

# The Nature and Character of God

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Several years ago, during a challenging and hectic period in my life, I read a statement by President Brigham Young that has meant a great deal to me ever since. He said:

*When you . . . see our Father, you will see a being with whom you have long been acquainted, and He will receive you into His arms, and you will be ready to fall into His embrace and kiss Him. . . . You will be so glad and joyful. . . . When you are qualified and purified, . . . you can endure the glory of eternity. [JD 4:54–55]*

How blessed we are to know what President Young taught us about our Heavenly Father—what kind of a being He is, what He is really like. How many people over the space of thousands of years have not even known that there is a Father in Heaven? How many individuals' lives might have been different if they could only have known about our loving, merciful, and caring Heavenly Father? Indeed, how blessed we are to have such teachings that center on the nature of our Father in Heaven. It is about God, our Eternal Father, that I wish to speak today.

The first article or principle in our declaration of faith as Latter-day Saints states, “We believe in God, the Eternal Father” (Articles of Faith 1:1). I do not think it is accidental or coin-

cidental that this statement comes first in our 13 Articles of Faith.

The Prophet Joseph Smith said: “It is the first principle of the Gospel to know for a certainty the Character of God” (*Teachings*, 345). In other words, one of the foundation stones of the restored gospel is a knowledge of what kind of being God actually is. But not only do we need to *understand* what kind of being God is, we must come to *know* God. In the same sermon from which we just quoted, the Prophet Joseph further stated, “If any man does not know God, . . . he will realize that he has not eternal life; for there can be eternal life on no other principle” (*Teachings*, 344). In His great high-priestly or Intercessory Prayer, the Savior confirmed that life eternal was to “know . . . the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom [the Father] hast sent” (John 17:3).

Thus everything of sacred significance connected with our future rests on both our coming to know *about* God the Eternal Father and, ultimately, our coming to *know* Him. “If

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men do not comprehend the character of God,” said Joseph Smith, “they do not comprehend themselves” (*Teachings*, 343). God and men are of the same divine, eternal species, and if we do not comprehend the nature of God, we cannot appreciate our divine parentage nor the very real potential we possess to become like our heavenly parents.

### God Must Be Revealed

Coming to know God is not for the spiritually lazy. He can only be known through revelation. And powerful personal revelation, as many of you know, is predicated upon righteous living and spiritual discipline. Elder Bruce R. McConkie of the Quorum of the Twelve provided this insight:

*God is known only by revelation; he stands revealed or remains forever unknown. He cannot be discovered in the laboratory, or by viewing all immensity through giant telescopes, or by cataloging all the laws of nature that do or have existed. A knowledge of his powers and the laws of nature which he has ordained does not reveal his personality and attributes to men in the true gospel sense. Certainly a knowledge of these laws and powers enables man to learn truths which are faith promoting and which help him to understand more about Deity; but saving knowledge of God comes only by revelation from the Holy Ghost as a consequence of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the gospel.*

*Man’s purpose in life is to learn the nature and kind of being that God is, and then, by conformity to his laws and ordinances, to progress to that high state of exaltation wherein man becomes perfect as the Father is perfect. [MD, s.v. “God,” 318]*

It was Jesus Christ who commanded His disciples to be perfect even as our Father in Heaven is perfect. It was Jesus Christ who restored in His own day a knowledge of God the Father to the people of Israel—a people who for the previous 1,200 or 1,400 years had lost, to a greater or lesser degree, an

understanding of the Supreme Parent of the universe.

It will be remembered that when Israel rebelled against God during the golden calf episode at Mount Sinai, God took the Melchizedek Priesthood out of their midst, as well as the higher law and the higher ordinances of His holy order. This was a devastating loss, for the Melchizedek Priesthood “holdeth . . . the key of the knowledge of God” (D&C 84:19). For the next 1,200 or 1,400 years, until the time of Christ, Israel lived without the higher law, and their knowledge of God the Father grew dim. They interacted with Jehovah, who was the premortal Jesus of Nazareth.

Of course all the prophets in ancient Israel held the Melchizedek Priesthood during this period (see *Teachings*, 181). But the people as a whole did not. In fact, among the people of Israel generally, only the tribe of Levi (one-twelfth of the male population) was privileged to hold any priesthood at all—and that was the lesser priesthood.

