

Knowing Who You Are

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It is wonderful to be here with you today, to know that you have arrived safely from your travels, and to see in you the bright hope of anticipation that accompanies a new year and a new semester.

We Have a Divine Nature

Let me begin with a story that may sound all too familiar to some of you. The airport had been packed for hours. The usually crowded holiday travel conditions were exacerbated by weather-related delays and cancellations at other airports. Hundreds of frustrated travelers were scrambling from one gate to another as they sought alternate ways to reach their destinations.

At one gate, the line to talk to the agent stretched for more than fifty yards. One of the passengers in the line was a well-dressed and obviously impatient man. As he glanced at his watch with ever-increasing frequency and tapped his foot at an ever-increasing rate, it was obvious to all around him that he was not a person who was accustomed to waiting.

Finally the man could stand it no longer. He bolted from his place in line and stomped up to the gate. Pounding his hand on the desk, he belted, “Do you know who I am?”

An awkward silence instantly gripped the area. The agent at the desk calmly picked up her telephone and, in a steady voice, said, “We may need a little additional help at Gate 19. There is a man down here who doesn’t know who he is.”

My question to you today is, Do you know who *you* are? This question may be more complicated than it at first appears. If someone were to ask you right now who you are, some of you might answer by identifying yourself as a BYU student—a worthwhile identity. Others might be more specific and identify themselves by their major or their year in school. Some would answer based on their home or place of origin. Those of you from Texas know what I mean. Some might identify themselves by an extracurricular activity in which they engage, a sport they play, or a talent they possess. Some might choose to identify themselves by their church calling, by an office they hold, or by their relationships with others, such as wife, husband, father, or mother.

Kevin J Worthen, president of Brigham Young University, delivered this devotional address on January 8, 2019.

Each of these answers would be truthful in the sense that they accurately describe *a portion* of who you are. And to some extent they may be the most appropriate response because of the context in which the question is asked. Our response to the question Who are you? will likely vary from time to time and place to place. And sometimes those answers, in the abstract, will contradict one another. Thus, knowing who we really are can get a bit complicated.

But what if you had to fully identify yourself in a single sentence? Could you in one sentence describe yourself in a way that would be accurate in whatever circumstance or whatever stage of life you might find yourself? It wouldn't be that you are a freshman, for that will change. Or that you are a BYU student, for that will also change—even though there are times when graduation seems an eternity away. Such a statement of who you really are would need to describe your fully defined being in a way that is not dependent on time or temporary circumstances. That kind of answer to the question of who you are is a bit more challenging to provide.

Fortunately, prophets, seers, and revelators have provided one example of such an answer in “The Family: A Proclamation to the World.”

The family proclamation clearly declares that “each [of us] is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents, and, as such, each has a divine nature and destiny.”¹ Most of us are familiar with that statement, as we have recited and sung portions of it since our Primary days.² Yet I wonder if familiarity has caused us to overlook the depth, breadth, and power of the truths this identity statement contains.

Note, for example, that the description is universal. It applies to everyone in this audience, everyone on this campus, every person who lives on this earth, and all who have lived or will ever live on this earth and on worlds without number.³ “Each is a beloved spirit son or daughter of heavenly parents . . . [with] a divine nature and destiny.”

Note also that the description transcends time, referring to our past, our present, and our future. It describes our beginning. As President Marion G. Romney once observed:

*In origin, [men and women are] son[s and daughters] of God. The spirits of men [and women] “are begotten sons and daughters unto God” (D&C 76:24). Through that birth process, self-existing intelligence was organized into individual spirit beings.*⁴

The family proclamation then goes on to describe a key feature of our present state: our divine nature. Within each one of us, regardless of our own unique circumstances, challenges, and even mistakes we have made, there is currently an essence of the divine. It is part of our nature—a part of who we are that does not change. Our grade point average may dip below 3.0 or 2.0 or even 1.0, we may not have been on a date for months or years, we may consider ourselves unlovable, we may have just lost our temper with someone we love, we may have been hurt by someone else, but we still have a divine nature. It is part of who we are now.

The statement also describes what can be our future, our divine destiny—our ability through the exercise of our agency made possible by Christ through His atoning sacrifice—to become like our Heavenly Parents.

Finally, note that in each of these three time periods—past, present, and future—the common reference point is God. Because He begat our spirits in the past, we currently partake of His divine nature, and we can ultimately become like Him. If we want to fully know who we are, we must first gain some understanding of who God is. As Joseph Smith explained, “If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves.”⁵

Understanding that we are children of Heavenly Parents—sharing Their divine nature and possessing the potential to be like Them—can bring great power into our lives. The prophet Moses learned this important point early in his ministry.

