

Thanks for the Covenant

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Sister Nelson and I are thrilled to be with you on this special occasion. Whenever we come to BYU and are privileged to rub shoulders with members of the faculty and student body, we are better for it.

In two days, people in this nation will set aside their usual labors and celebrate Thanksgiving Day. This custom fosters gratitude to God for the good things of life. Each one of you will offer your own expressions of gratitude in your own way, wherever you are. We have so much for which we are grateful—family, friends, food, freedom, faith—all of which come to us from a loving Father in Heaven.

On my list of things for which I am thankful are items that may not be on your list. I would especially like to express my gratitude for the privilege of being here today. In the past five weeks my calling has taken me to thirteen different nations on three different continents. So I'm grateful for the jet airplane and competent people who work to help us travel in safety. I'm pleased that I don't have jet lag. My poor brain has long since given up trying to keep track of which time zone I'm in. I find that if one travels eastward to Europe and then westward to the East, time zones get fuzzy

anyway, and opposing jet lags hopefully just cancel out.

I am grateful also for the fact that wherever I travel, the reputation made by groups from Brigham Young University has preceded me. I salute cultural ambassadors of goodwill who represent this institution. What you have done is of inestimable value. Literally, the world is your campus.

Another observation for which I am grateful is that graduates from BYU are widely disseminated throughout the earth. Precious seedlings of faith blown by winds of responsibility reach fertile soil of opportunity in lands near and far.

Wherever I go in the world, I see amazing growth of the Church. People once uninformed are learning of the gospel. I am an eyewitness to fulfillment of the promise made to the Prophet Joseph Smith when the Lord said, "The ends of the earth shall inquire after they name" (D&C 122:1).

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National governments once hostile to this Church are now cautiously opening doors because they have learned that doctrines restored through that great Prophet will strengthen citizens of their nations.

I would like to speak to each individual here with the hope that I may give you a new perspective of gratitude at Thanksgiving. Against a historical backdrop I should like to paint a mental picture that would allow you more fully to comprehend who you really are.

The panorama of history will extend so far back you will wonder if I have forgotten to relate my message to you. But if you'll pay careful attention and follow the thread of thought, you will see that the relationship is real. In fact, if you should view your own identity without this broader understanding, such limitation would constitute an unfortunate injustice.

Going Back in Time

Each one here no doubt has at one time or another had some sort of identity crisis. On those occasions one has wondered with truth introspection: "Who am I really? Why am I here? What am I to do?" To find identity, direction, and purpose, it helps to be reminded of the past.

Before we start, I'd like to give you a little quiz. Nothing you'd rather have today, is there? I won't ask for answers aloud, but perhaps you can silently answer these questions or even write them in your notes.

Who are your parents?

Where is your home?

Are you of Israel?

Are you Hebrew?

Are you related to Abraham? If so, how?

Are you Jewish?

To what countries do you trace your ancestry?

Do any of you trace your ancestry to Egypt?

To find answers, let's go back in a mental time tunnel. Before the world was made, "Jesus

Christ, the Great I AM, . . . looked upon the wide expanse of eternity, and all the seraphic hosts of heaven" (D&C 38:1). The Lord had shown Abraham "the intelligences that were organized before the world was; and among all these there were many of the noble and great ones" (Abraham 3:22). We are no doubt among those he envisioned.

"And God saw these souls . . . and he said: These I will make my rulers; . . . Abraham, thou art one of them; thou wast chosen before thou wast born" (Abraham 3:23). Contemplating the plan to create an earth on which those spirits could dwell, our Heavenly Father said to those about him, "We will prove them herewith, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them" (Abraham 3:25).

The Creation was accomplished. The fall of Adam took place that man might be. Dispensations of the gospel were entrusted to Adam, to Enoch, to Noah, Abraham, and others. (see Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, comp. Bruce R. McConkie [Salt Lake City; Bookcraft, 1954], 1:161) Then the Savior of the world was born. Prior to his planned atonement, he ministered among them.

You may recall the conversation the Master had with Jews who questioned his knowledge about Abraham;

Then said the Jews unto [Jesus], Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?

Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. [John 8:57–58]

"I am" was the name the Lord applied to himself.

Abraham's Covenant

After Abraham withstood the severe trial commanded of God in which Abraham was willing to offer his special son, Isaac, the Lord personally appeared and made a covenant with Abraham. Included were assurances that

1. Christ would come through the lineage of Abraham.

2. Abraham's posterity would receive certain lands as an inheritance (see Genesis 17; Galatians 3; Abraham 2).

3. All the nations of the earth would be blessed through his seed (see Genesis 17:7; Acts 3:25; 1 Nephi 15:18; 22:9; 3 Nephi 20:25, 27).

These divine declarations are known as the Abrahamic covenant.

