Joseph Smith upon Bishop Newel K. Whitney in Kirtland on October 7, 1835:

He shall be blessed with a fullness of the good things of this earth, and his seed after him from generation to generation. . . . Angels shall guard his house, and shall guard the lives of his posterity, and they shall become very great and very numerous on the earth. [HC 2:288]

I close by giving you a promise. As you can learn to see through the generations—by looking back and by looking forward—you will see more clearly who you are and what you must become. You will better see that your place in this vast, beautiful plan of happiness is no small place. And you will come to love the Savior and depend on Him—as His great gift to us makes this all possible. Your influence will continue generation after generation throughout all eternity.

I bear witness of these things: Jesus is the Christ, the Only Begotten of the Father. He lives. He is resurrected. One day everyone from all nations, all generations, all times, and all places will kneel and confess Him to be who we claim and know Him to be: the Savior of the world. He restored the priesthood to the earth. That priesthood and that power is found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He guides His prophets. I bear witness that you are a child of the covenant and pray that you may through your generations see the power that is in you, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.