In the revelation recorded in Moses 1, “Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain”⁶ to visit with God. God first introduced Himself to Moses by informing Moses of some of His attributes.⁷ Once having established who He is, God then informed Moses about Moses in verse 4: “Behold, thou art my son.”

In verse 6 God emphasized that relationship again, telling Moses, “I have a work for thee . . . , my son.” In verse 7 God referred to their kinship one more time: “This one thing I show unto thee . . . , my son.”

Clearly God wanted Moses to understand at the outset not only who He—God—was but also Moses’s relationship to Him. And the reason God wanted Moses to have this critical information quickly becomes apparent as the story unfolds. As soon as God left Moses to himself, Satan appeared to tempt Moses—as he often does when important things are about to happen in our lives. Moses’s response to the temptation is revealing. “Who art thou?” Moses inquired of Satan. “For behold, I am a son of God.”⁸

Moses’s understanding of his direct relationship to God gave him the power to resist Satan’s temptation and eventually the power to banish Satan from his life. It can similarly give us the power to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of college life and the other vicissitudes that are part of our mortal existence.

When asked, “How can we help those struggling with [a personal challenge]?” [President Russell M. Nelson] instructed, “Teach them their identity and their purpose.”⁹

There is great power in understanding who we truly are.

We Are Beloved Sons and Daughters of Heavenly Parents

There are two particular words in the family proclamation’s statement of identity that can easily be overlooked but which contain profound truths that sooner or later all of us need to understand more fully.

The first word is *beloved*. We are not just sons and daughters of Heavenly Parents; we are *beloved* sons and daughters. Because we are literally His offspring, His crowning creation, God loves us more deeply than we can comprehend. His sole purpose, His supreme joy, His work, and His glory come from seeing us succeed.¹⁰ As C. S. Lewis put it:

We were made not primarily that we may love God . . . but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest “well pleased.”¹¹

It is easy to underestimate God’s love for us. Indeed, with our finite minds and imperfect bodies, it is impossible for us to fully comprehend it in this stage of our existence. Yet there is no aspect of God’s character that is more central to His divine nature and none more critical to the development of our faith in Him. God’s love for us is so much a part of what makes Him God that the ancient apostle John taught that “God is love.”¹² God loves each one of us with a love that is greater, more powerful, and more constant than we fully appreciate. We should feel His love more often than we do. And as we feel that love more fully, it should—and will—change us. Indeed, God *requires* that we be changed by His love. Christ taught, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you.”¹³

In order to more fully understand God’s love for us, we should take care that we do not unintentionally reverse the commandment that we love others as God loves us—that we not focus so much on our own imperfections that we believe that God’s love is like ours, instead of believing that our love can become like God’s. As strange as that statement may sound, I believe there are many who underestimate the reach and constancy of God’s perfect love for us because they analogize it to the less-than-perfect love we can muster for our fellow beings, thereby figuratively dragging God’s celestial love down to the telestial level at which our love currently operates.

In its most common form, this reversal of the commandment manifests itself in the mistaken belief that if God really loved us, our lives would be free from much of the toil we experience in life—or in the related erroneous belief that the fact that we struggle in life is a sign that either God’s love for us is diminished or that we have failed to merit it and are therefore beyond its reach. This misunderstanding is so common that for some it is a stumbling block to believing that God exists. If God loves His children and if He is all powerful, some ask, why do so many of His children suffer?

To these skeptics, the existence of pain, sorrow, and injustice in the world conclusively establishes that not only does God not love us, He does not exist at all. But as C. S. Lewis explained:

*The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves, is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word “love.”*¹⁴

In that regard, Lewis asserted, we often confuse God’s love with human kindness. To quote Lewis:

*There is kindness in Love: but Love and kindness are not coterminous. . . . Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering.*¹⁵

Many of us want a God who is kind—by which kindness we mean

*the desire to see others . . . happy; not happy in this way or in that, but just happy. What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven—a senile benevolence who, as they say, “liked to see young people enjoying themselves,” and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, “a good time was had by all.”*¹⁶

But that is not God’s plan for us. He loves us more than that. He wants us to become like Him. He wants us to experience the fulness of joy He enjoys. And He loves us enough that He will do whatever it takes for us to reach that goal—including allowing His Son to suffer indescribable pain for us and including allowing us to experience challenges in our lives. God loves us so much that He is willing to let us experience things that are hard, difficult, and soul-stretching—and He does it not because He does not love us but precisely because He does.