So important were these promises that the Lord personally appeared to Isaac and renewed that covenant (see Genesis 26:1–4, 24). So important were these promises that the Lord personally appeared again to Jacob and reconfirmed that same covenant a third time to a third generation (see Genesis 28, 35:9–13, 48:3–4). Jacob's name was changed to Israel (see Genesis 35:9–10), so we may use the terms Jacob and Israel interchangeably.

Well, happily, as men are wont to do, Jacob fell in love. In an act I would not recommend today, Jacob kissed Rachel on their first date (see Genesis 29:11). But on that occasion Jacob also kissed her father (see Genesis 29:13). I wouldn't recommend that either. Concurrent kisses for both a father as well as his daughter would surely restrain any amorous enthusiasm. Jacob worked for years for the hand of his intended bride, Rachel. He asked Rachel's father for permission to marry her. But after agreeing, the father veiled faces, switched daughters, and gave his oldest girl, Leah. Her father cited the tradition of giving the hand of his first daughter before allowing the younger daughter to be married (see Genesis 29:26).

Later, Rachel and Jacob were permitted to marry. He worked another seven years for her. (That's even longer than waiting for a missionary today!) So great was his affection for Rachel that he described the period as "but a few days, for the love he had [for] her" (Genesis 29:20).

Leah bore sons Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Meanwhile, Rachel was barren. So

desirous was she of having children that she gave to Jacob her handmaiden, Bilhah, as another wife, with the expectation that children born to Bilhah would become Rachel's own, because Rachel owned Bilhah. Bilhah had been given to Rachel as a wedding gift by her father. Bilhah did conceive and gave birth to a son upon Rachel's knees (see Genesis 30:3). It was customary for names of babies to be selected by their mothers. "Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan" (Genesis 30:6). Dan in Hebrew language means "judge." Rachel wanted Dan judged as though he were her own offspring. Bilhah later bore a second son named Naphtali (see Genesis 30:8).

When Leah saw that pattern of surrogate motherhood successfully practiced by her sister, Leah decided to do the same. Her maid, Zilpah, was given to Jacob as a fourth wife, and she bore sons named Gad and Asher (see Genesis 30:9–13). Leah subsequently had two more sons named Issachar and Zebulun (see Genesis 35:23).

So Israel had ten sons before Rachel finally conceived and bore a son of her very own. She called his name Joseph (see Genesis 30:24). This name had a very special meaning. The word Joseph relates to the Hebrew word *yasaph*, meaning "to add." Rachel wanted all to know that this son was added to sons that she already had through her maid Bilhah. Joseph also relates to the Hebrew word *asaph*, which means "to gather" (see Genesis 30:24, footnote 24a in the LDS edition of the King James Version). The name and lineage of Joseph were destined to play an important later role in the gathering of Israel.

In time, Rachel conceived again. As they were traveling from Beth-el in the north to Bethlehem in the south, Rachel went into labor and experienced a fatal complication. Scriptures indicate that it was a particularly hard labor. She endured severe pain. The

midwife announced that the baby was a boy and asked for a name. As Rachel was dying, she gave the baby the name Ben-oni (see Genesis 35:18), which means “son of my sorrow.” Rachel then died and was buried just north of Bethlehem. Her husband was grief-stricken. I suppose he could not bear the thought of being reminded of the death of his beloved Rachel every time the name of the child was mentioned. So Jacob changed the name to Benjamin, which means “son of my right hand” (see Genesis 35:18). To me, this is one of the most tender love stories in all of holy writ.

The Birthright

This history takes on an additional dimension of importance when one considers the Hebrew law of primogeniture, or the birthright. Under this law, for example, if a man had three sons, his estate would be divided not three ways, but four, with a quarter going to each of the three sons and the fourth quarter going to the birthright son. To have the birthright meant power, property, and a measure of wealth to help defray the cost of managing the estate, to take care of any daughters and, who knows, maybe there would be a little left over for an executor’s fee.

Being the first son, Reuben held the birthright. But he lost it because he defiled his father’s bed. The question is, who was to get the birthright now? Was it to go to the second son, Simeon, or to any of the older boys? No! The Hebrew law of primogeniture required that the birthright go to the first son of the second wife. So the birthright went to Joseph (see 1 Chronicles 5:1–2). That’s why he was given the coat of many colors. It wasn’t because he was a favorite son, necessarily. It was because he was the birthright son. The coat carried that special designation. Of course, this infuriated his ten older brothers. You remember that they angrily sold Joseph into Egypt.

Joseph then married Asenath, and she gave birth to two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (see Genesis 41:45, 50–52).