When Jesus inaugurated a new dispensation of the gospel through His earthly ministry, He began to restore knowledge, doctrines, ordinances, and powers long withheld from the children of men. He was the Elias who came to restore all things in His day—as John the Baptist testified and as is now recorded for us in the Joseph Smith Translation of John 1:24–28.

As the great Restorer, Jesus spoke much about His “Father in Heaven.” Jesus wanted all men and women to come to *know* His true Father, who was also *their* Father. The phrase “Father in Heaven” is characteristic of Matthew’s Gospel as a whole and is found throughout the Sermon on the Mount, the discourse in which Jesus commanded His disciples to be perfect as their Father in Heaven is perfect (see Matthew 5:48).

Jesus’ desire to have His disciples understand and know God the Father is clearly demonstrated in such teachings as His exhortation

to His disciples to live so righteously and present such fine examples that others would see their good works and glorify their Father in Heaven (see Matthew 5:16).

Practically speaking, I think the Savior is telling us here that each of us has the obligation *and* the opportunity to live in such a manner that our friends and family members can more fully understand what our Heavenly Father is actually like because they see something of His divine nature in us and the Holy Spirit is able to confirm that such examples are authentic.

I have had the great blessing in my life of coming to know, in part, what our Heavenly Father is like by observing some of His characteristics and personality traits in the lives of dear friends, colleagues, and students here at the university, file leaders, apostles and prophets, *and* members of my own family. Brothers and sisters, can we who are parents or potential parents not see that our behavior makes it easier or harder for others to come to know—or even desire to know—our Father in Heaven? There is a great compelling power about those who the Spirit tells us are like our Heavenly Father.

In another statement Jesus commanded His disciples to love their enemies, to bless those who hurled curses at them, and to pray for those who spitefully used them. The reason is given in Matthew 5:45: “That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven.”

The original Greek wording of Matthew 5:45 connotes a rebirth, “so that ye may be born (*genēsthe*) the sons [children] of your Father in heaven.” This idea parallels the doctrine of being spiritually born of God and receiving His image in our countenances, as taught in Alma 5:14. Disciples must reflect in their lives—in their behaviors and in their countenances—the distinguishing traits of the Great Parent of the universe in order to truly become His children and His heirs in every way. As Jesus taught, patient love and tolerant restraint are great hallmarks of our Heavenly Father’s character and personality. “He maketh

his sun to rise on the evil and on the good” (Matthew 5:45), meaning that righteousness and wickedness are not—cannot be—immediately and constantly rewarded or punished. Such constant interference in the lives of men and women would thwart the plan of salvation and the purposes for which earth life was designed: to allow individuals to exercise patience, walk by faith, and be tested.

Thus one of the distinguishing features of Jesus’ earthly ministry was His restoration of the knowledge of the nature and personality of His Father in Heaven—the Father of us all. But, alas, this restored knowledge was not to last. Soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, another rebellion set in, and an even greater apostasy ensued than the one that existed from the time of Moses to the time of John the Baptist. This so-called Great Apostasy lasted for some 1,800 years. During this time a true and clear understanding of the nature and personality of God the Father was distorted and, at times, all but lost. Misunderstandings and distortions about the Godhead usually came as a result of debate without the confirming witness of the Holy Ghost. Pronouncements of theological councils defined the nature of God. Errors became entrenched.

### **Another Restoration**

However, good news has again come to earth. In these latter days, beginning in 1820, our Heavenly Father, through His Son and His prophets, has rerevealed many divine truths about His nature and personality so that each of us can again come to know Him as the meridian disciples knew him and as we knew Him in our premortal existence.

Joseph Smith’s First Vision in 1820 immediately clarified misunderstandings about the nature of the Godhead as well as the person of God the Father:

- God the Father is a distinct personage, separate from the Lord Jesus Christ.

- God the Father looks like a man, as does His Son—who is our Savior.
- God the Father can speak and move.
- God the Father knows individuals by name.
- God the Father hears and answers prayers.
- God the Father bears witness of His Son.
- Satan and his power are real, but God’s power is greater.