This does not mean that every struggle we experience and every hurt we bear is inflicted on us by God. Many of our challenges are the result of our own bad choices or those of others. Agency

is an inevitable part of the plan. God does not promise that every choice we or others make will be consistent with His will. But He does promise that He can make everything we experience work together for our good.¹⁷ He can make all our soul-stretching experiences—regardless of their source—part of the process by which we can become like Him. And that is His goal because He loves us so much.

We Have a Divine, or Godly, Destiny

That leads to the second key word in the identity statement in the family proclamation: *destiny*. We not only have a divine nature, we have a divine, or godly, destiny. Because we are literally Their offspring, we possess the power to become like our Heavenly Parents. That knowledge can also transform and empower us.

President Henry B. Eyring recently shared a personal example of this truth with the students at the LDS Business College. He related how he felt overwhelmed when taking some physics and math classes as an undergraduate. He said:

As time wore on, my discouragement led me to feel that it was useless to study. . . . I began to think of quitting and doing something easier.

It was on a night during that time of discouragement when I received the help that made all the difference for me. . . . Help came as a voice, an actual voice in my mind. . . . The words voiced were these: “When you realize who you really are, you will be sorry that you didn’t try harder.”

I didn’t know then all that those words meant. . . . But I knew then what to do. I went to work. I felt that I must have more ability to learn than I could see in myself. . . .

*I began to try to understand that message of encouragement. By pondering and working during the years that followed, I came to realize who I really was. I was a spirit child of God. I had inherent in me the potential to learn what He knows. Because of the Atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ and my faith in Him, my sins could be washed away. . . . I could receive the gift of the Holy Ghost as a companion. And I came to know that by the power of the Holy Ghost, we may know the truth of all things.*¹⁸

President Eyring stated that this experience, and others like it, “gave [him] the confidence to keep trying harder, even when the learning was difficult.”¹⁹ That can be true with you as well.

But there will still be times when the gap between the godlike state that is our destiny and our current imperfect state appears so immense that it seems overwhelming. At times we may find ourselves surrounded by constant reminders that we are falling short. When that happens, let me suggest three things we can do to retain, or regain, the eternal perspective that changes the knowledge of our potential from a burden into a blessing.

First, we need to recognize and remember that we are not alone in our struggles. God has placed others in our lives to help sustain us. They may include parents, siblings, roommates, or friends who may be praying and rooting for your success. But they will also include others whom you can serve. There are few more powerful antidotes to feeling inadequate than serving others in need. When you are struggling, if you will spend more time thinking about what you can do for someone else and less time thinking about your own limitations, you will find that your confidence in yourself and in God’s ability to work through you will increase. Doing godlike acts of service enables us to both become more like God and to feel in greater measure His love for us.

More important, even if you feel completely bereft of human companionship, remember that you are never truly alone. Because of His great atoning sacrifice, Christ knows how we feel and He knows how to succor and strengthen us.²⁰ Because of His great love for us, which mirrors exactly that of the Father,²¹ He will not—He cannot—abandon us, as long as we let Him in our lives.²²

Second, we need to be more patient with the process. We need to worry less about the speed at which we are moving and more about the direction we are going. We will not fully realize our divine potential in this life. And while we need to make wise use of our time in our mortal existence,²³ we should remember that God does not deal with time in the same way we do. In fact,

time as we understand it may not bind Him at all.²⁴ As Alma noted, “Time only is measured unto men.”²⁵ Because speed is a measure of distance over time,²⁶ if time becomes less relevant, so does speed. Thus, in eternal things, such as our ongoing progress in becoming like God, direction is more important than speed. In the long run, the direction we are headed matters much more than the rate at which we are moving.

If we become frustrated because we are not progressing as fast as we feel we should, we need to remember that we progress “line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little.”²⁷ The key is to make sure we are headed in the right direction. From time to time this will require a course correction. That is what we call repentance, which is really just a turning back toward God to go in the right direction.²⁸ If we will continue to head in the right direction, God will make up the difference in His own time.

Finally, and most important, when we are feeling overwhelmed in our quest for perfection, we need to return to the first truth in the identity statement of the family proclamation. We are *beloved* sons and daughters of Heavenly Parents. God loves us. That is a fundamental truth on which our accurate understanding of who we really are is based. As Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf testified in the most recent general conference:

*God knows you. You are His child. He loves you. Even when you think that you are not lovable, He reaches out to you.*²⁹

Indeed, as Elder Bruce C. Hafen once observed, “We never have more value in the Lord’s sight than when we are feeling completely worthless.”³⁰

In those moments when you wonder if you can make it, when the challenges seem too much, I urge you to turn to God. More specifically, I plead with you to find a time and a place when you can in all honesty ask God what He really thinks of you. Don’t assume anything. Don’t assume you are worthless, that He is displeased with you, or that He has given up on you. Ask instead, with real intent, the simple questions “Father, what do you think of me? Who am I to you?” I am

confident that if you are open, you will be pleasantly surprised by the answers. You will find the truth shared by the ancient apostle Paul: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?”³¹ And I would add, “Or a bad test grade, an angry comment, or a failed relationship?” The answer is an emphatic no.