Patriarchal blessings were as important then as they are now. When the father of these two sons felt that the time was appropriate for his boys to receive patriarchal blessings, he took them to patriarch Israel, who by that time was elderly. His eyes were described as “dim for age” (Genesis 48:10). (I presume he had cataracts.) You remember the story. Israel crossed his hands, put his right hand on the head of the younger Ephraim and his left hand on the head of Manasseh. Joseph tried to correct his father, but Israel persisted in his plan to give the patriarchal blessings in that order. He bestowed upon them blessings of greatness and conferred the birthright upon Ephraim (see Genesis 48:20; also D&C 133:34).

Promises from the Past

What does this ancient history have to do with you and your identity? It has everything to do with your identity. It also relates to the direction your lives may take, your choices, and your challenges. It should even influence your selection of your partner in marriage.

This connection became clear when in our latter-day, God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ came to earth. In addition to other actions of eternal consequence, they established once again the Abrahamic covenant, this time through the Prophet Joseph Smith. These are the words of the Lord:

And as I said unto Abraham concerning the kindreds of the earth, even so I say unto my servant Joseph [Smith]: In thee and in thy seed shall the kindred of the earth be blessed. [D&C 124:58; see also D&C 110:12]

The Master conferred upon Joseph Smith priesthood authority and the right to convey blessings of the Abrahamic covenant to others.

Joseph Smith, whose father's name was Joseph, had the same name as Joseph who was sold into Egypt, who millennia before had prophesied of Joseph Smith. This fact is documented in the Book of Mormon (see 2 Nephi 3:6–21). The name *Joseph* carried the connotation both that he was “added” to, and that his mission related to the “gathering” of Israel.

Have the promises of the Abrahamic covenant been fulfilled? Partially. Christ indeed has come from the seed of Abraham through the lineage of Judah. That line was entrusted with responsibility for preparation of the world for the first coming of the Lord. On the other hand, responsibility for preparation of leadership of the world for the second coming of the Lord was assigned to the lineage of Joseph, through Ephraim and Manasseh.

This remarkable fact was foreknown centuries before the birth of the Lord. In the earliest pages of the Book of Mormon this revelation is recorded:

Wherefore, our father hath not spoken of our seed alone, but also of all the house of Israel, pointing to the covenant which should be fulfilled in the latter days; which covenant the Lord made to our father Abraham, saying: In thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. [1 Nephi 15:18]

Now, what of the promise of possession of certain lands? Territorial inheritance destined for the sons of Israel provided property in the Holy Land for Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Gad, Asher, Dan, Naphtali, and Benjamin.

But where was the inheritance for Joseph? From the Book of Mormon we learn that his inheritance was this land in the American hemisphere (see Ether 13:8)—identified as being choice above all other lands (see Ether 1:42, 10:28, 13:2; D&C 38:20). It was choice, but not necessarily from the standpoint of scenery or wealth. It was choice because it was chosen. America was to serve as the repository of

sacred records written on metallic plates. It one day was to become the location for the restoration of the gospel. It was to host headquarters of the Lord's restored church.

Now do you see the importance of your patriarchal blessing? I hope each one of you has obtained one. It is precious. It is personal scripture to you. It declares your special lineage. It reminds you of your linkage with the past. And it will help you realize your future potential. Literally, you can lay claim upon the Lord for fulfillment of those blessings through your faithfulness.

Many of you have already qualified for endowment in the temple, and others will have that great privilege yet in the future. In the temple, with the authority of the sealing power, blessings of the Abrahamic covenant will be conferred. There, we may truly become heirs to all the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Each of them had severe trials in life. So will each of us, without exception. Speaking to the Saints of our day, the Lord said,

They must needs be chastened and tried, even as Abraham, who was commanded to offer up his only son.

For all those who will not endure chastening . . . cannot be sanctified. [D&C 101:4–5; see also D&C 136:31]

Submissive suffering is just as essential to our sanctification now as it was to patriarchs and prophets before. Knowing who we are helps us to endure our own Abrahamic tests.

Heirs to the Promise

Every man who has received the Melchizedek Priesthood has been foreordained from the foundations of the world for that privilege (see Alma 13:2–3). Every woman here today has been foredetermined to come at this time to participate in partnership in building up the Church and kingdom of God upon the

earth as part of the preparation for the second coming of the Lord.

Now, let's review those questions I asked earlier. Are you of Israel? Absolutely. You are the "Hope of Israel, Zion's army, Children of the promised day" (*Hymns*, 1985, no. 259). Once you were spirit children in premortal realms with Elohim, Jehovah, Abraham, and other elect rulers-to-be. There you were held in reserve to come forth in this latter day when this great and marvelous work of restoration was to come forth.

Are you Hebrew? Yes, as scriptures define the term. You are related to Abraham, who was the great "Eber" from which the term Hebrew was derived (see Genesis 10:21, 14:13; see also 2 Corinthians 11:22).