It is easy to see why President Ezra Taft Benson said:

*The appearance of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ to the boy prophet [Joseph Smith] is the greatest event that has occurred in this world since the resurrection of the Master. [Ezra Taft Benson, “Life Is Eternal,” Ensign, June 1971, 34]*

Other revelations about the nature and person of God the Father followed the First Vision, and Joseph Smith taught these truths to all who would listen. But these were radical doctrines indeed.

Though we take it for granted, section 130 of the Doctrine and Covenants teaches an incredibly profound truth:

*The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us. [D&C 130:22]*

In the King Follett Sermon, a year after section 130 was recorded in 1843, Joseph astounded the theological world with this further instruction about the physical person of God:

*God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens! . . .*

*These are incomprehensible ideas to some, but they are simple. It is the first principle of the Gospel*

*to know for a certainty the Character of God, and to know that we may converse with him as one man converses with another. [Teachings, 345]*

However, here a caution needs to be emphasized. We must always remember that God is exalted—we are not! He is perfect—we are not! He must never be treated casually. He possesses almighty power. His “brightness and glory defy all description” (JS—H 1:17).

In another way of explaining this, Joseph Smith further declared:

*God Almighty Himself dwells in eternal fire; flesh and blood cannot go there, for all corruption is devoured by the fire. “Our God is a consuming fire.” . . .*

*. . . Immortality dwells in everlasting burnings. [Teachings, 367]*

President Joseph Fielding Smith put it this way:

*God is full of energy, and should we mortals stand in his presence, unless his spirit was upon us to protect us we would be consumed. That is how much energy there is in a celestial body. [Joseph Fielding Smith, Seek Ye Earnestly (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1970), 275]*

It should come as no surprise that the Prophet Joseph and his associates described a god whose character and personality were made up of all characteristics possessed by His Divine Son. The traits of one are the traits of the other (see “Lecture Third” in *Lectures on Faith*):

- He “is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34).
- He is “merciful and gracious” (Exodus 34:6; see also Psalm 103:8; 2 Nephi 2:6).
- He is “slow to anger,” “abundant in goodness,” and will be so forever (Nehemiah 9:17; Exodus 34:6; see also Moroni 7:12).

- He is generous (see 2 Nephi 26:24).
- “He changes not, neither is there variable-ness with him; but that he is the same . . . yesterday, to-day, and for ever” (*Lectures on Faith* 3:15; see also Mormon 9:9; Moroni 8:18).
- He is just (see Mosiah 29:12).
- He is “a God of truth, and canst not lie” (Ether 3:12).
- He possesses independent faith. That is to say, He is the only being who has faith in Himself and is not dependent on any other being or any other power to accomplish His purposes and bring about His desires. If this were not so, we could not exercise faith in Him. We “would be as the heathen, not knowing but there might be a being greater and more powerful than [God], and thereby be prevented from fulfilling his promises” (*Lectures on Faith, Q&A* 3:19).
- God is the author of law. It originates with Him (see D&C 88:41–42).
- God possesses all power and all knowledge (see 1 Nephi 9:6; Mosiah 4:9; Isaiah 46:9–10).
- “God is love” (1 John 4:16). That is to say, this characteristic or attribute of love shapes, mediates, and influences all of God’s other attributes. “With all the other excellencies” of our Heavenly Father’s character, without love “to influence them, they could not have such powerful dominion over the minds of men” (*Lectures on Faith, 3:24*).

I am convinced that God’s love is both corporate—“He doeth not anything save it be for the benefit of the world” (2 Nephi 26:24)—and individual. I am also convinced that His love is proactive. To me one of the greatest examples of this personal and searching love is the parable of the prodigal son. I believe this parable is nothing less than a thinly veiled reflection of our Heavenly Father’s

personality—a personality dominated by love for us—and that Jesus presented the parable because He wanted us to know what He knew: what Heavenly Father is really like.

Like the father in the story of the prodigal son, our Father in Heaven is anxious to come to *us*, to meet us “a great way off,” as the parable says (Luke 15:20). He is desperate to get us back in His presence.