Like Paul,

I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,

*Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*³²

You are a child of God. You are a beloved spirit son or daughter of Heavenly Parents. Because of that, each of you has a divine nature and destiny. These statements are true. May they be ever in your mind and heart is my prayer, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. “The Family: A Proclamation to the World” (23 September 1995).
2. See “I Am a Child of God,” *Songbook*, 2–3.
3. See D&C 76:24.
4. Marion G. Romney, “The Worth of Souls,” *Ensign*, November 1978.
5. Joseph Smith, *Teachings*, 343.
6. Moses 1:1.
7. “Behold, I am the Lord God Almighty, and Endless is my name; for I am without beginning of days or end of years; and is not this endless?” (Moses 1:3).
8. Moses 1:13.
9. Brian K. Taylor, “Am I a Child of God?” *Ensign*, May 2018; quoting President Russell M. Nelson from an instance described in Tad R. Callister, “Our Identity and Our Destiny,” BYU devotional address, 14 August 2012.
10. See Moses 1:39.

11. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 40–41; chapter 3, paragraph 15.

12. 1 John 4:8, 16.

13. John 13:34. Also John 15:12: “This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.” Because both Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father have perfect love for us, references to Christ’s love apply equally to the love of His Father for us: “As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you” (John 15:9).

14. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 40; chapter 3, paragraph 15.

15. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 32; chapter 3, paragraph 8.

16. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 31; chapter 3, paragraph 7.

17. See Romans 8:28; D&C 105:40.

18. Henry B. Eyring, “Learning Who You Really Are,” LDS Business College devotional address, 6 November 2018, ldsbc.edu/president-eyring.

19. Eyring, “Learning Who You Really Are.”

20. See Alma 7:11–12.

21. See John 15:9.

22. See “How Firm a Foundation,” *Hymns*, 2002, no. 85, verse 7.

23. See Alma 34:32–33.

24. Elder Neal A. Maxwell explained:

God does not live in the dimension of time as do we. We are not only hampered by our finiteness (experiential and intellectual), but also by being in the dimension of time. Moreover, God, since “all things are present” with him [Moses 1:6], is not simply predicting based solely on the past. In ways that are not clear to us, he sees rather than foresees the future, because all things are at once present before him. [Things as They Really Are (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 29; emphasis in original]

The Prophet Joseph Smith also said:

The great Jehovah contemplated the whole of the events connected with the earth, pertaining to the plan of salvation, before it rolled into existence, or ever “the morning stars sang together” for joy [Job 38:7]; the

past, the present, and the future were and are, with Him, one eternal “now.” [HC 4:597]

25. Alma 40:8; see also Moses 1:6.

26. See Wikipedia, s.v. “speed.”

27. 2 Nephi 28:30; see also D&C 98:12.

28. Elder Theodore M. Burton once explained this concept by focusing on the Hebrew word for repentance from which the current English translation of the Bible is based:

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and the word used in it to refer to the concept of repentance is shube. We can better understand what shube means by reading a passage from Ezekiel and inserting the word shube, along with its English translation. To the “watchmen” appointed to warn Israel, the Lord says:

“When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.

“Nevertheless, if thou warn the wicked of his way to turn from [shube] it; if he do not turn from [shube] his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but thou hast delivered thy soul. . . .

“Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from [shube] his way and live.”

(Ezek. 33:8–11.)

I know of no kinder, sweeter passage in the Old Testament than those beautiful lines. In reading them, can you think of a kind, wise, gentle, loving Father in Heaven pleading with you to shube, or turn back to him . . . ?

That is the message of the Old Testament. Prophet after prophet writes of shube—that turning back to the Lord, where we can be received with joy and rejoicing. The Old Testament teaches time and again that we must turn from evil and do instead that which is noble and good. This means that we must not only change our ways, we must change our very thoughts, which control our actions. [“The Meaning of Repentance,” Ensign, August 1988]

29. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Believe, Love, Do,” *Ensign*, November 2018.

30. Bruce C. Hafen, “A Disciple’s Journey,” BYU devotional address, 5 February 2008.

31. Romans 8:35.

32. Romans 8:38–39.