Are you Jewish? That precious lineage may be claimed if your ancestors are from the loins of Judah. But most of us are of the lineage of Joseph through Ephraim or Manasseh. That was the lineage selected to pioneer the gathering of Israel, the seed to lead throughout the world in blessing all the nations of the earth.

Missionary work is only the beginning of that blessing. The fulfillment, the consummation, of those blessings comes as those who have entered the waters of baptism perfect their lives to the point that they may enter the holy temple. Receiving an endowment there seals members of the Church to the Abrahamic covenant.

Can you trace your lineage to Egypt? If your patriarchal blessing indicates that you are of the lineage of Joseph, Ephraim, Manasseh, or other descendents of Israel, yes, you may claim Egyptian ancestry.

And, of course, each of you is a child of God, created in his image. And you are disciples of his Beloved Son. If you really comprehend the power of that identity, other elements of your background matter less. Paul described this well. He said:

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. [Galatians 3:27–29]

The promise is the promise of the Abrahamic covenant.

The angel Moroni so taught the Prophet Joseph Smith. On September 21, 1823, Moroni appeared to the Prophet, quoting scripture from the fourth chapter of Malachi, "though with a little variation from the way it reads in our Bibles" (JS—H 1:36). The difference in text from the Bible is highly significant. You recall it refers to the heart of the fathers being turned to the children, and the heart of the children being turned to the fathers (see Malachi 4:6). Joseph Smith tells us that Moroni

Quoted the fifth verse thus: Behold, I will reveal unto you the Priesthood, by the hand of Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.

He also quoted the next verse differently: And he shall plant in the hearts of the children the promises made to the fathers, and the hearts of the children shall turn to their fathers. [JS—H 1:38-39]

The concept the Prophet was taught emphasized that the hearts of the children will become aware of the promises made to their fathers. Then, with that comprehension, the hearts of the children shall turn to their parents. That includes parents, grandparents, great-great-grandparents—including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once we know who we are and the royal lineage of which we are a part, our actions and our direction in life will be more appropriate to our inheritance.

Now you can better understand this revelation given through the Prophet Joseph Smith. It applies to each one of us. He said:

Thus saith the Lord unto you, with whom the priesthood hath continued through the lineage of your fathers—

For ye are lawful heirs, according to the flesh, and have been hid from the world with Christ in God—

Therefore your life and the priesthood have remained, and must needs remain through you and your lineage until the restoration of all things spoken by the mouths of all the holy prophets since the world began.

Therefore, blessed are ye if ye continue in my goodness, a light unto the Gentiles, and through this priesthood, a savior unto my people Israel.

[D&C 86:8–11]

The Lord has called you. He has chosen you. You have inherited greatness of transcendent worth.

“Children of the Prophets”

Why are you here today? At least two great reasons emerge. One: You are to learn in your youth to keep the commandments of God (see Alma 37:35). There is no other way you can achieve your divine destiny. A prophet said:

As you have commenced in your youth to look to the Lord your God, even so I hope that you will continue in keeping his commandments; for blessed is he that endureth to the end. [Alma 38:2]

Reason number two: Learn wisdom so that you can render significant service of worth to your fellowmen. How frustrating it would be to have desire only and little or no ability to help people. Prepare your minds and your hands so that you can qualify to serve people and bless their lives. Gain competence that others do not have. That takes work—it takes effort—but it is worth the price.

And for some, a third reason emerges. Here you may fall in love and find your eternal companion. Now with your understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, you may clearly see the importance of marrying within the covenant to obtain all the blessings of the covenant.

Long ago, when Jacob’s parents pondered the risk of his dating certain ladies not of covenant Israel, their concern was evident. His mother, Rebekah, said to Isaac:

If Jacob take a wife . . . such as these which are of the daughters of the land [and not of Israel], what good shall my life do me? [Genesis 27:46]

So today your parents and predecessors are pulling and praying for you. Be wise in selecting your companion. Keep courage to be morally clean. Let fidelity and trust distinguish all you do. Don’t ever defile our chosen lineage or demean your boundless potential for greatness.

These words from the mouth of the Lord recorded in 3 Nephi may summarize my message today:

And behold, 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. [3 Nephi 20:25]

At Thanksgiving time, express gratitude to your Heavenly Father for blessings uniquely yours. Echo in your heart this prayerful plea recorded in the Book of Mormon:

Take upon you the name of Christ; . . . humble yourselves . . . and worship God, in whatsoever place ye may be in, . . . live in thanksgiving daily, for the many mercies and blessings which he doth bestow upon you. [Alma 34:38]

Gratefully add to your list of blessings thanks for the covenant—the Abrahamic

covenant—by which you will be vital and precious participants in God’s promise to bless all the nations of the earth through that choice seed.

I express my love and invoke the blessings of our Father in Heaven upon you—that you will reach the potential of your divine destiny. God bless you always, I pray, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.