The parable of the prodigal son teaches that our Father in Heaven cares about the feelings of *all* of His children at the same time, even though it may appear that only certain ones are being blessed. For example, in the parable, the father’s patient tutoring of the older son—the “righteous” son who was put out over his father’s generous treatment of the profligate younger brother—is a reflection of our Heavenly Father’s personality:

*And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:*

*But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.*

*And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.*

*It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. [Luke 15:29–32]*

Our Father in Heaven loves me, and He loves you. His love is not a zero-sum exercise. He does not love me less and you more because there is only so much love to go around. His love is infinite. He loves me when I think or act a little like the prodigal son, and He is patient with me when I think or act a little like the jealous older son. In truth, during our years of mortality, are we not all, even just a little bit, like both the prodigal son and the steady but jealous older brother? Does our

Father in Heaven cease to be interested in our welfare when we are sinful and we need to come to ourselves? Does He turn off His care and concern for us when we are bad and turn it on again when we are good? I do not think so. The Father's love is as broad, deep, and lasting as eternity. It encompasses all.

Of course, God's love does not mean that all of us will receive the same blessings and opportunities. God cannot and will not do as much for the rebellious as He can and will do for the valiant. The disobedient cannot take full advantage of the Father's love, which love is manifested fully in the gift of His Son.

This, I think, is the meaning of Nephi's declaration: "Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; [but] he that is righteous is favored of God" (1 Nephi 17:35).

I testify that our Father in Heaven cares about each of us, individually and personally. There are many examples of this doctrine that I could share, but my son Mark recently reminded me of one. Mark served a mission to Mongolia. He served with and developed a deep love for a senior missionary couple from Idaho. They used an interpreter their entire 18-month mission. Their interpreter—a Mongolian sister—had an important story to tell. She grew up in Mongolia. The missionaries found her and baptized her. When she joined the Church, she started saving money for a full-time mission. She received a call to one of the missions in the United States, but at that time she spoke almost no English. She got on a plane in Mongolia to come to the Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah, knowing only three sentences in English:

"I am from Mongolia."

"I am a missionary."

"Please help me."

When she got on the plane, no one had explained to her that she needed to change planes to complete the flight to Utah. She

landed in Chicago, but, naturally, there was no one there to meet her and she didn't know the language. She found a chair, sat down, and prayed to Heavenly Father to know what to do. She then got up to try to find help. As she was attempting to explain her predicament to a ticket agent (using her three English sentences), a man tapped her on the shoulder, pulled out his temple recommend, and showed it to her. She recognized the temple recommend because she had been given one before she left, so she knew this man at her side was a member of the Church. He motioned for her to wait. Ten minutes later he handed her his cell phone, and on the other end of the line was the missionary who had taught her the gospel in Mongolia. The missionary told her to follow the man to the plane to Salt Lake City and get on board. He told her there would be people to meet her in Salt Lake City—and there were!

Our Father in Heaven truly watches out for His children—very often through others. But that's not the end of the story. The man in the Chicago airport was a businessman who has flown all over the world. He was upset that day because it was the first time he had missed his connecting flight to Salt Lake City. But because he was there at the Chicago airport, he overheard this Mongolian sister trying to get help, and he knew he could help her.

I testify, as others have, that our Father in Heaven not only answers prayers but at times chooses to micromanage the details of His kingdom. This, too, is part of His divine nature. But herein lies an important lesson. It is our Heavenly Father who chooses; we do not dictate to Him time, place, or circumstance. Still, we may rest assured that our Father knows all things and He does *all* that He does out of love. And He does what is best for us from an eternal perspective. He asks of us our loyalty, our willingness to help others, and our repentance—for which He will reward us with the riches of eternity.

As we near the end of another semester and another school year, it seems good to come back full circle to beginnings, to foundations and first principles. Therefore I return to where I began this morning—with President Brigham Young's statement:

*When you . . . see our Father, you will see a being with whom you have long been acquainted,*

*and He will receive you into His arms, and you will be ready to fall into His embrace and kiss Him. . . . You will be so glad and joyful. . . . When you are qualified and purified, . . . you can endure the glory of eternity. [JD 4:54–55]*

May President Young's vision become reality for each of us, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

